

LISTENING TO THE HOMELAND: SOUND NARRATIVE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SENSE OF PLACE IN DEAR YOU

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Abstract: Studies of cinematic Sense of place have long been dominated by analyses of visual symbols and spatial representation. Focusing on the 2026 the Teochew-Dialect film *Dear You*, this article examines how sound narrative constructs a sense of place associated with overseas Chinese communities in Chaoshan. The film transforms the homeland from a geographically visible space into an acoustically experienced place through the sonic encoding of the Teochew dialect, the spatial construction of environmental soundscapes, the layering of Chaozhou opera and diegetic music, and the narrative use of silence. While synchronized sound contributes to a sense of spatial authenticity, audiovisual counterpoint and subjective sound evoke memories that traverse the sea and connect different generations, rendering sense of place an auditory form of identification that moves between the homeland and overseas spaces, and between the past and the present. By foregrounding sound as a narrative and cultural medium, *Dear You* demonstrates how cinematic sense of place can be constructed not only through what is seen but also through what is heard, remembered, and imagined.

Keywords: Sound narrative; Sense of place; Chaoshan culture; Qiaopi; Soundscape

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of “sense of place” originates in humanistic geography. Yi-Fu Tuan defines it as an experiential sense of place that emerges when space is endowed with meaning, emotion, and memory [1]. Research on cinematic sense of place has predominantly focused on geographical landscapes, spatial composition, and visual symbols, while sound has often been reduced to a supplementary function in relation to the image. Yet cinematic sound possesses an irreducible capacity for producing locality. Dialectal accents, the acoustic texture of environmental sounds, and the timbres of local opera and folk songs can evoke an auditory imagination of a particular place even before viewers have fully identified the visual setting.

As Michel Chion has argued, cinematic sound is not merely an adjunct to the image; rather, it reconstructs perceptual experience through the relationship between sound and image [2]. R. Murray Schafer’s concept of the “soundscape,” meanwhile, understands sound as an integral component of a local cultural ecology [3]. In film production, sound designers transform locality into a perceptible auditory text through processes including microphone selection, location recording, dialogue editing, Foley, and mixing. In recent years, scholars have begun to reconsider the construction of cinematic sense of place from the perspective of aural culture, with sound narrative and auditory space in dialect films emerging as important areas of research [4]. Approaching cinematic sense of place through sound narrative is therefore not only a necessary theoretical extension but also a scholarly response to the practices of sound production.

With the emergence of sound studies and aural-cultural research, the perceptual field of sense of place has increasingly shifted from a predominantly visual paradigm toward a multisensory auditory network constituted by dialogue, environmental sound, music, and silence. This development has contributed to what may be described as an “aural turn” in cultural and media studies [5]. Released in 2026, the Teochew-Dialect film *Dear You*, directed by Chaoshan filmmaker Lan Hongchun, takes Qiaopi—letters and remittance documents sent by overseas Chinese to their families in the homeland—as a central narrative thread. It tells a poignant story of waiting, concealment, and redemption across geographical and temporal distances. The film’s Teochew dialogue and narration, the soundscape of the overseas-Chinese homeland, Chaozhou opera, and folk songs together constitute its principal auditory narrative. Sound consequently moves beyond its conventional function as a narrative element and becomes a primary force in the construction of sense of place. Against this background, the article addresses three interrelated questions.

1. What technological, medial, and cultural mechanisms drive the aural turn in cinematic constructions of sense of place?
2. Through what specific pathways do language, soundscape, music, and silence construct a sense of place?
3. How does the aural turn interact with the construction and transformation of sense of place?

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOUND NARRATIVE AND THE ACOUSTIC DIMENSIONS OF SENSE OF PLACE

Cinematic sound narrative consists of multiple layers: dialogue and narration at the linguistic level, environmental sound at the soundscape level, music and song at the musical level, and silence and absence at the level of auditory

negative space. Through sound design, editing, and mixing, these layers are woven together into an integrated auditory text. In terms of the construction of sense of place, sound operates through at least three dimensions.

First, linguistic timbre and auditory identity. A dialect is not merely a semantic system but also an acoustic fingerprint. Teochew, a variety within the Southern Min language family, has a complex tonal system and preserves a substantial number of features associated with historical Chinese entering tones. Its intonational contours, consonantal characteristics, speech tempo, as well as the vocal timbre, age-related qualities, and breathing patterns of individual speakers together constitute an identifiable auditory identity [6]. When viewers hear Teochew dialogue, they can make an initial identification of regional affiliation without visual cues. In intergenerational interactions, differences between generations in their use of different languages or social varieties of the same language—and differences in pitch, vocal intensity, and code-switching—can themselves articulate transformations in local identity. Particularly significant is the reading aloud of Qiaopi. As a textual medium connecting overseas communities with the homeland, Qiaopi generates a second form of sonic production through the act of reading. Written Teochew contained in the letters is revoiced orally by the grandmother. This process involves not only the distinction between the reading of written language and spontaneous speech but also the acoustic embodiment of emotional expression.

Second, soundscape and environmental ambience. Schafer distinguishes among keynote sounds, signals, and soundmarks. In film sound production, ambience and room tone constitute the foundational acoustic background of a space. Through location recording, supplementary sound libraries, and level control during mixing, sound designers determine which environmental sounds occupy the foreground and which recede into the background. The sustained low frequencies of waves, the broadband noise of rain falling in a traditional courtyard, and the signal sounds of vendors in a marketplace all contribute to the auditory perception of the homeland through their spectral distribution, dynamic range, and reverberation characteristics.

Third, musical texture and emotional temporality. Chaoshan possesses a rich sonic cultural heritage, including the melodic inflections of Chaozhou opera, the instrumental arrangements of Chaozhou string music, the recitational rhythms of Chaozhou narrative songs, and the folk songs associated with overseas migration. Their melodies, instrumentation, vocal timbres, and even the signal-to-noise ratios and frequency limitations of their recording media carry layers of historical time. Diegetic music, because its source is located within the represented world—for example, a radio, a temple stage, or a phonograph in a Qiaopi office—can establish a bridge between spatial authenticity and emotional memory. Non-diegetic music, by contrast, intervenes through the film score and moves the spectator from an ostensibly objective auditory position into a subjective emotional space. The layering and transformation of these two forms of music constitute an important strategy for constructing cinematic sense of place.

On the basis of these dimensions, this article examines the auditory text of *Dear You*, focusing on how dialogue, environmental sound, music, and silence individually and collectively construct a sense of place associated with the overseas-Chinese homeland.

3 THE LOCAL ENCODING OF SOUND DESIGN: AN ANALYSIS OF THE AUDITORY TEXT OF DEAR YOU

3.1 Dialogue and Narration: Dialectal Timbre, Qiaopi Reading, and Narrative Voice

The grandmother, who serves as the film's central narrator, speaks in Teochew throughout much of the film. Her voice is characterized by the acoustic qualities associated with an older speaker: a relatively low fundamental frequency, a slightly hoarse timbre, a slow speaking rate, and relatively long pauses for breath between phrases. These acoustic characteristics are not incidental but can be understood as products of sound design. Close-miking with a cardioid microphone, for instance, can preserve details such as lip and dental sounds, throat friction, and breath, while moderate enhancement of the lower-mid frequencies during mixing can strengthen the physical presence and intimacy of the voice.

Although the narration exists outside the diegetic temporal and spatial world as an off-screen voice, its timbral qualities closely correspond to those of the grandmother's diegetic dialogue. As a result, listeners are encouraged to perceive little distinction between the "grandmother who narrates" and the "grandmother within the story." The narration is thereby transformed from the voice of an omniscient narrator into an embodied subjective voice. Local memory becomes anchored in a particular body and voice.

Teochew functions in the film not simply as a language of dialogue but as an acoustic signifying system. The film preserves the full tonal contours and discourse particles of Teochew without substantial noise reduction or excessive post-production clarification. In some scenes, traces of ambient sound from the original recording remain audible. The preservation of this "imperfect" sound quality paradoxically enhances the sense of local authenticity associated with the dialect. By contrast, the Mandarin spoken by younger characters tends to be recorded in a cleaner and more intimate manner, producing a sense of acoustic distance and estrangement. When the younger generation begins responding to the grandmother in Teochew, the convergence of vocal timbre and adjustment of speech tempo accompanying this linguistic shift becomes an auditory marker of intergenerational reconciliation.

Scenes involving the reading of Qiaopi constitute some of the film's most significant auditory passages. The grandmother opens the yellowed letters and reads their contents aloud in Teochew. The brittle sound of the paper, the subtle friction produced as the letter is unfolded, and the grandmother's voice form a multilayered acoustic composition. As transoceanic letters, Qiaopi possess the concision and restraint of written language; through the grandmother's oral

reading, however, they acquire the discourse particles, emotional pauses, and vocal inflections of Teochew speech. Written words are thus re-embodied as a warm and corporeal voice.

Significantly, the mixing can position the grandmother's reading voice prominently and intimately within the sound field while reducing environmental sounds to a more distant background. The result is an experience of "close listening" in which viewers become intimate listeners to the grandmother's voice rather than detached observers.

3.2 Environmental Soundscape: The Sea, the Courtyard, Gongfu Tea, and the Acoustic Texture of the Homeland

The film's environmental sound design displays a distinctive soundscape of the Chaoshan overseas-Chinese homeland. Waves, rain falling into traditional courtyards, wind passing through arcades, and vendors calling out in marketplaces constitute the auditory background of the grandmother's everyday world. From the perspective of sound design, the sound of the sea is treated in the mix as a sustained low-frequency background, with a relatively compressed dynamic range and limited fluctuations in volume. This produces an acoustic impression of the density of coastal air and the continuity of time. The memories of overseas migration embedded in Qiaopi are closely associated with the sea: the sea is simultaneously a space of departure and the physical obstacle that letters must cross. When the grandmother sits alone beside the sea or gazes into the distance, the sustained low frequencies of the waves function as more than environmental sound. They acoustically materialize memory. The low murmur of the sea suggests the distance and uncertainty surrounding family members overseas.

The courtyard (Tianjing) of a traditional Chaoshan residence is another important setting. Rain falling into the courtyard possesses distinctive acoustic characteristics: drops striking roof tiles, stone slabs, and pooled water generate different frequency distributions and reverberation patterns. Through layered recording and matched reverberation, sound design can create a three-dimensional soundscape of "listening to rain in the courtyard." This soundscape is simultaneously a realistic representation of everyday life in the homeland and an auditory indication of the grandmother's prolonged coexistence with the natural environment during her years of waiting. The detailed sounds of water accumulating, flowing, and dripping from the eaves are often brought into the foreground, allowing viewers to experience the slow passage of time acoustically.

The sounds of Gongfu tea utensils constitute another emblematic component of the local soundscape. The crisp clinking of porcelain cups, the bubbling sound of hot water being poured into a teapot, and the subtle friction produced when a tea container is opened and closed are carefully reproduced through Foley and given moderate prominence in the mix. Gongfu tea is not merely a beverage but an important ritual of everyday sociability and hospitality in Chaoshan culture. The clarity and recognizability of these utensil sounds allow viewers to enter the rhythms of domestic life in a Chaoshan household. Sense of place is consequently transferred from the visual setting to the acoustic details of everyday existence.

3.3 Music and Sound Sources: Chaozhou Opera, Narrative Songs, and the Non-Diegetic Intervention of Music

The sonic cultural heritage of Chaoshan performs an important emotional and narrative function in the film. Excerpts from Chaozhou opera, Chaozhou narrative songs, and folk songs associated with overseas migration frequently appear as diegetic music. Selections of Chaozhou opera heard from a radio, live performances on temple stages, and old recordings played on phonographs in Qiaopi offices are all given identifiable sources within the diegetic world. This treatment embeds music within narrative space while preserving the sonic traces of particular historical recording media, including graininess, limited signal-to-noise ratios, restricted frequency response, high-frequency attenuation, and occasional distortion. These acoustic traces are not treated as technical imperfections but as deliberate "temporal fingerprints." Through sound, viewers can directly perceive the historical age of the medium. Sense of place therefore extends beyond spatiality into temporality.

The selection of Chaozhou opera is closely related to the narrative context. In the film, the grandmother watches *The Jade Butterfly* (Yuhu Die), a Chaozhou opera concerning misunderstanding, injustice, and reconciliation. The opera implicitly parallels the misunderstanding between Mu Sheng, Nan Zhi, and Shurou that emerges around a photograph and is ultimately resolved. The distinctive alternation between full and falsetto vocal registers in Chaozhou opera, as well as the responsive relationship between lead singing and supporting voices, is retained as a complete acoustic event rather than being reduced to unobtrusive background music. Listeners can hear the singers' breaths, ornamental vocal inflections, and details of the accompanying instruments. Together, these elements constitute an auditory text with a distinctive cultural identity.

The film also introduces non-diegetic music. When the grandmother reaches an emotional climax while reading Qiaopi, a restrained string or piano passage gradually enters and overlaps with the diegetic music. In the mix, the two musical layers can be assigned different spectral territories: the diegetic music retains its textural quality in the mid-frequency range, while the non-diegetic score expands into the higher and lower frequency ranges. This prevents significant masking and creates an acoustic dialogue between "the sounds of the past" and "the emotions of the present." Through such layering, sense of place ceases to signify a singular and static form of belonging and instead becomes an auditory field in which history and the present intersect.

3.4 The Narrative Function of Silence: Auditory Negative Space and the Sonification of Waiting

Sound narrative concerns not only “what sounds” but also “what does not sound.” Silence and auditory absence in the film occur most prominently when the grandmother is alone, when she falls into contemplation after reading a Qiaopi, or when the camera turns toward an empty old house or the sea. In cinematic sound production, such silence is rarely absolute. Instead, it is constructed through the reduction of environmental sound levels, the narrowing of dynamic range, or the retention of extremely low-level room tone. This produces a form of auditory negative space. Such negative space possesses an active semantic function: when the persistent sound of waves or courtyard rain is suddenly reduced, viewers immediately become aware that a sense of “loss” has emerged.

“Waiting” is one of the film’s central emotional themes. The circulation of Qiaopi implies prolonged waiting across the sea, and the temporal experience of waiting is transformed into a rhythm of silence through sound design. When the image shows the grandmother sitting alone on a doorstep and looking toward the entrance of the alley, environmental sounds may be reduced almost to the threshold of audibility, leaving only the faintest sound of wind or breathing.

This acoustic approximation of silence corresponds to the suspended temporality of waiting: nothing has yet happened, and only time continues to pass in silence. Silence consequently becomes a narrative language through which the abstract emotional experience of waiting is transformed into an auditory state that viewers can physically perceive.

4 AUDIOVISUAL RELATIONS AND THE MECHANISMS OF SENSE-OF-PLACE CONSTRUCTION

4.1 Synchronized Sound and Spatial Authenticity

The film makes extensive use of synchronized sound, in which sounds correspond precisely in time to their visible sources. The rustling of paper as the grandmother handles Qiaopi, the clinking of gongfu tea utensils, footsteps on stone-paved streets, and the periodic sound of waves striking the shore are all closely synchronized with the corresponding visual actions. Such synchronization is more than a technical convention. It is a strategy for constructing spatial authenticity. When sound and image correspond perceptually, viewers naturally attribute auditory events to the space represented on screen, generating a sense of auditory trust and immersion. The construction of sense of place through synchronized sound depends on the sound designer’s careful capture, editing, and spatial positioning of individual sonic details. For example, when a character moves from an interior room into a courtyard, the reverberation of footsteps may shift from relatively dry to more reverberant, simulating the changes in acoustic reflection associated with moving from an enclosed environment into a semi-open space. Such subtle adjustments in reverberation constitute an important source of spatial realism.

4.2 Audiovisual Counterpoint and the Emotional Tension of Transoceanic Memory

The film does not limit itself to the spatial realism generated by synchronized sound. It also employs audiovisual counterpoint to create emotional tension. When the image depicts a contemporary urban landscape or an abandoned Qiaopi office, the soundtrack may nevertheless retain Teochew narration, the sound of waves, or an old Chaozhou opera recording. This audiovisual disjunction is not a technical inconsistency but a deliberate aesthetic strategy. The visual space points toward contemporary transformation, whereas the auditory space remains anchored in memories of the past. Their divergence articulates an anxiety concerning the disappearance and transformation of the homeland. The transoceanic connections represented by Qiaopi acquire deeper emotional significance through this audiovisual counterpoint. When the image presents the calm surface of the contemporary sea while the soundtrack contains the words of a Qiaopi that continues to be read decades later, the temporal disjunction between image and sound allows viewers to experience the weight of waiting. In sound design, audiovisual counterpoint can be produced through techniques such as sound pre-lapping and sound continuation. Environmental sound or music from a preceding scene crosses the edit point into a subsequent visual space, maintaining auditory continuity while the visual field undergoes a discontinuity. For example, the grandmother’s reading voice may begin before the image cuts to another scene and continue over an empty landscape, allowing sound to narrate beyond the boundaries of the image. Such tension between sound and image constitutes one of the most emotionally powerful dimensions of the film’s construction of sense of place.

4.3 Subjective Sound and Spaces of Memory

The film also employs subjective sound to move viewers from objective listening into the grandmother’s interior auditory world. When she reads the Qiaopi, sounds described in the letters—waves, the voices of relatives overseas, and melodies of old folk songs—may enter the soundtrack in subjective form. A wave sound that does not actually exist in the immediate environment may suddenly become amplified, or the younger voice of a relative from decades earlier may emerge with an unusually clear and pure timbre, contrasting sharply with the contemporary soundscape. Through such acoustic treatment, sound ceases to function merely as a representation of the external environment and becomes an externalization of the character’s internal memory space. Sense of place consequently shifts from the public and physical domain toward the private and psychological domain.

5 CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CREATIVE PRACTICE

The sound narrative of *Dear You* provides a representative case through which cinematic sense of place can be reconsidered from an auditory perspective. Its cultural significance and implications for creative practice can be understood in three respects.

First, the film restores the overseas-Chinese homeland from a visual landscape to a lived soundscape. Many films concerned with local cultures tend to emphasize scenic landscapes or iconic architecture, allowing sense of place to become attached to images available for visual consumption. *Dear You*, by contrast, places waves, courtyard rain, the sounds of gongfu tea utensils, and Teochew dialogue in the auditory foreground, compelling viewers to “listen to” the place rather than merely “look at” it. This strategy resists the tendency to turn local landscapes into spectacles or consumable visual commodities. Instead, it foregrounds the everyday and often overlooked acoustic textures of the overseas-Chinese homeland. For sound practitioners, this suggests that the construction of sense of place should not depend solely on the selection of visual materials but should also give greater attention to the recording of environmental sound, the authenticity of Foley, and the preservation of ambient textures during mixing.

Second, sound narrative strengthens the temporal dimension of sense of place. Visual space tends to be anchored in the present, whereas sound—particularly dialect, Chaozhou opera, Qiaopi reading, and the sonic qualities of historical recording media—can readily bring the past into the present. The grandmother’s narration connects the written Qiaopi of decades earlier with the present; Chaozhou opera heard on the radio evokes scenes associated with a lover’s youth; and the younger generation’s use of Teochew in response to the grandmother marks the intergenerational transmission of local memory. The mobility of sound means that sense of place is no longer a static feeling of belonging but an ongoing and tension-filled temporal process. This also places higher demands on cinematic sound design. Sound must not only construct space but also construct time. Through timbre, reverberation, and dynamic treatment, sound can function as a container of historical experience [7].

Finally, the film offers methodological implications for the audiovisual preservation of Teochew and Qiaopi culture. At a time when visual media are increasingly globalized, the distinctiveness of local cultures may increasingly reside in sound [8]. Teochew speech, Chaozhou opera, Chaozhou narrative singing, and the reading of Qiaopi constitute cultural elements that are difficult to translate or reproduce fully.

As a form of cultural heritage associated with the history of overseas Chinese, Qiaopi possesses cultural significance not only through its written content but also through the sonic dimension produced when the letters are read and heard. *Dear You* brings these fragile forms of auditory heritage into the cinematic text through a sound-centered narrative approach, allowing them to circulate more widely and participate in contemporary processes of cultural memory. This practice offers a productive reference point for thinking about localized sound expression in Teochew-language cinema and, more broadly, in Sinophone cinema.

6 CONCLUSION

The Teochew-Dialect film *Dear You* establishes an auditory identity through the sonic encoding of Teochew dialogue and Qiaopi reading, constructs the atmosphere of the overseas-Chinese homeland through environmental soundscapes, evokes transoceanic memories through the layering of Chaozhou opera and diegetic and non-diegetic music, and transforms waiting into an auditory experience through the use of silence as negative space. The alternating use of synchronized sound, audiovisual counterpoint, and subjective sound transforms sense of place from a visible geographical space into an audible and temporal field of experience. This approach demonstrates that cinematic studies of sense of place need to move beyond visual centrism and take seriously the narrative capacity and cultural density of sound. Sound does not merely accompany the image. It can preserve linguistic identity, materialize memory, articulate historical time, and connect geographically separated communities. In *Dear You*, the homeland is therefore not simply a place that can be seen. It is a place that can be heard, remembered, and imaginatively inhabited through sound.

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