

## The Birth of Taiwan's Fourth Cinema

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The story of Taiwan's transition from brutal military dictatorship to flourishing democracy is widely celebrated, but few outside the region know of the parallel rise of Indigenous consciousness among the country's Austronesian-speaking ethnic groups. A recent film festival retrospective brought together seventeen films by Indigenous Taiwanese directors made in the first decade after the end of martial law, offering us a unique opportunity to look back and reflect on an exciting and uncertain time, when contemporary Indigenous Taiwanese identity was being formed. Curated by Wood Lin, *Indigenous with a Capital "I": Indigenous Documentaries from 1994 to 2000*<sup>1</sup> was part of the 2021 Taiwan International Documentary Festival (TIDF). It contained early films by directors who have gone on to become key figures in the Indigenous Taiwanese documentary film world as well as political and cultural leaders, and it also included works by lesser-known directors. Taken together, these works reveal filmmakers and their subjects groping with what it meant to be "Indigenous" after decades of being told that they were "Chinese."

The harsh policies of the martial law years (1949-87), which preceded these films, were justified by the myth that the Nationalist Party (KMT) didn't just rule Taiwan but remained the legitimate ruler of all China. Chinese language and culture was imposed upon the population (Chun 116), while local languages and cultures were banned, including Indigenous languages and cultures. When the KMT's power started to crack in the late 1980s and people took to the streets to express long-suppressed grievances (Hsiao 166-67), Indigenous activists were among the first to march for justice (Ku 99). The early years of Indigenous documentary film in Taiwan helps shed light on the history of this movement.

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<sup>1</sup> The English title does not make sense in Chinese, which does not have capital letters. The Chinese title “如是原民，如是紀錄” might be literally translated as “So it is to be Indigenous, so it is to be recorded.”

Adding to the value of this retrospective, the festival organizers also conducted in-depth interviews with the filmmakers and packaged them, along with a contextualizing essay and a timeline, in a bilingual (Chinese and English) catalog. One of the questions asked of these filmmakers was whether documentary films about Indigenous people should be made by Indigenous directors. Most of the answers are equivocal, like this one from veteran filmmaker Mayaw Biho (Pangcah<sup>2</sup>):

I'm not against non-Indigenous filmmakers, and many of them do a great job. But most of the incorrect stereotypical portraits [are] made by non-Indigenous filmmakers. On the other hand, Indigenous filmmakers can make the same mistake as well, so this has nothing to do with their identity. (Lin et al. 30)

Māori director Barry Barclay coined the term “Fourth Cinema” to highlight films made by Indigenous directors that prioritize Indigenous perspectives (Milligan 348-50). While Barclay’s ideas and the Indigenous directors he writes about did not directly influence Taiwan’s Indigenous filmmakers from this period, the films in this retrospective document a time when Indigenous Taiwanese were beginning to see their own struggles as part of a global Indigenous rights movement. Drafts of a UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples began circulating in the 1980s (Ku 94), and although the document emerged out of the social movements of Native Americans and First Nations in North America, many groups throughout the world recognized their experiences and concerns in the document’s demands, provoking a desire to link their own struggles to a global movement. This led Indigenous Taiwanese to demand that they be called “Indigenous” (原住民 *yuanzhumin*). Previously the government had referred to them collectively as “mountain compatriots” (山地同胞 *shandi tongbao*). By declaring that they were neither “mountain compatriots” nor “Chinese,” Indigenous Taiwanese fought to redefine their own identities and their relationships to the nation and the wider international community.

While the local and global Indigenous rights movements form an important backdrop for these films, so too does the national obsession with telling local stories that swept through Taiwan in the wake of democratization. Under martial law, school textbooks had focused almost exclusively on the culture and geography of China, largely ignoring Taiwan. With the end of martial law, people began to collect and

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<sup>2</sup> Pangcah, the largest Indigenous ethnic group in Taiwan, are also referred to as Amis.

record local stories, sometimes with government support (Friedman, “The Hegemony of the Local” 87-88; Chen, “Voices”). The Full Shot Foundation’s *Local Documentary Filmmakers Training Scheme* (1995-98), with support from the Council for Cultural Affairs,<sup>3</sup> trained several of the directors in this retrospective. Although such programs were not directly aimed at promoting Indigenous stories, these filmmakers brought their own Indigenous perspectives to their work. At least one filmmaker, Umin Howa (Truku), originally planned to make a nature film about centipedes rather than Indigenous issues, but joked that the Full Shot Foundation “brainwashed” him into focusing on human stories instead (Lin et al. 51). Having made this decision, it felt natural to focus on his own community. One of the training scheme’s organizers, Chen Liang-feng, recalled that “For the project’s Indigenous trainees, it was often the first time they ever held a video camera” (Lin et al. 90). The technical limitations of these films are quite obvious by today’s standards, but such flaws are often outweighed by the sense of discovery and power that comes from experimenting for the first time with a new medium and telling stories that had never been told before.

The retrospective’s seventeen films (Fig. 1) can be divided into two groups: the first focuses on social issues, such as urban poverty, child marriage, alcoholism, mental illness, and so on, while the second more directly attends to efforts at reclaiming Indigenous identities and cultures. In Taiwan, as well as within the global Indigenous community, artists, scholars, and activists have come to reject narratives that deploy “deficit discourses” (Fogarty et al. 2-5), which they see as pathologizing Indigenous peoples, especially when they fail to place such social problems in a wider historical context. However, even when these films do deploy such deficit narratives, their stories are told with an intimate familiarity only possible due to their directors’ position as community insiders. The second group of films, which focus on issues of land rights, oral history, and reviving traditional culture, tend to be much more explicit about the politics of Indigenous identity formation and so are largely able to steer clear of such issues. In some cases, the same filmmakers made films in both categories. Seen as historical documents, all these films are equally important for the way they capture a pivotal period in the history of Indigenous Taiwan.

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<sup>3</sup> In May 2012, the Council for Cultural Affairs became the Ministry of Culture.

作品名稱 Title	導演 Director	國別 Nationality	年分 Year	長度 Length
烏踏石仔的噶瑪蘭 The Kavalan: Past and Present	潘朝成 bauki angaw	台灣 Taiwan	1997	43
我們的名字叫春日 C'roh Is Our Name	Mayaw Biho	台灣 Taiwan	1997	34
天堂小孩 Children in Heaven	Mayaw Biho	台灣 Taiwan	1997	13
如是生活 如是 Pangcah As Life, As Pangcah	Mayaw Biho	台灣 Taiwan	1998	27
石壁部落的衣服 The Traditional Clothes of Raisinay Village	弗耐·瓦旦 Baunay Watan	台灣 Taiwan	1997	37
土地到哪裡去了 Where Has the Land Gone?	比令·亞布 Pilin Yapu	台灣 Taiwan	1997	34
彩虹的故事 Tales of the Rainbow	比令·亞布 Pilin Yapu	台灣 Taiwan	1998/ 2008	55
流浪者之歌 Song of the Wanderer	楊明輝 YANG Ming-hui (Umin Howa)	台灣 Taiwan	1996	45
請給我一份工作 Please Give Us a Job	楊明輝 YANG Ming-hui (Umin Howa)	台灣 Taiwan	1997	35
褪色的獵舞 The Forgotten Hunting Dance	楊明輝 YANG Ming-hui (Umin Howa)	台灣 Taiwan	1997	38
小夫妻的天空 Too Young	楊明輝 YANG Ming-hui (Umin Howa)	台灣 Taiwan	1998	43
新樂園 New Paradise	喇外·達賴 Laway Talay	台灣 Taiwan	1999	34
油漆手鄭金生 The Painter from Fata'an	拉藍·吾那克(蔡義昌) Lalan Unak	台灣 Taiwan	1996	28
面對惡靈 And Deliver Us from Evil	希·雅布書卡嫩(張淑蘭) Si Yabosokanen	台灣 Taiwan	2001	55
尋找鹽巴 Looking for the Salt	龍男·以撒克·凡亞思 Lungnan Isak Fangas	台灣 Taiwan	1999	41
回來就好 Angoo	龍男·以撒克·凡亞思 Lungnan Isak Fangas	台灣 Taiwan	1999	40
阿慕伊 A Mu Yi	米將·斯谷 Michang Seku	台灣 Taiwan	2000	15

Fig. 1. List of films shown in the retrospective *Indigenous with a Capital "I": Indigenous Documentaries from 1994 to 2000* (Lin et al. 92).

## Films about Social Issues

Turning first to the films about social issues, I start with four films on women's stories: *Angoo*, *A Mu Yi*, *Too Young*, and *Song of the Wanderer*. All four focus on women who find themselves (often at a very young age) trapped in bad marriages. Some run away, others drink, and still others suffer severe mental breakdowns. These films are at their best when they give us sensitive and intimate peeks into the lives of their main subjects, but sometimes they can feel exploitative. Indeed, director Lungnan Isak Fangas (Pangcah) makes this point about his film *Angoo* (1999), which follows his sister struggling to make it as a single mother, occasionally moving back home between a series of failed relationships and different jobs. He says:

I knew I'd tried to make [my sister] cry when filming because it would be more appealing to audiences. After filming *Angoo*, I never again wanted to make my subjects feel uncomfortable; I didn't want to pry into someone's privacy that way. I began to avoid filming my family. (Lin et al. 77)

While Lungnan has a difficult time balancing his desire to understand his sister with his sense that she has unfairly burdened their parents and been a less than ideal mother to her child, the film's portrait is ultimately a sensitive one that shows the struggles of being a mother in a rapidly changing society.

*A Mu Yi* (2000) by Michang Seku (Pinuyumayan) is a short film about a woman who was married to an abusive older man at the age of fourteen to help pay her mother's medical bills. She survives the marriage but becomes an alcoholic, only getting her life together after receiving support from her church. As the film ends, we learn that she now tries to help others who are going through similar circumstances, although it remains unclear if her efforts will bear fruit. Umin Howa's (Truku) film *Too Young* (1998) is also about a young mother, one who is unable to handle the twin stressors of motherhood and an unfaithful husband. Eventually she runs away, leaving her teenage husband to raise the baby by himself, which he is far from ready to do. When the baby develops boils, the director's wife steps in to care for the baby for a while. At the end, some sort of reconciliation between the two young people seems to have taken place, thanks (in part) to the efforts of Umin and his wife, but there does not seem to be much hope of it lasting for very long.

Umin's first film, *Song of the Wanderer* (1996), also features two Indigenous women in failed marriages, but focuses on the fact that they both seem to suffer from

some form of mental illness. Although the 1990s did see some reforms regarding how mental illness is treated in Taiwan (Wu and Cheng 118), it is still common for families of those who are suffering from psychiatric issues to have to take on much of the responsibility for caring for them (Hou et al. 509). In the case of Indigenous villages, it might be the entire village that takes on such a responsibility. This is what happens to one of the women in this film. She was abandoned in her home village by her husband's family and lives in a small shack behind some farmland, but dreams that her husband will come back for her someday.

The stories in these films are heartbreaking, but rarely do we get a sense that these are particularly Indigenous stories. The strength of these films comes from the intimacy of their portraits, but that same intimacy means that they tend to focus on individual women's lives and fail to place these issues in a wider social context. Recently, the director Ho Chao-ti (Han) came under fire for her 2018 film *Turning 18* precisely because it was seen as decontextualizing issues of alcoholism and sexual abuse in a rural Indigenous community, showing that today's audiences are more sensitive to such issues than they were in the 1990s (Hu, "Weilai").

Si Yabosokanen's (Tao) 2001 film, *And Deliver Us from Evil*, was also controversial when it came out. The film, set on Orchid Island (Lanyu), is about a custom in which Tao elders voluntarily banish themselves from the community. Often unable to care for themselves, the film shows them living in unhygienic conditions, in need of care, food, and companionship. At the center of the film is a church group made up of Tao women who care for these elders despite traditional taboos against doing so. They often give this care in secret because of the strong disapproval it evokes in their families. It is hard not to feel sympathy for the bravery of these Tao women, going against tradition to do something they feel is right. At the same time, the film gives the impression that it is Indigenous traditions that are the source of the problem. Si Yabosokanen says she did not intend to make such an argument, but when the film was shown on Orchid Island, many interpreted the film that way. Responding to her memory of this experience, Si Yabosokanen says that she "was deeply saddened as I had no intention of overthrowing my culture, I merely wanted to fill the gaps and deficiencies in the local healthcare system caused by these traditional values" (Lin et al. 71).

Another important social issue from the early 1990s, Indigenous laborers and their families struggling to eke out an existence on the edges of Taiwan's rapidly urbanizing society, is the subject of the next three films: *Please Give Us a Job*, *New Paradise*, and *Children of Heaven*. After decades of growth in urban construction, the 1990s saw an increased reliance on foreign labor from Southeast Asia, which

often displaced Indigenous workers who had few other options open to them. At the same time—as property values began to rise—the temporary dwellings Indigenous people built on the outskirts of major cities became the target of demolition campaigns. Whereas Umin Howa’s *Please Give Us a Job* (1997) gives voice to the resentment and fears of Indigenous workers whose jobs are being given to foreigners, the other two films focus on the issue of housing.

One of the hidden gems in this section is one of the first films by the Pangcah filmmaker Mayaw Biho, who went on to have a long career documenting Indigenous culture and politics (Siku 60–63), served for a time as the director of Taiwan’s Indigenous TV channel, and has been an outspoken critic of the government. He now also runs an Indigenous-immersion preschool (Chen, “Immersion”). The short film *Children of Heaven* (1997) is a poetic and experimental work—made more so by Mayaw’s reliance on still photos. The film foregrounds a group of Pangcah children who play around their illegal, temporary housing by the river and later rebuild their homes after bulldozers come and tear everything down. Defiant, the children proclaim, “If they tear it down, we’ll build it again.”<sup>4</sup> This attitude of pragmatic defiance can be seen in Laway Talay’s (Pangcah) *New Paradise* (1999), which also brings us into a community of Pangcah construction workers living in makeshift housing on the outskirts of a city. Despite the community’s uncertain future, the residents begin planting roots, even electing people to traditional village leadership positions. Whereas the kids in Mayaw’s film are defiant, declaring that they will rebuild their homes as many times as necessary, the adults in Laway’s film are more resigned, saying that if they must leave, they will.

The last of the films focusing on social issues is *The Painter from Fata’an* (1997) by Lalan Unak (Pangcah). This film is a portrait of a disabled Pangcah man, Cheng Chin-sheng, whose story attracted some brief national attention because of how he had spent months practicing balancing on one leg in order to get a job as a house painter. On the surface, this appears to be a stereotypical “uplifting” story of personal triumph over adversity. What saves the film from being overly sentimental or patronizing is the charm and humor of the main character and those around him. He tells jokes that make fun of the way he has been made into a hero by the press. As he reminisces about his life, his exaggerations become more and more absurd, until he is claiming to have been good friends with the former Taiwanese president, even sleeping over at his house! That Cheng Chin-sheng is Pangcah is central to the story told in *The Painter from Fata’an*. It shows up in the context of his life (there is one

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<sup>4</sup> See my discussion in Friedman, “The Shifting Chronotopes” 95.

scene of him learning to dance a traditional Pangcah dance with one leg) and in his humor, but like many of the films just discussed, it is not a film *about* Indigenous identity. Films which *do* make identity issues central to their narrative are discussed in the next section.

## Films about Identity

The story of Indigenous identity in Taiwan is a story of colonial erasure. Japanese colonial rulers banned many traditional customs, while the KMT adopted an explicitly assimilationist educational program. When Indigenous activists in the 1990s began reclaiming and teaching their traditions, there were fortunately still many elders who remembered having learned these traditions from their parents. Although Indigenous languages and cultures had not yet officially been included in the national curriculum in the 1990s, Indigenous teachers began using after-school activities as a way to expose children to their own traditions. Umin Howa's *The Forgotten Hunting Dance* (1997) documents the efforts of Truku elders who were invited to teach elementary school children how to perform a traditional dance. Even though it makes it more difficult for the children to learn all the moves, they insist on teaching the full dance as they had learned it. Only in this way could the tradition be passed on to the next generation.

*Looking for the Salt* (1999), by Lungnan Isak Fangas, explores the opposite end of the educational spectrum by examining an Indigenous student group at National Taiwan University—Taiwan's premier institute of higher education—in Taipei. We follow them through five days of activities, often accompanied by students from other regional Indigenous student groups, as they perform traditional rituals, give speeches and performances, engage in Indigenous language speaking competitions, and more. The film's title comes from one of the judges at the speaking contest, who criticizes the students for simply memorizing their speeches without really understanding the meaning of the words, comparing such behavior to a meal that lacks salt.

If young Indigenous people are still looking for salt, the elders have it in abundance. Mayaw Biho's *As Life, As Pangcah* (1998), along with two films by Pilin Yapu (Atayal), *Where Has the Land Gone?* (1997) and *Tales of the Rainbow* (1998), all benefit greatly from the wisdom and humor of their older subjects. Like Mayaw, Pilin Yapu has remained a consistent and important voice in Taiwanese Indigenous documentaries ever since these early films came out. He also works as an educator. A public school principal for many years, he recently became the director of the P'uma experimental school, which incorporates elements of Atayal culture into the



national school curriculum (Siku 67). Mayaw's *As Life, As Pangcah* follows Lerkar Makur, a 93-year-old Pangcah man, as he goes hunting and fishing, prays at a Catholic mass, and uses traditional Pangcah divination to see if the traps he laid will be successful. He regrets that he cannot speak Mandarin better, saying that (if he could) he would not be embarrassed to tell people that he is proud of his culture. Pilin's *Where Has the Land Gone?* also follows old men as they go into the mountains, but there is a political purpose to their visits: the Atayal villagers of Mapihaw are trying to regain rights to their ancestral lands. They had lost these rights in 1965, when Mapihaw traded them away so their village could be electrified. It was supposed to be a temporary contract, but now that it has expired, the government will not revert the land rights back to the village.

What makes *Tales of the Rainbow* particularly endearing is Pilin's relationship with the women elders at the center of the film. That he visits these women regularly is clear from the way they tease each other. What is unique about these women is that they are some of the last remaining Atayal women to still have facial tattoos, a practice that was banned during the Japanese Colonial period. Atayal women would get such tattoos after they learned to weave, a sign of maturity. Weaving is also at the center of Baunay Watan's (Atayal) film, *The Traditional Clothes of Raisinay Village* (1997), which follows the work of activist and scholar Yuma Taru (Atayal). Yuma has devoted her life to recovering Atayal textile traditions. In this film we see her when she was just getting started, learning to weave and interviewing elders as she tries to recover lost patterns and techniques.

Another film by Mayaw Biho to come out in 1997 is *C'roh Is Our Name*, about a Pangcah rowing team from C'roh village in Hualien who are competing in the annual Dragon Boat Festival in Taipei. Central to the film's story is their decision to represent their own village in this race. In this sense it is a film about decolonization and identity, even if racing dragon boats is not really a Pangcah tradition. While they do mention other kinds of boat races that have a basis in Pangcah culture, they insist that they only see dragon boat races as sporting events, not part of a Han cultural tradition. They want to compete just like everyone else. It is hard work, but they have fun along the way, even inventing a funny song about sweet potatoes to help motivate them while they train.

Finally, Bauki Angaw's *The Kavalan: Past and Present* (1997) is a film about discovering a hidden past. Growing up, the director did not know he was Indigenous. Raised as a Han, Bauki's parents had even gone so far as to write "Fujian" on their ancestors' graves, falsely implying that they had migrated from China. It was only later that Bauki became aware of his origins as one of Taiwan's unrecognized Pingpu

ethnic groups. The Pingpu are those Indigenous peoples who had lived for hundreds of years alongside early Han settlers or—fleeing Han encroachment—had sought refuge among other Indigenous groups on the remote east coast. As a result, the Kavalan were often misclassified as either Han or Pangcah. It wasn't until 2002 that they were finally officially recognized as a unique Indigenous ethnic group. Bauki's film shows us his own personal journey to reverse the course of such erasure in his own family.

## Conclusion

The landscape of Indigenous documentary filmmaking in Taiwan has changed tremendously since these films were made. There are now multiple dedicated venues where one can view such films, such as the Pangcah Film Festival founded by Mayaw Biho, the Indigenous Film Festival, the Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival (TIEFF), and, of course, TIDF. A dedicated Indigenous television station, Taiwan Indigenous Television (TITV), was launched in 2005 and serves programming in what are now sixteen officially recognized Indigenous languages. It has a dedicated YouTube channel as well. A radio station, Alian, was launched in 2017. More recently, social media has also become an increasingly important part of the Indigenous media landscape. Mayaw used Facebook livestreaming to broadcast Indigenous protests (Siku 62). And in the past couple of years, podcasting has become popular in Taiwan with several young people starting their own Indigenous-themed podcasts. These new voices and channels for communication have led to a flourishing of diverse viewpoints representing Indigenous Taiwan. Many of the concerns remain the same but, as I wrote recently (Friedman, "The Shifting Chronotopes" 97-100), there is a newfound confidence in how young Indigenous filmmakers take on these topics. By putting together this retrospective and catalog, TIDF has helped us better understand the historical development of Indigenous documentaries in Taiwan and the global development of Indigeneity more generally.

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