“Benshi and the Introduction of Motion Pictures to Japan”
-Jeffrey A. Dym

Jeffrey Dym’s book, Benshi, Japanese Silent Film Narrators, and Their Forgotten Narrative Art of Setsumei: a History of Japanese Silent Film Narration is the only comprehensive source about the history of benshi that is written in English. If you are interested in learning about the benshi and their history but don’t have the time to sit through a 312 page book, then this article, “Benshi and the Introduction of Motion Pictures to Japan,” is a great alternative source for the book. This article is like a shortened and more concise version of the book; however this article focuses more on the rise and proliferation of the benshi and only touches briefly on the social impact and fall of the benshi institution. Another difference is that this article contains pictures and the kanji characters for Japanese words, both of which the book did not include.

This article opens up with a brief overview of the benshi and speaks about their functions as entertainers, which “were to market the cinema, to attract audiences to performances, and to educate viewers regarding what appeared on the screen” (Dym 509). As motion picture novelties came into the country, the people were curious about the machines’ functions, thus a person was hired to explain the function of the motion picture apparatuses. These explainers eventually evolved into the benshi.

The motion picture industry did not lead to the development of the benshi. The benshi were not a result of motion pictures. They did not come about because the Japanese masses needed motion pictures and motion picture technologies explained to them. Rather, the benshi institution stemmed from practices found in commingled theaters (such as etoki, kabuki, noh, and bunraku puppet theater), that have existed since before the beginning of motion pictures. In a commingled theater, performances have “two (or more) separate but equal forms of narrative information, usually one visual, the other aural, coalesce into one presentation” (Dym 517). The Japanese people were familiar with a commingled theater, therefore, the benshi were readily accepted by the public, because they “fit into the prevalent practice of commingled theater” (Dym 517).

Although the benshi were not an entirely new concept in Japan, due to the country’s history of commingled theaters, they did serve as an important attraction for theater houses. Often times, people went to playhouses to hear a certain benshi perform but not to see a certain film. Films circulated around theaters, and silent movie fans would wait until the film was at the theater where their favorite benshi performed before going to see the film. Some people would go see the same film several times in order to hear their favorite benshi perform. “For many people the benshi’s setsumei is the biggest attraction” (Dym 528).

The popularity of the benshi coupled with the freedom to interpret silent films any way they wish, gave the benshi the power to influence the audience’s way of thinking. Some benshi took advantage of this power to impress upon the audience their own view. For example, for a movie that showed Thomas Edison watering his garden, the benshi Jumonji Daigen was reported to have given this setsumei: “What is going to be projected next is Watering by the Great Inventor Edison. He is a great man who even waters his own garden and does not have someone else do it. Labor is a divine thing. People should not despise labor” (Dym 529). Although it isn’t certain to what extent the benshi’s interpretations of silent films may have influenced the Japanese public, their role as social educators cannot be ignored. Indeed, national authorities in Japan have tried to control the benshi to ensure that they give “moral” setsumei of films.
Reviewed by Melissa Yang