“Benshi as Stars: The Irony of the Popularity and Respectability of Voice Performers in Japanese Cinema”
-Hideaki Fujiki

As the title states, the main idea of this article is the irony that surrounds the existence of the benshi performers, with a more specific focus on how the paradox of their existence brought about the fall of the benshi and vice-versa, how the demise of these entertainers was also a paradoxical phenomenon. That being said, because Hideaki Fujiki is focusing on the irony of the benshi’s existence, there are a lot of contradictions in his piece which makes his argument intricate and at times hard to decipher. Nevertheless, Fujiki points out many interesting points about the benshi’s stardom.

As entertainers, the benshi were viewed as “low-culture” (Fujiki 79) people. At the same time, benshi were considered educators because of the lessons that they could impart on the audience through their setsumei, or explanation, of films. The potential for benshi to be social educators brought rise to the question of whether they should be active social educators or inconspicuous narrators subordinate to the film (Fujiki 69).

Although film critics wanted the benshi to remain low-key, in the beginning, many benshi gave setsumei that were autonomous to the film. According to Fujiki’s view, this independence is what makes the benshi indispensible to the playhouse. Being subordinate to the film will only cause the benshi to fade into the shadows. However, this autonomy drew attention to the benshi and not just the attention of the public audience, but also the attention of the national authorities as well.

Seeing that benshi had the power to influence the public, the government sought to control them. Had the benshi been regarded as insignificant in the Japanese society, the government would not have tried to institutionalize them (Fujiki 78). This is not to say that the institutionalization of the benshi was a bad thing per se, on the contrary, many benshi aspired for this type of recognition from the government (Fujiki 79). It proves that they weren’t just some two-bit entertainer that could easily be disregarded. However, this social significance was a dual-edged blade (Fujiki 78).

The authorities sought to control the benshi because they recognized that the benshi’s “lowbrow behavior and autonomy during their performances” (Fujiki 78) could potentially be harmful to the audience and their social morals. At the same time, this desire for control over the benshi and their performance shows that the national authorities acknowledged the social influence that the benshi had on the public (Fujiki 78). The institutionalization of the benshi thus became both a way to regulate them and to officially recognize their social importance.

According to Fujiki, the benshi started becoming obscure in the 1920s, as they started losing their prime commercial attraction. Other sources state that the benshi were still going strong until the early 1930s. Regardless of the timeframe, the importance, as Fujiki argues, is that the institutionalization of the benshi was what kept them from going under even when the benshi no longer held the same attraction power as before. Ironically, the legitimization of benshi performers did little for their social respectability. On the contrary, it served to exemplify the “uncultured” (Fujiki 79) nature of the benshi. During the legalization process, benshi had to take certification exams to become licensed benshi. A benshi could not perform without a license. To be clear, Fujiki did not personally think that the benshi were uncultured, but critics at the time would often mocked the benshi’s “uneducated” (Fujiki 79) answers on the exams and used that as the reason to demean the benshi as vulgar and uncultured.
Finally the demise of the *benshi* was what was truly ironic. As the filming industry advanced, the *benshi* had to adapt, by changing their *setsume* style, to keep themselves from becoming dispensable. As films extended to multiple reels and became self-sufficient in narration, the *benshi* had to shift from demonstrating their virtuosity to providing moment-by-moment commentary (Fujiki 76) in order to ensure the audience’s understanding of the film (Fujiki 79). In other words, the *benshi’s* *setsume* became more explanatory than entertaining. In that matter, the *benshi’s* *setsume* which was once an autonomous art form became simply functional (Fujiki 80), and this allowed them to become replaceable by talkies.

Reviewed by Melissa Yang