

Ancient Piety in a Chinese Art Song: Musical Translation and Filmic Use of a Work by Huang Zi (1904-1938)

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Chinese art song embodied an intended break from China's musical past in the early twentieth century. A musical form of Western origin that featured Chinese texts, Chinese art song presented a set of new possibilities for composers to deliver Chinese sentiments of modernity. Different from school song—the earlier modern song form written primarily for teaching school children, art song generally had a more sophisticated lyrical character, and did not typically feature teachings from ancient Confucian classics. In this regard, “Song of Familial Bliss” (“Tianlun ge” 天倫歌, 1934) that celebrates Confucian classical teaching of social piety seems unusual. Despite its didactic subject, however, the song has been widely received both inside and outside the art music circle. Composed by Huang Zi, the song has remarkable lyrical accessibility that is heard as realizing a strong Chinese character.

This paper analyzes how “Familial Bliss” effectively “translated” Western musical practices into Chinese art song expressions. Aspects of melodic design, melody-texts relationship, and the idiom of functional harmony will be examined, showing the creativity of Huang in asserting musical Chineseness to an adopted foreign genre. The unusual didactic content of “Familial Bliss,” however, impels us to situate the celebrated Chineseness of the song in its complex political and filmic contexts, which reveal processes of negotiation and adaptation that had impinged on the translation practice of Huang and even beyond.

“Familial Bliss” was created as the theme song of the film *Tianlun* (天倫) / *Song China* (1935), which was produced by United Photoplay Film Company in support of a cultural-political movement known as New Life Movement launched by the Nationalist government. Taking into account Huang's affiliation with the government (the National Conservatory of Music and school music education committee), the production of “Familial Bliss” underlines a close connection between musical reform and government support. While Huang needed to negotiate between political imperative and his aesthetic imagination, the former urged his strengthened presentation of a Chinese style in “Familial Bliss.”

The resultant Chinese style reached not only singers and listeners, but also the film's director and music producer. Chinese instrumental music was the primary musical medium of the film. “Familial Bliss,” sung by a soprano and children choir accompanied by the piano and violin as well as Chinese instruments (*pipa*, *sheng*, and the gong), is heard in the last episode. The addition of Chinese instruments expanded Huang's score, which used the piano only. Most interestingly, the song melody in a Chinese ensemble version is heard at the beginning. The strengthened Chinese style of “Familial Bliss” thus generated another form of Chinese music, engaging an expanded practice of translation beyond the personal creativity of Huang.