

# On the New Trends of Chinese Film Music Creation from Unoriginal Music of *American Dreams in China*

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## Abstract

It is not uncommon to watch on the screen the films with the theme of reminiscence for the lost youth years. *American Dreams in China*, a film released in 2013, was a big hit, winning a box office and public praise. It tells a story of the growth, dreams, struggles, and success of three young men born in 1960's and 1970's. Pop music with time features was largely applied to narrating the story and better displaying the social context and the psychology and feelings of the characters. This article analyzes the music in the film and focuses on the features and applications of music creation for the purpose of summarizing the characteristics of Chinese film music creation and non-original music application.

Keywords: *American Dreams in China*; Film Music Creation; Original Music; Non-Original Music

## 1. Introduction

*American Dreams in China* is the one of the most outstanding Chinese films directed by Hong Kong director Chen Kexin in 2012. The film tells an inspiring story of three young people who started their own businesses from the 1980s to the early 2000s. There are three main roles in this film, namely, Meng Xiaojun (portrayed by Deng Chao), who was born in a family with the tradition of studying abroad and aspires to change the world on American soil; Wang Yang (portrayed by Tong Dawei), a romantic and free spirit who enjoys the exuberant youthfulness of China's early reform and opening-up period; and Cheng Dongqing (portrayed by Huang Xiaoming), a young man from a rural area who has failed twice in his college entrance exams, who takes Meng Xiaojun as the role model, and gains a beautiful love. Three of them met in the college, shared the same dream and went out into the world together to build their careers, founded an English training school together, and finally achieved fame and success and realized their dreams.

At present, the stories of "inspirational films" and "role model films", which have been scarce in the Chinese film market, are often unrealistic and ungrounded, while *American Dreams in China* closely echoes the times, reflecting the story of institutional reform and personal struggle under the social and economic transformation of China in the past 30 years. The director narrates the bitter and painful journey of the three protagonists in an approachable and realistic way, and awakens the "youthful spirit" of a generation imprisoned by reality with his own delicate narrative technique, ushering in the "Chinese dream" which was once fading in cinematic expressions. "

Among all the highlights in *American Dreams in China*, the use of music is unique and different from other film music compositions. The main feature is the use of a large number of unoriginal musical materials, and these unoriginal musical materials are basically pop music that keeps pace with the development of the times.

"Unoriginal music" is a paradigm of musical expression in which published musical works are applied to the creation of films. It includes, but is not limited to, the use of various styles of music, including classical music, pop music, and even other film musics in a film. Another kind of "original music" refers to musical passages composed specifically for a film by a composer. Therefore, the stylistic characteristics of "original music" tend to be consistent with or close to the overall style of the film. "Unoriginal music" and "original music" are the two forms of film music presentation. In the film *American Dreams in China*, the "original musics" are composed by the famous composer Mr. Jin Peida, but not frequently used, which are mainly simple with piano, guitar and strings as the main instrument. The focus is on melodrama, so that the audience can be brought quickly into the lives of the characters in the film through the music.

This paper mainly analyzes the "unoriginal music" in the film.

## 2. Analysis on the Application of "Unoriginal Music"

The "unoriginal music" used in the film *American Dreams in China* is mainly pop music that bears the marks of the times: Luo Dayou's "Story of Time" (1981), Su Rui's "Same Moonlight" (1983), Beyond's "Boundless Sea and Sky" (1983), Qi Qin's "The World Outside" (1983), Cui Jian's "Rock On The New Long March" (1989) and "Flower House Girl" (1989), Tang Dynasty's "International Song" (1991); and international hits such as John Denver's "Leaving On A Jet Plane" from the 1990s.

These pop musics are essentially songs that were widely popular in the 1980s and 1990s, with a distinctive imprint of times. *"The timeliness of pop music can instantly evoke the historical background of the film. Pop music is popular. So it can easily incite the audience to share a common memory. In terms of economic and communication effects, a mature commercial-film director will also consider the communication benefits of existing pop musics. For example, the story of "Sweet Honey" was originally called "Little Love in a Big City". When director Chen Kexin heard the news of Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng's death, he immediately thought that Teresa Teng's "Sweet Honey" and other songs have nurtured the hearts of a generation and become the common language and sentiment of the new generation. Therefore, he decided to incorporate this sentiment into the works he was developing, and the result was very good"* (Cai Hong Sheng, 1999:102). In the film *American Dreams in China*, Chen Kexin likewise incorporates this kind of pop music with the color of the times into the film. Luo Dayou's "Story of Time" is even directly used as the theme song of the film with recomposition and performance. This old classic pop song is full of the characteristics of the times and is one of the most popular and catchy songs of the 1980s. Therefore, its rationalized application makes the audience easily strike a chord with the content and the sense of the times, and reflects the film's theme more completely and clearly. It is an inspirational story about the time, growth, struggle, dreams and success.

The use of pop music not only enhances the background of the times, but also portrays the psychology of the protagonists and vividly explains their emotions. More importantly, under the situation of perfect coordination of sound and picture, the charm of these old classic pop songs instantly ignites the audience's fond memories and touches their hearts, and they really see a kind of hope and a motivation to struggle with the rhythm of the music in the film. Therefore, the music in the movie is not only a simple auxiliary lyric, but also a dramatic tension between the songs and the specific situation to multiply the narrative ability and artistic infectiousness of the movie.

### 2.1 Setting off the Background of the Times: "Rock on the New Long March" and "Same Moonlight"

The story of *American Dreams in China* spans from the early 1980s to the early 21st century. Therefore, the narrative style of the film is typical post-modern, and borrowed from David Fincher's feature film "The

Social Network". Multiple viewpoints are used as narrative structure, and the sequences and episodes in parallel are applied to structure the plot. The narrative space of the film mainly consists of two cities, Beijing, China and New York, USA. Thus, when pop music is used, it should be considered for its identifying role in time and space. In the 1980s, "rock music" landed in China and quickly became popular among students for its cathartic and provocative nature. In Cui Jian's rhythmic electro-rock, the wildness of the young people all erupted with his live performances. As a result, Chinese rock music became the most accepted and sought-after culture among the intellectual elite of that era, and the confusion and uncertainty that Cui Jian expressed through rock music made him the spokesman of the times. Therefore, in the film, after he failed in the college entrance exams in consecutive two years, Cheng Dongqing passed in the third year and was admitted to Yanjing University, China's top university. The background music is always composed by Cui Jian's "Rock on the New Long March". The rhythm of the song and the emotions expressed in the lyrics are not only in line with Cheng Dongqing's enthusiasm as a freshman in the college and his great anticipation of the college life, but also expresses the protagonist's infinite yearning for his future college life, thus highlighting the image of the protagonist as a young man full of vitality and enthusiasm, and more importantly, outlining the atmosphere of the 1980s when idealism was boiling everywhere in China.

In order to resonate with a wider audience, the director also applies classic lyrics from popular songs, distilling them as new lines or themes to incorporate into the plot. For example, "Did we change the world, or did the world change us?" This is a question that everyone who has gone through growing pains and transformation will ask themselves, and this is exactly what the classic lyrics are in the "Same Moonlight" sung by the famous Taiwanese singer Su Rui, who was popular in the 1980s across the mainland. In the film, when Meng Xiaojun passionately brings up the most important slogan of this era - "Change" for the first time in the book club, the director uses the pop song "Same Moonlight" as the background music and an important backdrop to the content of the picture, which plays an important role in echoing each other both in terms of content and atmosphere.

## **2.2 Portraying the inner feelings of the characters: “Polonaise”, “Leaving on A Jet Plane” and “The World Outside”**

The director used "unoriginal music" such as "Polonaise", "Leaving on A Jet Plane" and "The World Outside" to depict the love between the protagonists Cheng Dongqing and Su Mei. The use of these musics not only expressed the emotions of the protagonist, but also portrayed feelings and moods that could not be expressed in words.

In the first scene, the protagonist, Cheng Dongqing, stayed in the library when he met his first love, Su Mei. At this point, the director adopts a romanticized approach by using the background music of "Polonaise" in "The Mood For Love" by Shigeru Umebayashi, a famous Japanese composer for the film. The song is well known among the young people in mainland China and easily gives the audience the impression that Hong Kong was luxurious, magnificent but stereotypical in the 1930s. However, the use of this song in this film seems very appropriate. If it is considered from the inner emotions of the characters, the appearance of Su Mei is as stunning to the monotonous and isolated Cheng Dongqing as Maggie Cheung's appearance in a gorgeous cheongsam on a dark street corner. Therefore, it is said that pop music of different times can make the psychological touch of the characters more dramatic, and thus can leave a deeper impression on the audience.

Later, Su Mei succeeded in getting a visa and left Cheng Dongqing for the United States, while Lucy also left Wang Yang to return to the United States, a cruel youthful tale of the death of youth and the ensuing problems. The director chose a popular, sad and fresh American country folk song "Leaving on A Jet Plane" to express the emotional conflict. The version sung in this film was a cover version by Hong Kong singer Cen Ning'er. Through the support of Cen Ning'er's fresh voice, the original sadness of separation buried deep in the

heart of the protagonist was relieved and released. The song kept the same light rhythm as the movie, which made the characters' parting glance sad but not hurtful, and carried some kind of self-deprecating ridicule in the music, which did not deviate from the theme of inspiration, struggle and patience expressed in the whole movie, and well foretold the end of the protagonist's feelings and the real beginning of their career struggle.

When Cheng Dongqing's career achieved a certain level of success, he had a chance reunion with Su Mei. The "unoriginal music" at this time is Qi Qin's pop song - "The World Outside". At this time, Cheng Dongqing's career encountered difficulties, the brothers broke up, but peremptorily still maintained the calm temperament of successful people. And Su Mei also remained as calm and self-assured as before, but this seemed to be hidden underneath a thousand feelings and could not be expressed. In such a complex and intertwined scene, it seemed difficult for the actors to grasp the degree of performance, and too much body language and facial expressions could ruin the awkwardness of this reunion, without the emotional reality. Therefore, the melody of "The World Outside" delivered the mood and lyrics, which were in line with the mood of Cheng Dongqing at this time, showing both helpless and heartfelt feelings for the old love.

### **2.3 Promoting the film narration: “Internationale”, “Flower House Girl” and “Boundless Sea and Sky”**

In the narrative rhythm of this film, the "unoriginal music" - "International Song", "Flower House Girl", "The Sea and the Sky" and other pop songs are not only well in rhythm, speed, mood and mood to maintain a kind of integration with the picture posture, but also it pushes the narrative rhythm of the film. "Picture and sound are an inseparable whole, the picture shows the characters and the scene, but the sound of the movie expresses the emotion, and the heart of the characters cannot be fully expressed by the movie picture. So we have to use certain music to express the psychology of the characters and the conflict of the plot, so as to promote the development of the plot" (Xia Bing, 2011: 96).

For better storytelling, the film begins with narration interspersed with flashbacks and narration through voiceover, while a parallel narrative montage organizes the screen time and space, introducing the struggles of the protagonists in a concise manner, thus quickly building up the setup of the entire film. For example, by playing English with radio sound effects before the cineframe begins, the sound and picture separation highlights the fact that one of the prerequisites for an American labor visa is to speak English, and the student status of the three main characters as they are about to leave school. At the same time, it also sets the stage for the core of the film, "New Dream" English school. Then the screen turns to the story of the protagonist who, after being refused a visa, successfully establishes the "New Dream" English education school and thus achieves great success in his career. The Tang Dynasty Band plays the "International Song" in a heavy metal rock style, but it is very exciting and fits the moment when the main characters are successful in their careers and in their prime. So, with their stadium speeches and Deng Chao's voice-over, the film quickly draws the audience into this passionate story of entrepreneurship.

Cui Jian's "Flower House Girl" appeared at the beginning of the love between Cheng Dongqing and Su Mei. At that time, Cheng Dongqing was pursuing his school sister Su Mei, but because of an accident, Su Mei had tuberculosis. In order to show affection, Cheng Dongqing went to visit Su Mei and kissed Su Mei. At this time, the "Flower House Girl" suddenly rendered the atmosphere at the time. Through the synchronization of sound and picture, and the stirring sound of music just like the heart of Cheng Dongqing, he finally plucked up the courage to express his love to his goddess. At this time, although Su Mei was lying in the hospital room, the sound of the music seemed to suggest that the hospital room should become a flower room for their lifelong love, which pulls the curtain for Cheng Dongqing and Su Mei's love.

Beyond's "Boundless Sea and Sky" came about when Cheng Dongqing and Wang Yang started an English training class, found their way to success and made their first bucket of money since they were at a low point in

their lives. Especially when Wang Yang was singing this classic song in a karaoke, the emotional gathering and narrative climax became the tear-jerker of the film. At this time, they had already experienced setbacks and gradually come out of the trough period. The road ahead really coincided with the song's theme of "boundless sea and sky", so the audience could foresee in the music that their road would be more open and finally realize their dreams.

Director Chen Kexin once said:

"Using old songs to set off a movie is actually not new to me, but this movie has made me feel that using old songs is the right thing to do. It's not just the sentiment of the era. It also has the right thing in each word that goes with the picture." (Cai Hongsheng, 1999:101)

### 3.Conclusion

The use of music in the film *American Dreams in China* is different from the one in the traditional film. Its biggest characteristic is the application of a large number of non-original music pieces, which are basically classic pop songs marked by the times. These classic pop songs are interspersed with Jin Peida's original music in simple style, perfectly setting off the era atmosphere of the film story. It fills in the deficiencies of the film screen and helps convey more of the emotional information in the film.

Therefore, we can say that the choice and application of the non-original music can produce unexpected and creative effects in rendering the flavor of the times and arousing collective memory of people who once lived it.

Although the music materials of this film are nostalgic and warm, the rational use of music can effectively refine the theme and help create the right atmosphere. Therefore, while advocating the use of original music, remember the use of non-original music can also work as a new trend of film music production. However, we should also be aware that, although the large use of non-original music can not only save a lot of production costs, but also bring us a sense of nostalgia, there are also certain risks in using non-original music in a movie. It may lead to suspicion that the music itself might take the spotlight of the movie, which will make the film look like too much of a music video instead, eventually affecting the story narration. Therefore, in the production of film music, one must select the non-original music pieces with caution.

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## **Biography**

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