

MY IMPRESSIONS OF THE 1ST CHINA MUSICS ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM EXHIBITION

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Abstract

This short review is dedicated to the first China Musics Ethnographic Film Exhibition, which took place in the second half of 2019 in Shanghai.

Keywords

Ethnographic Film, Chinese Music, Exhibition, Diversity

It was such an honor for me to rub shoulders with distinguished film makers and scholars from ROC and Taiwan at this film festival and exhibition. Watching their masterful films and hearing their incisive comments on those by other filmmakers was an exceptionally valuable learning experience. I was equally impressed with the level of interest and enthusiasm among young scholars and filmmakers toward this media. The festival was intense with about 40 films screened and commented during the five-day event. For non-specialists of the region like myself, the festival served also as an excellent crash course on the enormous diversity of musical genres and styles as well as contents and styles of filmmaking. Regardless of such diversity presented during the festival, I was reminded of the importance of solid research for making a persuasive film. This may sound a decisively banal and common-sensical observation not worth repeating, but I found the emotive impact and academic merit of the film depended greatly upon the quality of research (and often a film maker's long-term engagement with individuals and communities at hand).

The technology has made such a rapid advance that making a film with high-quality audiovisual images has become considerably easier but it is often in-depth research that makes a film compelling with lasting impressions in the end. The downside of the technological advance is ironically the easiness with which a film can be made. I would encourage young/less experienced directors to reflect deeply on why they wish to make films to begin with and to what audience they wish to communicate with.

I believe that ethnographic films can contribute to a deeper understanding of, and empathy toward, the subject (particularly the marginalized individuals and communities) and that a film's value should be evaluated by the degree to which they achieve the goal by appropriating the unique features of audiovisual media.

Below are a few of my general observations on the tendencies that I observed during the festival. First, I was struck with the number of films using the drone. The bird's-eye view of the area or an event is often spectacular and satisfies the visual desire of the audience. It also provides the viewers with a larger spatial context. Yet, after watching several films with similar drone shots, I became a bit restless, feeling it has become a cliché. I admit it can be effective in some cases but the filmmaker needs to think hard about why such perspectives are necessary in the context of the entire film narrative. The panoramic view is infused with a sense of power and ownership as local minority people had no access to such perspective until very recently and therefore the filmmaker needs to be sensitive to such representation. Having said that, with the increasing availability of the drone, minority communities in rural regions are also getting used to having this type of vision, which may affect (and may even have already affected) their manner of performance.

Second, the use of BGM in some films seems to deprive the viewers of the sound environment of the scene depicted. It is a common technique in feature films and TV documentaries, but for ethnographic

films with a focus on the local perspectives, this needs to be utilized carefully, if used at all. By injecting sound imagery from outside sources, the filmmaker is instilling his/her particular perspectives: i.e. contrasting rural and urban lifestyles, contemporaneity of traditional arts and many more. It should be used sporadically and only when the objectives of such external sound images are clearly defined and do not hamper the ultimate goal of the film.

Third, some films include a “set” scene where members of the minority community were instructed to perform specifically for filming, often with a visually stunning scenery in the background. This generates a post-card imagery of performing arts with colorful costumes to impress the viewer, which tends to exoticize minority groups by fixating them to traditional culture.

Perhaps, these areas of my concerns mentioned above are aspects frequently used in typical TV documentaries, to which most of the general public are accustomed. If so, we all need to ask how the films, ethnographic or otherwise, can contribute to the deeper understanding and empathy of the minority groups (who are the subjects of many films presented) and other film subjects through such audiovisual media.

I think that the style of mass media presentation should be critically analyzed because there is a danger in such manners of presentation or depicting them as the exotic other. It should not be brushed away too hastily, however, as the power of mass media to reach a larger public can be appropriated for a better cause. The urgent task for us ethnomusicologists, in my opinion, is to explore how we can collaborate with media specialists to incorporate anthropological and ethnomusicological perspectives into popular media. In this context, I was happy that filmmakers with ample experiences in TV production are now interested in making ethnographic films.

Finally, I owe my profound gratitude to Professor Xiao Mei and her team for organizing the festival so efficiently and look forward to the future development of this highly valuable endeavor.

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