

## Listening to Early Chinese Sound Film: *Two Stars in the Milky Way*

Jean Ma



[Link to film clip in criticalcommons.org](#): "Listening to song in TWO STARS IN THE MILKY WAY"

1931 was a pivotal year in the Chinese film industry's transition to sound filmmaking. March saw the release of *Songstress Red Peony* (*Genü Hong mudan*), a film heralded as China's "first all-talking and singing sound picture," made by Mingxing Film Studio in collaboration with Pathé Records. Following in its wake in the same year was a string of releases from other studios using various kinds of synchronized sound technology, from wax disc soundtrack recordings to sound-on-film systems: *The Singing Beauty*, *Peace after Storm*, *Pleasures of the Opera*, and *Two Stars in the Milky Way*, a sound-on-disc production from United Photoplay Service, billed as a "musical song-and-dance picture." [1]

The opening scene of *Two Stars in the Milky Way* (*Yinhan shuang xing*) showcases the novelty of sound film technology with a performance of song, overheard by a group of diegetic listeners. During a location shoot in the scenic West Lake District, two film actors stumble upon a scene that halts them in their tracks: a group of villagers gathered around a house, held fast as if enraptured by a spell. The ensuing shot of the house's interior reveals the object of their entrancement to be Yueying, a young woman with a beautiful voice who lives with her father, a composer, in their country villa. Seated next to her father, Yueying sings to him as he smokes and rocks in his chair. Absorbed by the singing and distracted from the film shoot, the two actors wander towards the house. After some time they are joined by the director, who comes searching for them. The film lingers on this musical moment, inviting its audience to listen along with the characters. Only after several minutes, when Yueying reaches the end of her song, does the action resume. The film crew enthuses over this

serendipitous discovery of talent, and in the remainder of the story we witness Yueying's move from the countryside to Shanghai, her transformation into a movie star and, finally, her disillusioned and brokenhearted retreat from the glamorous world of stardom.

Despite the emphasis placed here on the act of listening, it is impossible for contemporary viewers to know exactly what was being heard in this opening number. For while *Two Stars in the Milky Way* is one of a handful of extant productions from this period, it survives only as a silent film; its soundtrack was created on disc recordings, to be played in theaters during specific scenes, that ultimately proved to be even more fragile than celluloid. Several other surviving Chinese films from the early 1930s are, like *Two Stars in the Milky Way*, partial-sound productions. [2] These partial-sound films combine methods of silent storytelling and dialogue intertitles with recorded instrumental accompaniment, sound effects, and interludes of musical performance. They display the effects of technological change in their inconsistent textual surface and internal breaks between silence and sound, while also pointing to the vast ambiguous territory between silent and full-sound filmmaking. Such inconsistencies and internal tensions are heightened in *Two Stars in the Milky Way* as a work whose images have outlived its soundtrack, rendering it a mute testimony to the beginnings of film sound. Given the challenges to reconstructing Chinese cinema's transition to sound on the basis of extant audible examples, *Two Stars in the Milky Way* is all the more intriguing as a film that *shows* listening. It offers the historian an important set of clues about how early sound films were heard, and what were the implications of listening to film, in an era when sound technology was new.

To begin with, the focus on song as an object of listening in the opening number is consistent with a general tendency in this period to acoustically spotlight the singing voice, and moreover, to visually anchor that voice in the body of a female singer. [3] If the term "talkie" in Western film critical parlance signals a sonic regime that privileges dialogue above other kinds of sounds, partial-sound films like *Two Stars in the Milky Way* signal the workings of a different sonic hierarchy. These films endowed their singing characters with audible voices, even as those around them remained consigned to silence, their speech communicated only through intertitles. The singing voice alone penetrated the soundtrack, mingling with instrumental accompaniment. [4] Even after the standardization of full-sound pictures closed the audible gap between speech and song in the second half of the 1930s, the singing voice still retained a distinctive emphasis.

The owner of the voice in this particular instance was Zi Luolan, also known as Violet Wong. Previous to being cast as Yueying in *Two Stars in the Milky Way*, Wong was widely known as a "queen of southern songs and dances," having built a reputation as a stage performer working with a popular musical revue troupe. During the transition to sound many stars, like Wong, were recruited from the musical stage and recording industry to act in movies. (Other luminaries who crossed over from stage to screen in this fashion include Li Lili, Wang Renmei, and Zhou Xuan.) The display of Wong's vocal talent in this opening scene in *Two Stars in the Milky Way* thus cannily banks on her established celebrity as a singer, representing but one of many examples of the symbiotic connections forged between the film and music industries in this period. [5]

Textual sources indicate that during this sequence the audience hears the well-known Cantonese ballad “Raindrops on Banana Leaves,” one of two songs performed by Wong’s character in the film. The second song is a lengthy aria from Cantonese opera, sung by Yueying for her debut feature “Love’s Sorrow in the Eastern Chamber.” Attired in historical costume as the Concubine Mei Fee, Yueying appears on an elaborate set of an imperial garden pavilion overlooking a pond and performs the solo aria. At the end of her song, the camera tracks back dramatically to reveal that the imperial garden setting is in fact a sound stage, surrounded by a production crew busy at work shooting the scene. The spectacle of sound is here framed by an instance of live performance, in the process of being recorded. As Zhang Zhen has pointed out, fictional situations of performance like this one were referred to as “plays within the play” (*xi zhong xi*), a term that highlights the connections between the early Chinese sound film and theater. [6] The recourse to the setting of the stage in this instance is consistent with a larger pattern where the latter repeatedly functioned as a platform for musical display, a naturalized feature of the fictional world, and an audio-visual perspectival construction directed at a diegetic audience as well as the actual audience of the film. [7]

Returning to the opening song number, however, what is most striking are its deviations from the formula of the play within the play. Listening is not confined to a theatrical perspective. Rather, the spatial presentation of song here is unusually dynamic, freely traversing the boundary between inside and outside as it constructs a virtual space of listening. Indeed the absence of the film’s original soundtrack further casts into sharp relief the host of ways in which this opening number strives to visualize sound and envision a sonorous presence, portraying the effects of sound as it ripples throughout the fictional world and elicits responses from various characters. As Yueying sings, the film cuts between shots of the listeners listening outside the country villa and the father-daughter pair reposing inside, unaware of their audience. The reactions of the film crew are singled out in medium shots that capture their pleasure at Yueying’s ballad. The beauty of her singing is indexed by the delighted expressions of her listeners, the powers of musical sound conveyed as a magnetic force that irresistibly pulls them in her direction. At the song’s conclusion, the singer is herself in turn startled by the sound of applause coming from outside. The father and daughter turn to look at the window behind them, draw the curtains, and are surprised to discover their audience.

Here a clearcut spatial boundary structures the scene of listening. The singer’s physical separation from those who listen to her song only underscores the impact of this performance, for sound is not merely layered onto the image, but rendered tangible in the very disjunction between seeing and hearing. This sensory disjunction carves out a zone for the unhindered movement of sound and prompts one of the most film’s most unusual visualizing strategies – a use of editing as a means of relating spaces that are audible yet not visible to one another. In the pattern of alternating shots between the singer and the other characters, we can recognize something akin to a standard shot-reverse shot technique that stitches these shots together according to a logic of spatial contiguity. But in this instance, the identification between the gaze of the character and that of the camera is broken, given that Yueying remains invisible to her diegetic audience throughout the performance, enclosed within the walls of her home, just as her listeners are themselves hidden from her sight. Thus the shot-reverse shot alternation instead represents an auditory perspective, doing for the ear

what the mechanisms of suture typically do for the eye and carving out a subject position of listening within the space of the fiction. With this appropriation and re-purposing of an established convention, *Two Stars in the Milky Way* discovers an innovative discursive strategy for the cinematic inscription of sound.

The song has the effect of seizing and pausing the story's action as it unfolds: Yueying's singing quite literally stops the two actors in their tracks and thus brings to a halt the film shoot that is in process. Not simply absorbed into a sequence of narrative events, the song intercepts this sequence and detours it into another time zone, one characterized by inaction, stillness, and intense absorption – as if the film itself has caught the spell that binds the characters. The spell lasts for the full duration of the song, and only after Yueying has ended her tune does the flow of story action resume.

The “Raindrops on Banana Leaves” number marks an overdetermined moment: a reflection on auditory perception, a testament to the arresting force of song, and a parable of the newfound powers of the sound film. It stands in contradistinction to the play within the play format of musical presentation, which points back to operatic traditions of performance in which body and voice coincide on stage and simultaneously engage the senses. By contrast, the virtual space of listening constructed in the opening number reflects a changing cultural geography of mechanical reproduction, of which the emerging sound film was part, and in which musical sounds were set loose from the scene of performance, voices detached from bodies, and spaces of listening diffused. In the number's movements between the audible and visible, the acousmatic and embodied voice, we grasp the ways in which the experience of listening was restructured in a modern universe of technologically mediated sounds. For the present-day viewer who can only experience *Two Stars in the Milky Way* as a silent film, Yueying's voice stands out as its absent center. Even so, we can still hear that voice as an injunction to listen in an expanded sense, to trace its sonic reverberations in the interplay of image and sound, and to heed its effects on cinematic time and space.

**Jean Ma** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art and Art History at Stanford University, where she teaches in the Film and Media Studies Program. She is the author of *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema* (2010), and coeditor of *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography* (2008) and “Sound and Music,” a special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*. Her book *Sounding the Modern Woman: The Songstress in Chinese Cinema* is forthcoming from Duke University Press.

## NOTES

[1] Meanwhile, silent film production continued throughout the transitional period, with the 1930s witnessing the release of some of the most highly regarded works of Chinese silent cinema. As Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin point out, somewhat paradoxically, it was only after the advent of sound that silent cinema reached its zenith as an art form in China. *Zhongguo wusheng dianying shi* [The history of Chinese silent film] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1996).

[2] Another surviving partial-sound production from this period whose soundtrack has been lost is *New Woman* (1935).

[3] On singing women in Chinese cinema, see Jean Ma, *Sounding the Modern Woman: The Songstress in Chinese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

[4] This pattern is evident in the partial-sound films *Song of the Fishermen* (1934) and *Big Road* (1934).

[5] For a discussion of tie-ups between the film and music recording industries in republican era China, see Andrew F. Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Zhang Zheng, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), chapter 8; and Ma, *Sounding the Modern Woman*, chapter 1.

[6] Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, 307-308. The commonality of plays within the play also hints at the influence of American backstage musicals, many of which were screened in Shanghai in this period. Kristine Harris notes that *Two Stars in the Milky Way* was directly inspired by the 1928 MGM musical *Show People*. See her “Two Stars on the Silver Screen: The Metafilm as Chinese Modern,” in *History in Images: Pictures and Public Space in Modern China*, edited by Christian Henriot and Wen-hsin Yeh (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2012), 211.

[7] The fictional scenarios of such plays within the play often echoed the film’s diegetic situations. For example, Mei Fee’s ballad of lament foreshadows the romantic disappointment that lies in store for Yueying.