FILM REVIEWS

Returning Souls

Returning Souls. Directed by Hu Tai-Li; 85 mins., DVD, 2011, color; in Taiwanese and Min Nan, with English subtitles. Distributed by taili@gate.sinica.edu.tw; Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Nankang 115, Taipei, Taiwan.

In 1958, in the aftermath of a typhoon, the carved pillars of an ancestral house were removed from Tafalong village, in Taiwan, and taken for safe keeping to the Institute of Ethnology Museum at Academia Sinica in Taipei, where they remain to this day. The pillars contained the souls of the ancestors of the Kakita'an family, members of the Amis tribe, the largest indigenous group in the island. With remarkable subtlety Returning Souls documents the long journey to recreate the pillars, rebuild the ancestral house, and win back the souls of the ancestors. The Tafalong villagers hope that rebuilding the ancestral house will prompt cultural revitalization and lead to the recovery of the soul of the village itself. The film provides a moving record of the frustrations and triumphs experienced by the Tafalong villagers and sheds new light on a range of intellectual issues: the changing role of the museum, the complexities of cultural property claims, the tensions inherent in cultural revitalization projects—all of which have import well beyond this particular context.

The fight for the return of the ancestral souls begins in 2003 when a young Tafalong schoolteacher petitions the Institute of Ethnology. In his eyes the pillars were stolen, taken without clear permission in the aftermath of the typhoon. To the director of the museum removing the pillars, which in 1958 were already in a state of disrepair, was the only way to prevent their decay and total loss. This is the first of many scenes that raises important questions about the purpose of any museum, particularly about how claims to cultural ownership can be reconciled with conservation and display. When representatives of the village are invited to visit the ancestors at the museum, further tensions emerge: there is a stark contrast between the weeping of a possessed shaman, whose body becomes a channel for an ancestor, and the bureaucratic rationale of the Institute. As Tafalong villagers dance before their ancestors in the museum, spraying the glass cases with spittle as blessing and slaughtering a pig as sacrifice in the museum parking-lot, their actions draw the viewers’ attention to the sterility and fixity of the museum context. Further, the Kakita’an family, from whose ancestral home the pillars were taken, refuse to attend the initial meetings with museum staff, making it unclear who exactly can make a claim, and what the pillars are...
taken to represent. Back in Tafalong, the plan to carve new versions of the pillars and return the ancestors is met with ambivalence: for some Amis, conversion to Christianity has altered their interest in ancestors, while other villagers believe that moving the souls of the dead is too dangerous to consider.

Despite these challenges, and with financial support from the Institute, new versions of the pillars are carved and the ancestral house is rebuilt. The final scenes of the film are again marked by the subtlety that is a hallmark of Hu Tai-Li's directorial style. At points the Kakita’an family are triumphant: the ancestors have returned, and tour buses loaded with tourists eager to hear the origin myths and visit the ancestral house now fill the streets of Tafalong. However, when several family members die, a shaman explains that rituals had not been performed properly when the ancestral souls were settled in the new home, and the ancestors’ dissatisfaction must be linked to the current misfortunes. Finally, the continued existence of the house is called into doubt when villagers embroiled in a long-standing land dispute challenge its legality.

A particular strength of the film is the careful observation of Amis religious practice and its place in contemporary Taiwan. In several scenes, accompanied by the music of the jaw-flute, Tafalong elders recount the origin stories that are carved into the pillars, describing the descendants of a Mother Sun, including a glowing girl who marries her brother and gives birth to a snake child. What is clear to the viewer is the continued power of these narratives; the origin stories are far more than a remnant of a vanishing past. In another scene, inside a Catholic Church, a statue of the Virgin Mary is crowned with an Amis headdress and a priest encourages the Tafalong villagers to include their ancestors within their Catholicism, making clear the porousness of religious traditions here.

Returning Souls provides an extremely nuanced account of the complexities inherent in cultural property claims, raising important questions about who can speak for whom, and about what people hope to recover in cases such as this, for, as one museum employee reflects, “the culture is not just these pieces of wood.” More broadly, the film provides a thought-provoking account of the place of “traditional” religious practice and belief in a rapidly changing context. The plan to regain the ancestral souls is inseparable from the wider context: Amis life, altered first by the Japanese occupation, then by religious conversion—the scenes documenting how Amis beliefs are combined with Catholicism are a particular strength of the film—and more recently by rural-urban migration. The film is a must-see for those with interests in museum studies, religion, material culture, and the changing lives of indigenous people. Further information about the film in Chinese and English can be found at http://returningsouls.pixnet.net/blog.

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