

The Development of “Indigenous People Documentaries” in Early Twenty-first Century Taiwan, and the Concern with “Tradition”

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When I began filming 16mm documentaries on Taiwanese indigenous people in the 1980s, I once consulted a colleague in the field of television documentaries about network support. He told me that “works concerning indigenous peoples evoke the degenerate and grim aspects of Taiwanese society. They would not sell.” Indeed, from the period of the Japanese occupation to that of the Nationalist governance, documentaries in Taiwan had long been beholden to the state. To gain legitimacy, the films had either to pay lip service to the government, which was desperate to domesticate and educate the people (Lee), or serve as international propaganda, projecting the positive image of Taiwan to the world. This was true not just in network television. Even Central Pictures Corporation, whose main output consisted of narrative films as well as documentaries, had been dubious about the indigenous themes. To a great extent, the development of documentary films in Taiwan well exemplifies Faye D. Ginsburg’s statement concerning “the deliberate erasure of indigenous ethnographic subjects as actual or potential participants in their own screen representations in the past century” (Ginsburg 40).

With the lifting of martial law in 1987, communities previously marginalized began their struggle for self-governance and financial support. In 1996, the Executive Yuan’s Council of Aboriginal Affairs (renamed the Council of Indigenous Peoples in 2002) was founded, answering directly to the central government. The Taiwan Public Television Service (PTS) went on the air in 1998, featuring the documentary program *Aboriginal News Magazine* produced by trained journalists of indigenous origin. In 2005, the Taiwan Indigenous Television Station was launched on a cable network and became affiliated with the corporate body of PTS. *Aboriginal News Magazine* and its crew, under PTS, were then transferred to the Indigenous Television Station. Receiving a grant from the Council for Cultural Affairs (now the Ministry of Culture) from 1995 to 1998, Full Shot Studio cultivated local documentary makers, affording many indigenous people the

technical skill to make documentary films independently. In a shifting political climate that saw the reorganization of ethnic cultural relations, documentaries based on indigenous people or indigenous themes gradually grew in prominence.

Before the popularization of camcorders, documentary directors working with 16mm cameras and film stocks were all Han Chinese. Things began to change in the mid-1990s, when a group of self-identified indigenous documentary directors came on the scene. Operating with just-out, inexpensive and light camcorders and editing apparatuses, they threw themselves into the visual documentation of indigenous culture and society. Mayaw Biho, whose mother is an Amis and father a Han Chinese, is among them. After earning his B.A. in film and visual art, he worked as a journalist for PTS's *Aboriginal News Magazine* before joining the crew of the documentary program on Super TV as a writer-director. Submitting prospectuses for his documentaries to institutions such as the PTS, National Culture and Arts Foundation, and Council of Indigenous Peoples, he became a full-time documentary director after successfully garnering grants from these institutions (T. Hu, "Ethnographic Films"). His first documentary short, *Children in Heaven* (*Tiantang xiaohai*, 1997), won the PTS Judges' Recommendation Award at the First Taiwan International Documentary Festival held in 1998. It became the first indigenous documentary by an indigenous director to make headway at an international film festival.

The term "indigenous documentaries," used by scholars, often denotes documentaries made by indigenous directors. This essay uses the term "indigenous people documentaries" to discuss indigenous-themed documentaries made by directors of both indigenous and non-indigenous descent. To mark the advent of the twenty-first century, the Taiwan Association of Visual Ethnography initiated the Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival in 2001. This festival takes place biennially in theaters in Taipei City (T. Hu, "Renewal"; "A Retrospective"). From the first (2001) to the sixth (2011) Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival, two hundred and twenty-three films were screened, local and foreign, forty of which were based on Taiwanese indigenous people. By this time, the film festival had become an important venue for the formal screening of documentaries on Taiwanese indigenous people.

The first festival, in 2001, with the theme of "Island Odyssey," had a special segment on "Orchid Island" and featured five documentaries, including *Voice of Orchid Island* (*Lanyu guandian*, 1993) and *And Deliver Us from Evil* (*Miandui eling*, 2001), which explore the inevitable contradictions, clashes, and adjustments brought about by the impact of modernity on indigenous residents' worldviews. The

festival made “Indigenous Voices” its theme in 2007, and featured Victor Masayesva, an American Hopi director, and Mayaw Biho, a Taiwanese Amis director. It introduced Mayaw Biho’s documentaries *Children in Heaven* (1997), *Dear Rice Wine, You Are Defeated* (*Qin'ai de mijiu, ni bei wo dabai le*, 1999), and *Carry the Paramount of Jade Mountain on My Back* (*Beiqi Yushan zuigaofeng*, 2002). It also held the first ever screening of the then newly-discovered *Pasta'ay* (rite of the legendary Saisiyat little people) documentary, filmed in 1936 by the late Japanese scholar Miyamoto Nobuto in Da-ai Village of the Saisiyat tribe, Taiwan. The work, entitled *Pas-taai: The Saisiyat Ceremony in 1936* (*Basida'ai: 1936 nian de Saixia jidian*), was shown alongside my treatment of the same subject in *Songs of the Pasta'ay* (*Airenji zhi ge*, 1988), shot in 1986 in the same locale. Two works by the Atayal director Pilin Yapu, *The Stories of Rainbow* (*Caihong de gushi*, 1998) and *Through Thousand Years* (*Zouguo qiannian*, 2009), were introduced in the “Featured Director” segment of the 2009 festival. The Amis director Lungnan Isak Fangas was one of the theme directors of the 2011 festival, where the work which made his career, *Ocean Fever* (*Haiyangre*, 2004), along with his latest work, *The Making of “On the Road”* (*Henjiu*, 2011), were screened. The Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival offered distinguished indigenous directors in Taiwan a chance to be seen, acknowledged, recognized, and honored.

In what follows, I have chosen to discuss representative “indigenous people documentaries” released early in this century by directors who have been featured at the Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival and other film festivals and in TV programs. They may be seen in the light of the issues concerning indigenous society and culture that they raise. Among them, those directed by indigenous directors are Mayaw Biho’s *What’s Your Name, Please?* (*Qingwen guixing*, 2002), *My River* (*Wojia menqian you dahe*, 2009), Pilin Yapu’s *Through Thousand Years* (2009), Chang Shu-lan’s (Si-Manirei) *And Deliver Us from Evil* (2001) and *Si Yabosokanen* (*Xi yabushuka'nen*, 2007), Lungnan Isak Fangas’s *Who Is Singing There* (*Shei zai nabian chang*, 2009) and *The Making of “On The Road”* (2011), and Pan Chao-cheng’s (Bauki Angaw’s) *Collected Ping-pu Memories: On Representing Kavalan and Ketagalan Voices and Images* (*Shoucang de Pinpu jiyi: zaixian Gemalan yu Kaidagelan shenyong*, 2011). Those by Han Chinese directors are Lin Chien-hsiang’s *Keep Rowing* (*Hua dachuan*, 2009), Futuru C. L. Tsai’s *Amis Hip Hop* (*A'mei xiha*, 2005), Chen Wen-bin’s *MSGAMIL: Once Upon a Time* (*Taiya qiannian*, 2007), and my *Returning Souls* (*Rang linghun huijia*, 2012).¹

¹ Except for Futuru C. L. Tsai, all the Chinese and indigenous names appear in the article in their original order.

Mayaw Biho is the most prolific and most political Taiwanese indigenous director of the early twenty-first century. His more culturally and socially provocative documentaries take a straightforward approach to his themes, seeking to exert practical influences. The film series he produced and directed for PTS, *What's Your Name, Please?*, has as its objective the recovery of indigenous names over and against the Han names imposed upon indigenous people through forced assimilation. Didactic films like this are hardly film festival favorites, but they have for years been an integral link in Mayaw Biho's effort to retrieve indigenous peoples' collective identification through visual art. *My River*, sequel to his first documentary short *Children in Heaven*, tells the follow-up story of its protagonists—children living with their migrant Amis parents in the river conservation site below Sanying Bridge in Sanxia, New Taipei City. From childhood to adolescence they have lived through countless purges by the authorities, and fallen prey to bulldozers and big trucks. Old and new images impose themselves upon each other in this film. Behind the children's perky and guileless manner lies the rugged path of their growth. Yet they keep returning to this place of origin long after they have left it, insisting on building an "earthly paradise" compatible with the temper and "traditional" lifestyle of the Amis. The song "Neither drunk nor sober, neither aching nor itching, neither shown nor seeing, neither dead nor living, am I not in Heaven?"—sung in a worldly basso profundo by indigenous singer Hu De-fu (Kimbo)—runs through *My River*. The light, humorous touch with the serious issues that are central to the two films in question are characteristic of the Amis temperament. Through their resilient hope and sense of generosity, these films show us the reality of urban indigenous life in the grip of the state apparatus.

Pilin Yapu's *Through Thousand Years* can be discussed alongside Chen Wen-bin's *MSGAMIL: Once Upon a Time*. The latter was funded by the administration of Shei-Pa National Park, which commissioned My Homeland Studio for its production. The team solicited Atayal director Pilin Yapu to pitch in and record the shooting of *MSGAMIL: Once Upon a Time*, resulting in the documentary *Through Thousand Years*. *MSGAMIL: Once Upon a Time* tells the story of the migration of the ancient Atayal tribe. The crew classifies their work as a documentary which aims at reshaping the traditional Atayal lifestyle and culture. To realize this purpose, director Chen Wen-bin had not only to find Atayal people to play their Atayal-speaking ancestors, but to mobilize two Atayal tribes to reconstruct ancient Atayal lodgings in proper locations, hoping that after the film they would become educational tourist attractions and induce a deeper

understanding of tribal life.

Along with the “stylization” and “romanticization” of the Atayal tradition and its scenic milieu, its members, its clothes, and its melodious songs, the film’s lack of a specific historical referent has led an anthropologist to categorize it generically as “drama” (Lu). Pilin Yapu’s *Through Thousand Years*, on the other hand, reveals the frustrations encountered by a Han director and his crew while filming the Atayal tribes in Zhenxibao and Xinguang, Hsinchu County. The search for the locations for old lodgings alone took them nearly half a year before making any final decision. The original collaborative team, the Makaoy Group (*magao xiaozu*), accused the production team of fraudulence and backed out halfway. Before the end of the film, Pilin Yapu asks in a voiceover: “[Should a visitor investigating the Atayal tribe] understand its culture first or its organization? Who is the subject? How do you convince the tribal members? Confronted by the influx of outside resources, how do you strike a balance between traditional culture and modern civilization?” In the film, though, he is vague on the reasons behind these conflicts. It is hard to account for this evasiveness, to know whether it springs from the director’s reluctance, as a member of the Atayal clan, to delve deeper into the internal contradictions of the Atayal tribes, or from the film’s financial affiliation with Shei-Pa National Park, where prudence holds sway above in-depth analysis and powerful critique.

Since the screening of her works *And Deliver Us from Evil* and *Si Yabosokanen* at the Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival, Chang Shu-lan (Si-Manirei), a nurse from the Tao (Yami) tribe on Orchid Island, has received numerous requests for screenings and talks, and has garnered considerable financial support for the House Care Association of Orchid Island she founded. Both films document an indigenous Tao tradition: the elderly build their own lodgings and live away from their families. This is because there is a deep-seated fear among Orchid Island residents that the malign spirit (*anito*) of the dead will wrest the living away. This fear colors people’s attitude towards those who, advanced in age, are near death. By living separately they avoid contact with the breath of death. Chang, who as a nurse was in charge of the domestic care of the aged, had thus encountered many obstacles at work. After meeting up with Han documentary filmmaker Huang Chi-mao, who worked at the meteorological observatory of Orchid Island and who had received training in film editing at Full Shot Studio, she began in earnest her apprenticeship in documentary filmmaking, hoping to improve her ability to provide domestic care for the aged.

The images of *And Deliver Us from Evil* and *Si Yabosokanen* shook all who saw them. The lens, so close to the subjects, not only lays bare the life of the aged

on Orchid Island but also allows them to speak their minds. In *And Deliver Us from Evil*, Chang is seen encouraging Christian women on the island to overcome their traditional fear of *anito* and to volunteer to serve the aged, by helping them with things like bathing. Grateful, the aged speak to the camera about the tradition. Believing in it, they would rather not risk coming near their children, whose welfare they treasure above themselves. The film clearly challenges the traditional concept of *anito* in Orchid Island. Chang's other work, *Si Yabosokanen*, delves further into the simple and self-sufficient philosophy of the aged. The most they expect their children to do, in providing for them, is simply to "bring us meals." The film clearly depicts the everyday life of the aged, and shows their children bringing them meals and renovating their houses. Through her documentary images, Chang wishes to disprove a myth about the indigenous Tao people on Orchid Island which is still believed by the Han, the myth that the Tao are "lonesome old folks and heartless children."

Comparable to Chang Shu-lan's work is a documentary on the Tao (Yami) people produced by Han director Lin Chien-hsiang, whose ties with Orchid Island began while he was the cinematographer for my documentary *Voice of Orchid Island* (1993). The films he directed later are mostly about traditional culture, and were commissioned by museums or scholarly projects. In 2009, however, he made the film *Keep Rowing*, which breaks the traditional taboo of Orchid Island. Learning that the international corporation Diageo was sponsoring projects for their "Keep Walking Fund," Lin came up with the proposal of "Keep Rowing," which would involve building a canoe on Orchid Island and paddling it to the shores of Taiwan. This proposal got him the Diageo grant and resulted in the film *Keep Rowing*. The film focuses on the crew's apprehensions about violating tribal taboos by expanding a traditional "canoe for ten" into a "canoe for fourteen" for non-fishing purposes. The film depicts the historical process by which the indigenous people of Orchid Island finally overcome taboos, and come to the shore of Taiwan rowing their stupendous canoe. Through the narration of Kuo Chien-ping (Siaman Vengayen), we learn that those who are used to building canoes for ten for fishing, in order to shed their unease about breaking taboos, have come to view the ornate canoe for fourteen as an exception, something set apart from the canoes they normally build for fishing. Moreover, as the film shows, rituals are conducted wherein, as a supplication for safety, chicken blood is sprinkled upon the canoe's keel in the beginning and a pig is killed in sacrifice after the completion of the canoe. Lin's documentary, like Chang's *And Deliver Us from Evil*, provokes in us reflections on the preservation and transcendence of traditions in indigenous

society.

Lungnan Isak Fangas is an Amis Director brought up in the metropolis of Taipei. After *Ocean Fever*, which featured the rock bands that participated in the Ho-hai-yan Rock Festival, he went further in *Who Is Singing There*. Here he extended his knack for in-depth exploration to the indigenous band closest to him, TOTEM, whose rise and disintegration he closely documented with his camera. After the band shot to fame Lungnan noticed a widening rift between the lead singer, who came from the Amis Dulan tribe in Taitung, and the writer of the music and the lyrics, Suming. Suming wished to move their music in the direction of Amis pop (popular music composed in the Amis language), and to incorporate a sacrificial rite into the beginning of each show, but he did not receive the support of other members. Lungnan staged a dramatic scene in which he asked Suming and his comrades to perform in a “farewell gathering.” The band members ended up baring it all to one another. *The Making of “On the Road”* documents the production of the indigenous musical *On the Road*, which was performed in the National Concert Hall to the accompaniment of the National Orchestra. Both the producer and the two directors of the musical were Han Chinese. Its actors were pop singers of the Puyuma tribe who had won Golden Melody Awards. While Lungnan raised questions as to “whether indigenous music should be thus presented” and also expressed concerns about the musical’s dual directorship, eventually the completed film only makes a rather evasive critique of the musical. This being so, Lungnan has shown, through his documentaries, the rising prominence of the indigenous tradition in both popular and classical music, and its potential for future development.

In contrast to Lungnan, Futuru C. L. Tsai is a Han director and an anthropologist who has long lived among the Amis Dulan tribe and so, with his rich first-hand experience, is able to make detailed observations. His representative work, *Amis Hip Hop*, looks at how members of the younger generation in the Amis Dulan Age Organization, influenced by popular culture, created Amis-styled hip-hop and performed it at the tribe’s grand annual New Year Festival. Performed at this festival, what appears at first to be modern song and dance turns into an innovative enactment of a venerable tradition, delighting the tribal elders. The son who invents “Amis hip-hop” demonstrates the convivial talent for song and dance he has inherited from his mother, thus embodying the traces left over from the society’s matrilineal past. The film challenges the “traditional” mindset, which demands rigid observance of conventions and resistance to change, by harmonizing it with modern elements.

Two documentaries touch on the importance of the indigenous artifacts and audio-visual archives in the Museum of Anthropology for the revival of traditional indigenous tribal culture. One is *Collected Ping-pu Memories: On Representing Kavalan and Ketagalan Voices and Images*, directed by Kavalan director Pan chao-cheng (Bauki Angaw), in collaboration with its producer, associate professor of Anthropology at National Taiwan University, Hu Chia-yu. The other is the recently completed *Returning Souls*, directed by myself. *Collected Ping-pu Memories* captivates the audience with a moving scene in which a descendant of one of the near-extinct Ping-pu tribe, the Ketagalan, hears the archived voice of his ancestor and excitedly asks for a copy of this tape for research and conservation of tradition. Pan, who discovered his Kavalan identity only in manhood, integrates into his documentary at several points what Hu Chia-yu retrieved in Japan: images filmed seventy to eighty years ago. They touch the audience just as they did him. In his film, Pan attends to such rites as the Kavalan paying homage to their ancestors, a sea offering and a divination, and also shows us the name-restoration movement of the Kavalan tribe whose purpose is to achieve continuity with the past. The film also depicts the revival of the banana silk craftsmanship he actively pushes for in the Kavalan Xinshe village. As producer Hu Chia-yu says in a dialogue published in *Man and Culture (Renlei yu wenhua)*: “In *Collected Ping-pu Memories*, I seek to present, through the film, relics of the *Ping-pu* past in their respective forms, so that everyone in the tribe can see these relics, and have their memories quickened, their passion for their community rekindled” (C. Hu and T. Hu).

The film I made in 2012, *Returning Souls*, came about when a youth from the Amis Tafalong village approached Academia Sinica’s Institute of Ethnology in the hope of reclaiming from its museum the sculpted ancestral pillars of the tribe’s most prominent house, the house of Kakita’an, so as to rebuild the ancestral house. The pillars had become part of the museum’s collection after the ancestral house was knocked down by a severe typhoon in 1958. Through the mediation of shamans, descendants of the house of Kakita’an and the village representatives communicated with the ancestral spirits in the pillars. In the end, they ushered the spirits back to the tribe and started to rebuild the ancestral house without taking the original pillars from the museum. The film presents the many obstacles these young people encounter in their wish to bring back the ancestral spirits of Tafalong and revive the tribal soul. This is what I said at the screening:

The young people who participated in the reconstruction of the Kakita’an house have hoped that an un-museumized ancestral

lodging, which houses ancestral spirits as well as on-going rites, can one day stand in the land of the Tavalong again. For a long time, I have observed the reconstruction project and documented it through my film out of identification with the vision of these young people. I hope that the reconstructed ancestral house, together with the ancestral pillars, can spur tribal cultures into self-searching, such that a new life may be born of a new age, of the culture's deepened autonomy and vitality.

I find in the documentaries discussed in this article a common concern for the interaction between “the traditional” and “the modern.” Some of these films stress the revival of tradition whereas others seek to challenge and transcend it. Whatever angle or ethnic identity they adopt, they share an awareness of tradition as the fount of thinking and acting. As impossible as it is for “tradition” not to keep changing, we obviously cannot view it as something readily disposable. While what we think of as “tradition” is but the invention of an age (see Hobsbawm and Ranger), it is at the same time constitutive of the ethos of a community, and essential to the cultural singularity it treasures and preserves. The “indigenous people documentaries” of Taiwan engage in visual dialogue with “tradition” in just this sense, for through it they seek to find the optimal way forward for these cultures and these peoples. This may change the production of the environmental documentary.

—Translated from the Chinese by Heng-Jui Chang

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