Sound, Gender, and the Thing: Earphone and Miss Earphone in Shanghai Cinema, 1939–1949

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When reflecting on the incorporation of sound as an emergent sensory element within Chinese cinema since the late 1920s, Zhen Zhang (2005) succinctly mentions the application of earphones for interpreting use in some Shanghai theaters. Zhang propounds that "the literal translation by a disembodied and technologically mediated voice was, however, not quite the same as the gesticulating and atmosphere-generating 'interpreter' inside the auditorium" (370n86). Recorded in an inconspicuous footnote and inevitably entailing an inadvertence, this commentary diminishes the intricacy of interpreting through earphones, thereby warranting further investigations of the human-machine interplay in articulating Western films through a comprehensible language to Chinese moviegoers.

The invention and development of acoustic devices, from the latter half of the nineteenth century onward, revolutionized the vocalization, storage,

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circulation, and consumption of sounds: the ephemeral, amorphous, idiosyncratic sound can be captured and preserved in its original form and transmitted transcending temporal and geographical restraints. Scholars have been relishing the charm of these audio devices, encompassing but not limited to microphones (e.g., McCracken 2015), phonographs (e.g., Roy and Rodriguez 2022), telephones (e.g., Fischer 1994), earphones (e.g., Weber 2010), and radios and loudspeakers (e.g., Li 2020), devices that have caused colossal changes in the (re)arrangement of *dispositifs* within the modern soundscape, concerning the gender division of labor, audience response, the evolution of vocal genres and aesthetics, the dynamics of competition, and cooperation between media interfaces, as well as the institutionalization of mass media industries. The audio devices, positioned at the intersection of sound, technology, and labor, have therefore indexed and disclosed inextricable entanglements between the human and the nonhuman and further problematized entanglements as such, by which they are empowered to venture beyond the physicality of objects and apodictically assert themselves as *things*.

Situating itself in the global historiography of auditory machinery and echoing the foregoing endeavors to contextualize the sonic devices, this article zooms in on the earphone in Republican Shanghai cinema, with a purpose not only to tease out the intersectional history of the machine-mediated and gendered interpreting voice but also to probe into the problematics of the thing, to enunciate the thingness—hinted at but never lucidly enounced—derived from the acoustic objects as represented by the earphone under scrutiny. Bill Brown's (2001) elaboration of the dialectic between objects and things sheds light on the emergence of thingness of earphones. Things serve as the metaphysics of objects. If objects embody themselves as material, concretized, and palpable beings, things hover over objects, invented and functioning to signify the abstract out of the material and sound the ineffable, as well as attach affects, values, imaginations to the mundane. Objects and things, ensnared in the danger of conceptual conflation and reciprocal effacement, lack a distinct boundary. But Brown does offer us a scenario where we can temporarily catch a glimpse of things out of objects: "We begin to confront the thingness of objects," Brown writes, "when they stop working for us" (4). If juxtaposed with Brown's subsequent

expositions regarding the subject-object relation, the "stop" is not so simple as it seems. If this stop, for Brown, represents a methodology for bifurcating thingness from objecthood as caused by an altered subject-object relation, then it is also justifiable to interpret this "stop" as something else—as "changes" of any forms of human-object interaction, as "gaps" of material development, as a psychological "void" that requires fulfillment and ignites imaginations about new things, and even as a "start" that reifies a nonexistent subject-object relation, that rectifies the perennial irregularities between objects and things, and that remolds objects in accordance with "the not yet formed or the not yet formable" things (5).

This article does not intend to be a thematic exploration of thing theory, and the boundary between things and objects, in either Brown's canonized essay or the relevant scholarship,[1] can hardly be demarcated. Nevertheless, this coarse, rudimentary, and far from optimal division between objects and things foreseeably is of immediate and immense value to help us elucidate, on the one hand, the objecthood of earphones—their technical contribution to the interpreting enterprise—and on the other hand, how the application of earphones mediated the film translation industry, moderated the gender composition of translators, regulated the consumption of foreign films, and sculpted the aesthetic shift in vocal culture and mass entertainment—the thingness inherent in earphones as informed by thing theory. Therefore, through the prism of thing theory, of relevance is not only how earphones as a nascent object intervened in and altered film-screening and filmgoing practices but also the "genealogy" of earphones, earphones as materialization and epitomization of the continuing endeavors Shanghai cinema made to reduce language barriers for local filmgoers and the concomitant evolutions that occurred in the film translation industry. In treating earphones as the thing, therefore, this essay is dedicated to unraveling not only what exceeds the object in utilization but also what Brown refers to as the "latency" lurking in the prehistory of the very object (5), which is, in the context of Shanghai cinema, the translational and transcultural praxis, one that foregrounded and determined, in one way or another, the formulation of earphones for interpreting use from 1939 onward.

In addition to the dialectical dichotomy between things and objects, a theory of things cannot validate itself without considering, if not recogniz-

ing, the agency of humans. For Brown, things serve more like a conceptual container encapsulating the anxieties and ambivalences arising from the human-object interaction—a gray area or contact zone where humans and objects build connections and foster intimacy through sensual perceptions, emotional investments, psychological projections, and retro-projections. In this light, *things* becomes a synonym for the totality of human-object relations: it indicates a status that Ian Hodder (2014) defines as "entanglement"—the "symmetry of relations" (19) and "dialectic of dependence and dependency" (20) between humans and objects. To draw your attention to humans, nonetheless, aims not only to include the operators of earphones—Yiyifeng xiaojie 譯意風小姐 (Miss Earphone)[2]—within the purview of this article but also, out of a more imperative need, to remind you of the human-object interplay, instead of the mere object, that truly makes the thing shine. If the perspective of thing theory brings to the surface the before—the *shuoming shu* 說明書 (program pamphlets),[3] *zimu fanyi* 字幕翻譯 (intertitle/subtitle translations),[4] *benshi* 本事 (film synopses),[5] *yingxi xiaoshuo* 影戲小說 (shadow-play stories), *dianying xiaoshuo* 電影小說 (film novels)—which can be legitimized as the "latency" of earphones, then it also seems necessary to identify the precedent counterparts of Miss Earphone—the male literati who made the aforementioned textual translations—and to put the human-object interplay within a broader time frame so that the thingness emanated from earphones can be better pinpointed. In addition to the feminization of the interpreting industry, which attests to the power of the earphone, the application of earphones shaped a new form of mass entertainment fraught with gender tensions. It was the earphone that empowered Miss Earphones to vocalize within the soundscape of modernity in 1940s Shanghai; it was also the earphone that provided the male audience with acoustic privacy to facilitate the consumption of female voices, concealing—rather than eradicating—gender inequalities. Such a gender distribution prompts a renewed reflection on the interplay between object, gender, and sound.

This article is not, indeed, an archaeology of the earphone, nor is it a biography of Miss Earphone. Instead, both earphone and Miss Earphone are taken as microcosms to frame the film translation history in Republican Shanghai cinema. This article is thus intended, on the one hand, to reveal how the material development organized, disorganized, and reorganized

the filmmaking and filmgoing forms, and to bring to light, on the other, the esoteric entanglement between objects and human agents, embodied in the advancement of translation technologies, in the corresponding adjustments imposed on translation practitioners, as in the media competition between textuality and sonicity, the professional rivalry between male translators and female interpreters, and the commercial interplay between cinemas and audiences. For descriptive and argumentative clarity, this article, though revolving around the pivotal event of the 1939 application of earphones as a watershed moment, unfolds in a chronological order, commencing with the prehistory of earphones, then progressing to illuminate its objecthood, and ultimately uncovering its thingness, which is embedded in the film translation enterprise, the history of technology, and the larger contexts of mass entertainment and popular culture in Republican Shanghai.

Prehistory of the Thing

If, as argued, the earphone can be legitimized as a thing, one that, from a pragmatic perspective only, helped local audiences overcome language barriers, its thingness as such lurked and thus is traceable in the preceding cross-linguistic practices—more specifically speaking, the material objects that served to the same translational goal as earphones did. Before earphones were adopted for interpreting use, the task of translation was conducted by program pamphlets, intertitle and subtitle translations on slides, film synopses published mostly on newspapers, and bound shadow-play stories and film novels. Due to material constraints, it is unsurprising that Shanghai cinema turned to textual mediums as the most convenient means to "translate" foreign films. This form of translation not only served its expected role in facilitating cross-linguistic communication but also exemplified a transmedia practice that transcribed and transfigured films—with visual representations and lexical expressions—into the form of text-based storytelling.

I will offer an overview of the translational genres before proceeding to untangle the entanglement between this transmediality and thingness. Usually composed bilingually in a hybridized language of classical Chinese and modern vernacular (Lee 1999: 89–90; Zhen Zhang 2005: 49), program pamphlets were dispatched before movies were played. In the era of silent mov-

ies, which were bereft of linguistic elements except for titles and intertitles, pamphlet makers translated, if not renarrated, those films based more on visual images than on the insufficient language elements. Confronted with the subsequent augmented use of intertitles and subtitles, pamphlets, due to limited space, persisted in deploying condensed synopses as the trans-editing method. With the widespread use of subtitles, subtitle translation gradually manifested itself as an indispensable part of film translation. Translated subtitles were usually projected on screens separated from and adjacent to the main screen. Of various sizes, these screens were positioned either above and below or to the left and right of the main screen. Subtitle translations were handwritten beforehand and projected manually in sync with the progression of original subtitles during film exhibition. Film critic Xidu (1941: 12) commented that in second-tier Shanghai cinemas subtitle translations offered by Golden Gate proved most informative and well structured, while those provided by theaters, such as Lido and Paris, were too cursory, sloppily written, and perfunctory. What's worse, despite efforts to synchronize subtitle translations with the display of movies, projectionists may fail to maintain an appropriate speed, resulting in a misalignment between subtitles and visuals and thus causing audiences "considerable inconvenience" (12).[6]

Outside of cinema, translations of foreign films were produced, circulated, and consumed in other forms. Film synopses were usually crafted in semiclassical Chinese and disseminated through newspapers, contingent upon either the intrinsic content of the film or the accessible intertitles and subtitles. For instance, the synopsis for *Surcouf* (1924, dir. Luitz-Morat) was developed by summarizing film content (Yun 1925: 4); the synopsis for *The Garden of Eden* (1928, dir. Lewis Milestone) was essentially an amalgamation of translated intertitles (*Shenbao* 1928); and film dialogue constituted the major source for the synopsis of *The Match King* (1932, dirs. William Keighley and Howard Bretherton) (Ximeng 1933). Translators' declarations were frequently given at the outset of these synopses, claiming that film synopses would offer more exhaustive references, serving as valuable supplements to program pamphlets dispensed by cinemas. Concurrently with the circulation of film synopses, shadow-play stories and film novels found dissemination through print media such as magazines and newspapers, as well as compilation into stand-alone books. When presented as bound volumes,

these stories were enriched and embellished by variegated paratexts, including but not limited to film stills and cast information. For instance, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923, dir. Wallace Worsley) was, as highlighted by its advertisement, translated and complied into books for sale, which included film stills (*Shenbao* 1924).

Even though Shanghai audiences and film practitioners steadfastly considered the aforementioned textual genres as translations,[7] these "translations," which prioritized creativity and pragmaticism over strict fidelity to the original text—and, of course, the original text of some silent films consisted solely of their titles—can only fall under the category of cultural translation which, if embracing "an openness of the concept" suggested by Maria Tymoczko (2014: 57), is commensurate to transformation, transmission, and transculturation. This cultural translation, embodied as textualized translations either within or beyond cinema, constituted an interface that complicated as well as contributed to film exhibition as "a system of interfaces" (Zhou 2021). At the surface, this interface manifests itself as an interaction between language and visual arts, whose complexity points ultimately to the intersection between print and audiovisual culture, a realm governed and regulated by material conditions. Rather than rigidly defining these translations as domesticated expressions of foreign films, it is more pertinent to conceptualize these artifacts—flyers, pamphlets, and brochures—as materialized incarnations of the visual and then audiovisual medium, ones that signified and signaled a tangible expansion of the cinematic beyond the space of theater.

A transmedia adaptability, or transmediality, looms out of such cultural translation. This transmediality emerged from the material reliance on the textual medium as much as it was designated, determined, and destined to bridge the sensory gap induced by the advent of film. Set against the backdrop of the early twentieth century, when film was developed as a burgeoning media form and print culture was still in full swing, the text-based translations should not be construed superficially as instrumental tools for surmounting linguistic barriers, but they warrant recognition as endeavors strategically intended to supplement or in some instances supplant visual media to fulfill the imperatives of mass communication. The transmedia reconfiguration of resources as such pivoted on the fact that, in comparison

to films, print media continued to benefit from expediency in producing, disseminating, and consuming popular culture. This advantage of print culture was largely ascribed to the advantageous utility of the material objects, which, as compared to films, interacted with both filmgoers within cinema and a broader group of urbanites outside cinema. For argumentative convenience, if utility is temporarily underscored as one, albeit not the only, factor eliciting the thingness of objects, then these textual objects have attained a thingness that, akin to that of the earphone (as will be addressed below), resulted from the human-object interplay conditioned by the cooperation or competition, or both, among various media forms at this historical juncture.

These textual artifacts asserted their thingness under different contexts,[8] but in an essay elucidating translation history, emphasis is placed on the translation industry. If the crucial role of the human-object relationship in thing theory is acknowledged, then what is of concern is not only how the emergence of film brought forth the materialized translations but also the (re)formation of human-object relations in the film translation industry. Scholars (Lee 1999; Zhen Zhang 2005) have, intentionally or not, reached an agreement that the text-based translations were composed mostly, if not exclusively, by the male literati of Yuanyang hudie pai 鴛鴦蝴蝶派 (the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School),[9] including Pan Yihua 潘毅華, Zhou Shoujuan 周瘦鵑, Song Chunfang 宋春舫, Wang Chunyin 王純銀, Lu Dan'an 陸澹盦, and others. Given the male-dominated composition of translators as a group, the question in point is less about how these translators made the translations than about what made the male translators capable of translating. As implied by Zhen Zhang (2005: 49), the Butterfly School literati maintained a linguistic advantage through the utilization of a hybrid language, blending the classical Chinese and its modern vernacular, which found favor among the so-called petty bourgeoisie in Republican Shanghai. This language, in Leo Lee's (1999: 90) terms, endowed filmgoers with "a double pleasure," one derived from the exotic visuals and the other from the trans-writings imbued with stylistic nuances of the Butterfly School.

Provided with these insights from Zhang and Lee, further explanations are required considering what this translating language signified when con-

fronted with the incremental yet irreversible transformation from print to audiovisual culture. This language cannot be reduced to customized signs without material bases but should be recognized as codes clinging to the textual vehicles, nurtured by the millennia-old print culture and manipulated overwhelmingly by the male literati—a privileged class that almost monopolized the generation and publication of texts in imperial China. As films emerged as a germinal medium, they were enmeshed in the intricate fabric of print culture—a closely knit network woven by male agents and textual artifacts. In addition to foreign films, local Chinese films were likewise "translated" into textual formats, categorized as film novels to facilitate wider circulation and consumption, evincing the power of the textual in representing, if not outright replacing, the filmic.[10] Films therefore relied on the semiclassical and semivernacular language to be translated and articulated the way they were circulated, comprehended, and consumed in the form of material objects. This rupture—or, alternatively, interdependence—of print and audiovisual mediums is described by Leo Lee (1999: 90) as "a possible link between film and fiction—film plots read as written stories."

The consumption of films was regulated by the preexisting human-object relations structured in print culture. The human-object relations, as suggested by Perry Link (1981: 79), were further mediated by the "technological change (new methods of printing and transportation), new commercial roles (the professional author, publisher, distributor, advertiser), and rising literacy rates." The male literati thus served not just as text producers: they formed groups and associations (164–70), ran publishing houses, and took charge of newspapers and magazines to leverage their influence in print culture for cultivating a spectatorship that complied with aesthetic standards comparable to those of the Butterfly novel readership. For example, Bao Tianxiao 包天笑, a Butterfly School writer and translator, was strategically featured in film publicity, serving "a ploy to capitalize on his popularity and turn his vast number of readers into film audience members" (Zhen Zhang 2005: 154). The same strategy was applied in film advertisements, where the names of Butterfly School male translators, such as Zhou Shoujuan, were usually underscored (e.g., *Shenbao* 1924).

The Debut of the Earphone

The thingness of earphones remained dormant in the precursory translation practices whose intrinsic quality as transmedia and whose regulatory function of the human-object relationship continued to moderate the application and formulation of earphones—as an incarnation of the textual antecedents. The inherent logic within the chronicles of the obsolescence and renewal of the objects has remained consistent. If the textual artifacts indicated an endeavor to textualize films, the earphone as another material device was intended to vocalize films. Nevertheless, the transmedia and cross-sensory translation practices, which gained momentum from the material irregularity between the filmic and the print, were further complicated when sound as another modality assumed an augmented role in film exhibition.

The transition from silent to sound movies was not achieved overnight; instead, in the 1930s, "all-silent, semi-silent, partial-sound and total-sound films . . . coexisted" (Zhen Zhang 2005: 81). Dialogue constituted only one vocal element, beside which background music inbuilt in the soundtrack or offered by live bands was of no less importance (Junchao 1925: 2). The challenge arising from the transition to sound movies, however, resided not in the nonliteral sounds intelligible without linguistic constraints but in the translation of dialogue laden with substantial meanings that necessitated unpacking. Theater advertisements in Shanghai showed a predilection for emphasizing that both Chinese translations and live music were offered, embodying a concerted effort to elevate the moviegoing experience through a multimodal approach. This conventional multimodal approach, integrating understandable translations offered by film pamphlets, matching music by live bands, and filmic visuals on the screen, might have served as the reason for some initial resistance to foreign sound movies. The Paris Theatre, for instance, staunchly adhered to this approach; its adamancy was, as it contended, ascribed to the persisting language barriers that rendered sound movies devoid of any advantage over their silent counterparts (*Shenbao* 1929). The Paris Theatre's adamancy proved to be successful, as its "seats are all taken half an hour before the running time" and "its popularity is unprecedented in Shanghai theaters" (*Shenbao* 1930).

The unfavorable reception of foreign sound movies probably stemmed

from the fact that film dialogue was not translated or, even worse, was deemed untranslatable. The success of the Paris Theatre rested upon its perceptive judgment of this technical lag—namely, a temporal and temporary discrepancy between filmmaking techniques and dubbing tools. This lag brings to the fore the materiality of translation, which, as suggested by translation studies scholar Karin Littau (2011, 2016), constitutes an essential part of translation—an activity that has, however, long been considered as something without media and material support. Littau (2011: 277) exhorts us to position translation within "the larger circuit of media history," for "it is not only the linguistic text but also the media carrier which is subject to translation." The materiality of translation, in Littau's understanding, includes both mediality, given that translation is media-carried, and technicity, as media is subject to continual technological development. This materiality thus conveniently manifests itself in the dynamic update of objects as well as in their interventionist role in mediating among modalities, languages, and senses. When foreign sound movies introduced new challenges to the practice of moviegoing and comprehension, the conventional way remained viable—sound-borne dialogue could be and was adapted into texts the way motion pictures were textualized.[11] This transmedia collaboration, considering its efficacy, is unapologetic, but given the uninformative textual translations as well as the significant number of illiterate film viewers,[12] foreign sound films may have achieved greater acceptance if sounds were interpreted.

Earphones responded to the transmedia and cross-sensory gap as an object of utility to transmit simultaneous interpretations. There exist two narrative renditions concerning the debut of earphones in Shanghai cinema, with A. R. Hager assuming the role of protagonist in both stories. Hager served as the manager of the Asia Theatres, which ran several first-tier cinemas, such as Grand Theatre, Nanking Theatre, and Cathay Theatre. During a film exhibition, Hager was impressed by the interpreting service offered, as recorded in the two stories, either by his friend's wife at a social gathering (e.g., Yang 1940: 47) or by the professional interpreter Ms. Nie at a preview screening (e.g., *Zhongguo yingxun* 1940: 29). Hager was said to proclaim, without exception, "how poor Chinese audiences are when seeing foreign films without such references offered by interpreters" (Yang 1940: 47). Fur-

ther enlightened by the earphone used at the League of Nations in Geneva, Hager decided to implement a trial installation of earphones in the Grand Theatre. According to Margareta Bowen et al. (1995: 250), the "system of earphones and microphones" developed by International Business Machines Corporation was deployed by the League of Nations to offer consecutive interpreting in 1927 and simultaneous interpreting in 1935. This situation was covered by some English newspapers based in China, such as the *Shanghai Times* (1929: 7) and the *China Press* (1929: 7), potentially serving as the sources from which Hager drew inspiration.

At the end of 1939, the Grand Theatre was equipped with two hundred sets of earphones adapted for theater use. Each seat was installed with a plug socket, connecting the earphones worn by audience members to the booth from which interpreters transmitted their voices through microphones. On November 4, 1939, local and foreign journalists were invited to attend the premiere of *The Return of the Cisco Kid* (1939, dir. Herbert I. Leeds), during which earphones were implemented for the inaugural provision of Chinese interpretations. In the wide coverage of the test screening (e.g., Kelu 1939; Sima 1939; *Qingchun dianying zhoukan* 1939), which indicates the grandiosity of the event, earphones garnered widespread acclaim—they not only assisted audiences with inadequate proficiency in English to overcome language barriers but also, during film viewing, emancipated audiences from the visual and cognitive burdens associated with consulting subtitles or program pamphlets. The ingrained tradition of coupling visuals with indispensable textual translations underwent a transformation into a brand-new audiovisual viewing mode by harnessing the auditory sense. The advent of earphones consequently constituted nothing short of a revolution—a sensory paradigm shift expediting the transition from print to audiovisual culture.

Embraced by Shanghai film practitioners, the arrival of earphones precipitated changes within the film industry. A report contended that the installation of earphones in the Grand Theatre facilitated a demographic shift in its audience composition, transcending the confines of "modern teenagers" to encompass the elderly, who, with the succor of earphones, demonstrated a newfound willingness to engage with a diverse array of film genres (Sima 1939: 13). Concerns arose about theaters that insisted on exclusively showcas-

ing Chinese films, expressing apprehension that their audiences might be enticed into those theaters equipped with earphones (Kelu 1939: 2). Owing to such a favorable reception, earphones expeditiously permeated other theaters in Shanghai[13] and various urban centers, including Hong Kong, Beijing, Nanjing, Chongqing, and Kunming. Although words of praise outnumbered criticisms, there were voices of skepticism that can be divided into two categories. The first category cast doubts on the professional ability of interpreters, finding fault with their unfaithful (e.g., Qisi 1947: 2), incomplete (e.g., Guangyu 1947: 2), or emotionless (e.g., Raoxi 1947: 5) interpretations. The second grumbled about the inconvenience caused by wearing earphones, highlighting the auditory isolation from ambient sounds, such as the film scores and whispered conversations with friends (e.g., Chengjian 1941: 11; Tangluo 1949: 3).

From Earphone to Miss Earphone

The thingness of the earphone, as elaborated above, becomes more discernible in its adherence to a transmedia pragmaticism that was nurtured by its textual counterparts in facilitating cross-linguistic and cross-sensory engagement in film consumption. To thoroughly capture the thingness derived from the earphone, however, warrants further inquiries into its operators—to unravel how the emergence of the object instigated a reconfiguration of the established human-object relationship. Miss Earphone— Yiyifeng xiaojie or Yiyifeng nülang 譯意風女郎—served as the most common name for those earphone-equipped interpreters. Despite the ephemerality of sounds that renders a conundrum to trace the impromptu interpretations, a news report offers scant but pertinent clues:

> The film exhibited yesterday is *The Return of the Cisco Kid*. . . . Two soft-voiced ladies offer an interpreting service. Interpreting the film through Mandarin with exceptional fluency and clarity, the interpreters not only deliver narrations and dialogue but also resort to many supporting words [*zhuci* 助詞].[14] In a scene depicting scenic beauty, one interpreter remarks, "Look! What a wonderful place! How lovely!" When the protagonist sings after evading danger, she exclaims, "Look, he is singing joyfully." During

> the scene where one of the main characters enters a perilous situation, she says, "Ah! It is dangerous for him to go to that place!" There is even a scene where the hero and heroine engage in flirtation and approach a kiss; she comments as usual, "Now the hero is flirting with the heroine, and then . . ." When the kiss transpires, she trails off with a murmuring of "then . . . then . . . ," unable to continue. Supporting words, as intriguing as those mentioned, recur throughout the interpretation. (Kelu 1939: 2)

The responsibilities of Miss Earphones have extended beyond mere linguistic transference, encompassing explanation, commentary, humor infusion, audience interaction, and even education, which were facilitated by the apt and adept deployment of *zhuci*. Miss Earphones thus cannot be reduced to interpreters but rather are vocal performers. The failure of interpreting the kissing scenario serves as a testament to the performativity of the profession: the murmuring of "then . . . then . . ." was not viewed as nonprofessional but endorsed as "intriguing." The murmuring, in this light, functioned more as a performative tactic designed to arouse the interest of audiences.

The performative nature of the earphone-assisted career endowed Miss Earphones with considerable latitude in deviating from the source text (motion pictures and dialogue) to take care of the needs of audiences.[15] The recruitment advertisement for Miss Earphones illustrates how the concern for acceptance took precedence over that for fidelity. According to Mary (1948: 11), who passed the recruiting test and became a Miss Earphone, there were three criteria for selecting prospective practitioners: first, a good command of English for "thoroughly understanding the dialogue in foreign films"; second, the ability to speak fluent Mandarin so that audiences could understand the interpretation; and third, a "low and pleasant voice," "clear and strong" while not "hurting audiences' auditory sense." Although the recruitment notice established benchmarks for bilingual proficiency and conversion capability, the paramount criterion was whether the audiences could understand and appreciate the interpretation. Therefore, criteria such as "clear," "strong," and "pleasant," which prioritized articulacy and acceptability, were underscored for producing viable interpretations, while faithfulness and accuracy—the source-text-oriented standards—were marginalized or not even incidentally mentioned.[16]

In compliance with the emphasis on elocution, Miss Earphones strived to deliver fluent, expressive, and performative utterances. Confronted with the challenge that English dialogue could shift rapidly (12), Zhang Zuping (1947: 18) urged interpreters "to translate in simple, clear, and concise phrases to vividly capture and deliver the original content," which ensured expressiveness at the expense of fidelity. In furtherance of enhancing expressiveness, Miss Earphones were permitted to attend film test screenings to prepare for on-the-spot interpreting assignments (Mary 1948: 12). Ideally, they would have been provided with English dialogue and would have gotten them translated beforehand to facilitate subsequent interpreting tasks (Zhang Zuping 1947: 18). Miss Earphones could even satisfy their craving for performance. Mary (1948: 11), for instance, characterized the earphone-assisted profession as a synergistic fusion of film, drama, and oration—a platform where she could actualize her performative aspirations and dramatic interests. She impelled herself not only to "translate dialogue meanings" but also to "immerse herself in roles" and "convey to audiences the characters' delight, anger, sorrow, and joy" (11).

Nevertheless, interpreter and performer only assumed two roles of the multifaceted profession. Miss Earphones also played the role of social educators: Mary (1948: 12) elucidated the technique of montage to her audiences; Zhang Zuping (1947: 18) advocated for the inclusion of more "meaningful" materials, including film introduction and commentary, to assist audiences in "learning about film content" and "improving their aesthetic taste." Acting as interpreter, explainer, performer, and educator, Miss Earphones share similarities with film narrators in disparate historical and geographical contexts, such as the Japanese *benshi*, the Korean *pyônsa*, the film projectionist in Mao's China, and the voice-over narrator of "edited film recording" in 1970s China.[17] Motivated to enhance the film literacy of their audiences, these film narrators were responsible for either explaining motion pictures or interpreting film dialogue, during which entertainment, education, propaganda, and other functions were performed.

Emerging mostly, if not exclusively, in non-Western cinemas, these narrators responded ultimately to the invention of films that necessitated their presentation through an array of exhibitionary apparatuses—an object called forth a cluster of objects, be they human or nonhuman. These narra-

tors thus can be considered as exercising, in Weihong Bao's (2015: 9) terms, a linear model of the medium through which they relied on their bodies as tools to intervene in and mediate between "the sender, the receiver, the message, and the channel." In this regard, Miss Earphones not only are narrators deciphering the "conflicted cinematic vocabulary and grammar" (Andrew 2004: 15) but also can be objectified, in a neutral sense, as a medium made of flesh and blood—a materialized object akin to the earphone serving to bridge transmedia and cross-sensory gaps as produced by the advent of film.

The Power of the Object

The emergence of earphones gave rise to a new profession. This profession, however, cannot be reduced to a formation of an additional human-object relation but should be recognized, when viewed against the broader film translation industry, as a reconfiguration of (non)human resources. A gender shift serves as the most prominent feature of the reconfiguration: the Butterfly School male literati no longer monopolized the translation industry, and it was women who took control of the interpreting career. Although specific demographic information awaits discovery, it is no exaggeration to contend that the interpreting profession is a feminized one. Qisi (1947: 2) asserted that "currently most of the commentators are female." And it was specified in a recruitment notice that only female interpreters were required (*Shenbao* 1938). There was even an imagist-style definition of the earphone: "League of Nations in Geneva; gatherings in Shanghai cinemas; and women's crisp sounds—these three elements are synthesized as earphones" (Sima 1939: 13).

The feminized profession becomes more justifiable if viewed against the larger soundscape of Shanghai cinema. In grappling with the plausible correlation between sound and gender, scholars (Zhen Zhang 2005; Ma 2015) have affirmed that female voices, owing to the development of recording and filmmaking techniques, had become an indispensable sensory element in the production and consumption of mass media in Shanghai before the 1940s. Zhen Zhang (2005: 307) observes that "early sound films commonly privileged singing girls and self-reflexive reference to the theater world," and it is not until the late 1930s that "the female singing voice was joined by male voices and eventually swallowed up in a revolutionary chorus" (Ma

2015: 12). It therefore is irrefutable that female voices exerted predominant, if not complete, control over the soundscape in the 1930s.

The ubiquity of female voices constituted a phenomenon that Jean Ma (2015) terms "the songstress in Chinese cinema." The Chinese songstress, in Jean Ma's use, serves as a generic category of the women whose voices gained popularity through radio broadcasts and sound movies. This phenomenon incarnated the traditional "entertainment culture," which assigned women to the role of singsong girls and male literati to that of pleasure-seekers. This role assignment, along with the decline of the courtesan industry, was passed down to the cinema industry. With the aid of "a panoply of mass-accessible cultural productions catering to an urban petty bourgeoisie" (15), women underwent a metamorphosis, transitioning from singsong girls in live pleasure quarters to luminaries on the screen. Compared to female images that held no less appeal than female voices, voices transmitted through radios were more accessible and consequently more favorably consumed by the Shanghai audience, leading to a prevalence of female voices. This deduction cannot be accused of building some arbitrary and clichéd erotic relationship between feminine sound and male demand. As will be addressed, there is no denying that female voices, including those articulated by Miss Earphones, did cater to the male audiences who were captivated by erotic imaginations through the auditory sense.

No definitive correlations existed between the female-dominated soundscape of the 1930s and the preference for female interpreters in the 1940s. Surely in this process umpteen intricate factors were at play. Nonetheless, this deductive juxtaposition proves instructive in gauging the nuanced interplay between sound and gender, language and media, human and object. It is observed that the singers in Shanghai cinema were predominantly female, while the composers were primarily male (Ma 2015: 11; Zhen Zhang 2005: 312). Such a gender divide in the labor force is isomorphic to that in the translation industry—male translators monopolized text-based translations and female interpreters sound-borne interpretations. It is thus not an overstatement that texts showed a propensity for fostering intimacy with men and sounds with women. This proclivity was profoundly rooted in imperial China's patriarchal tradition, wherein men were permitted and encouraged to pursue scholarly and official careers through text-centric imperial

examinations—a privilege, however, denied to women, who were deemed of propriety only in the absence of exposure to texts. This paradigm underwent reform during the Republican era, ushering in a transformative phase where women started to receive education. Yi Dan and Peng Jin (2020) posit education as a decisive factor contributing to the feminization of the interpreting profession. Indeed, the first two female interpreters at the Grand Theatre graduated from Yenching University and the University of Shanghai (Suxiao 1939: 1).

The debut application of earphones, viewed now, served as an epiphanic moment of gigantic gender-mediated irony. In addition to the two female interpreters, the Grand Theatre invited another two delegates—Mr. Zhou Shoujuan and Mr. Yan Duhe 嚴獨鶴—to give comments according to their translation experiences. At the press conference after the screening, they bounteously praised the female interpreters for the unexpected interpreting quality. Zhou and Yan served as the editor in chief at *Shenbao* and *Xinwenbao*, respectively, two of the most influential newspapers in Republican Shanghai. Due to their seniority and capital in press circles, they were not only translation producers but also magnates of the print industry. The implication of the act of conferring honor on the female interpreters by the male translators thus is twofold: on the one hand, a gradual yet unfaltering gender shift was underway within the translation industry, and on the other, a gendered disciplinary power persisted, wherein the empowerment of women remained subject to the authority of men established in the print industry. The earphone indisputably reshaped the gender dynamics in the workforce, but this power of the object was, as I have shown, not unconstrained.

The Male Ear

The earphone not only reshaped the demographical landscape within the film translation industry but also fostered new dynamics between translators and audiences. As delineated by Lawrence Venuti (1995: 1), the penchant for and imperative of fluency in text-based translation make translation "not in fact a translation, but paradoxically the *de facto* 'original text,'" thereby perpetuating the invisibility of translators. The textual fluency pivots on the

intermediating effort of translation while ironically denying the existence of both translation and translator. The invisibility of translators, which is ultimately governed by the pursuit of readability at the reception level, nevertheless does not hold true for the interpreting profession that retained, if not exploited, the sonic features of Miss Earphones to establish an authorial—rather than merely translatorial—role of interpreters.

The audibility afforded by Miss Earphones presents an intriguing counterpoint to the invisibility of translators. The interpreter's audibility manifested itself in the gendered media coverage. A torrent of expository tropes, such as *yue'er* 悅耳 (euphonious) (e.g., Suxiao 1939: 1; Sima 1939: 13; Mary 1948: 11), *wanzhuan* 婉轉 (mellifluous) (e.g., Suxiao 1939: 1; Yang 1940: 48), *jiao* 嬌 (sweet and delicate) (e.g., Yang 1940: 48), *qingcui* 清脆 (crisp) (e.g., Suxiao 1939: 1), *meimiao* 美妙 (beautiful) (e.g., Sima 1939: 13), *dongting* 動聽 (pleasant) (e.g., Zhang Zuping 1947: 18), and *rouhe* 柔和 (soft) (e.g., Kelu 1939: 2; *Qingchun dianying zhoukan* 1939: 2), constituted gender-specific criteria for seemingly assessing the voice of women instead of interpreters. Voice surely constitutes an integral dimension in the assessment of interpreting proficiency, but an exclusive emphasis on voice would inevitably obfuscate the manifold skills set inherent to the practice of interpreting. Despite scant criticisms of interpreting skills, gender-oriented commentaries assumed a greater presence in the news coverage. In this way, the profession of Miss Earphone transcended the mere act of interpreting but operated as a gendered performance, one that was enacted exclusively by women and delivered through female voices.

Through microphones and earphones, Miss Earphones artificially delivered and augmented their soft, dulcet, and sensually breathy sounds, which shaped a new form of auditory consumption: "A few days ago, I went to the Roxy Theatre to see *Du Barry Was a Lady*. . . . The interpretation offered by the Miss Earphone was exhaustive, going so far as to translate the phrase 'I love you.' A young man in a suit seated beside me then murmured to himself that 'I love you, too'" (Liangting 1946: 3). "For those in Shanghai, if you go to see foreign films, you will have both visual and auditory pleasures. When it comes to the clandestine love dialogue, earphones provide an avenue to savor the melodious tones of the Chinese lady who delivers sweet and soothing flirtatious lines directly to your ears" (Yang 1940: 48). The pre-

sented evidence directs our attention to the unequivocal correlation between the female interpreter's audibility and "the male ear"[18]—that is, the male audience's voyeuristic auditory sense. The ideation of the male ear is comparable to Laura Mulvey's (1975: 11) conceptualization of the male gaze that "projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly." The male ear problematizes the acoustic consumption of female voices the way the male gaze questions the gender-biased visual presentation of women. If women are visually represented, conforming to a "to-be-looked-at-ness" that objectifies them as erotic, then, by the same mechanism, the voice of Miss Earphones was subjugated to a sort of to-be-heard-ness governed by the male ear. It bears pointing out that this to-be-heard-ness validated itself in the milieu of cinema—dark, immersive, and thus suggestive of eroticism. This ambient arrangement matched seamlessly with the use of earphones as not just a tool of listening but, in Heike Weber's (2010: 340) terms, a "technique of acoustic privatization."[19] The formulation of the male ear hinged not only on the audible female voices transmitted by earphones but also on the sonic privacy enabled by the earphone to foster intimacy and proximity.

In addition to such an erotic drive, other factors also took part in this gendered phenomenon. In a regretful tone, one report (Wusejizhe 1946) lamented that foreign sailors found it impossible to comprehend the interpretation offered by Miss Earphones, despite having no difficulty in understanding the original dialogue. This self-delusory report irrefutably lapsed into a nationalistic sentiment, but meanwhile it testified to the indispensable role of Miss Earphones in not only interpreting dialogue but also mediating mass media consumption. What mattered was not the visuals of "foreign girls with thighs stretched across" (8) but how this visual representation was "annotated" by Miss Earphones, constituting an erotic enjoyment that was both local and exotic. Nevertheless, the audiences Miss Earphones served cannot have been exclusively male, which problematizes the extensive coverage of the male ear. It might serve as a reason that theaters, operating as profit-driven entities, may strategically shape media coverage to appeal to their prospective audiences.

What is of note, nonetheless, is the fact that the male ear was counteracted by Miss Earphones, who exercised the power of sound and object.

Zhang Zuping (1947: 18) considered the booth, the working venue for Miss Earphones, as *jingong* 禁宫 (forbidden palace):

> The forbidden palace is positioned behind the seat area opposite the screen, a confined space featuring only two double beds, a square aperture in the front wall, and a rear door. During film screening, the door is shut, *enclosing* you in the forbidden palace and *isolating* you from the external world. Then you ascend a tall stool, activate a lamp, and gaze through the small square aperture at the screen radiating in the darkness. Equipped with the earphone connected to the film's audio source, you unfold the pretranslated translation (if any) and start to interpret and explain. How strange it is that every uttered sound reaches the audience *without delay*! You are *constrained* within the confines of the forbidden palace, hearing your voice reverberating and boiling in this small room. Yet, when you *look down at* the silent audience *buried* in darkness, you find they are engrossed by the motions on the screen while listening to your voice! Your explanation serves as an *instruction* that brings them closer to the soul of the film, as they can comprehend the storyline *only* through tightly following your voice. (italics added)

The forbidden palace metaphor sheds light on the interplay between gender and power within the spatial and optical design of cinema. Situated between the luminous screen and the enclosed booth illuminated with only a beam of light, the seating area assumed a state of darkness and tranquility during film exhibition. The screen was positioned higher than the seating area, and so was the female interpreter on the tall stool. This layout reminds us of Bentham's Panopticon, which, in Foucault's ([1975] 1995: 202) elaboration, "automatizes and deindividualizes power," power as not tangible penalties but "a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes." In the space of cinema, when audiences were seated in darkness and indulged themselves in fantasy, they were caught by the very darkness on the segmented and immobile seats, surrendering to the "instruction" prescribed by the interpreter. Meanwhile, although Miss Earphones could "look down at" the audience, they were confined to the forbidden palace. Only voices can be transmitted outward, albeit without any delay, thereby posing challenges of excessive audibility and exposure. The design as such achieved a

Foucauldian arrangement "whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up" (202). At the crux of the interplay thus is the arrangement of space, light, darkness, and sound, which empowered and constrained both the male ear and the female interpreter.

Conclusion: The Myth of the Thing

This article explores the untested film translation history in Republican Shanghai through the lens of the earphone. The earphone provides us with a standpoint to reexamine the anxiety, euphoria, and ambivalence ensued by the continuing material improvement in Shanghai cinemas. As demonstrated, the sudden success of the earphone in 1939 was indeed the result of a convergence of forces that shaped the contour of Shanghai's mass media landscape: the advancement of cinematic technologies; the popularization of filmgoing as an urban life style; the phenomenon of songstress that nurtured a sonic culture and shaped a sophisticated and sexually expressive soundscape; the development of modern acoustic technologies that fostered new forms of intimacy; and the loosening of patriarchy as well as the increasing opportunities for women to acquire education. The concerted forces empowered the earphone, and the earphone in turn exerted profound influence over the mass entertainment: it facilitated the removal of language barriers, upgraded the way of film consumption, enhanced the prevalence of female voices, eroded the male-dominated print culture, and won professional dignity for its practitioners.

The latency and outcome of the application of earphones granted us a glimpse of the thingness of the earphone—not as a technical object but as the multifaceted thing perpetually renovating, mediating, and regulating the (re)formation of human-object relationship. A glimpse of the thingness—instead of the totality of the thingness—points to concerns that may have exceeded the purview of this essay. The earphone represents only one of the manifold exhibitionary technologies that underwent perpetual advancement ever since the birth of film. In addition to earphones and the textual artifacts, some Shanghai cinemas even provided audiences with telescopes to "zoom in to appreciate the actor's performance" (*Heping ribao* 1947: 4). The thingness, in this light, may represent the continuing endeavor to eman-

cipate and mobilize diverse sensory experiences for the audience, with an aim to achieve an impeccable viewing experience—to step into the film, to get thoroughly immersed in the film, or even to ultimately become the filmic. On this front, the thingness of the exhibitionary apparatus emerges less from their texture, utility, aesthetics, and value than from the fundamental divide between reality and representation—the filmic, alluring, and whimsical world constructed by cinema.

Presenting itself largely as one of the prevalent "object histories," this article nonetheless strategically sidesteps the potential epistemological pitfall that, in Bruce Robbins's (2005: 456) terms, "authors attribute to their chosen commodities an exaggerated, mysterious, almost godlike power." The power of the earphone was admittedly not unconstrained: despite the changes brought to the gender imbalance in the translation industry, the agency of earphones and female interpreters was still limited by masculine power. And with the continuing development of subtitling and dubbing tools, earphones gradually were phased out, and the voices of Miss Earphones faded away. The earphone no longer exercises power over today's filmgoing experience, but there remains an imperative to study it, not for its tangible influence on the cinematic but, as this article demonstrates, for how its existence prompts a necessary contemplation of our broader relationship with the material.

Notes

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable insights, which have greatly enhanced the quality of this essay.

1 For further insights, consult *The Object*, edited by Anthony Hudek (2014), which contains a comprehensive bibliography on objects and things, as well as their unequivocal yet undistinguishable relationship.

2 Miss Earphone refers to either the interpreting profession or the practitioner in this essay.

3 *Shuomingshu* has different English translations, such as "plot sheet" (Lee 1999: 89–90), "program pamphlet" (Zhen Zhang 2005: 73), or "pamphlet of explication" (381). In this essay, "program pamphlet" is adopted.

4 The term *zimu* referred to not only subtitles but also intertitles. For instance, the translated intertitles of *What Happened to Jones?* (1926, dir. William A. Seiter) were also called *zimu* (*Shenbao* 1926).

5 As a traditional genre, *benshi* encompasses all types of story synopses. Within the realm

of cinema, an opinion piece annotated *benshi* with "synopsis" (Zimei 1927: 7), so *benshi* is translated here into "film synopsis."

6 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

7 The term *yi* 譯 (translation) was persistently adopted to describe these textual entities, which legitimized them as translations from the perspective of readers.

8 For instance, pervasive in the purses of Shanghai modern girls, film pamphlets exemplified modernity (Bei 1933: 2). Teenagers even collected these pamphlets as self-study materials to enhance their English proficiency (Jiedong 1941: 12). The symbolic and educational values attested to an "excess" of these objects—their thingness arising from "what remains physically or metaphorically irreducible to objects" (Brown 2003: 5).

9 As a prevalent literary genre in the Republican era, the Butterfly School is famous for its old-style fiction. See Link 1981.

10 For a detailed account of how the Butterfly School literati mediated between film and fiction, see Yeh 2012.

11 Indeed, following the screening of foreign sound movies in Shanghai, treaters recruited translators for more detailed subtitle translations, as confirmed by a recruitment notice (*Shenbao* 1933).

12 An illiterate spectatorship was evident in Shanghai cinema, as suggested in a critique mocking those feigning to read film pamphlets (Xuefan 1932: 6). With the rise of earphones, a critic (Liuxu 1943: 3) even suggested interpreters use "Shanghainese" instead of "Mandarin" to address auditory literacy challenges.

13 The application of technology is not merely determined by technical advancement but unavoidably regulated by sociocultural factors. For instance, besides the first-tier theaters, other theaters, unable to afford the "high cost" (Huang and Liu 2019) of earphones, continued relying on text-based translations.

14 In this context, *zhuci* does not mean "particle"; instead, it denotes the instructive and supportive information offered by Miss Earphones.

15 The performative role was likewise performed by the counterparts of Miss Earphones in Shanghai cinema. For example, the explicators of foreign silent movies could distort the "intended" meanings of the images and mediate "between foreign sights and local tastes" (Zhen Zhang 2005: 157). A space between film and audience was carved out by these "interpreters" who engaged in film exhibition as performers.

16 This propensity for target-oriented standards is also evident in the coverage on Miss Earphones. For instance, the criterion of *liuli* 流利 (fluency) was most highlighted (e.g., Suxiao 1939: 1; Kelu 1939: 2; Mary 1948: 11; Zhang Zuping 1947: 18).

17 *Benshi* not only entertained but also educated the public (Dym 2000). *Pyônsa* worked as both standby comedians and polyglot interpreters (Maliangkay 2005). Socialist projectionists in Mao's China served the goals of mass education, mass entertainment, and propaganda (Zhou 2021). And the voice artists dubbed foreign films to convey either political or aesthetical messages in 1970s China (Huang 2013).

18 Inspired by Mary Louise Pratt's ([1992] 2008) concept of "imperial eyes," Thomas Irvine (2020) coined the term *imperial ears* to delineate the power dynamics in the Sino-Western sonic interactions. Taking Irvine's cue, this essay formulates the concept "the male ear."

19 Although Weber (2010: 340) emphasizes how earphones "enable mobile listeners to actively carve out sonic privacy while on the move," the seated and fixed film audiences also enjoyed this privilege of acoustic privatization.

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