The Journal of Asian Studies Vol. 70, No. 1 (February) 2011: 77–97.
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The Question of Translation in Taiwanese Colonial Cinematic Space

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This essay studies the practice of cultural translation in colonial Taiwanese cinematic space. Just as the Japanese translation of Western cinema brings into play traces of Japanese otherness, the Taiwanese translation of the Japanese translation disrupts the Japanese monopoly on the meaning of cinematic experience in colonial Taiwan. A key figure in this complex cultural translation was the benshi*, a translator who performed alongside the screen to interpret the film for the audience. This study argues that an overemphasis on the interventional power of the* benshi*'s word does not do justice to the complex role of the* benshi *as a translator. In spite of its inscription of the cultural specific in the cinematic space, the presence of the benshi is also a reminder of an unfulfilled desire: the desire for the (foreign) image and the desire for the other. Insofar as the act of translation is a critical engagement with the challenges posed by the other, a simplistic celebration of local resistance does not help us fully address the complexity of cultural translation that defines the mediascape of the modern age.*

It has been argued that in Asia, the question of translating the Western mode of technologized visual representation has been entangled with the translation of modernity from the very beginning (Chow 1995, 9). In Rey Chow's account, an illustrative example is the well-known story of the Chinese writer Lu Xun's unexpected traumatic encounter with "modernity" through the impact of technologized visuality. On the occasion of a lantern slide show in Japan around 1905, Lu Xun, a young student who was to become one of the most important writers in modern Chinese literature, was shocked at seeing the slide of a Chinese spy at the point of being beheaded while his fellow Chinese simply stood by without the slightest expression of sympathy. At this moment of highly charged visual power, Lu Xun was forced to *see* China with a fresh eye. His eyes were suddenly opened, and he experienced a painful consciousness of how China was viewed from a "modern" perspective. He then decided to abandon his medical training and devoted himself to an enlightenment project that he hoped would transform what he saw as a "backward China" into a "modern" country—a country that would no longer fit the image he had seen

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on the screen. The discovery of the overwhelming power of technologized visuality occurred concomitantly with the discovery of the full significance of modernity (Chow 1995, 18; Mamie 2001, 209).

There was certainly no lack of visual representation in traditional Asian art forms. The visual often plays a role in meaning production in traditional theatrical space. A case in point is the colorful facial makeup used in Chinese operas: the red face signifies royalty and bravery, the black indicates the character's selfless personality, and the white implies a villain. However, what makes the new mode of visual representation astoundingly "Western" and "foreign" is the technologization of visual production (Chow 1995, 6–8)—a modern mode of representation that is defined by Walter Benjamin as the polar opposite of traditional visual representation such as painting (2002, 115). Although both film and painting are image-centered art forms, "the images obtained by each differ enormously. The painter's is a total image, whereas that of the cinematographer is piecemeal, its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law" (Benjamin 2002, 116). With technologization, new conditions of cultural production and consumption are created. For Benjamin, film demonstrates par excellence the modern form of visual representation that demands of its viewers a new kind of appreciation and participation quite different from their experience of traditional art (2002, 119).

For many Asian countries in the early twentieth century, the development of an adequate film industry was seen as essential to the production of modernity. The Japanese cinema is a case in point. If we take the first film screening by the Lumière brothers in 1895 as the founding event in the history of film, by 1899, Japan was already setting up its own film infrastructure to produce films (Richie 2005, 17). The outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 not only witnessed a great leap forward in the Japanese film industry as a result of the high demand for war footage, but also saw the birth of a true Japanese "viewing public" of films (High 2003, 7). By 1914, "the movies had become a big business in Japan" (Richie 2005, 31). And many films produced in the 1920s, such as *Souls on the Road* (1921), were already developing a sophisticated Japanese film aesthetic and techniques that, according to some critics, would be considered advanced, even avant-garde by Western standards (Burch 1979, 101–4; Richie 2005, 41).

Turning to China, we find the same eager engagement with issues of film production. In the 1910s, Chinese were already exploiting the power of documentary films for educational purposes (Li and Hu 1997, 40–44). In the 1920s, there were more than 180 film companies in large cities. The Chinese film industry was reaching a stage of maturity that enabled it to produce quality feature films (Li and Hu 1997, 3). At the same time, in a nationalist move to counter the monopoly of foreign films in the distribution network, China began to build movie houses and solve film distribution problems. The so-called costume films that flourished in the late 1920s showed the Chinese film industry to be fully fledged, with

adequate mastery of film production techniques (Li and Hu 1997, 6). In all of these attempts to grapple with the power of visual representation through the development of a national film industry, the question of how to translate the Western technologized visual representation was high on the cultural agenda. That is, the question of the cultural translation of Western modernity itself was entangled with the translation of Western film production.

The Japanese Model and Two Critical Discourse Paradigms

It is necessary to note that in many Asian countries, the translation of Western cinematic practice was often executed in a way that redefined the new mode of representation with the specific imprint of the target culture. In discussing the significance of the so-called costume films of the late 1920s, film historians often point out that this type of movie produced an idiosyncratic genre of *Chinese* movies (Li and Hu 1997, 40–44). Likewise, Japanese cinema practiced a mode of representation that is regarded as possessing a distinctive Japanese flavor (Burch 1979, 75–86).

The Japanese *benshi* phenomenon presents a particularly eloquent argument for this view. It has to be remembered that silent films dominated film production in the early twentieth century. It was not until the mid-1930s that talkies became popular in Japan (Anderson 1992, 292). To help the Japanese audience understand what was going on in the movies, the *benshi* was called into being. When a silent film was being shown, a *benshi* performed by the side of the screen, supplying dialogue, narrating the story, explaining what was happening in the film, and even making elaborate comments (Anderson 1992, 261). The roles of a *benshi* were multiple. He or she was a translator, an interpreter, a commentator, and the persona of the characters (Anderson 1992; Hiroshi 1992; McDonald 2005).[1] Be it translation or interpretation or comment or character role-playing, all of these functions point to the play of the spoken word as the central activity of the *benshi*'s performance. The verbal presentation of the *benshi* was combined with the technologized visual representational mode to create a peculiar Japanese cinema practice in which the word of the *benshi* off the screen might be even more attractive to the audience than the image on the screen (Hiroshi 1992, 251). In one of their landmark studies of Japanese film, Joseph L. Anderson and Donald Richie describe the dominant role of the *benshi* in Japanese cinema as follows:

> Eventually the *benshi* rather than the film became the box-office attraction. After the arrival of the story film and the star system, film

[1]In Japan, a *benshi* could be a man or a woman. I have not been able to find any documents about women *benshi* in colonial Taiwan.

> advertising was showing the *benshi*'s name in larger characters than those used for the title of the film, the stars, or the director. His pay became equivalent to that of the highest paid Japanese film actor, and his position was further secured by the producers and distributors, who liked the *benshi*, saying he saved the cost of printing titles. (1982, 25)

Thus, it has often been argued that, unlike Western cinema practice, which stressed the primacy of visual representation, early Japanese cinema dislocated the centrality of visuality and operated with a presentational mode in which the spotlight was cast instead on the verbal performance of the *benshi.* Many films critics have pointed out that the presentation style of the *benshi* can be traced back to the Japanese tradition of storytelling found in many age-old forms of performance, such as *Bunraku* theater (doll drama), *Kabuki*, *Kodan*, *naniwabushi*, and the comic *rakugo* tales (Dym 2003, 10–13; McDonald 2005, 89). The popularity of the *benshi* therefore demonstrates the powerful inscription of the Japanese cultural tradition on a form that was supposed to be an import. For many critics, the Japanese-speaking *benshi* defines the "Japaneseness" of early Japanese cinema (Burch 1979, 77–81; Hiroshi 1992, 285).

From the very beginning, the peculiar combination of the *benshi*'s verbal performance and on-screen visual representation in Japanese cinematic space has been the focus of debate in Japanese film studies. If the *benshi*'s verbal play is indispensable to what we now understand as the "glocality" of cinematic practice, in which cultural forces of geographically distinct civilizations intersect to generate continuous mutations of something traveling on the global scale (Robertson 1995, 27)—in this case, filmic representation—the "Japaneseness" taken to be imbedded in the *benshi*'s performance has been subject to various interpretations.

There are basically two discourse paradigms in discussing this peculiar Japanese cinematic practice. One of the paradigms takes the Japanese combination of visual representation and the *benshi*'s spoken word as an imperfect translation of Western cinema. The presence of the *benshi* is considered a residual connection with premodern Japanese art forms, barring Japan's full entry into the Western mode of cinematic practice, the primary mode of representation in the modern age. This original/copy discourse paradigm was prevalent in the early twentieth century, when the call for "modernizing" Japanese cinema by breaking free from traditional theater's hold was on the rise (McDonald 2005, 89). The Pure Film Movement (1910s–1920s), which started with the attempt to eliminate the *benshi* in order to bring into being a self-contained Japanese cinema, is illustrative of this discourse paradigm. For advocates of this movement, filmic signification should operate mainly through the image and self-contained filmic texts. The presence of the *benshi* was seen as preventing Japanese cinema from participation in a universal trend of cinema development that took the

image as the defining feature of cinema as a unique mode of signification (Gerow 2001, 12–17).

It is noteworthy that a whole set of binary oppositions is implicitly built into this discourse paradigm: spoken word/technologized visuality, Japan (East)/West, local/global, and tradition/Westernization. The *benshi* is understood as the sign of the local, the word, and Japanese traditional art. This discourse paradigm thus regards the distinctive Japanese cinematic practice as marking a transitional stage from immature, unskillful Asian grappling with the new mode of representation to the Western model of "mature" cinematic practice. The *benshi* embodies the voice of the local, stubbornly inscribing what is supposed to be the past into the time of the present. The play of the spoken word in early Japanese cinema is disparaged as an outdated mode of representation that has to be overcome so that modernity can truly take place and grow in Japan.

In contrast to this negative view of the peculiar Japanese combination of the word with the image in cinematic practice, the second paradigm of discourse argues that early Japanese cinema actually provided a specific mode of mediation between the local and the global, with the "global" being here defined as a transnational hegemonic force. The popularity of the *benshi* suggests a peculiar Japanese (re)definition of the cinematic experience. For advocates of the second paradigm, the Japanese model serves to illustrate the tension between the emulation of a powerful foreign other and the preservation of local tradition. It is taken to exemplify an uneasy situation in which many Asian countries were caught as they tried to carve out their own trajectories of modernity. The issue is no longer "translating the West," but "transforming the West" through a Japanese/Asian model that can creatively accommodate what is foreign to the local cultural context. Here we find a shift from the idea of the Japanese translation as a degenerate copy of the Western original to a paradigm of translation that celebrates the "otherness" of the translated version. Thus, Noel Burch argues that what is usually regarded as "primitive" about Japanese cinema prior to 1920 and even 1930 "was actually the manifestation of a fundamental incompatibility between the West's developing 'codes of illusionism' and Japanese indifference to 'illusionism' in the Western sense" (1979, 66).

However, in spite of their seemingly opposite views of Japanese translation practice, upon closer examination, these two paradigms are not fundamentally different. In fact, it seems that both paradigms share the same theoretical assumptions. The same set of binary opposition can be found operating in both paradigms: spoken word/technologized visual representation, Japan (East)/West, local/global, and tradition/Westernization. Both see the *benshi* as fundamental in defining the Japanese cinema. Both interpret the *benshi* as signifying the "Japaneseness" of Japanese cinema. The *benshi* is interpreted by both camps as the sign of the local, the word, Japanese traditional art, and, in a word, the embodiment of the quintessential Japan. In both paradigms, the *benshi* is taken to be the locus of resistance and subversion, the site of the cultural

specific that challenges the homogenizing forces traveling on a global scale. The only difference is that whereas the first paradigm sees the cultural specific as something undesirable for the pursuit for modernity, the second interprets it as essential in the Japanese endeavor to implement its own project of modernity. In current terms of translation studies, the first paradigm is based on an original/copy model that prioritizes the original, whereas the second turns to the Benjaminian concept of "afterlife" in interpreting the relationship between the source text and the target text in translation practice (Benjamin 1996, 254).

Colonial Translation and the Japanese Model

This Japanese model of cinematic practice was later transported to Taiwan, which became a Japanese colony in 1895, the same year the Lumière brothers screened their first film. The *benshi* appeared in Taiwan as early as 1900 with screenings of silent films brought to the island by Japanese businessmen (Ye Lung-yen 1998, 53–54). Taiwanese *benshi* began to practice in 1921, performing in theaters with local Taiwanese as the main audience (Lu 1961, 6).[2] The Japanese cinematic practice quickly took hold on the island, as the *benshi*'s performance was akin to the Taiwanese tradition of storytelling in popular entertainment (Ye Lung-yen 1997, 173–76). By the 1920s, film viewing was gaining popularity as a new form of urban entertainment in Taiwan (Mamie 2001, 366).

But the Taiwanese case is more intriguing than that in Japan. In colonial Taiwan, issues of cultural translation were cast in different terms because the film industry was largely underdeveloped on the island. In contrast to the burgeoning film industry in mainland China and in Japan, film experience in colonial Taiwan was restricted to screening and viewing. Films were imported from Japan, China, the United States, and Europe (Lu 1961, 28–29). During the fifty years of Japanese colonial rule (1895–1945), a total of sixteen movies were made in Taiwan, only two of which were produced and directed by Taiwanese (Mamie 2001, 366). The rest were either collaborative works by Japanese and Taiwanese, or produced by Japanese alone (Mamie 2001, 366–67). In other words, unlike Japan, which witnessed a flourishing film industry in the first half of the twentieth century, colonial Taiwan failed to develop a film industry of its own (Lu 1961, 6). Therefore, the issue of how to translate the Western model of technologized visuality in local film production was scarcely a concern.

Considering the fact that Japan did all it could to help develop local film industries in the places it colonized—such as Korea, Manchuria, and Indo-China—the exclusion of colonial Taiwan from Japan's pan-Asian film production

[2]Movie theaters in colonial Taiwan tended to have different patrons. Because quite a lot of Taiwanese people were not well versed in Japanese, the movie theaters they frequented mostly showed films imported from China and staged Taiwanese *benshi* rather than Japanese *benshi* performance.

network is striking. In Korea, Japanese played a key role in the development of the film industry (Noh 2001, 20–31). The first big motion picture production studio in Korea was set up by Japanese in 1922, with a capital of ninety thousand dollars—much more than any present-day Korean film company has (Anderson and Richie 1982, 150). In the following year, the Japanese-controlled South Manchurian Railway Company established a film unit to produce movies. In 1938, the Manchurian Motion Picture Association was also established with the aim of outdoing Chinese and American films in the Manchurian market. In Japanese concession areas in China, Japanese-backed companies also began to churn out films to counter the anti-Japanese films made by China. As Japan advanced further into Southeast Asia and occupied more territories, it showed the same keen interest in intervening in local film industries (Anderson and Richie 1982, 150–4). Indeed, it is argued that many Indonesian filmmakers benefited from the education of Japanese staff working at Nichiei Jakarta, which was set up by the Japanese in Jakarta during the war period (Hidenori 2002). In the words of Anderson and Richie, "as a by-product of this political interest in other Asian countries, the Japanese were responsible for giving a number of these countries their first really professional work in the films" (1982, 157).

Curiously, owing to its unique place in Japan's imperial project, Taiwan was excluded from this expanding Japanese international network of film production. Unlike other areas colonized by Japan in the prewar period, Taiwan was regarded by the Japanese as part of Japan rather than foreign, "conquered" territory. From the Japanese point of view, there was no need for Taiwan to produce its own films because, as Burch points out in his study of early Japanese cinema, Japan kept pace with the West in terms of film production (1979, 57–58).

With scarcely any films being made by local Taiwanese, it would seem that the translation of cinema was hardly an issue in colonial Taiwan. In his study of cinema discourse in colonial Taiwan, the Japanese scholar Fujii Shozo (2005) remarks that while Japanese critics and readers in colonial Taiwan actively voiced their film criticism and opinions in the monthly newsletters issued by the Taipei Cinema League—a movie fan club in the colony founded by a Japanese university professor in 1931 to "promote film"—the Taiwanese remained silent. According to his findings, the Japanese in the colony showed a great interest in the new mode of representation and actively participated in cinema discourse at that time, whereas the voices of colonial Taiwanese were nowhere to be found. Thus, it seems that the translation of Western cinematic mode of representation was hardly a concern for local Taiwanese intellectuals at all. Fujii Shozo sums up the split of discourse in colonial Taiwan as follows:

> So we see in the cultural history of Taipei during the colonial period that movie culture movement first flourished in the 1930s with Japanese forming the center of the movement, but that the 1940s gave birth to the literary journal movement, in which Taiwanese natives had a

> powerful voice. The asymmetries between visual and print, cultures and the ethnic divergence between the vanguards of these movements reveal more of what the League critic Takujima Katsumi called the "dark shadow of the colonial politics." (2005, 92)

Fujii Shozo points out that it was in the literary journals *Taiwan Literary Arts*, *New Taiwan Literature, Literary Arts Taiwan*, and *Taiwan Literature* that local Taiwanese intellectuals voiced their opinions. In contrast to their silence in film reviews and studies, Taiwanese intellectuals were rigorously engaged in literary reforms and debates. The question of literary language, rather than the production of the image, was the central issue on their cultural agenda. Parallel to Japanese dialogues about movie culture in Taipei Cinema League, Taiwanese intellectuals conducted heated debates in the so-called Taiwanese Language Movement of the 1930s (Xiang Yang 2004, 21–27). While the Japanese in Taiwan were intrigued by the question of the image, Taiwanese intellectuals were occupied with the question of the word.

It is my contention, however, that although colonial Taiwanese intellectuals were concerned with literary reform in print, they nevertheless tried to grapple with the new mode of visual representation in terms shaped by their historical conditions. And if we find no clues in Japanese-language sources—such as the monthly newsletters issued by the Taipei Cinema League—we may as well turn to historical documents in the local language for further investigation. Local newspapers, such as *Taiwan People's Newspapers* (*Taiwan Minpao*, weekly, April 1923–February 1930) and *Taiwan New People's Newspapers* (*Taiwan New Minpao*, daily, March 1930–April 1932), prove to be useful sources. In contrast to *Taiwan's Daily News*, which was issued by the Japanese colonial government in Taiwan, *Taiwan People's Newspapers* was published by the Taiwanese and had local Taiwanese as its targeted readers. Probably the most influential newspaper run by the Taiwanese in the colonial period, it provided space for local debates on social movements and political critiques of Japanese colonial policies.

Starting in April 1926, the newspaper ran repeated coverage in Chinese of the activities of a film-screening group called the Mei-tai troupe (Beautify Taiwan Troupe), which was set up by the dissident Taiwanese Cultural Association as part of its "enlightenment project" (figure 1). The Mei-tai film-screening troupe was established in 1926 and gradually lost its influence in the 1930s because of internal strife within the association. News reports about the Mei-tai troupe first made an appearance on April 18, 1926—the day the troupe was formally set up—and continued to appear from time to time into the 1930s. What we find in the newspaper coverage about the film-screening activities by the troupe constitutes the most important primary material for any research on colonial cinema in Taiwan. A browse through the news coverage about the troupe's activities during this period shows that the news reports

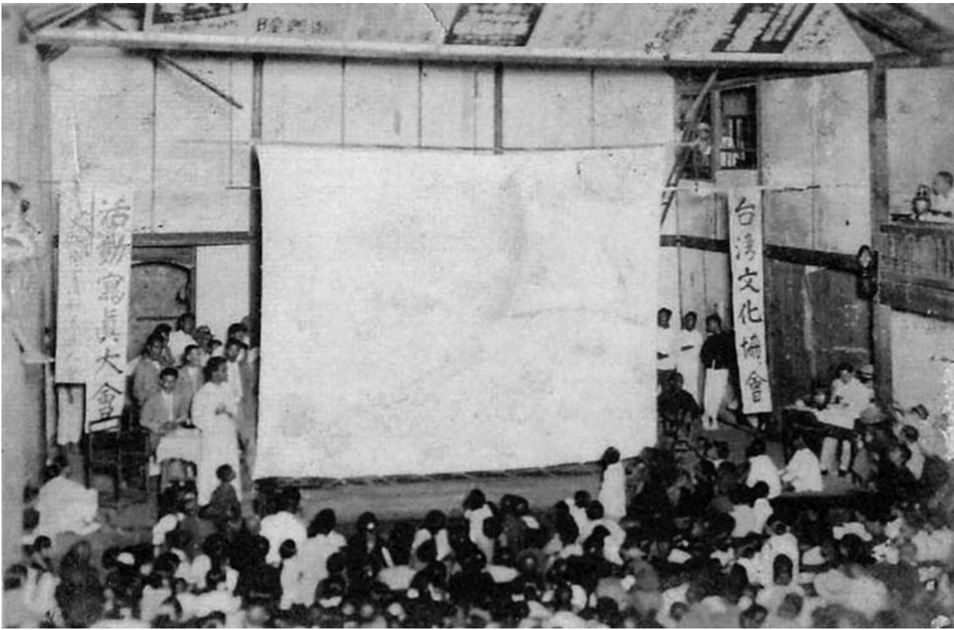

Figure 1. Film screening organized by the Taiwanese Cultural Association under Japanese colonial rule. Courtesy of Professor Hsiao-feng Lee.

constantly covered the conflicts between the Taiwanese *benshi* and the Japanese policemen who tried to delimit what could and could not be said on these film-screening occasions.

News reports of August 1, 1926; November 21, 1926; and March 6, 1927, demonstrate how the verbal play of the Taiwanese *benshi* on these film-screening occasions raised the policemen's suspicion and led to the halt of film screenings. For example, the news report of November 21, 1926, describes how the Japanese policemen charged the *benshi* for not observing the precensored script and for speaking in a way that carried an implicit politically subversive message. The report gives details of the *benshi*'s speech:

> Little cubs are nurtured by their mothers when they are still young. They begin to feed themselves when they become adult animals. So do humans. Isn't it a shame that a society cannot provide a good nurturing environment for its people? Or, an environment not good enough for the people to support their families? If we don't try to do something about this kind of society, it will eventually become a dark and hopeless place. (*Taiwan People's Newspapers*, November 21, 1926)

It is not difficult to see why the Japanese policemen were not pleased at all with the *benshi*'s wild digression from the precensored script. The film being screened on this occasion was an imported documentary film showing human adventure in the North Pole. The *benshi* apparently made an abrupt turn while explaining the

representation of polar animals. Instead of matching up with what was going on in the film, the *benshi's* digressive comment, as reproduced here in the news report, insinuated a critique of the Japanese colonial government for its failure to provide a good society for the people who were supposed to be under its protection. An analogy is implicitly drawn between the little cubs and the people in the colony—both need to be taken good care of. The *benshi*'s remarks, obviously going way beyond what the film tried to say, appeared to border dangerously on anticolonial critique. Little wonder that the policemen suspected that politically subversive messages were hidden in the digression and decided to intervene in the *benshi*'s performance.

In this corpus of colonial news coverage, we find the most important colonial cinema discourse from the Taiwanese perspective, which is usually missing in Japanese-language sources. It is important to note that the newspapers ran repeated coverage of the pressure of colonial censorship on the *benshi*'s verbal performance (Lee 2006, 139). Thus, interestingly, it was the transportation of the Japanese model that provided the Taiwanese with an unexpected access to the power of representation in the colonial cinematic space. The key is the Taiwanese *benshi's* verbal play. As was the case in Japan, the *benshi* was essential to Taiwanese cinematic practice. And as in Japan, the verbal performance of the *benshi* was not placed in a subservient position to visual representation in the film. It must be remembered that the *benshi* was a box office attraction. The verbal play of a virtuoso *benshi* often had the power to hold the audience in thrall, manipulating their moods at will (Lu 1961, 190–91). It can be argued that, as was the case in early Japanese cinema, the word did not necessarily supplement the image in colonial Taiwanese cinematic practice; instead, it challenged the domination of foreign, technologized images in determining the meaning of cinematic experience.

Paradoxically, the peculiar disjunction of the word and the image in Japanese cinematic practice carved out a space for the production of Taiwanese local (re) vision. Just as the Japanese translation of Western cinema brings into play the traces of Japanese otherness, the Taiwanese translation of the Japanese translation disrupts the Japanese monopoly on the meaning of cinematic experience in colonial Taiwan. Insofar as the Japanese model endows the play of the local word with a significant role in the space of cinema, the model inadvertently creates room for the infiltration of the Taiwanese voice into a space where the Taiwanese were denied access to the production of the image.

As mentioned earlier, the Japanese translation of the Western mode of representation generates two paradigms in approaching early Japanese cinema. Each of the paradigms had its heyday. The Taiwanese translation of the Japanese model, however, yields mainly one paradigm in defining the terms of understanding the colonial cinema. This "translation as transformation" paradigm stresses the subversive play of the local element in the process of adopting an encroaching culture. In other words, the subversiveness of the Taiwanese translation of the

foreign (Japanese) mode of representation in the local *benshi*'s verbal performance is highlighted. The newspaper coverage of the Mei-tai Troupe's film-screening activities exemplifies the use of this paradigm, which continues to hold sway over scholarship on colonial Taiwanese cinematic practice (Chen Guo-fu 1985, 96).

This makes an interesting case for comparative studies of cultural translation in Japan and Taiwan during the colonial era. In the case of Japan, we see the conflict of two critical paradigms in regard to the peculiar practice of combining the *benshi*'s verbal play with the image on the screen. The first paradigm stresses the primacy of the technologized image, whereas the second highlights the important role of the subversive power of the local word in the cinematic space. In contrast to the presence of two opposite paradigms in studies of early Japanese cinema, it is the second paradigm alone that has been dominant in understanding early Taiwanese cinema. The first paradigm is missing in the critical discussions on the subject. One obvious reason, of course, is the lack of access to the production of the image for colonial Taiwanese. As discussed earlier, most of the films screened in colonial Taiwan were imported from Japan and other countries. In Japan, the first paradigm of discourse is deeply entrenched in the desire to "modernize" Japanese film industry. How to produce a local cinema in a modern form that would do away with the residual elements of the traditional theater is the main concern. The objective of the critical discourse is to bring into being a "modern" Japanese film industry. The Pure Film Movement is a case in point.

In colonial Taiwan, because the film industry scarcely existed at all, the production of the image was controlled by foreign forces. Hence, how to "modernize" film production through a shift from reliance on the *benshi*'s word to technologized image-centered representation was far from the concerns on the Taiwanese cultural agenda. Moreover, for Taiwanese intellectuals, such a move actually played into the hands of their Japanese colonizers, for it was the Japanese who controlled image production with their powerful film industry and colonial censorship. Under such historical circumstances, the word was the only vehicle through which the voice of the local could possibly participate in the cinematic space. The elimination of the local word from the Taiwanese audience's cinema experience would tip the scale in favor of the Japanese colonial power in controlling the production of meaning in the cinematic space. Given these historical conditions, it is not difficult to understand why the second paradigm has gained currency in Taiwanese colonial cinema studies. With its emphasis on the Taiwanese subversive exploitation of the Japanese model of cinematic practice, this paradigm can be called the postcolonial paradigm of cultural translation, for it is basically informed by the notion of "mimicry," which Homi K. Bhabha (1994, 85–92) has elucidated in his now well-known postcolonial theoretical essays.

As I have tried to point out, this paradigm finds substantial support in the news coverage of the film-screening activities organized by the Association of

Taiwanese Culture (Chen Guo-fu 1985, 89; Ye Lung-yen 1997, 182–84). If we take the news coverage as a kind of discourse on colonial Taiwanese cinema, the postcolonial paradigm of cultural translation is already built into the discourse. If the combination of the *benshi*'s word and the technologized image defines a peculiar Japanese translation of Western cinema, the Japanese model is transported and subject to a further transformative translation in Taiwan. While the Japanese model operates through binary oppositions between the spoken word/local/tradition/Japaneseness and technologized visuality/global/ Westernization, the Taiwanese translation of this model gives a subtle twist to the binary oppositions: spoken word/local resistance/tradition/Taiwaneseness versus technologized visuality/foreign domination/colonial modernization/ Japanization.

What is said about Japanese cinema in the second paradigm of discourse is also applicable to the Taiwanese case, only this time the tables are turned on Japan. Here we have an ironic reformulation of the translation practice of Japanese cinema discussed earlier: it was through the *benshi* that the Taiwanese defined the "Taiwaneseness" of the cinematic experience in colonial Taiwan, and the popularity of the *benshi* suggested a peculiar Taiwanese (re)definition of cinematic experience and a subversion of the colonialist project of "Japanization." The *benshi* is interpreted as the sign of the local, the word, Taiwanese traditional art, and, in a word, the embodiment of the quintessential Taiwan. In this understanding of the Taiwanese translation of Japanese cinematic practice, the Taiwanese cleverly use the master's tool to dismantle the master's house.

Translation Desire and the Word

So far, we have discussed how Japanese and colonial Taiwanese translations call into question the primacy of technologized visuality in meaning production in the cinematic space. A word of caution, however, is necessary in reassessing the meanings of the translation transactions in Asian cinematic practices. The second paradigm of cultural translation is not without its own problems. While the peculiar operation of the *benshi*'s verbal play in Japanese and Taiwanese cinema certainly challenges the domination of technologized filmic text in cinematic experience, it is important that we do not interpret the *benshi*'s translation practice as simply a resistance to the imported technologized mode of visual representation. In stressing the subversive or interventional power of the *benshi*'s word, the second critical paradigm tends to overlook two important issues of cultural translation that are embedded in the *benshi*'s performance.

First of all, it is noteworthy that the *benshi*'s appearance on the Taiwanese as well as the Japanese cultural scene occurred concomitantly with the introduction of the newly imported mode of visual representation. In other words, the *benshi*'s performance was fundamentally driven by a translation impulse. In his book on

Japanese *benshi*, Jeffery A. Dym identifies some fundamental tasks of the benshi: (1) to clarify "many particulars about Western customs, manners, history, traditions, and culture that Japanese audience did not understand," (2) "to help Japanese fans appreciate foreign films at a higher level with their discussions of the invention and mechanics of motion pictures," and (3) to translate the foreign language intertitles contained within the films (8–9). All of these tasks were basically translation activities.

The demand of the foreign image to be translated was never completely written off in the Asian cinematic experience. The most important function of the *benshi* was not so much to reach back for a connection with local cultural tradition as it was to help the audience gain access to the meanings of the new mode of image-centered representation. If what really mattered was simply the experience of traditional entertainment, there were already abundant occasions to satisfy the audience's craving in that respect. It is important to bear in mind that the performance of the *benshi* was made possible by the presence of the technologized foreign image; that is, the *benshi* was there because the image was there. In other words, it was the desire for the other/technologized foreign image/modernity that created the need for the *benshi.* The *benshi* were entrusted with the important mission of "translating (foreign) modernity."

Indeed, in the case of colonial Taiwan, we must not forget that the film screenings staged by the Association of Taiwanese Culture were intended as part of an enlightenment project that would usher the Taiwanese masses into modernity (Cai 1971, 317–18; Ye Jong-zhong 1971, 317–18). As film historians have pointed out, many films screened by the Association of Taiwanese Culture were educational documentaries (Chen Guo-fu 1985, 89; Ye Jong-zhong 1971, 318). On the list of screened films were films about agriculture in Denmark, the Red Cross, polar animals, and cavalry (*Taiwan People's Newspapers*, January 8, 1929). These films were meant to "enlighten" the illiterate audience and to open their eyes to the world outside. A *benshi* was not simply a subversive political player; he was, first and foremost, a translator, mediating between the audience and the image. His main task was to introduce his audience to the world of the foreign image, to help them learn to grapple with the new technology of visual representation so that they would, it was hoped, understand what it meant "to live in a modern age."

I contend that this understanding of the *benshi*'s performance as basically translation is important in conducting a historicized analysis of the *benshi* phenomenon in colonial Taiwan. Unless we situate the *benshi's* oral performance in the context of cultural translation, we cannot address fully the historical complexity of the social conditions that called the *benshi* into being. In spite of its inscription of the cultural specific in the cinematic space, the presence of the *benshi* is at the same time the reminder of an unfulfilled desire: the desire for the image and the desire for the other. This desire remains unfulfilled as long as the audience does not have adequate access to the meaning of the image.

In his account of one of his early film-viewing experiences during the colonial period, the Taiwanese writer Ye Jong-zhong notes how he failed to grasp the meaning of the film image. The gap between what was shown in the movies (usually imported from abroad) and the daily life of the people in Taiwan was so wide that the Taiwanese audience hardly understood what was going on in the movies (1967, 37). It is important to bear in mind that the meaning of a Western film was not transparent and often proved difficult to understand for many of Asian audiences in the early twentieth century.

In addition to a cultural gap that barred the Asian audience from understanding many of the foreign elements in imported films, the lack of skill for properly decoding the imported technologized visual text also posed a problem. Elizabeth Cowie remarks that films were appreciated mainly as spectacles when they were first introduced to the Arabs. Indeed, it was noted that the Arabs often failed to follow the plot of the film under screening in their early encounters with Western films—they did not even notice it when the film was shown in the wrong order! (1999, 26). This incident calls our attention to the fact that technologized visual representation requires a new mode of appreciation and participation that the audience may not have been accustomed to. The *benshi*'s role as a translator needs to be understood in this context. He or she was called on to translate the foreign exotica and to help the audience gain access to an unfamiliar modern visual mode of representation.

Another historical factor that needs to be taken into account in assessing the *benshi*'s verbal performance as a translation transaction is the linguistic barrier in seeing foreign films. This deserves particular attention in the case of colonial Taiwan. In spite of all of the endeavors of the Japanese colonial government to promote Japanese language education, Japanese was not the main language in the daily transactions of the Taiwanese. The registration rate of local Taiwanese for Japanese primary school education was less than 10 percent in 1915 (Wu 1987, 8). From 1899 to 1918, only a total of 53,401 Taiwanese successfully completed primary education, which constituted less than 2 percent of the total Taiwanese population (Wu 1987, 8). In 1915, only 0.38 percent of the Taiwanese population could use Japanese for daily conversation (Wu 1987, 8).

I will not delve here into the complicated discrimination in Japanese-language education policies and linguistic struggles in colonial Taiwan that obstructed the spread of Japanese as the common language for local Taiwanese. Suffice it to note that in 1925, a year that witnessed the popularity of film as an urban entertainment in colonial Taiwan (Mamie 2001, 286), about 6 percent of the total Taiwanese population was able to speak Japanese (Wu 1987, 19). It is safe to assume that not all of these Japanese-educated Taiwanese were able to understand the imported films on their own. Given the linguistic situation in colonial Taiwan, the majority of local Taiwanese could not manage to decode the films even if they were talkies. Nor could they understand the Japanese or English or Chinese subtitles that were eventually incorporated into the visual

texts. Therefore, reliance on the *benshi* should not be understood as a reluctance on the part of the audience to quit their old habit of art appreciation. Illiteracy and low foreign language proficiency underscore the important role of the *benshi* as a translator mediating between the Taiwanese audience and a foreign mode of representation that was beyond their understanding, both visually and linguistically.

In a sense, the *benshi* thrived on the gap between themselves and the audience, a gap defined by the desire for the technologized visual text and the demand for translation. Once we begin to understand the Asian cinematic space as a space saturated with translation desire, we see that it is translation, rather than the simple reproduction of a familiar cultural tradition, that constitutes the raison d'être of the *benshi.* The *benshi* was brought into the cinematic space to translate. And his translation was supposed to be oriented toward the meaning of the image that appeared inscrutable and foreign to the audience. In the postcolonial paradigm of analysis, the *benshi* is implicitly understood as the spokesman of the local people, for he is taken to be associated with the word, the local, and tradition. But such an interpretation fails to register the gap between the *benshi* and his audience. And it is this gap that throws into relief the *benshi*'s translation as a site of split desire.

On the one hand, the gap, which makes possible the appearance of the *benshi*, speaks of the desire for translating the foreign image—the trace of the other. The *benshi* is there because this desire is not yet fulfilled. Should the audience have already gained access to the technologized image-dominated representation that was believed to be the defining element of "modernity," the presence of the *benshi* would have been regarded as superfluous. Thus, in spite of the furious struggle of the *benshi* to remain in the cinematic space as cinema gradually developed (McDonald 2005, 93), the *benshi* was eventually forced out of business.

The disappearance of the *benshi* did not occur simply because talkies were invented. A more important reason, I would contend, is that the need for the *benshi*'s translation died out as material conditions were transformed that made it possible for the Asian audience to acquire new skills to meet the challenges of this modern mode of representation. In other words, the *benshi* is inseparable from the desire for translation. The *benshi* served as a bridge to the foreign image and to the vision of modernity that the Asian audience did not yet know how to translate into their own language. Thus, it is important to note that in Asian cinematic space, the word does not position itself as a simple opposition to the technologized foreign image. Nor does it attempt, as the second discourse paradigm seems to suggest, to replace the technologized image as the center that defines the Asian cinematic experience.

On the other hand, if the gap between the *benshi* and the audience marks the space of Asian cinema as a space of translation, we should conceive of this space as a site of split translation desire. While enacting the translation of the other, the

benshi also engaged in the translation of the local. I would like to take a closer look into the view of the *benshi* as the spokesperson of the local, which is implicitly operating in both paradigms of cultural translation examined in this essay. Both paradigms set up a binary opposition between the word/the local/tradition and the technologized image/the global/West (or Japan, in the case of Taiwan). In both paradigms, the *benshi* phenomenon is associated with the idea of the local even though the two paradigms have different approaches. But the notion of the *benshi* "representing the local" is problematic once we register the gap between the *benshi* and the local audience.

Indeed, Taiwanese intellectuals from the Association of Taiwanese Culture always had problems communicating with their audience when they gave speeches (Li Cheng-ji 2004, 227; Lee 2006, 145–48). It has been noted that in colonial Taiwan, there was not just an opposition between the official Japanese language and the so-called local Taiwanese language. There was also stratification within the Taiwanese language, not simply owing to ethnic differentiation but also to class division. This language stratification often stood in the way of proper communications between Taiwanese intellectuals and the illiterate masses (Li Cheng-ji 2004, 226–34). This has something to do with their different degrees of exposure to foreign concepts and their translations. Taiwanese colonial intellectuals habitually operated with foreign vocabulary as they tried to grapple with the problems of modernity and colonization. Thus, when they sought to "enlighten" their illiterate audience, they found it hard to get their messages through to an audience for whom the imported, translated words and concepts were all Greek. With this gap between colonial Taiwanese intellectuals and their audience, the "local" is already a site of split language and split desire. While the illiterate masses used a Taiwanese language that was little affected by foreign ideas and vocabulary, the "Taiwanese" language for the intellectuals was already a hybrid form of local Taiwanese infiltrated by Japanese and Chinese *bai-hua*—a modernized form of the Chinese literary language (Li Cheng-ji 2004, 221). Under such circumstances, the idea of the *benshi* as representing the voice of the local is certainly problematic, for the so-called local is not so much a homogeneous entity as a site of complicated play of languages and desires.

Instead of "representing the local," what we have here is a question of "translating the local." What does it mean to translate the local? It would be a mistake to assume that the *benshi* spoke for the local simply because he spoke Taiwanese. I have tried to demonstrate how the "local" was also posed as a question for the *benshi.* The gap between the *benshi* and his audience makes unsustainable the conception of the local word as a unified entity. The "local" is itself a site of splitting, its meanings unsteady and exceeding the simplified inscription of "subversion."

Once we refuse to buy into the simplistic equation of the *benshi*'s verbal play with local resistance and try to register the full complexity of his translation

transaction, we cease to subscribe to the neat binary opposition of spoken word versus technologized image or local versus global that is seen to operate in both paradigms of cultural translation examined in this essay. The verbal play of the *benshi* already points to the possibility of the word's passage to the hegemonic concept of modernity defined by the foreignness of the technologized image. The word is not necessarily subversive. Neither is the "local." Apparently, the complexity of the political and ideological implications of the spoken word needs to be more carefully investigated. We may now find it necessary to revise the set of binary oppositions that serves as the basic theoretical framework for both paradigms of cultural translation. Instead of pitting the *benshi*/the word/the local/tradition neatly against the technologized image/the global/Westernization (or, in the case of colonial Taiwan, Japanization), we may begin to dissect, or at least to problematize, the links between the *benshi* and the local, tradition, and the word.

As a translator mediating between two cultures and two modes of representation, the *benshi* is an ambivalent figure. To disregard this ambivalence is to underestimate the complex practice of cultural translation in the specific historical conjuncture that brought the *benshi* onto the Asian cultural scene. In other words, while we should not lose sight of the possibility of agency in acts of colonial mimicry and translation, we would do violence to the complexity of colonial situation by emphasizing anticolonial struggle at the expense of the desire for translating the (colonizing) other. The colonial space is not simply a space defined by the conflict between the colonial power and anticolonial force. The colonial space, as a space of translation par excellence, is a space saturated with conflicting desire and ambiguities. The *benshi* serves to demonstrate how ambiguities and complicated desire are brought into play in that space.

The Pursuit of the Technologized Image Production

Throughout the colonial period, the Taiwanese tried in vain to gain access to the power of image production (Lu 1961, 6). Because they could not, the Taiwanese were forced to turn to the word in order to envision modern Taiwan. The word became a site of fierce ideological and political struggle. And the word remains the main source of political intervention in contemporary Taiwan. This heavy reliance on the spoken word as the main tool of political and ideological intervention defines the history of Taiwanese reformation. The word is imbued with heavy and complex ideological implications—a legacy from the 1930s, when the Taiwanese spoken word became a crucial issue for the politically oriented literary agenda (Li Cheng-ji 2004; 201–39; Lu 1961, 24–29). This longstanding investment in the power of the spoken word may explain why language is such a hypersensitive issue in Taiwan. Reliance on the spoken word in political interventions remains a defining Taiwanese cultural legacy up to the present day.

Indeed, I cannot stress too much the role of the spoken word in Taiwan's cultural history. From the Taiwanese language movement in the colonial period through the Nativist movement in the 1970s to the contemporary indigenous movement (Wei 2007, 142–43), the enactment of the spoken word has always been equated with the enactment of resistance and intervention.

It was not until the mid-1980s that the issue of technologized image production was cast into the spotlight with the announcement of the Taiwan New Cinema manifesto.[3] The New Documentary filmmaking, which also started in the mid-1980s, throws into relief the urgency of probing the question of the image in representation (Chiu 2007). However, in the field of cultural critique and historical studies, the power of the spoken word continues to preoccupy critics' attention. So far, the long-standing belief in the spoken word as a subversive force continues to hold sway. I have tried to demonstrate that an overemphasis on the subversive power of the spoken word leads to a reductive understanding of the complex roles of the spoken word in the history of ideological struggle in Taiwan. However "local" it may be, the spoken word also speaks of an unfulfilled translation desire that seeks to appropriate something other than what it is.

If the word in Taiwanese cinematic space was brought into play in response to the challenge of modernity, which reveals the power of technologized visuality as the revolutionary mode of representation in the new age, the word is not only associated with local resistance to the overwhelming impact of the emergence of a new mode of representation in modernity, but also is saturated with a desire that inscribes its "lack" as a mode of representation. However, because the technologized image remained out of reach, colonial Taiwanese were forced to fall back on whatever resources were offered by the word to tackle the problem of modernity. Eventually, the word came to define the history of the laborious Taiwanese struggle in the pursuit of modernity. The challenge of the image is left underaddressed. Insofar as the act of translation is a critical engagement with the challenges posed by the other, a simplistic celebration of local resistance does not enable us to fully address the complexity of cultural translation that has increasingly come to define the mediascape of our modern age.

Acknowledgments

This paper is the output of a research project supported by the National Science Council in Taiwan. A preliminary version of the manuscript was presented at a workshop organized by the Center of Taiwan Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. I would like to thank Bi-yu Chang and Dafydd Fell for inviting me to participate in the workshop. The constructive feedback from the workshop participants

[3]The manifesto was published in *Wen-xing* magazine, no. 105, 1987. See Zhan Hong-zhi (1988).

was tremendously useful in the preparation of the manuscript. I would also like to thank Hung-chiung Li, Chi-ming Wang, and particularly Donald Kartiganer for their insightful comments on earlier versions of the draft. The two anonymous reviewers offered very valuable comments and suggestions that helped me think through some of the problems I tried to present in my argument. Professor Hsiao-feng Lee sent me the precious photo of the Mei-tai troupe taken in the Japanese colonial time. I cannot thank him enough for his generous help.

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