



Treasure of the Lisu: Ah-Cheng and his music

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REVIEW

Treasure of the Lisu: Ah-Cheng and his music, directed by Yan Chun Su, Waterdrop Films, 2010, DVD, colour, 30 mins, Lisu and Mandarin with English subtitles, distributed by Documentary Educational Resources, Watertown, MA, institution sale \$295.00

Treasure of the Lisu: Ah-Cheng and His Music, directed by Yan Chun Su (with American filmmaker Les Blank serving as editor and story consultant, and American musician Don Grusin as music consultant), is a biopic that depicts an intimate portrait of Ah-Cheng Heng, a master musician and tradition bearer of the Lisu people. The Lisu are a Tibeto-Burman-speaking ethnic group of over one million people living in southwest China, Myanmar, Thailand and India. In China, this minority nationality [*minzu*] resides in the Nujiang Prefecture of Yunnan Province, southeast of the Tibetan plateau.

Starting in 2005, Yan Chun Su, a self-taught Chinese filmmaker, began to travel in the Nu Jiang (Salween River) Canyon in southwest China to document the diverse music cultures of the people in that area before their environmental and cultural patrimony was affected by the construction of hydroelectric dams. Spending an extensive period of time with one Lisu family, she worked as a one-woman crew in the production of *Treasure of the Lisu*, a 30-minute observational style documentary with occasional captions to provide context on the musical culture and religion of the Lisu people.

Ah-Cheng is both a musician and luthier, steadfastly preserving the crafts of making and playing the *chiben* [four-string wooden lute], one of the three ‘treasures’ for the Lisu people—the other two being the crossbow and the knife, which Ah-Cheng is also skilled at making. The film begins with Ah-Cheng making a new lute with cutaways to scenes of daily life, while in the background we hear the musician’s voice-over.

In a short span of time, three important issues emerge. The first is the power of *chiben* music to lift people’s spirit and to ‘regulate’ social relationships. Ah-Cheng’s voice-over tells 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 ‘when you are sad sometimes playing some *chiben* will relieve the sadness’. Among the Lisu, instrumental music serves two primary functions: accompaniment for dancing and evening entertainment when the working day is over. But nowhere in the film can we see any social occasion in which people simply listen to the *chiben*.

The second issue is the rejection or retention of cultural practices in relation to Christianisation. During the twentieth century, Protestantism began to spread through Lisu villages in the mountainous Nujiang region. The *chiben*, used widely in traditional religious gatherings, was considered a threat to this newly introduced religion and, as a result, was banned from the church. In fact, all traditional instruments were forbidden due to their connections with animism, ancestor-worship and their association with alcohol consumption. In the past, the *chiben* was used to accompany dancing and drinking on festival days, sometimes around a fire, sometimes as part of festive processions into the mountains. Thus, the *chiben* has fallen out of popularity as a direct consequence of the spread of Christian beliefs among the Lisu. Nowadays, Christian worship consists of singing a *cappella* hymns in four-part harmony, *ddoqmuq mutgguat* [praise songs] derived from North American urban gospel songs and influenced by Lisu folk multi-part singing, *mutgguat ssat* [short songs] which are a kind of Christian pop-gospel accompanied by electric guitars and drums, and the *daibbit* dance.

The third issue is the continuity or rupture of their musical traditions as a result of the generational divisions. Ah-Cheng is presented as the only *chiben* maker and practitioner in his village. He received his musical knowledge from his father, and he is concerned about passing it on to the younger generations in the village. However, the harsh reality is that younger generations are more interested in western music and instruments like the guitar. These youths tend to ignore traditional ethnic instruments like the *chiben*.

In two scenes showing Ah-Cheng's attempts to transmit his art, the dichotomies of tradition/modernity, past/present and old/young are apparent in discussions concerning oral transmission versus written notation. Ah-Cheng's voice-over explains: 'Our Lisu music doesn't have written notes. The only way to learn is by listening and remembering it in your heart.' Another scene shows Ah-Cheng trying to teach his youngest son to play the *chiben* but it is a tough task; Ah-Cheng's son says '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.' Towards the end of the documentary, we hear Ah-Cheng's voice again: 'If my grandkids become interested in *chiben* when they grow up, I will try hard to teach them. If they don't learn, I'm afraid what I know will be lost forever.' Viewers witness a *chiben* lesson with Ah-Cheng's nephew suddenly interrupted by a ringing cell phone. Other shots capture the installation of a satellite dish and a television broadcasting Chinese pop music. These images introduce the viewer to the rapid economic changes and technological development taking place in China, and their effects on traditional rural lifestyles of these mountain-dwelling people.

Conscious of the difficulties of presenting an exhaustive overview of Lisu instrumental music, the researcher, director and producer of *Treasure of the Lisu* decided to focus on just one of the traditional instruments of the Lisu—the others being the *fulu* free-reed mouth organ, the *julü* bamboo flute and the mouth harp. The film is technically competent and professionally shot and edited, but the depths of Lisu musical culture are often merely implied. For example, throughout the documentary, we never see Ah-Cheng sing. Although never overtly stated in the film, in traditional Lisu musical culture voices and instruments are never used in combination. Similarly, the attentive viewer might correctly infer from the film that the Lisu have no professional musicians. Moreover, in Lisu traditional society, only men are allowed to play musical instruments—except for the mouth harp, formerly considered a woman's instrument.

This is not a film that intends to provide detailed information about Lisu musical culture, but rather a glimpse into the life and music of one of the last *chiben* makers and practitioners. Frequent handheld and close-up shots bring an intimacy and immediacy to the viewer's experience. To her credit, Yan Chun Su brings to light the musical practices of a Lisu community hitherto seldom examined by ethnomusicologists. Despite shortcomings imposed by the scope and duration of the film, *Treasure of the Lisu* should also prompt fruitful discussion about the changing cultural landscape of minority groups in contemporary China.

Two other documentaries on ethnic music in Yunnan deserve a mention here. *From China's Southwest Borders: Minority Dances, Songs, and Instrumental Music of Yunnan* (2001) is a collection of edited research films offering a panoramic view of the musical cultures of 29 of Yunnan's ethnic minorities (including sub-groups) and China's ethnic majority, the Han. These video excerpts were recorded by Li Wei and Zhang Xingrong of the Yunnan Art Institute, who spent more than 20 years conducting field research in Yunnan—a selection of their best field recordings have also been published in two double CDs, *South of the Clouds: Instrumental Music of Yunnan* (2003). The two-volume DVD set includes 70 segments showing short performances, most of them recorded in their original context. Text information is displayed using Chinese subtitles while a translation in English, compiled by

Helen Rees and Amy Catlin with the purpose to make ‘these meticulously collected and rare materials available to scholars and educators outside China’, is available in the DVD booklets.

The other documentary is *Small Path Music, with Laurent Jeanneau (2012)*, produced and directed by New Zealand filmmaker David A. Harris. This film is structured as a travelogue in which the on-screen presenter Laurent Jeanneau, a French experimental musician and ‘sound collector’, travels through South-East Asia to document the local music traditions of ethnic minorities living in the borderlands between Yunnan and northern Laos. This documentary shows a stunning richness and variety of traditional performances, very well recorded in their natural and cultural setting with good-quality video footage considering the technical limits due to the use of just one hand-held camera. In spite of little musicological interpretation of the songs and scarce ethnographic insight on the socio-cultural context of the music, the film uses captions before each performance to indicate the name of the ethnic group, the location, the genre or repertoire and the name of the performer. Beside this, there are sufficiently long sequences of musical examples to allow for classroom appreciation and analysis.

In recent years, a new interest in musical ethnography and filming traditional music has grown in parallel to the development of ethnomusicology in China. These three documentaries reveal contrasting approaches to the representation of traditional music of the ethnic groups in Yunnan: the first is akin to a monograph that deals with a specific musical tradition, the second comprises a sampling of performances that give an overview of styles and genres of different ethnic groups and the last is filmed in a travelogue style. These three documentaries are recommended for use together as teaching aids on the music of East Asia.

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