

Film/Video Review

Home Coming: The Ethnography of Dong (Kam) People's New Year "Chun Jie" in Xiaohuang Village. Huí Jiā: Dòngzú Xiǎohuáng Cūn Chūnjié Lǐsú Zhì. Directed and edited by Zhiyi Qiaoqiao Cheng. Photographed by Zhiyi Qiaoqiao Cheng and Stephan Larose. Sound recording by Ya Ming Chen. Produced by Xiao Mei. A collaboration between the Research Institute of Ritual Music in China at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and Shanghai SounDate Cultural Communication Co., Ltd. In the series *Sounding China: An Audio-Visual Ecomusicological Ethnography*. 39 minutes.

Zhiyi Qiaoqiao Cheng's film *Home Coming (Huí Jiā)* spans a little more than two weeks in the life of Fengyun, a woman who works in a zipper factory in the Chinese city of Dongguan, as she returns to her home region (Xiaohuang—a name that refers in the film to a cluster of three villages as well as to one of the three) to celebrate the traditional Spring Festival and reunite with her family, including her husband and young daughter, and with her childhood friends. The film offers vivid impressions of the preparations and celebration of spring festivities, and of the culture of the Kam/Dong (self-designating vs. Chinese terms, respectively) community concentrated in the provinces of southern China on the border of Vietnam.

The Spring Festival follows a prescribed sequence that progresses over a series of days. Beginning with preparations undertaken by the villagers, it includes a day reserved for a mass wedding in the village and culminates in the climactic convergence of the people of the three villages. Singing and instrumental troupes and sites such as the village drum towers all mark important focal points. Throughout the film, periodic intertitles in English and Chinese annotate what is about to unfold in the coming segment. The intertitles also provide key terminology and clarify Fengyun's or the singing troupes' roles in the proceedings.

Musically, the film centers women's multipart singing. This highly cultivated sphere of practice is vital to the life rhythms of these communities and has been accorded a certain prestige on the national scale. Mention is made of journalists who come to hear and record the traditional singing, which has been officially designated by UNESCO as bearing the status of intangible cultural heritage.¹ Informal discussions with the villagers provide some of their perspectives on how songs and their transmission fit into the texture of social life. The songs sung by women's troupes speak of the artisanal labor that goes into the festival. For instance, songs accompany the weaving that is essential for producing the

¹ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/grand-song-of-the-dong-ethnic-group-00202> (accessed 20 December 2023).

colorful textiles on display in public spaces, while the texts also express longings and uncertainty about the future. The outside attention attracted by the unique vocal textures clearly contributes to the sense of flux intimated in the words sung.

The festival culminates in a formal nighttime procession narrated both by women's singing and by men playing highly textured, rhythmic pieces for percussion and mouth organ ensemble, which strikingly recall other milieus in the wider region, such as the processional dances accompanied by the *ploong* mouth organ in Mru/Murung communities in the highlands of eastern Bangladesh.

More contemporary forms of pop music and dance performance—gymnastic or folkloric—are integral to various nodes of sociality that mark the festival calendar. At times, one senses a playful tension between the young men and young women of the village, many of whom, like Fengyun, have returned from working and studying in urban environments. There are men's singing troupes as well, but they do not receive as much attention as the women's troupes, which include Fengyun's young daughter's girls' singing troupe as well. In one memorable sequence, Fengyun's troupe is invited—in accordance with custom—to join a male troupe in eating and drinking, leading to drinking songs and drunkenness, cinematically accentuated at one point by disorienting camera movement and a double exposure.

The film's ethnographic objectivity is fleshed out by cinematography and editing that are quite immersive and artful after the fashion of independent narrative filmmaking. With its emphasis on rural China in transition, and with a sort of *verité* fly-on-the-wall slice-of-life ethos guiding the flow, the film's pacing, ambience, and underlying concerns recall recent trends in Chinese cinema—I thought of Jia Zhangke, despite Cheng's explicit ethnomusicological angle. The photography tends to hone in on physical texture and materiality—often relying on a narrow depth of field—and to dwell as well on the subtle expressiveness of its subjects, who are treated with respect and patience. Implicitly, the film aims to circumscribe the women's multipart, unaccompanied songs with as detailed an extramusical context as possible, placing social realities into dialogue with the social ideologies framed by this annual event. If there is one pronounced artifice to the film—which is not spelled out for the viewer—is that it is structured as if it depicts a single Spring Festival while it was shot over multiple annual celebrations from 2015 to 2017, which has enabled a very thorough presentation woven from an abundance of material.

This film will be of interest and benefit to scholars, students, and filmmakers who wish to explore ways of combining the presentation of data with more poetic and visceral modes of documentary engagement. It will be of value as well to those with a direct interest in the cultural particularities of the transitional zones between China and Southeast Asia and in issues surrounding rural and minority cultural environments in contemporary China.

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doi:10.1017/ytm.2024.4

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