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TREASURE OF THE LISU:

a h - c h e n g a n d h i s m u s i c

a documentary by Yan Chun Su

2010 | USA | TRT: 30 mins

in Lisu and Mandarin with English subtitles

Treasure of the Lisu tells the story of one of the last remaining tradition bearers of the Lisu ethnic group in a remote mountain village in southwest China, just south of the Tibetan plateau. With mountains of new changes seeping in to every crevice of his life, will his culture survive?



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[Synopsis]

Treasure of the Lisu takes us into the world of Ah-Cheng, a master musician and tradition bearer of the Lisu minority people in southwest China. Originating in eastern Tibet, the Lisu people now live among the mountainous Nu(Salween) River canyon, an area caught between the ancient and the modern world.

As a skilled craftsman, Ah-Cheng is the only person in his village who can still make the Chiben, an emblematic four-string lute, which alongside the knife and the crossbow, are the three most important objects to the Lisu People. The British Protestants brought Christianity to the Lisu at the beginning of the 1900s. The Chiben, used widely in traditional religious gatherings, was considered a threat to the newly introduced religion and as a result, was banned from the church system.

The Communist revolution from 1967 brought an end to the missionary work. When China exited the repressive cultural revolution era in 1980, Christianity, which had always been practiced by many Lisu people in secrecy, returned to the public and spread even further.

As China develops further into the modern world, TV, cell phone, and new ideologies gradually penetrate into the idyllic lives of these mountain people. Being one of the last remaining tradition bearers of the Lisu people in his village, Ah-Cheng holds a vital role in the survival of his ethnic culture. Even though he is illiterate, he is able to keep a clear mind regarding what is important to Lisu cultural identity. Practicing all the essential traditions of the Lisus while still accepting Christianity, Ah-Cheng embodies the human capacity to embrace differences in the face of changes. Through intimate access to the daily life of three generations of Lisu people in Ah-Cheng's family, this 30-minute documentary film shows, with heart-felt compassion and humor, the effect of modernization and its implication on ethnic traditions.

Treasures of the Lisu, observational in style with no scripted narration, paints an intimate portrait of one family of an ethnic minority living in modern day China. It presents a world rarely seen by Westerners, a world that seems so faraway yet we will find the unexpected similarities striking. Inspiring a deeper observation, the film provokes viewers to contemplate the value of simple living and traditions that are worth preserving.

[about the filmmaker]



Yan Chun Su is a self-taught documentary filmmaker. She was born in China and received her education in both China and the US.

After working as a computer software engineer for a number of companies in Boston, Yan took to the road and traveled to many far and distance places including Patagonia, the Amazon, the Arctic, Mongolia, and many remote communities in China and southeast Asia, etc. Her first film, *Sega, African School Dream*, which aired on Current TV, was a product from teaching in a small village in

Ghana during 2006.

Since then, documentaries she produced and directed have been shown on cable TVs and international film festivals. Yan also works as a cinematographer, editor, and has created documentary style promotional videos for non-profit organizations.

From 2005, Yan began to travel to the Nu(Salween) River Canyon in southwest China near the Burmese and Tibetan border and documented some of the uniquely diverse indigenous cultures of that area. Spending an extensive period of time with one family of Lisu people, one of the thirteen ethnic minorities in the region, she worked as an one-woman crew and made *Treasure of the Lisu*, a 30-minute observational style documentary. The film presents an intimate portrait of one of the last remaining tradition bearers of an ethnic minority living in modern day China.

Yan continues to explore the endless possibilities of using documentary films to tell stories about her native China and other parts of the world she encountered. Several projects are under development.

[film credits]

producer|director|camera|sound|editor: Yan Chun Su

music: Ah-Cheng Heng

colorist: Rick Gougler

sound mixing: Jason McDaniel

translators: Yue Yang, Yeh Hua Yoe, Jia Cong He, Dao Ping He, Da Wei Hu, San Yee Kwu

[director's statement]

It was the winter of 2005 when I first backpacked to the Nu(Salween) River Canyon region in southwest China. Bordering Tibet and Burma, this mountainous area defined by the roaring river and snow-covered jagged peaks is considered one of the last unexplored, undeveloped areas left in China. Although immediately captivated by its natural beauty, I was drawn even more to the ethnic minorities there living harmoniously together and their innate habit of appreciating the simplest pleasure in life.

And it was then that I became aware of the government's plan for a massive hydroelectric project consisting of thirteen dams on the Nu River. So in late 2006, I returned to the Nu River region with a group of Chinese journalists and members of the local environmental organizations in an attempt to document the changes happening to rivers in western China, Nu river included. The result was a six minutes news-type short documentary. But I felt that was far from enough to portrait this amazing area tittering at the edge of drastic changes.

So, in early 2008, I traveled back to the area in search of characters through whom, I hoped, the story of the area and its people could be told with more intimacy. Through a chain of lucky encounters, I met Ah-Cheng, a musician, farmer, and tradition bearer belonging to the Lisu ethnic group in the heart of the Nu River Canyon. The following year, I returned and stayed with Ah-Cheng and his family, living with them and filming everyday. The majority of the footage was shot during the Spring of 2009.

I was born and raised in China and spent the last fifteen years living in the U.S. I have the privilege to experience the transition in myself from admiring everything associated with the highly developed western world to starting to question some of the fundamental issues about what actually defines the advancement of a society.

What I experienced at the Nu River Canyon felt like a return to the essence of human nature. The generosity of the locals living in obvious economical scarcity, their talents for singing, dancing, and their sense of humor moved me and inspired me to keep on going with this seemingly impossible project. During my time of filming, I also noticed the sense of helplessness when the locals talked about changes happening to the area. The allure from the outside world is overwhelming, and many of the young people have gone to the big cities to do labor work. As a result, many of the ethnic traditions are disappearing.

In some senses, the Nu River locals, like myself, straddle between two worlds with startling contrasts. And they, like myself, have experienced times when their traditions were considered backwards and inferior. As I grow deeper appreciation of ancient wisdoms, I am struck by how clear-minded some of the locals are in understanding the value of life and living. Having witnessed the devastating side-effects of some of the insensible developments in these ethnic communities, it is my great desire to find ways to help the Nu River locals with maintaining a strong sense of cultural identity and pride toward their traditions and values. And I hope that the making of this documentary will make a contribution.

[production stills]



[the making of the film]



It took me three years and three visits to the Nu River Canyon to find the subject of this film. Most of the filming was done in the Spring of 2009, some in early 2008, and some in late 2006.

The Lisu people have their own language. Ah-Cheng, the musician and I can communicate in very basic Mandarin. Not being able to understand the local language is both a challenge and a blessing. They were less conscious of themselves and what they said when I was around and that allowed me to retreat easily to the background and let things unfold naturally in front of me.

I spent most of my filming days living among the family, doing farm work and taking part in whatever their daily chores might be. Once every few days I would return to the nearby small town to review footage, have them translated, and charge batteries.

Working as a one-person crew is also a challenge and blessing at the same time. To get good sound was especially difficult. But I was able to develop trust and close relationship with my subject and people in the local community that otherwise would not have been possible had I gone with a big film crew.

Most of the footage was shot with a Sony Z1u HDV camera with a Sanken CS1 external microphone and the occasional use of a Sennheiser wireless lav.

I was extremely fortunate to have the acclaimed documentary filmmaker Les Blank taking an interest in my film. Les provided invaluable advice on story structure, editing, and helped bringing this film to its completion in numerous ways.