Film Review: A Review of Hu Tai-Li's Documentary Educational Resources Series

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A REVIEW ESSAY

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ABSTRACT This review addresses six films made by Taiwan’s most well respected ethnographic filmmaker, Hu Tai-li. The films were recently released as part of the Documentary Educational Resources series and cover Hu’s most well-known works. The films in the series span two decades, beginning with her first film in 1985. Hu’s films capture the everyday lives of the disenfranchised in Taiwan, ranging from aboriginal groups to working-class Taiwanese who have been displaced by shifting economic structures. Her films are especially important for Taiwan Studies, for they capture fading traditions as well as continued ethnic and class tensions within Taiwan. As such, the films are important for anyone who wants to come to a better understanding of Taiwan’s past and present. [Keywords: ethnic diversity, ethnographic film, modernization, Taiwan]

In the field of Taiwan studies, Hu Tai-li needs no introduction. Widely recognized as Taiwan’s premier ethnographic filmmaker, her documentaries have been shown in film festivals in France, Germany, Taiwan, and the United States. Hu is a research fellow at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taiwan’s premier think tank. She also teaches courses at Tsing-hwa University’s anthropology department, which is widely recognized as one of Taiwan’s top two anthropology graduate departments.

Through sheer perseverance, sincerity, and charm, Hu gained access to filming in areas denied to reporters or other anthropologists. In doing so, she has documented several religious and performative traditions that are being lost to modernization. The Documentary Educational Resources (DER) series includes six of her films, all of which include English subtitles.

OVERVIEW OF THE INDIVIDUAL FILMS


Released in 1985, The Return of Gods and Ancestors documents a Paiwan aboriginal ceremony called Malaveq that took place every five years when the Paiwan deities and ancestors were thought to come down from the mountains. Examining a festival that survived legal prohibition under Japanese Colonial rule (1895–1945), Catholic opposition soon after that, and a general disinterest by youth in the modern era, the film examines the challenges of reviving traditions in the modern age. Recorded with a hand-cranked 16-mm camera, the film is surprisingly sophisticated visually. The sound quality leaves something to be desired, however.


Songs of Pasta’ay documents Saisiat aboriginal customs and religious mythology, focusing on a festival for the Ta’ay, the legendary “little people,” that occurred every other year. The weeklong festival includes three consecutive nights of singing and dancing to entertain the Ta’ay, concluding with
a daytime ceremony to both honor and expel the spirits. *Songs of Pasa’ay* addresses the difficulty of maintaining traditions when confronted with the cultural influences of the neighboring Atayal aborigines and the Taiwanese majority. The sound and visual quality are poor in comparison with her later films although Hu still manages to produce some remarkably good shots.


*Voices of Orchid Island* has two central themes. The first concerns the exploitation of the Yami aborigines including ethnic tourism, anthropologists who use images of the Yami for their own ends, and nuclear waste dumping. The second section involves the tension between Western medicine and indigenous religious beliefs.

Though not as technically masterful as her later films such as *Sounds of Love and Sorrow*, to my mind *Voices of Orchid Island* is one of Hu Tai-li’s best works. Compared with most of her other films I suspect that this documentary will especially be of interest to people who are not overly concerned with Taiwan for its own sake but, rather, with what Taiwan can teach us about larger issues such as ethnic tension, modernization, and political economy.


As with *Voices of Orchid Island*, *Passing through My Mother-in-Law’s Village* examines the ways in which a poorer, less-educated populace is made to bear the brunt of the price of modernization. The film tells the tale of a federal highway project that was being built directly through Hu’s mother-in-law’s village in central Taiwan, wreaking havoc on the families and the community of the village. Hu explores the villagers’ anxieties concerning where they will go and how they will maintain their livelihoods once their houses and small-scale factories have been torn down.

Of these six films, *Passing through My Mother-in-Law’s Village* is the most likely to resonate with an audience that is familiar with Taiwan, for it is the best representation of “the Taiwan experience.” Indeed, the economic, personal, and political events portrayed in this film will easily be recognized by anyone in Taiwan—either because they have experienced it themselves or because they have relatives, friends, and neighbors who have gone through similar victories and defeats. *Passing through My Mother-in-Law’s Village* is sure to bring a wave of nostalgia to anyone who has spent any time in Taiwan, and I predict that this will be the film for which Hu Tai-li is remembered.


*Sounds of Love and Sorrow* documents traditional Paiwan aborigine flute playing, the making of the instruments, and the courtship involved with flute playing in traditional Paiwan culture. The film is flawless in its narrative as well as in its sonic and visual presentation and is far more thematically focused than most of Hu’s films. Indeed, it is so finished in comparison with her other films that one gets a sense that it was produced for television airing in Taiwan. It is also the most accessible of the six documentaries to a Western audience because of its tight thematic focus and the internationally familiar themes of art, folklore, and music, as well as the appeal of hearing the elderly villagers’ reminiscences of youthful courtship, loves, and loves lost. It is a truly charming film and would be a great fit for a class addressing Taiwan’s aboriginal culture, music, or religion, although some of her other documentaries such as *Voices of Orchid Island* or *Passing through My Mother-in-Law’s Village* bring up larger social issues and, therefore, might be more appropriate for a class that is not specifically centered around these particular topics.


*Stone Dream* focuses on mainland Chinese soldiers who fled the communist revolution in 1949 and their subsequent marriages to local Taiwanese or aboriginal women from poorer families. It addresses the resentment of women whose parents forced them to marry the mainlanders against their will, and the experiences of the mainland Chinese who had no choice but to start a new life in Taiwan after the loss of China to the Communist Revolution. This division between *benschengren* (local Taiwanese) and *waishengren* (mainlanders and their children) continues to be one of the greatest ongoing political tensions in Taiwan. The film expertly documents many of the familial tensions and the complexities of personal identity in this particular cultural context.

*Stone Dream* creatively uses the region’s beautiful and abundant stones as a link to the different narratives: from an elderly mainlander’s recollections of being employed to move stones to channel a river to his memories of clearing his rock-laden plot of land, to his son’s involvement in collecting rose stones, which, when cut in half, bear a striking resemblance to calligraphic art.

In many ways *Stone Dream* is the most moving of the six films. It captures a father’s strained relationship with his son, the passing of his wife, and the family’s resistance to his plea to return to his homeland rather than stay with his son and grandchildren in Taiwan where he has spent most of his adult life. As with *Passing through My Mother-in-Law’s Village*, it movingly documents a set of experiences that everyone in Taiwan is familiar with on a personal level.

**OVERVIEW OF THE FILMS AS A SERIES**

Hu’s films should be mandatory viewing for any Taiwan studies major. They are filled with the magic of traditional life that many Western scholars who have spent most of their time in Taiwan’s urban environments (such as myself) have only read about. Few people in Taiwan under the age of 40 are familiar with these rituals, and even fewer of
them have witnessed the ceremonies first hand, so the films also expose many younger Taiwanese—including Taiwan’s aborigines—to aspects of their own cultures.

One of the greatest strengths and weaknesses of many of Hu’s documentaries is that she is not afraid to include moments of daily life that may not connect to the central themes of her films. A few examples of this are Paiwan aborigines singing a Chinese language song produced in Taipei (The Return of the Gods and Ancestors), an aboriginal-style sculpture of Jesus (The Return of the Gods and Ancestors), a Christian wedding in church including a bride in Western-style white dress while many of the audience members wear either Western-style clothing or bright ceremonial aboriginal garb (Sounds of Love and Sorrow), and watching an ox-led rice plow, which even at the time of her filming was almost obsolete (Passing through My Mother-in-Law’s Village). In many ways, it is these tangential moments that give her films their ethnographic and visual richness. Yet several of the films include these extraneous scenes to such a degree the main themes are virtually lost in an almost postmodern pastiche of seemingly disconnected images. Passing through My Mother-in-Law’s Village and Stone Dream are the best examples of this and, indeed, these smaller scenes paradoxically both make and break the films.

Hu is often present on screen as the interviewer but, with the exception of Songs of Pasta’ay, she is remarkably modest in her claims as a narrator, preferring instead to let interviews and images speak for themselves. To use these films in an English-speaking classroom, one would therefore first have to lecture on Taiwan’s history and political economy, show a map of Taiwan, detail the population size of those being studied and the group’s average income in relation to Taiwanese average income, and provide some other historical background that relates to each particular film. Providing a US$ or Euro equivalent for the NT$, while introducing its own set of problems, would give the English-speaking audience a better sense of the economic disparity addressed in many of the films. Cultural background would also greatly enhance the films’ accessibility and their significance to the Western audience; for example, explaining that one is watching hired funeral wailers in Passing through My Mother-in-Law’s Village, or that white headbands in a temple signify that someone had died in Stone Dream, for example.

It should also be noted that Hu’s films focus on rural communities representing some of the lowest economic strata of Taiwan. Seventy percent of Taiwan’s population lives in cities with populations of 50,000 or more (Adrian 2003:33; Hermalin et al. 1994:56); forty percent of Taiwan’s urban residents are living in Taipei (Adrian 2003:33). Therefore, any course using Hu’s films might also want to include fictional portrayals such as Ang Lee’s Eat Drink Man Woman (1994) or Edward Yang’s A One and a Two (2000) to gain a better sense of urban lifestyles to round out the pictures of Taiwan that are so wonderfully drawn in Hu’s films.

Of course, no film can do all things, and if I have been particularly detailed in ways to introduce these films to an English-speaking classroom it is because I also hope for their long-term success. All of Hu’s films address the tensions between change and continuity, tradition and modernity. For Taiwan studies, her films are invaluable in documenting traditions that are quickly fading away—or ones that have left us already. All of her documentaries evince an admirable empathy and sensitivity. Although rarely behind the camera herself, it is clear that she closely supervises both the filming and editing process, for one can see a continuity of visual style in the films’ hushed moments of appreciating nature’s beauty juxtaposed with the hustle and bustle of community lives. One can count on each of her films containing at least several breathtaking shots that could be mounted on one’s wall as art. In short, Hu Tai-li’s films should be mandatory viewing for anyone in Taiwan Studies. Future generations of filmmakers in Taiwan will owe a great debt to her.

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