Keyword: Memory

Reading the Gospel in Miao: Christian Memories of Development in *Songs From Maidichong*

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Abstract

In this review I discuss Hu Jie's 2016 film *Songs From Maidichong*. The review focuses on the film's framing of developmental logics and memories of development. It also attempts to contextualize *Songs*' portrait of Christian devotion in relation to the role played by Christian iconography in earlier films by Hu Jie, exploring how Christian devotion within the film unsettles conventional logics of development.

After leaving the military, where he had trained as a painter, Hu Jie (胡杰) went through a process of self-questioning. Dissatisfied with his creative output, he asked himself, 'who are the people?' and 'when the people face problems, how can we help them?' In Rita Andreetti's recent film, *The Observer* (2019), Hu reflects that, 'when you think about such questions, you will find that your art becomes closely linked to the people.'[1] It was in this context that he came to the Mini-DV camcorder and began to make documentary films.

Many of Hu's best known documentaries take up historical subjects, with *Searching For Lin Zhao's Soul* 寻找林昭的灵魂 (dir. Hu Jie, 2005) asking explicitly, 'will our history enter our memory? How will it enter our memory?' Li Jie has even made the case for reading *Though I Am Gone* 我虽死去 (dir. Hu Jie, 2007), as a kind of cinematic museum (Li 2009). Hu's 2016 film, *Songs From Maidichong* 麦地冲的歌声 (dir. Hu Jie, 2016), takes up a historical subject but, because it concerns the history of a Christian devotional community, could be said to possess an extra historical dimension: residents of Maidichong, Yunnan see their lives as playing out between Christ's crucifixion and their joining the Lord in heaven. Traveling to the village, Hu interviews locals about the history of their faith and its place in the life of their community.

Stylistically, Hu's interest in oral history is on display here, with interviews making up much of the film. Archival footage is largely absent, but there's an interest throughout in historical texts (a 1937 Miao textbook, the bible in Miao, the journal of a cadre) and photographs (portraits of religious leaders, group photos of Miao gatherings). Some may see in the repeated closeups and freezeframes given to such objects echoes of the preoccupation, in works like *Searching For Lin Zhao's Soul* and, to a lesser extent, *Spark* 星火 (dir. Hu

Jie, 2013), with the materiality of texts. These two forms– interviews and historical media– stitch together sequences of the people of Maidichong praying, working and singing hymns. The film's fascination with the singing of Christian songs, signalled in its title, is probably its most distinct formal aspect within Hu's oeuvre, and space is made for performances throughout.

Films like *Searching*, *Though I Am Gone*, *Spark*, *East Wind State Farm* 国营东风农场 (dir. Hu Jie, 2010), *My Mother, Wang Peiying* 我的母亲王佩英 (dir. Hu Jie, 2012), *Book of the Gulag* 格拉古之书 (dir. Hu Jie, 2013) and *Liaoxi Memento Mori* 辽西记事 (dir. Hu Jie, 2017) use talking-head interviews to intervene in histories of death, suffering and martyrdom. In this way, they offer memories of crisis as a counterpoint to the triumphalist accounts of development and modernity found in more official history documentary films and programmes, such as those on China Central Television (CCTV). *Songs* is certainly interested in martyrdom but, in contrast to this grouping, the film's focus is on the *life* of a community. Hu's interview subjects at times speak of the dead, of calamity and of martyrdom, but the style of *Songs* also allows residents of Maidichong to reflect on their art, work, faith, studies, recovery (as from the Great Leap), habits, skills and futures. The frequent musical sequences, as collective celebrations of divine grace, likewise offer a counterpoint to individual oral narrations of suffering and death. Such moments bring historical narrative to a halt.

Songs finds Hu interviewing plenty of residents, a reverend, an itinerant dentist and a veteran cadre on the history of Christianity in Maidichong, as well as probing the village's contemporary life. The film is tightly geographically bounded but temporally slippery: village seniors recount tales from the Cultural Revolution and their childhoods, worry about the future, and offer glimpses into past generations. Throughout, Hu pesters his subjects with demands for clarity, elaboration, and performance: 'Could you read me a bit of the Miao Bible?'[2] 'Do you have a schedule for who sweeps on what day?'[3] 'How much do you generally make in a year from the flue-cured tobacco?'[4] 'What are you carrying on your back?'[5] 'So they brought these watermelons here, for everyone to eat?'[6] This mode, familiar in fragments from other films, is prevalent in *Songs*. The result– as evidenced by the nature of the above questions– is not a portrait of a community in crisis. Nor do such questions force a reckoning with a traumatic past, as in *Searching*, *Spark*, *Liaoxi*, etc. What the resolutely ordinary responses to such questions produce is a sense of a community that, perhaps, *has* come to terms with its past, to the extent that such things are ever possible.

Early on, locals Long Dezhong (龙德忠) and Zhang Jifu (张寄福) characterize the area's pre-Christian religion as the veneration of boulders and 'belief in demons'. With the 1903 arrival of Samuel Pollard, a Methodist missionary, they came to accept the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Since then, at least one martyrdom within their own community has become a historical reference point for courage in the face of death– the transcendence of *something* over worldly concerns: Hu's film opens, a bracing performance of *Amazing Grace* in Miao notwithstanding, with a discussion of the life, works and martyrdom of, not Christ, but the

Reverend Wang Zhiming (王志明). Unwilling to renounce his faith, Wang was executed late in the Cultural Revolution. As we will see, his death marked a moment of violent confrontation between two competing modernization programs: Christian missionary modernization, itself part of a colonial project, and nationalist, communist modernization. Both were interested in bringing literacy and modern healthcare to Maidichong– both regarded as key social indicators of development to this day– and both claimed the authority to name the sacred.

The village of Maidichong has since been granted explicit freedom of religious practice. As Long fondly recalls traveling to Kunming in April of 1980 for a meeting with the provincial government, he notes that the good news he received there had to be written up and mailed back home, as there were not then any telephones in Maidichong. It's one of many gestures to a history of rural economic development throughout the film. For locals, memories of development are complicated by an uneasy mixture of secular nationalist development (first in the ROC and then in the PRC) and Methodist missionary work. Literacy and Western medicine first arrived in Maidichong in the context of an effort to convert Miao peoples to a foreign faith. Imagine the consternation of Republican officials realizing the local Miao *were* becoming literate, but not in the national language: Pollard had sufficiently familiarized himself with the local Miao language by 1906 to develop a script. Textbooks followed, predictably using scripture and psalms to teach the new abugida. Emblematic of this admixture of different pressures and desires to develop– some national and external and others spiritual and local– Pollard apparently returned to England at some point to study dentistry, then came back to Yunnan and offered dental care to the people of Maidichong.

This according to former Yunnan Provincial Party Committee Secretary Zhou Ziren (周孜仁), a unique character in the film. Zhou was a cadre who seems to have visited the community frequently in the 1960s and 70s in the course of political work. Over the course of the film, it becomes clear that for Zhou the whole story of Miao conversion is one of development: he describes how, reading Pollard's diaries, he came to see that it was his bringing modern dentistry to the local Miao that allowed him to gain their trust and convert them to Christianity. British missionaries appear here as competing with the CCP to enter into a familiar transaction: modernity in exchange for loyalty to a political project. Hu cuts from Zhou explaining his reading of the situation to an itinerant doctor doing outdoor dental work in contemporary Maidichong. In so doing he evokes the barefoot doctors, an iconic program by which the CCP brought basic medical care to vast swaths of countryside some fifty years after Pollard first began pulling teeth in Yunnan. The juxtaposition begs comparison of the past to the present through memory. As Vinay Lal writes, within the logic of development 'the present of the developing world is none other than the past… of the developed world' (Lal 2002, p. 114). How development is *remembered* in the past is a determining factor in how it will be evaluated in the future, not by planners or policymakers, but by people like those living in Maidichong. One of Elder Zhang Guode's (张国德) memories places literacy and hygiene side by side as markers of progress: 'When the gospel

came to this place, the illiterate learned to read, and those who didn't wash their faces started washing their faces.' [7] One detects here, as in the descriptions of pre-Christian local religion, a disdain for the remembered past. This is why I insist throughout this review on the word 'development', as opposed to, say, 'modernization'. Development encodes notions of a desirable teleology within its very name. Who could wish to remain undeveloped, since to develop is almost definitionally to progress? The framework of development also allows us to read the memories presented in Hu's film beside contemporary struggles that likewise take up the logics of development, such as the campaign to eliminate absolute poverty that the CCP concluded in 2021.

An earlier sequence also produces literacy as a key battleground for development. An interview subject, identified only as the wife of Pan Wenxing, an elder imprisoned nine years for his faith, sits beside her grown son. In the course of the interview, she notes that her son is illiterate because she was unable to send him to school. It is unclear but, it seems to me, implied, that this inability was at least partially due to the imprisonment of her husband. Hu cuts from this sequence to a shot of a mother and two young boys, both in backpacks, walking up a road in present day Maidichong. 'Going to school?' asks Hu, from behind the camera. 'Yes', the mother replies.[8] Missionaries tried to use literacy to effect a change in the consciousness of the people of Maidichong. This change in consciousness, at times opposed by the state, resulted in persecution that also deprived one young boy of his own education and literacy. In the present day, Hu suggests, this has been overcome: young boys are going off to school as they ought to. Where missionary modernity ultimately failed, a certain postsocialist modernity has succeeded. Hu takes a memory– orally recounted– and holds it up to the present– both recorded in action (the woman and her children walking down the road), and confirmed orally by their confirmation: yes, we are going to school.

Hu's attraction to Christian martyrdom has been established in earlier films. It's a marked part of the Lin Zhao saga (itself a passion narrative) that Hu narrates in his formative breakout, *Searching For Lin Zhao's Soul*. In that film, Hu explores the life and death of a young communist who fell afoul of the Party during the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign. While in prison, Lin wrote hundreds of thousands of characters, many in her own blood, addressing herself to the editors of the People's Daily, the CCP itself, future generations and god in heaven. Lin received a Christian missionary education as a child (Jinghai Missionary School of Suzhou) and later embraced the faith in the wake of her persecution. That is, while she had previously been devoted to the Party, sneaking away from home to join the underground in 1948 and later participating in land reform, Lin increasingly turned to Christianity after being branded a dissident. Hu's film, five years in the making, changed its maker. After 2005, Hu becomes a more conspicuously active presence in his own films. In works like *Distant Mountains* 远山 (dir. Hu Jie, 1995) and *Beside the Sea* 在海边 (dir. Hu Jie, 2000), he asks questions, and his personality thus enters and inflects these films, but the impression is still of a cameraman turning up in a place and recording the people who work there. *Distant Mountains*, for instance, includes no music, minimal voiceover, and no archival footage. Philip P. Pan writes that Hu felt he would have

to become a greater presence in *Searching* in order to make the film he wanted to make, and so consciously took on 'a more active role' (Pan 2008, p. 51). Ever since he has made much freer use of music, voiceover, archival footage, illustration, on-screen text, and a variety of other strategies.

But his subject's faith also left a mark on Hu Jie. The film employs choral passion music, Christian imagery, and climaxes with a moment of sacred rupture: Hu Jie forces a silent confrontation between the viewer and Lin Zhao's physical remains, holding a lock of her hair to the camera's lens. On one level, I see the importance of this iconography for Hu's project as that of a mnemonic tool: Christian martyrdom is mobilized by Hu to organize dissident histories while troubling more official ones. In his films, notions of the sacred pass from traditions of socialist martyrdom into a Christian one. We can see this not only in Hu's acute interest in Lin Zhao's faith and the formal strategies noted above, but in a film like *Though I Am Gone*. That film is structured by the testimony of Wang Jingyao (王晶垚), whose wife, Bian Zhongyun (卞仲耘) was murdered by her students in the August of 1966, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Wang purchased a camera and photographed her remains, and has since carefully preserved Bian's bloodied clothing, materials he describes as evidence. Throughout the film, Hu films Christian art hanging on Wang's walls, including the Last Supper. What is most striking in both films is not so much any particular instance of Christian imagery, but the fashioning of relics: the remains of the dead accrue meaning here in relation to martyrs. Not the red martyrs of Chinese communism, but victims of post-1949 political violence. The departure of *Songs From Maidichong* is that while the film *does* mobilize Christian martyrdom in its passing exploration of Wang Zhiming's life and death, its sustained focus is the *life* of the Christian community as such.

Christianity is not here a mere resource but part of the film's true subject. As with work like *Distant Mountains*, which follows illegal coal miners in Qinghai, and *Beside the Sea*, which follows a family of seaweed gatherers scraping by on a Shandong beach, the film is an exercise in centering the experiences of marginalized peoples. The Miao of Maidichong live at the intersection of rural poverty and ethicised minority status and, if the testimonies gathered in Hu's film are any indication, their struggle long predates any nationalist movement. Unlike those films, *Songs* is also interested in preparing a history. Given the centering of Christianity in that history, this is no doubt Hu at his least palatable for a European or North American festival set– or indeed for an anti-imperialist Left: how can memories of Christian missionary work ever be mobilized *on behalf of* a history of resistance by oppressed peoples?

But scripture can and has been so mobilized by oppressed peoples around the world. We should recognize that texts are capable of transcending the political projects by which they were originally instrumentalized. Indeed, isn't a certain radical instability of meaning part of what makes scripture *scripture*? This draws us back to Reverend Wang Zhiming's execution. The intransigence of those for whom spiritual commitments are nonnegotiable can perhaps become revolutionary– hence the ambivalence of certain national

projects towards those who do make them. In the film, Reverend Jiang Zhulin (江祝林) describes how Christian doctrine appealed particularly to the Hua Miao (大华苗族). A subgroup of the Miao with their own identity, Jiang characterizes the Hua Miao, looking back to the Qing Dynasty and beyond, as among the most exploited and impoverished of Miao peoples in the region. Zhang Guode relates the perspective of a production team leader, around 1976. Preparing to participate in a struggle session against Zhang, who had insisted on holding services for worship, the team leader remarked that 'if you don't stop these people, they'll be out of control.' [9] Something about hearing this case put forward so forcefully and directly does make one wonder: is it true? The assertion certainly confirms that the battle over which commitments are sacred (to the Party, to the people, to a Christian god) is perceived as immensely consequential to power. But what does it mean that, as soon as freedom of worship was guaranteed to the community, the threat of this 'loss of control' vanished?

At the time Hu was shooting in Maidichong, the fraying link between development and Christian devotion was a source of anxiety for local elders. In a late scene, Zhang Guode expresses his concern that young people are failing to embrace the faith and the choir. The reasons cited are as familiar as they are unsatisfyingly pat: now that TV and movies have reached Maidichong, material culture is asserting itself and distracting the youth. In fact, Zhang tells Hu, this was foretold by party members as early as the 1960s: 'The second thing he [a county level government official] said was, they came to believe in this religion because science is not well developed here… when science is well developed, and other things such as movies and television are well developed, they will stop believing in religion.'[10] Modern dentistry and the promise of literacy were used by missionaries to draw locals into the Church. Now Elder Zhang Guode worries that yet other technologies like television will draw the next generation *out* of the church. What is constant in this trajectory are the imperatives of modernization and economic integration within a large and non-Miao state. Literacy and a foreign faith must have offered the Hua Miao of Maidichong certain advantages in an era of dueling state formations (European empires, the KMT, the CCP) and now consumer electronics are attractive within the borders of the twenty first century PRC. Taking a cue from Ou Ning（欧宁）, Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel have described a tendency in independent Chinese documentary to produce alternative archives (Berry and Rofel 2010). Alternative archives preserve and present materials that official archives may neglect. In doing so they don't necessarily confront official archives so much as supplement them. In moments like this last one, from the final interview with Zhang Guode, one senses Hu's self-conscious construction of such an archive. That is, the faith of this community appears starkly contingent, with the film offering neither an indictment of the imperialism of British missionaries or of any state formation. Rather, what we have is a Christian community freely practicing its faith and remembering particular histories. *Songs From Maidichong* does not stoop to preach, insisting only 'this too', and forsaking polemical fury as it does so. How radical such an approach appears depends on the audience.

Notes

1 *The Observer*, dir. Rita Andreetti (2019, New York: Icarus Films), digital copy: 00:18:53. “这些东西你去思考的时候，你会发现你的艺术就和人民联系在了一起.”
2 *Songs From Maidichong* 麦地冲的歌声, dir. Hu Jie 胡杰 (2016), digital copy: 00:28:20.
3 *Songs From Maidichong* 麦地冲的歌声, dir. Hu Jie 胡杰 (2016), digital copy: 00:35:39.
4 *Songs From Maidichong* 麦地冲的歌声, dir. Hu Jie 胡杰 (2016), digital copy: 00:39:40.
5 *Songs From Maidichong* 麦地冲的歌声, dir. Hu Jie 胡杰 (2016), digital copy: 00:45:45.
6 *Songs From Maidichong* 麦地冲的歌声, dir. Hu Jie 胡杰 (2016), digital copy: 01:01:27.
7 *Songs From Maidichong* 麦地冲的歌声, dir. Hu Jie 胡杰 (2016), digital copy: 00:19:35.
8 *Songs From Maidichong* 麦地冲的歌声, dir. Hu Jie 胡杰 (2016), digital copy: 00:44:40.
9 *Songs From Maidichong* 麦地冲的歌声, dir. Hu Jie 胡杰 (2016), digital copy: 01:11:13.
10 *Songs From Maidichong* 麦地冲的歌声, dir. Hu Jie 胡杰 (2016), digital copy: 01:12:01.

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