

Stone Dream

Hu Tai-li, *Stone Dream*. Color film, 79 mins.; 2004. Available as DVD, VHS, or 16 mm film from Documentary Educational Resources, 101 Morse Street, Watertown, MA 02472. See www.der.org for details.

Hu Tai-li is a Taiwanese national and an American-trained anthropologist who has created an important place for herself in her Taiwanese institute, the Institute of Ethnology/Academia Sinica, and in the larger world of Taiwanese film culture. She began her career in a conventional way, studying at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, writing a dissertation under Burton Pasternak, and then publishing her dissertation, *My Mother in Law's Village*. That book is, in my opinion, one that is very well researched and interesting.

However, once back on Taiwan, Dr. Hu moved on to the study of Taiwan's aboriginal (*yuanzhumin*) cultures and also decided that she wanted to make documentary films. She had no formal training in that film discipline, she told me, but she did have what must be termed the "ethnographer's eye," and that has served her well. These decisions were made over 20 years ago. Since then, while keeping in the good graces of her colleagues and superiors by publishing articles in a number of journals—as one must do in the supercharged atmosphere of the Academia Sinica institutes—she has also made seven documentaries that range in length from 16 to 89 minutes. And over these years she has honed her skills and has been hands-on in the putting-together of her films, down to the detail of just what musical passages one must use at any given moment in a film. Over these years she has also found her calling as an activist intent upon helping her friends in one of the major aboriginal tribes to preserve, through performance, various ritual song-narratives.

Stone Dream, her latest film, combines her interests in a variety of ways. It also demonstrates her growth as a filmmaker. The documentary tells the story of a fascinating and in many ways very troubled hybrid culture that has evolved on the harshly beautiful and remote eastern shore of Taiwan, near the city of Hualian. The film examines the way the Nationalist government of Taiwan dealt with a difficult problem—how to demobilize and then create new lives for thousands of mainland Chinese soldiers who had helped the Chiang regime secure their hold on the island of Taiwan, the large island (and now *de facto* nation) that became the Kuo-min Tang's bastion after they gave up control of China to the Communists in 1949.

The government's policy was to have these men, mostly of peasant background and most of them impressed into the army, work in the large and

generally dry beds of the rivers that wind their way to the sea along the rocky east coast of Taiwan. These soldiers had the arduous task of creating protected, square-shaped areas made with walled borders of large stones that were then filled in with soil, which then could be farmed. The new agricultural land was created by this painstaking method, and the soldiers, now demobilized, were given the land to farm—but not to really call their own. Then the government, in an effort to form a more stable community for these soldiers-turned-farmers, arranged marriages between these men and aboriginal women deemed “unsuitable” for marriage to others. Some were widows with large families, for example, as was the case with the wife in the film.

In *Stone Dream*, Hu Tai-li looks at one such soldier and his family about 30 years after he had settled into his new life as a farmer, husband, and family man. This soldier, Liu Pi-chia, had been the subject of an earlier film, a film made by the pioneering Taiwanese observational documentary maker, Chen Yao-chu (Richard Chen), in 1965 as a thesis film in the UCLA Film School. Dr. Hu’s film continues the story of this man’s life, but also tells a broader, more complex tale than that first film.

Stone Dream moves at a deliberate pace to unfold, layer by layer, the story of Lu, his wife, and his adopted son/nephew. We meet the main characters as they live their daily lives and we also meet members of the larger village community of which they are part. We see how other *waishenren* (mainlander) retired soldiers and their aboriginal wives relate, and we discover the degrees to which this is a dysfunctional place created by a policy that may not have worked as the government intended it to. Yet as the film goes on, we find that the filmmaker’s initial assumptions about this village were a bit off, for there was a certain sense of place and of real and deep bonding that took place among the couples of these managed or forced marriages.

At a key moment in the film a major new character, the son/nephew of Liu Pi-chia, is introduced. He had a long career in the army and had served as a commissioned officer. He had also retired and was now trying to find a new place and a new life for himself and his family. He returns home and, while still unemployed, spends his time looking for Rose Stones, large rounded boulders that littered the river bed of the Mukua River near the village. These rocks hold a treasure, for when one slices them open one finds that, because of oxidation and various other natural pressures, they may contain what look like classical Chinese landscape paintings. They are a collector’s item and are much sought after. One can therefore make very good money when one finds just such a stone.

We do get to know these individuals well and see close-up the dynamics of family life. We also see how this family reconnects with its tribal home. The village had reached such a level of well-being that it wanted its own temple. A Taipei temple devoted to the Golden Goddess was about to be destroyed, but instead was recreated in the village, and the image of the goddess was moved to this new home in a quite spectacular rural setting. This moment of ritual is a powerful one in the film, one that speaks to the themes of hybridization and acculturation that serve as the film’s major *leitmotifs*.

Stone Dream’s last section is devoted to the funeral of Liu’s wife and to the days and weeks that follow this sad if inevitable moment in the collective of all the

local families. We see grief but also deep levels of family bonding. We see how strong were the ties that developed between husband and wife and between the stepfather and his wife's many children. The viewer has so become a member of the family that he or she must cry during these powerful moments—as powerful perhaps as the final painful scenes of Clint Eastwood's recent masterpiece, *Million Dollar Baby*.

This is a beautiful movie that has much of the flavor of another cinematic masterpiece, Ozu's celebrated *Tokyo Story*. The use of silence, the way the landscape becomes another character, the sense of the deep, quiet bonds of devotion between husband and wife, and even the sense of alienation felt by at least one of the couple's children, are all there. Dr. Hu said that this film is one of her favorites and thus, in its own distinctive way, *Stone Dream* is an homage to that work of the 1950s, with its theme of family in an alienating environment.

Anthropologists will find much to make use of in this film. It covers many bases and can be used in a host of ways. Its final message is, I would argue, difficulty in defining the nature of identity on Taiwan. These people are, in the view of the Taiwanese (Minnan) majority, not really Taiwanese. However, the nature of what is Taiwanese has changed. This hybrid village represents part of the *xintaiwan ren*—the new Taiwan that former president Li Denghui talked about, and that point is made clear as the film comes to its conclusion.

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Cover: The Aztec goddess Tlazolteotl is shown giving birth, an act which connects her to the fertility of the earth.



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