

## **Reality and Fiction: Audiovisual Representations of Traditional Musical Cultures in China**

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### **Abstract**

'Real' and 'fake' in filmic representation is a long-standing dilemma. Reality is an age-old anthropological and philosophical debate characterized by the dialectical tension within things as they appear through our representation and what they 'really' are. Film as an audiovisual representation of the world is a textual "construct" in the same way as the written text; writing on musical cultures as well as filming musical cultures are both unavoidably form of "creative" treatment of a (musical) reality.

The 'crisis of representation' of the 1970s in visual anthropology studies brought inevitably to redefine the boundaries between fictional and documentary film, encouraging new audiovisual languages, such as the docu-fiction or "ethno-fiction", as result of the hybridization of the documentary-style languages and the narrative conventions of fictional-theatrical film.

This article offers an overview of different ways of representing traditional music -with a particular emphasis on documentary, fictional and docu-fiction films dealing with traditional music in China - through the use of a variety of cinematic languages, interweaving brief historical notes of the development of early Chinese cinema with different theoretical approaches expressed in visual anthropology and ethnomusicology.

Keywords: Audiovisual Representation, China, Traditional Music, Ethnomusicology

## **Introduction**

*Visualizing* music, and not just listening to it, is one of the fundamental principles to deepen the knowledge of music belonging to traditional cultures. The audio visual approach to the study of music allows us to catch the *sounding image* containing a significant amount of useful information that, in many cases, become essential to the knowledge of musical performance in traditional cultures. The musical knowledge that is orally-aurally-visually transmitted by master to pupil is not composed only of repertoires, i.e. *what* you sing or play, but also *how* you sing or play, a combination of postures, body movements and gestures involved in musicmaking.

The methodological importance of audiovisual documentation as a research tool in ethnomusicology was asserted for the first time by Mantle Hood in his essay *The Ethnomusicologist* (1971), in which he wrote: “The motion picture filmed in colour with synchronized sound is the most powerful medium of documentation available to the ethnomusicologist” (Hood 1971:202-3). Hood prescribed the use of the camera in field research as an essential tool in order to record the contextual aspects of musical experience. Such a fieldwork conducted among the Ashanti of Ghana in 1963 led him to create one of the first ethnomusicological films: *Atumpan: The Talking Drums of Ghana*(1964).

## **Research film and documentary film**

Before addressing the various issues relating to audiovisual representation of musical cultures, it is necessary to make a preliminary distinction between *research* film and *documentary* film. In fact, a *research* film made by an ethnomusicologist does not constitute a documentary by its self. In other words, if research film can be compared to a sort of multimedia note book used during fieldwork, documentary film can be considered an audiovisual text book or monograph of musical ethnography.

From a technical perspective, it is customary to indicate as *research film* that set of ethnographic-musical data collected with a camera or camcorder during fieldwork, as the result of a process that is limited to the collection of audiovisual materials useful to later analysis; a process which, generally, does not continue in the later stages of editing and publishing (in other words remains the "raw footage").

The *documentary film*, instead, is a structured work made for presentation to an audience, an edited product that has gone through a complete production process, common to all films, regardless of the genre to which they belong: the preliminary research, fieldwork, survey or groundwork (preproduction), shooting (production) and editing (postproduction): "Through the editing process—Baily writes—this raw material is used to create a highly structured communication in a manner which is not very different from the way macro-units of written text are used to construct a conventional ethnography" (Baily 1989:14).

The 7<sup>th</sup> ICTM Colloquium titled "Methods and Techniques of Film and Video recording in Ethnomusicology", held in Bratislava in 1988, has established the distinction between *research film* and *documentary film* in ethnomusicology. Baily (1988), reporting the outcomes of the ICTM Colloquium, outlines three factors that are involved in the definition of the two categories of *research film* and *documentary film*: the *conception* and *intent* of the filmmaker, the *methods* adopted for the shooting and editing, and the *destination* of the film.

First of all, comes the *conception* and the *intention* of the filmmaker/ethnomusicologist: the camera can be considered a tool to collect ethnographic and ethnomusicological data, like a notebook for "visual notes" aimed at analysis (such as the case of the research footage) or as a means to represent a musical phenomenon (such as the case of the documentary film).

The second factor discriminating between research film and documentary film lies on the *modalities* of its implementation. A basic characteristic of the documentary is the construction of a film through a

work of editing, cutting and pasting frames in different ways and times which could be a voice-over commentary (or captions), while the research film is characterized by “sequence shots” (long continuous shots where the hand-held camera explores different aspects of the scene in turn) which preserves temporal and spatial logic, thus respecting the course of the events in real time (Dauer 1969).

The *destination* of the film product is the third element that makes the difference between the two forms of audiovisual representation of music of oral tradition. Research film and documentary film have different purposes and are oriented to a different audience: the documentary represents the final publication of a completed research project to be presented to a wider public. Research film, instead, is a step of research, a working document to be analyzed and discussed. This means that while the edited film can be immediately presented to a general audience, the film constructed in sequence shot is addressed to researchers and students of ethnomusicological and anthropological disciplines.

### **World music film and ethnomusicological film**

Within the category of *documentary* film, it is also necessary to make a further typological distinction between world music and ethnomusicological documentary. The world music documentary can be considered a musical film focused on traditional/ethno/folk/world music, including hybrid urban musical forms, in which there is a mixture of musical traits belonging to both traditional and popular music. They are mostly audiovisual products directed to a wide audience and broadcast by television channels or cinema distribution. The *ethnomusicological* documentary is mainly a form of musical ethnography exploring some aspects of a musical culture, most commonly a non-Western one. In this case, the topic is analyzed with the tools and methods belonging to ethnomusicology.

The distinction between world music documentary and *ethnomusicological* documentary, however tenuous it may seem, does not

rely on *content* as the defining characteristic, i.e. in *what* is filmed, but rather in *how* this subject is treated, i.e. on the intention of the filmmaker, the choice of methods adopted according to the objectives, and the target to whom it is addressed. If the world music film concerns any sort of *sounding images* about a musical culture, the *ethnomusicological* film shows a deeper ethnomusicological insight and has the ability to communicate ethnomusicological concepts and contents. The difference between the two kinds of documentary films, basically lies in the emphasis placed on the "ethnomusicological perspective" (Hood1971).

The world music documentary tends to overlook or ignore the ethnomusicological needs that would give a "scientific" status to the film, since "ethnomusicological correctness" is not its priority, while the aesthetic dimension is the main target, together with the immediacy of music and images, and their inherent capability to communicate feelings to the viewers. On the other hand, one of the aims of the ethnomusicological film is to expose the different musical practices of the world without falling into exoticism, providing "an adequate amount of information" (Heider 2006:75), and trying to answer a number of common journalist's questions about them: who, where, when, what, how and why.

The criteria to make a distinction between world music film and *ethnomusicological* film is a quite problematic matter and will stimulate an active and productive debate about the concept of the "ethnomusicological point of view" in film productions. Therefore, how can we define the ethnomusicological film? I suggest to define the ethnomusicological film as the audiovisual representation of music cultures through *sounding images*, using methodologies and theoretical perspectives developed in the framework of ethnomusicology.

### **‘New wine in old bottles’: re-writing folk songs in Chinese movies**

The interest to "visualize" music and dance dates back to the early stage of the history of cinematography, marked by the advent of modern photographic technology of still and movie cameras at the end of the 19th

century. Filming music and dance began with synchronized sound technology. In 1891, Edison and Dickson had already built a prototype, called *kinetophone* (or *kinetophonograph*), a device capable of adding sound to the film, to which the kinoscope was later connected to a phonograph to synchronize the images to sound.<sup>1</sup>

The arrival of sound film in the late 1920s allowed the adding of dialogues and sounds to film. *The Jazz Singer* (1927) directed by Alan Crosland is considered the first feature-length motion picture with synchronized sound and dialogue sequences, marking the decline of the silent film era. In China, the first sound film was *Sing-Song Girl Red Peony* or *Songstress Red Peony* (*Genü Hongmudan* 歌女紅牡丹, 1931), directed by Zhang Shichuan and produced by Mingxing Film Studio in collaboration with Pathé Records. The background music drawing on traditional opera songs<sup>2</sup>(featuring China's opera master Mei Lanfang), played by traditional Chinese instruments (*erhu* and *pipa*), was added to silent film in 1935, using the sound-on-disc technology (*lapan fayin*), also known as Vitaphone (*witafeng*) (Zhang and Xiao 1998; Zhang 2004). It is interesting to notice that the first musical film in China, that goes back to the 1960s, concerns a legendary singer belonging to an ethnic minority: *Liu San Jie* (刘三姐, *Liu the Third Sister*, 1960), directed by Su Li, which tells the story of Liu San Jie, a legendary folk female singer of Zhuang minority in Guangxi Province, who became known for her singing: when various local oppressors came to her village they were left speechless and defeated by her tuneful and witty songs (recently a remake was made,

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<sup>1</sup> The advent of moving images at the end of the 19th century, has changed the approach to the study of music, adding to the sound its visual dimension. In 1891, Edison and Dickson had already built a prototype, called *kinetophone*, the first sound film system. It was a device capable to add sound to the image, in which the kinoscope was connected to a phonograph to synchronize the images to sound. The first film to test the kinetophone was a 17 seconds film, *Dickson Experimental Sound Film* (1894) by Dickson, an experimental attempt to create sound motion pictures.

<sup>2</sup> The first sound films made in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan were all based on Chinese opera (Yeh 2002).

inspired by the Liu San Jie's story: *Su You Peng* - 寻找刘三姐, A Singing Fairy, 2010, directed by Zhu Feng).

At the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, Deng Xiaoping initiated the PRC's reform and open-door policy. China ushered in a period of economic reform, accompanied by incremental cultural liberalization. Film production resumed, and the Beijing Film Academy reopened after a long time. In 1982, Chen Kaige was the first to graduate at Beijing Film Academy since the mid-1960s. His directorial debut, *Yellow Earth* (*Huáng tǔdì*, 1984), - with his classmate Zhang Yimou as cinematographer - made such a mark on the development of Chinese cinema: "*Yellow Earth* emphasizes imagery over plot, symbolism and song over dialogue, and ambiguity over explicit didactic function" (Farquhar 1992:154).

Folksongs and folk music played by shawm bands from the northern Shaanxi (Shaanbei) have a prominent role in *Yellow Earth*.<sup>3</sup> The plot is very simple: In early spring 1939, a soldier of the arts division is sent to the remote area to collect folk songs in order to re-write them with communist lyrics in order to boost the morale of the Eighth Route Army soldiers. While collecting folk songs to adapt as revolutionary anthems, a communist soldier opens the eyes of an ignorant peasant girl to the modernizing potential of communism. As Harry Kuoshu (a.k.a. Haixin Xu) writes in *Celluloid China*, "the collection and re-writing of folk songs is central to the Chinese Communist literary theory. It was called "new wine in old bottles" and writers were to take traditional popular literature and art and re-write them with a revolutionary content" (Kuoshu2002:225).

Many northern-style folksongs as well as wedding ceremonies, traditional festivals and rituals are included in this movie. Although *Yellow Earth* may be considered a fiction film, it shows two 'real' ceremonies in

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<sup>3</sup> The documentary *Notes from the Yellow Earth* (2009) by Stephen Jones offers a panoramic view of ritual and folk music in Shaanbei. It shows bards performing at a temple fair and to bless a family in distress, and shawm bands performing at a wedding, at funerals, and a shop opening (including their pop repertory with the 'big band').

their traditional socio-cultural context: the *Ansai Yaogu (Waist Drum) Dance*(安塞腰鼓舞) and the *Rain Prayer Ceremony*. Nowadays, the *Ansai Waist Drum Dance* is rarely performed at villages, because the young drummers have migrated to the cities and it is held annually in Yan'an during the government-organized New Year's festival, in which professional troupes stage waist-drum performances in the form of a street parade: "In other words, the sign of a Wan'an waist-drum performance is now constantly mass-mediated, performed and consumed out of its original and spatial contexts, and its live performance now engages rural performers and urban photographers, tourists, and government officials much more than rural neighbors. At the same time, the Yan'an waist-drum dance was a recent target of national heritage listing and conservation. Urban intellectuals rushed to investigate its historical meanings and performative forms and spoke of it as an unchanging tradition" (Wu 2015:20-21).

The final scene shows a *Rain Prayer Ceremony* within vocations to gods for rain by the prayers to the Dragon King, inspired by the rituals for "seeking rain" (*qiu yu*) or "praying [to the gods] for rain" (*qi yu*), practiced in many villages in the northern areas of China, because of the dry climate (Overmyer 2009).

*Song of the Phoenix*<sup>4</sup> (百鸟朝凤, 2013), the final film of the late director Wu Tianming (former head of the Xi'an Film Studio),<sup>5</sup> is a story about transmission and survival of traditional *suona* (a Chinese double-reed woodwind instrument) music in modern society. The movie charts the life and trials of You Tianming, a young *suona* apprentice who goes on to form his very own *suona* troupe at a time when the presence of traditional instruments was declining in Chinese society. Tianming faces the harsh

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<sup>4</sup> The title of the movie "Song of the Phoenix" (also translates as "Hundreds of birds Courting Phoenix") is from a very famous Chinese *suona* music piece.

<sup>5</sup> Director Wu Tianming, who just recently passed away, was considered a prominent figure among the Fourth Generation Chinese filmmakers who inspired many well-known Fifth Generation filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige.



reality that his artistic calling is no longer in tune with a modern and urbanized China. Adopting a narrative method, the movie depicts two generations of *suona* players and their father-son relationship. Chinese ethnomusicologist Yu Hui captured the essence of this arthouse film:

Although the story is from a fictional novel, both the author of the novel and the movie director based their creativity work on personal experiences. The depiction of *suona* music, the instrument itself, the apprentice system, and the troupes' practices vividly reflect the real life situation. In Chinese mythology, the phoenix is associated with the sun, and the phoenix obtains new life by arising from the ashes of its predecessor. The movie demonstrates people's struggles in their changed lives, and their persistence, confidence, and seriousness when safeguarding their music traditions (Yu Hui. From the abstract of his paper "The *Song of the Phoenix* in a Changing Society" of the 1<sup>st</sup> ICTM Symposium on Audiovisual Ethnomusicology, 2016).

### **Documentary and ethno-fiction**

'Real' and 'fake' in filmic representation is a long-standing dilemma about different ways to make a documentary film, concerning the legitimacy of staged and scripted scenes, reconstructed or reenacted behavior, events provoked, instigated or encouraged by the filmmaker, etc. Indeed, every representation of reality is no more than a fiction in the sense that it is an artificial construct, a selective view of the world, produced for some purpose and therefore unavoidably reflecting a given subjectivity or point of view.

Nowadays, with the advent of documentary films in the worldwide commercial film arena as well as their ever expanding production in most countries of the world, most generic classifications of style, such as "documentary" and "fiction", have changed. This evolution, leading to the overlap of styles and genres, has placed far more overt, interpretive control in the hands of the filmmaker.

The effect of the *world music* phenomenon, spreading in the late 1980s, has led not only to an increase in documentary production, but also

to test new audiovisual languages such as the ethnomusic docu-fiction or "ethno-fiction", produced by hybridization between documentary and narrative conventions of fictional-theatrical film. Since the 1990s, new languages became popular in ethnomusic documentary production not belonging to audiovisual ethnomusicology, nor to the "standard" television documentary, but increasingly closer to the type of docu-fiction (or docu-drama). The substantial differences between the two genres, documentary and docu-fiction, are based on different conventions that can be simply summarized:

1. The documentary is made mainly on archival materials (photos, movies, documents, writings, etc.) and interviews; the docu-fiction is oriented towards the use of a narrative language, sometimes with poetic accent, centered on a story constructed in shooting and editing (*diegesis* in the film criticism language).

2. In the docu-fiction, there is a script and the scenes are "staged", all unusual features for a documentary *stricto sensu*; the subjects become 'characters', 'social actors' acting out their lives as 'film actors' in front of a camera, following a script assigned to them by the director.

3. The documentary often presents comment on the images through a voice-over, captions or subtitles, while in the docu-fiction the message is implicit in the action (or, in some descriptive moments, there is an intervention of the voice-over during the action).

The gradual transformation of the documentary genre in docu-fiction with the acquisition of technical and narrative methods have enhanced the value of entertainment. In this way, the documentary, initially rejected by the schedule of the general television, finds its place thanks to the processes of "hybridization" of genres in thematic channels.

This process of hybridization in the research of new languages depicting traditional music, raises the same doubts and questions already encountered in the "classic" documentary when dealing with form and content, observer and observed, insiders and outsiders, and *emic* and *etic*

approaches.<sup>6</sup> But in this case, the docu-fiction raises further issues related to the "correctness" of information, with the risk of trivializing the "ethnic music", as a form of hedonistic neo-exoticism.

Documentary and docu-fiction have different priorities, objectives and targets: concerning the balance between *information* and *entertainment*, the "standard" documentary focuses on the musical data trying to achieve a scientific rigor and objectivity to represent a musical culture, while giving little importance to the entertainment component; on the contrary, the docu-fiction tries to convey correct information (with some poetic license) through entertainment. The "standard" documentary is intended to represent reality, while in docu-fiction the reality of the facts is functional to the narrative.

In the late 1990s, the French production company Boreales by Barthélémy Fougea made eight world music docu-fiction of the series "Kids, Music and Dance" (1998). Those films, led by eight different film directors, drew the portraits of child musicians from around the world: a Chinese *lusheng* player, a Spanish guitarist, an Indian *tabla* player, a Bulgarian *kaval* player, a musician playing *steel drums* of Trinidad, a Cuban *conga* player, a Colombian *acordeón* player, and a *kora* player from Mali.

All movies have a narrative form in which the relationship of the child with his teacher and with his family, the importance of the musical instrument as a means of communication and expression, and the social prestige enjoyed by the musician and the competition with other

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<sup>6</sup> The terms "emic" and "etic", coined by the linguist Kenneth Pike, are derived from the suffix of the word *phonetic* which pertains to the study of sounds, which are universally used in human language, and the word *phonemic* which is primarily concerned with the acoustics, external properties, and meanings of words. Applied to the study of human behavior, «etic viewpoint studies behavior as from outside of a particular system», while the «emic viewpoint results from studying behavior as from inside the system» (1967:37).

instrumentalists, all clearly emerge. The protagonists of the film are the same child musicians who play the part of themselves as real actors, but the most interesting fact is that the children themselves shared the script along with the directors during the survey. In a *similar* manner to documentaries, those films have a voice-over to comment on the images and, *similarly* to fiction, the characters play a part following a script all inside of a staging. The model proposed by Fougea slightly differs from the "classical" docu-fiction to assume the guise of a "documentary-like fiction."

One of the ethno-fictions of this series is *Xiao Feng and His Lu Sheng* (1998) directed by Xiaoling Zhu. The film is focused on 11 year old child, Xiao Feng (Little Zephyr), player of the *lusheng*. The *lusheng* (芦笙) is a mouth organ with multiple bamboo pipes, each with a free reed (*huangpian*), which are fitted into a long blowing tube made of hard wood. According to the Chinese musical instruments classification in 8 categories known as *bayin* (八音), the *lusheng* belongs to the gourd category (匏) and to the *sheng* (笙) family. The traditional *lusheng* consists of six tubes— the shortest one is one meter whereas the longest is as high as three meters— that produce five tones. *Lusheng* is used primarily in the rural regions of southwestern China, where it is played by ethnic groups such as the Dong and Miao. Performers often dance or swing the instrument from side to side while playing, or moving like drawing circular lines as it is shown in a scene of Alan Lomax's film *Dance and Human History* (1974) to explain the choreometrics theory.<sup>7</sup>

This is the synopsis of the ethno-fiction *Xiao Feng and His Lu Sheng*: Xiao Feng lives in Linlu village and belongs to the Dong (Kam) people, a minority ethnic group living in Guangxi Province, in Southern China. His intention is to follow the musicians and play music with them in the rice

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<sup>7</sup> This free-reed mouth organ has also inspired the title of the fiction film *Lusheng lineage* (芦笙恋歌), *The Love Story of Lusheng* or *The Love Song to the Tune of Lusheng*, 1957), by Yu Yanfu, in which the Lahu people of Yunnan Province fight a war of resistance against the Nationalist Chinese Army.

fields. Xiao Feng's dream is to become a great *lusheng* player, but his desire is opposed by his father, who wants his son to learn to plow the fields with the water buffalo. The master Yang, the village's music teacher, intends to select the most gifted boys to form a children's band, and for the first time in Dong history they will take part in the *lusheng* competition.

Some scenes are shot in the Dong drum tower, a distinctive architectural feature of Dong villages, that represents a center of a village's social activity.<sup>8</sup> The voice-over commentary refers to traditional beliefs of the Dongs when he says: "The music is said to make the rice grow and the cattle fatten". In fact, according to Dong beliefs, *lusheng* music and dance originated in a religious rite held before spring ploughing to pray for fine weather for crops and good harvests. But, according to one of their taboos, the *lusheng* should not be played between the sowing and transplanting of rice seedlings, since it could attract plagues of insects. Finally, the child will take part in the *lusheng* competition that is held every year in the village to celebrate the first riceshoots

The film shows the relationship with his grand-father who is also his master. His grand-father is a famous *lusheng* maker and player, who explains to him the history of the *lusheng*, dating back to 3000 years ago, and explains the meaning of the folk dances: the call for rain, the ancestors and the friendly spirits. He also shows his nephew some traditional practices concerning the construction of the instrument, starting from selecting the bamboo's quality and size, putting a small metallic reed slide at the base of the bamboo and some "secrets" such as that the *lusheng* should often be dipped into water to give it a beautiful sound. Finally, Xiao

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<sup>8</sup> In each village, each clan built its own drum tower. The drum tower embodies a particular clan's power and wealth. The higher, the more elaborated the drum tower is, the richer and more powerful is the clan who built it. In the past, the council of elders gathered in the drum tower. They discussed the affairs of the village. When the rules of the village were violated, they would decide on punishment according to customary law. The elder would beat the drum and the villagers would gather to hear what the council had to say.

Feng's group win the competition and the film ends with Grandpa warning them, "Do not seek in the past, but listen with your hearts."

### **Representing Chinese music on screen**

Far-east Asian music was the object of the ethnomusicological films shot by Robert Garfias, whose first filmic research projects began in 1966 in the Philippines and Korea (then edited in *Music and Dances of the Philippines and Korea*, 1969). His *concept-films*, based on specific performances, were produced through the University of Washington where he had established an ethnomusicology department, and they have been used as didactical tools in the classroom (Garfias 2004). Although he never made any film about Chinese music, he shot two short films on *kuqin* and *zheng* played by Tao Chu-Shen at the University of Washington in 1977.<sup>9</sup>

In the late 1970s, Bengali ethnomusicologist Deben Bhattacharya travelled throughout India and China collecting over 800 hours of recordings and shooting 23 films, some of them concerning traditional music in China: *Echoes from Tibet* (1980), *Folk Music from Inner Mongolia* (1983), *Chinese Opera* (1983), and the series *Performing Arts of China* (1983).<sup>10</sup>

Since the 1980s, local music scholars throughout China have been working on a definitive collection of sound recordings of regional music, entitled *Anthology of Chinese folk music* (*Zhongguo minzu minjian yinyue jicheng*). More recently, two video anthologies on Chinese music have been released: *Ancient Chinese Music Instruments* (2008) and *Chinese Folk Music* (2004) directed by Li Bing (produced by Huwa Golden International). Among the audiovisual anthologies on world music for educational or didactical purposes, mention must be made of the *JVC Video Anthology of World Music and Dance* (1990; 2005), edited by Fuji Tomoaki, and produced by JVC in collaboration with the National Museum of Ethnology

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<sup>9</sup> The videos are available on streaming: <http://www.socsci.uci.edu/~rgarfias/films.html>.

<sup>10</sup> The series includes six videos: 1. *Instruments and Music*; 2. *Folk Music*; 3. *The Opera*; 4. *Uighurs on the silk route*; 5. *Minorities of the Southwest*; 6. *The children: tomorrow's artists*.

(Osaka) and Smithsonian/Folkways Records. Two of the twenty videos are focused on China, presenting examples of music and dance of the Han people and two ethnic minorities: Yi people of Yunnan and Uygur people of Xinjiang. Another educational TV series, *Exploring the World of Music* (1999), produced and directed by Martin D. Toub, includes a video with an introduction to *qin* by Yu Hui.

Musical instruments are the main focus of most of the documentaries about traditional music in China.<sup>11</sup> *Resonance of the Qin* (2000) by Willow Hai Chang and *The Heart of Qin in Hong Kong* (2010) by Maryam Goormaghtigh are both centered on the *qin* (zither). Musical archeology is the topic of the documentary *The Bells of Marquis Yi* (2005) by Frank Kouwenhoven and Antoinet Schimmelpenninck,<sup>12</sup> about a set of 64 *bianzhong* bells discovered in the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng (曾侯乙), an important archaeological site in Suizhou, Hubei (China), dated sometime after 433 BC. Transcultural and transnational musical encounters, linking East and West through instrumental music, is the *leitmotiv* of three documentaries: *The Long Song Project* by Mehdi Ali, a musical meeting between Mongolian traditional “long song” *urtiin duu* (Khongorzul Ganbaatar, vocal), Chinese traditional music (Liu Fang, *pipa* and *guzheng*) and Western classical music (Yegor Dyachkov, cello); *Journey of Strings* (1997) by Hunt Hoe explores the history of chordophones, featuring the

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<sup>11</sup> Deserving of a special mention the didactical video *Introduction to Chinese musical instruments* (1992;2007) by Yang Mu, including the following performers: Chen Baitao, *sanxiao* ; Chen Wenjie, *pipa*, *ruan*, *liuqin*; Chen Wenxiang, *yangqin*; Dong Quiming, *dizi*, *xiao*, *bawu*, *koudi*, *hulusi*; Feng Zhihao, *erhu*, *gaohu*, *banhu*, *zhonghu*, *jinghu*; Hu Weigang, *danguan*, *shuanguan*, *suona*, *haidi*, *dasuona*; Li Li, *sheng*; Wang Zhengtin, *sheng*; Yang Mu, *qin*, percussion instruments; The Australian Chinese Music Ensemble.

<sup>12</sup> Dutch ethnomusicologists Frank Kouwenhoven and Antoinet Schimmelpenninck, founding members of CHIME, a foundation for the promotion of Chinese music research based in Leiden (Netherlands), are the authors of other video documentaries about Chinese music: *Guo Wenjing's Opera Fenyiting* (2004), *Musical Courting in China* (2004), *Hua'r Singing in Northwest China* (2005), *Masters of Chinese Traditional String Instruments* (2007), *Chinese Shadows: The Amazing World of Shadow Puppetry in Rural Northwest China* (2007).

*zheng* from China, *santur* from Iran, *bouzouki* from Greece, guitar from Spain; and *The Music of Strangers: Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble* (2015) by Morgan Neville, a travelogue about the Silk Road Ensemble, a group of master musicians from around the world brought together by acclaimed cellist Yo-Yo Ma to perform and teach (featuring *pipa* master Wu Man). Internet is also a source of didactical short clips or documentaries about Chinese traditional musical instruments, such as the series *A Guide to Chinese Instruments* by filmmaker Jonah Kessel, available on streaming on Vimeo, or *The History of Chinese Musical Instruments*, produced by CCTV, available on YouTube.

In the last years, however, a new interest in musical ethnography and in filming traditional music is growing in parallel to the development of ethnomusicology in China (*Zhongguo yinyuexue* or *minzu yinyuexue*).<sup>13</sup> Different approaches to represent traditional music through audiovisual media have been adopted. Let's consider, for example, the audiovisual representation of traditional music of the ethnic groups in Yunnan province (Southwest China). Among the country's fifty-six recognized ethnic groups, twenty-five minority "nationalities" (*minzu*) are found in Yunnan. If we take a look at the recent documentary production, we can notice different choices of filmmaking: from the "monograph" of a particular musical tradition belonging to a specific ethnic group, or an overview of different styles and genres of many ethnic groups of the region, to the travelogue filming style.

*Treasure of the Lisu: Ah-Cheng and His Music* (2010), directed by Yan Chun Su (with Les Blank as editor and story consultant), depicts an intimate portrait of one family belonging to the Lisu ethnic group, a small minority group with a population of about 635,000 living in Nujiang district of Yunnan Province, just south of the Tibetan plateau. From 2005,

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<sup>13</sup> In Taiwan, ethnographic films concerning the music of different ethnic groups of the island have been made by Hu Tai-li (*Songs of the Pasta'ai*, 1989, and *Sounds of Love and Sorrow*, 2000) and by David Tawai Lee (*Songs of the Mountains, Dances of the Sea: Music and Dances of Taiwan's Indigenous People*, 1997).



Yan Chun Su, a self-taught documentary filmmaker (born in China and grew up in US), began to travel to the Nu (Salween) River Canyon in southwest China near the Burmese and Tibetan border and documented some of the uniquely diverse indigenous cultures of that area. Spending an extensive period of time with one family of Lisu people, she worked as a one-woman crew and made *Treasure of the Lisu*, a 30-minute observational style documentary.

The film is focused on Ah-Cheng, a master musician and tradition bearer of the Lisu minority people in southwest China. Ah-Cheng still firmly maintains the craft of making and performing *chiben* (four-string lute), one of the three treasures for the Lisu people (the other two are crossbow and knife, which Ah-Cheng is also skilled at making). In the first part is shown the making of the lute with cutaways of daily life scenes while in the background we hear the musician's voice-over. In a short lapse of time, some important issues emerge from the interview and from the *sounding images*:

The power of music as “regulator” of social relationships. Ah-Cheng's voice-over tell us that “the *chiben* is the dearest to our heart, because it brings us laughter and joy. Without the *chiben* to dance to, people fight when they get drunk” and that “when you are sad sometimes, playing some *chiben* will relieve the sadness”.

The apprenticeship through oral-aural-visual communication: “Our Lisu music doesn't have written notes. The only way to learn is by listening and remembering it in your heart”. The master musician tries to teach his son to play the *chiben* but, as he said, it is a tough task: “It's very hard to understand what my father is playing. He doesn't have any written notes. It's very hard to learn just from hearing him play”. The master's lesson is suddenly interrupted by a ringing cellphone. As China develops further into the modern world, TV, cell phones, and new life-styles gradually penetrate into the idyllic lives of these mountain people.

The impact of religion on traditional music practices. The British Protestants brought Christianity to the Lisu at the beginning of the 1900s.

The *chiben*, used widely in traditional religious gatherings, was considered a threat to the newly introduced religion and as a result, was banned from the church system. Traditional instruments were not allowed in the church, because these instruments were used in rituals involving ghosts. In the interview, Ah-Cheng says that “now many people become Christian. Few want to learn *chiben* anymore” and claims that “some people thought that believing in God required that we give up our traditional music. Our good things were said to be bad. Our songs, dance, and music all belong to the Lisu people. If we don't treasure them, who will?”.

The concern about continuity of an ancient musical tradition. At the end of the documentary, Ah-Cheng says: “If my grandkids become interested in *chiben* when they grow up, I will try hard to teach them. If they won't learn, I'm afraid what I know will be lost forever”.

An example of a documentary showing a panoramic view of a variety of musical culture from Yunnan is offered by the documentary *From China's Southwest Borders: Minority Dances, Songs, and Instrumental Music of Yunnan* (2001) by Li Wei and Zhang Xingrong. It constitutes a broad introduction to some of the dance and music, vocal and instrumental, of many Yunnan ethnic minorities: Yi, Dai, Wa, Jinuo, Zhuang, Naxi, Lahu, Miao, Lisu, Bai, Yao, Hani, Bulang, Shui, Mang, Kemu, Tibetan and Han. This material is an excerpt from the extensive archives of Li Wei and Zhang Xingrong of the Yunnan Art Institute in Kunming. This husband-and-wife team has worked extensively in the field, traveling through-out Yunnan, collecting and recording, for almost twenty years.

Another kind of ethnomusic documentary is the *travelogue* or road movie, a TV format based on a journey for collecting and recording folk songs, in which the presenter gives directly to the audience and, in front of the camera, comments and reflections on the events he is observing or commenting on what occurred during the day. In *Small Path Music* (2012) by David A. Harris, the French musician Laurent Jeanneau keeps travelling to South-East Asia to document the local music traditions of ethnic minorities living in the mountain of Northern Laos and into the borderlands

of Yunnan, China. He has self-produced on Kink Gong, his home-grown record label, more than 80 albums recorded in ethnic minority villages.

This travelogue (shot over a period of 8 months in 2010) is structured as a travel diary with a series of sequences of recording sessions in the field among different ethnic groups. Here, the self-reflexive approach by the “sounds collector” offers a personal perspective on the musical cultures he documents during his fieldtrip and his relentless quest to capture audio recordings of vanishing indigenous music from ethnic groups of this vast region. From shamanic rituals to love songs, historical epics to lamentations, his microphones document what he discovers there. Although the documentary shows a stunning richness and variety of musical traditions, the weakness of this type of documentary, as confessed by Jeanneau in front of the camera, is to give to the audience a superficial view characterized by a lack of an ethnomusicological insight.

In spite of their totally different approach to filming traditional musical cultures, all these documentaries are oriented to *preservationism* and *survivalism*, highlighting the threats of the impact of the modern world on traditional cultures and the urgency to preserve it. In *Treasure of Lisu*, Ah-Cheng wants to pass his crafts on to the younger generation in the village and his offspring. But contrary to his wishes, his enthusiasm was met with the cold reality that the younger generation is more interested in novel western music and instruments like the guitar while the ethnic instrument *Chiben* is largely ignored. In the “Director Statement”, Yan Chun Su wrote: “During my time of filming, I also noticed the sense of helplessness when the locals talked about changes happening to the area. The allure from the outside world is overwhelming, and many of the young people have gone to the big cities to do labor work. As a result, many of the ethnic traditions are disappearing”.<sup>14</sup>

In one of the scenes of *Small Path Music*, where a “Cultural Show” from Shuangjiang (Lincang, Yunnan), a stylized and kitschy performance

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.waterdropfilms.com/chiben/index.html>.

for tourists, is shown,<sup>15</sup> the process of “folklorization” of ethnic music and dance (or “fakelore”), pushed by Government officials in China under the banner of promoting ethnic diversity, emerges. Observing this performance, Jeanneau complains about the gap between the visual level (dancers in traditional costumes) and the musical level (a kind of country and western swing) and rejects the creation of artificial cliché to satisfy the aesthetic expectations of Han tourists. In her book *Echoes of History: Naxi Music in Modern China* (2000), Helen Rees calls this process “domestic orientalism”:

The special talents and achievements of minorities in the performing arts are keenly promoted in China – to such an extent that the foreign observer comes away with a strong sense of a kind of “domestic orientalism” at work, in which the minorities are presented as an exotic alternative to the more staid and sober Han. An awareness of this tendency is necessary to any examination of minority culture and its promotion to the outside world (Rees2000:23-4).

Anthropologist Stevan Harrell, in his book *Ways of Being Ethnic in Southwest China* (2001), analyzes the phenomenon of “ethnic tourism” in China:

Ethnic tourism in contemporary China is usually promoted by tourist bureaus at various levels of government, who work with local cadres to develop facilities for feeding and lodging tourists, as well as routines for receiving and entertaining them. Developing routines often involves taking native practices, such as dress, song, dance, drink, and sometimes even ritual, and adapting and standardizing them into performances that fit tourist tastes and schedules (Harrell 2001:254).

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<sup>15</sup> About the impact of the market economy and ethnic tourism on traditional culture of ethnic minorities in China see: *Planning for Ethnic Tourism* by Li Yang and Geoffrey Wall (Ashgate, 2014)

Chinese and Western ethnomusicologists are aware of the urgent need to protect ethnic cultural heritage, a cultural memory that should be safeguarded because of the risk it will be lost. As Jeanneau stated in an interview by Mike Ives, “the project is a race against time, because it is increasingly difficult to find older singers and musicians who know and perform the traditional songs they learned as children” (Jeanneau in Ives 2011).

Another travelogue in docu-fiction style is *The Two Horses of Genghis Khan* (2009) by Byambasuren Davaa,<sup>16</sup> structured as a journey made by the Mongolian singer Urna Chahar-Tugchi, from Inner Mongolia (the autonomous region that is part of China) to Outer Mongolia (the independent nation). An old, broken *morin khurr* (horse head fiddle) compels singer Urna to take a road journey to Ulan Bator and the steppes of Mongolia. Engraved on the head of this *morin khurr*, left behind by Urna's grandmother, are incomplete verses from the ancient and forgotten song *The Two Horses of Genghis Khan*. The fiddle was damaged during the Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia. While in search of the missing verses and the music that accompanies them, Urna encounters countless strangers in a changing landscape.

In recent decades, the production of documentaries concerning ethnic/traditional/world music oriented to the television audience has increased significantly. Most of them are made by professional filmmakers whose main target is television broadcast. The consumption of the television product has different ways and times in comparison to the cinematic film. A documentary that lacks commentary, uses subtitled interviews and is too slowly paced is usually rejected by TV broadcasting,

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<sup>16</sup> Byambasuren Davaa has been co-director of the movie *The Story of the Weeping Camel* (2003), in which a Mongolian nomadic family's newest camel colt is rejected by its mother, and a *morin khuur* player is needed to play for her to change her mind.

since it risks being boring for a non-specialized audience. TV documentaries try to “condense” a large amount of ethnographic information into a short time.

This is the case of TV-oriented documentary films about ethnic minorities and their musical heritage. Music of the minority groups in China has been of interest to ethno-filmmakers since the films made by Bhattacharya on the music of the Uighur population in the Xinjiang region (*The Performing Arts of China: Uighurs on the silk route*) and the music of Yi and Bai of Yunnan (*The Performing Arts of China: Minorities of the Southwest*). New Zealand composer Jack Body (1944-2015) spent three months in China (from December 1986 to February 1987) to work on the documentary film ‘*Big Nose*’ and *Body Music* (1988) directed by Patrick McGuire. The documentary records Jack’s encounters with everyday music-making in the Sichuan and Guizhou provinces of southern China, especially the traditions of minority peoples such as the Yi, Miao, and Ge.<sup>17</sup>

Recently, the traditional music of the Miao (or Hmong) people of Southern China attracted the attention of many filmmakers: *Love Songs of the Miao in China* (1992), produced by Japanese television NHK, *People of the Orient* (2010), directed by Jean François Bordier, produced by French production company ZED, and *Hmong, Musiques et Chants de Séduction* (2002) by Patrick Kersalé, produced by Geozik. All these documentaries capture the lifestyle of the Miao people, focusing on the communicative function of music - using instruments to ‘talk’ is widespread among Yunnan minorities - and highlighting courtship rituals and love songs; in particular, the *duige*, songs in responsorial (one-to-one) or antiphonal (group-to-group)

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<sup>17</sup> Forty video tapes of raw footage from the ‘*Big Nose*’ and *Body Music* expedition are included in the Alexander Turnbull Library’s Archive of New Zealand Music. The documentary is available on streaming: [http://www.jackbody.com/pages/big\\_nose.htm](http://www.jackbody.com/pages/big_nose.htm).

form sung or fun, for purposes of allaying fatigue during labor, or for youngsters to find potential spouses.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusions

The documentary cannot be defined from a language characterized by an established set of techniques, because it renews itself under continuous changes of cinematic languages. The conventions of documentary film and fiction films are increasingly being "contaminated", the boundaries between documentary and fiction are increasingly blurred, as well as those between reality and fiction.

The concept of *re-presentation* of a musical event becomes a key element in the definition of ethnomusicological documentary and its relationship with reality and fiction, and consequently its relevance as a scientific tool. Regardless *how* it is made (the techniques of shooting and editing, staging, etc.), *what* is its aim (research, teaching, dissemination) or to *whom* it is destined (the general public, scholars, etc.), a documentary is not *the* reality but a *re-presentation* of it.

The film language, both fictional and documentary, is built on *conventions* foreign to daily life, as the narration, the compression of time, the cuts from one scene to another, the change of angle of the frame to shoot a scene, the introduction of photos or historical films in black and white, etc. Although the filmmaker-ethnographer seeks to minimize the subjective intervention of the observer, using long sequence shots or limiting the use of the zoom, these conventions are used to represent the reality. Conversely, many fiction films show the tendency to represent reality in more "realistic" way.

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<sup>18</sup> French ethnomusicologist Yves Defrance made a short ethno-clip with no narration on Dong and Miao polyphonies (The video is available on streaming on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/2653525>).

In China, the interest for traditional music traces back to the very beginning of Chinese cinematography and the introduction of sound film in China in the early 1930s. Between the end of 1950s and beginning of 1960s, folk songs of ethnic minorities had a prominent place in musical fiction films, based on love stories, witnessing the interest of Chinese cinema for ethnic minorities' music and culture. From the 1980s, with the advent of the "Fifth Generation" of film directors, "fiction" films tended to tell a story having as background 'real' traditional musical performances represented in their own socio-cultural context. Nevertheless, apart some exceptions, Chinese folk music has been largely neglected by documentary production companies and by ethnomusicologists-filmmakers until the last decades.

In the last years, however, a new interest in musical ethnography and in filming traditional music – in the form of edited research film and ethnographic documentary film, with a particular emphasis on minorities' musical cultures - is growing in parallel to the development of ethnomusicology in China. Moreover, different "cinematic languages" have been adopted by filmmakers to represent traditional music in China, from travelogue to ethno-fiction, conceived for a wider audience and oriented mainly to TV broadcasting.

While hybrid filmic forms such as ethno-fiction and travelogue stand in a precarious balance in-between entertainment and ethnomusicological information, we can assume that the representation of traditional music on screen has increasingly embedded a narrative style to reach a broader audience. It shows that it is possible to represent a musical culture telling a story, and creating empathy with the musicians who, through their witness and their music, communicate to the audience their story, their life, their concerns and wishes.

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