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Film Reviews

Peasant Family Happiness (*Nong Jia Le*)

Jenny Chio, dir. 71 min. IMDb, 2012.

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In *Peasant Family Happiness*, Jenny Chio explores the efforts of two ethnic minority villages to create economies combining agriculture and tourism. Ping’an Village, populated by the Zhuang ethnic group, is set in the lush terraced fields of mountainous Guangxi Province and is now booming with family-run guesthouses, restaurants, and stalls selling locally and regionally produced embroideries. Upper Jidao Village, in Guizhou Province, occupied by the Miao ethnic group, has only recently begun marketing itself as a destination for tourism.

The film opens with some striking footage of tourists being carried up steep slopes in colorful canopied bamboo sedan chairs. Ping’an men keep tallies on whose turn it is to carry the next passenger at the sedan chair boarding station. From an observation point, a tour guide in ethnic dress armed with a microphone rallies the spring–autumn tour group, consisting of urban Chinese tourists, to admire the rural landscape. Pointing authoritatively to a book’s photograph, the guide didactically informs tourists that they are looking at Moonlight Field surrounded by four star fields: “Do you see it now?” she blandly repeats over and over into her microphone (see Figure 4). A major attraction in Ping’an is ethnic minority culture, as illustrated by scenes of Chinese men paying to pose with attractive young women adorned in elaborate ethnic dress, while simultaneously joking with each other about providing the girls with pigs or cows as a bride-price. Much of the film is composed of a series of interviews conducted by Chio, who is audible although not visible to the audience. A villager asks Chio to recommend an investor who could front money to construct a guesthouse. Land and labor rich but cash poor, the villager explains the standard investment equation in which a boss from outside pays 100,000 RMB (a little over \$13,000) to receive a return of about 80,000 RMB annually (\$10,000), with the villager receiving 20,000 RMB per year (\$2,600). As in

other tourist destinations in China, many of the guesthouses were built with outside funds; one of Ping’an’s most expensive guesthouses is owned by someone from the United States. The labor required to sustain tourism is no minor feat. In one scene, about 40 village men carry a huge piece of machinery, intriguingly decorated with clay pagodas, up a hill. In contrast to other documentaries in which there is an overarching explanatory narrative, Chio’s approach is to provide viewers with a series of images and interviews, allowing them to draw their own conclusions. Yet the overall effect suggests that Ping’an villagers’ enthusiasm for tourism is not without ambivalence. One young woman laments that nowadays everything is about “money, money,” although an elderly woman praises tourism for improving transportation and raising the standard of living.

Experiences in Ping’an contrast with those in Upper Jidao Village, where there are few young people in the village, although they appear to be the key players in the promotion of tourism. In Upper Jidao, ornately dressed dancers practice with a young male choreographer. During

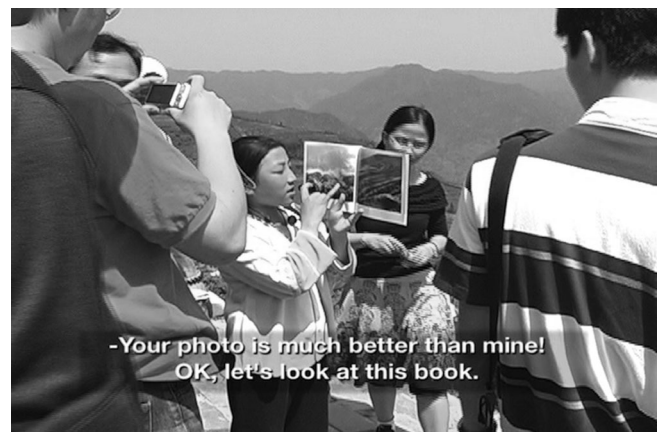


FIGURE 4. “Your photo is much better than mine! OK, let’s look at this book.” (Photo courtesy of Jenny Chio)



FIGURE 5. “Jenny, if I wore Miao women’s things . . . this would look even better.” (Photo courtesy of Jenny Chio)

a rainy morning, villagers dutifully assemble in preparation for the arrival of tourist buses. Tickets are distributed to villagers based on levels of participation—that is, whether they simply wear Miao ethnic dress or dress up and perform or engage in other tourism-related activities (see Figure 5). The tickets will be converted into work points, mimicking a system of labor compensation used during the Collective Era. Young female performers adorned with stunning metal headdresses sing a song of greeting while male villagers entreat tourists to drink liquor from a horn, a customary Miao ritual of hospitality.

The film ends with a delegation from Upper Jidao Village, accompanied by Chio, travelling to Ping’an to learn about how to create a tourist destination. Ping’an villagers themselves had learned from villagers in Yangshuo, a center for tourism in their home province. It is not until the film’s epilogue that Chio actually frames the dilemmas presented by the shift to a tourism-based economy. Upper Jidao villagers identify the major obstacles to tourism development as economic, requiring government or outside investment to establish a tourism infrastructure. Ping’an Village has had its share of tourism-related tensions, giving rise to two criticisms: that residents have unevenly benefitted and that the outside management model has not always resulted in profits shared with the village (giving rise to views that the Ping’an “brand” should be managed by Ping’an villagers rather than outsiders).

What may be less apparent to the audience is the broader economic framework in which rural tourism has been promoted. China’s promotion of rural tourism dates to the 1980s Poverty Alleviation through Tourism initiative, which was intended to address the vast economic disparities between China’s rural and urban populations. The phenomenon of peasant family happiness (*nong jia le*) originated with the activities of Chengdu farmers who offered simple countryside housing and rustic meals to tourists in the early 1990s, a practice that caught on as far as Shanghai. By 2009, the number of families operating *nong jia le* reached 1.3 million (Su 2012). Although open to all international and

national tourists, *nong jia le*, a phenomenon drawing on the model of European vacations in the countryside, primarily serves urban Chinese tourists. Although initiated by the villages themselves, *nong jia le* is actively promoted by the China National Tourism Association, which has subsidized and encouraged domestic travel in order to alleviate rural poverty and allow China’s middle class to invest in the domestic economy in the wake of the Asian financial crisis of 1997 (Chao 2012). The state holidays referred to as “golden weeks” were established for the purpose of encouraging domestic travel and rural tourism. In southwest China, *nong jia le* has emphasized the marketing of ethnicity given the significant minority populations in this region.

Although the government promotion of tourism is not conspicuous in Chio’s film, the audience is nonetheless provided with glimpses of its shaping force. A sign tells us that tourists are charged according to the Guilin and Longsheng Price Inspection Bureaus. When asked about her views of tourism, an older woman responds by singing a song praising the Communist party for providing the village with “a new outlook.” Although the song is old, it is evident that peasants equate tourism with the government’s plan for rural development and prosperity. In another interview, a young woman assures Chio that the tourist economy will attract young villagers back to the countryside. In her usage, “*nong jia le*” is a double entendre: a peasant home where urban Chinese can have fun; and something that regenerates the peasant family home, making it “happy again” by reversing rural migration to urban areas with the promise of a sustainable livelihood for a multigenerational rural population.

There is little doubt that rural families and village communities play the major role in creating *nong jia le* tourism, but the question remains as to what other alternatives they have to the otherwise harsh economic conditions in their villages. The state encourages rural tourism, but it is not clear that local people are prospering as much as the outside bosses who invest in it. If one Ping’an villager’s account, that the elderly can now earn almost a dollar a day to buy snacks, is representative of the financial rewards, then tourism has far to go to alleviate rural poverty.

Chio’s film, *Nong Jia Le*, provides us with a rich and vivid account of the challenges of developing and sustaining rural tourism from the vantage point of rural communities. It provides students with a contemporary view of rural China, which in the southwest is characterized by the commodification of ethnicity and striking economic polarization between China’s urban and rural residents. As suggested in Chio’s film, there are also generational divisions among the rural population in which older villagers may occasionally dress up but primarily continue to farm, whereas younger villagers appear to be more involved in full-time tourism-related activities. For young rural residents who now provide affordable leisure and travel destinations for China’s middle class, ironically, the path to “peasant happiness” has meant labor in a tertiary service-based economy and a shift away from an agricultural livelihood.

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Jathilan: Trance and Possession in Java

Robert Lemelson, dir. 27 min. Elemental Productions. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources, 2011.

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With the release of *Jathilan: Trance and Possession in Java*, Robert Lemelson and Elemental Productions add another superb film to their rapidly growing catalog of documentary films about cultural politics and psychology in Java and Bali, Indonesia. The catalog currently consists of 11 films, but more are surely on the way. *Jathilan* explores the cultural, political, and psychological significance of a Javanese possession ceremony by the same name, which refers to the movements of the horses the participants are said to ride as they enter trance (see Figure 6). Possessed by spirits, the participants are able to perform extraordinary feats—eating burning incense, broken glass, and live chickens and submitting to scalding irons and the weight of a moving motorcycle. The film offers numerous analytical perspectives on the ceremony, showing how its significance has changed as the political context in which it is performed has changed yet also showing the cultural continuity it provides for the participants, who remark more than once that the purpose of the ceremony is “to preserve our culture and heritage.”

The film follows the process of a *jathilan* ceremony in Yogyakarta, Java, incorporating the commentary of participants, observers, and an Indonesian anthropologist as

the ceremony unfolds. A loudspeaker announces that “the authentic *jathilan*” is about to begin. Observers gather along the perimeter of the dusty courtyard where the ceremony will take place. Participants, traditionally men, dress as warriors and apply makeup to their faces (see Figure 7). The stage and props—the horses that the dancers will ride, the masks they will wear, the offerings that will be made—are blessed with incense by a priest, who asks for the protection of various spirits, including those of the dead. The anthropologist explains that, in the past the ceremony initiated young boys into manhood. Then the warriors begin to dance in unison, riding their horses in fluid movements that quickly become “harsh and expressive,” in sharp contrast, one observer explains, to the “refined and organized” dances of the court (*kraton*). “I see that as a form of resistance from the people,” he says, “a resistance against the artistic forms of the Royal Court.” The story recreates a battle in the forest between human-devouring spirits and the soldiers of two princes, Bancak and Doyok. Historically, it is connected to the collapse of an early Mataram kingdom.

Following the bloody coup that brought Suharto to power in 1965–66, throughout Indonesia, but especially in Java, traditional performances that once maintained a space for resistance were made “safe” and put on display, demonstrating the sterile “unity in diversity” of the New Order (see Pemberton 1994). In the case of the *jathilan* ceremony,



FIGURE 6. The dancers ride horses as they go into trance. (Photo courtesy of Elemental Productions)



FIGURE 7. The dancers are made up as warriors. (Photo courtesy of Elemental Productions)