

Pyramid Club Presentation of Film and Video works by David Harris 2019?

A couple of months ago I saw an article online reporting a fire that swept through a village in Yunnan, China destroying all but four of the houses and buildings. The village, named Onding (Wending) near Cangyuan (Lincang Prefecture) was reported to be thousands of years old and had been afforded the highest level of protection as a unique living cultural relic. The article said all of that had gone up in smoke and was reduced to ash as flames leapt over the narrow paths between the wooden, thatched-roof houses. I remember those houses. The striking image of buffalo's skulls on spikes at the village entrance. The narrow dirt pathways between the stilted foundations lined with used car tyres. I remember the wild sound of the countryside, the noises of pigs kept underneath the house where we stayed. And the songs sung acapella around its stone-hearth indoor fire-pit, their melodies mingling with the small group gathered in the dim soot-ceiling interior at the end of the day, before the sleeping mats were spread out.

I feel lucky to have had that experience. Listening amongst the ears in that room there were also recording mics. I sat on the floor, hunched over a video camera trained on the few singers we could find who still knew some of the "old songs". Reading about the fire incinerating that village brought home to me what a time-capsule recordings are. The room I remember is no longer there, but you can catch a flickering glimpse of it in the recordings we made that night.

It was a joy to play recordings from that night at Pyramid Club and share them with an audience from quite another world. These were excerpts from the documentary "Small Path Music", which followed the work of Frenchman, Laurent Jeanneau, who I'd met in Yunnan, and followed his work collecting the songs, recitations and ceremonies of the people living amongst this hilly landscape, primarily because he loved the sounds he found there. This was an entry into a rich world of folk traditions and customs to be found in the hills of Yunnan, Sichuan, Laos and along the Burmese border.

Music was a common thread in much of the work I'd got up to in China, video camera in hand.. I first picked up a camera in 2005 and followed a friend's post-punk band, P.K.14 around the country as they toured 25 cities or so in the space of a month. Travelling all overland, by bus, train, taxi, and truck. Making that doco "A Tour of the Public Kingdom" was a blast. I got to see a lot of the country and swore I'd make a similar trip each year. That didn't happen, but I did make other, different explorations, both geographic and cinematic.

Beijing Opera was one of the richest worlds I delved into. I'd been living in China for 15 years at that stage but knew next to nothing about the artform, it was still something very foreign. A world of elaborate costumes, raucous percussion, stylised voicings, acrobatics and a huge vocabulary of gesture and expression. I was invited by musician Zhuma to create a cinematic component for a live music stage piece intended for festivals.. Both of us were keen on exploring Beijing Opera but neither of us was familiar with this world. It was only when we teamed up with Lusu, a professional Beijing Opera performer, that we could develop the story with some depth and with the appropriate respect. Lusu guided us on character choices from the pantheon of Beijing Opera characters and our piece focussed on Guan Gong (The Saint of War) and the fateful events which are recorded in story of his encounter with Diao Chan, one of the Four Legendary Beauties of ancient China.

Again it was great to share this with an audience cos the work had been designed for the stage and it had a good run but it had been a while since I'd seen it.

It was also a great chance to show some little recordings I'd made which had never been incorporated into a larger work. One such recording was of a little blessing ceremony performed to bless new fields which had been recently prepared and were now ready for planting. A chicken was sacrificed and its bones were divined to see if everything was properly in order. One of the local kids explained what the diviner looked for in the bones.

And far away from the long winding gorge roads of that countryside, far from the dense jurassic forest with whirring insect chirp, over the wide sweeps of agricultural land we returned to Beijing and the night ended showing the premiere screening of a documentary film that fellow filmmaker Edward Burger and I shot in 2017 and just recently completed..

The film, "Huajiu", followed the lives of three characters, Lin Xiao (93yrs), Wei Yanfang and Zhou Aizhen (both in their 80's) who had been part of the Railway Performance Troupe. It followed their stories from before the Communist "Liberation" and during the tumultuous periods afterwards. Ending in a reunion after 40 years The film

had been intended as a feature documentary as Lin Xiao was the troupe's photographer and we expected to have a lot of archival material to bulk out the images. However upon beginning production we discovered that the trove of his work had been destroyed when the organisation cleared out it's archives. Such is the way of things. Lin Xiao himself passed away the year following our filming.

So I was stoked to be invited by Pyramid Club to show some of these works and talk about them with the audience that came along. I really enjoyed it. It's one thing to shoot them but sharing them with others is where they are brought to life again.

I'm writing this probably two years after the fact now so... yeah. Speedy gonzaes.

David
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