

A production of Tail Bite Tail Films



Singing in the Wilderness

a film by Dongnan Chen

Documentary feature

98 mins | DCP | 5.1 | China | In Mandarin, A-Hmao Language with English Subtitles

Logline

After hiding in the mountains for a century, a Miao ethnic Christian choir is discovered by a propaganda official and becomes a national sensation. Two young Miaos and all the villagers must reconcile their faith, identity and love with the real world of China.



Story Summary

Singing in the Wilderness takes place in Little Well Village on the barren mountaintop of Southwest China. Ping and Sheng are two idealist young Miaos that belong to an ethnic minority who lost almost everything, including their written language, during the painful migrations in history because of wars with the Han, Chinese majority. Living in poverty and fears, Little Well was haunted. However, there was one thing that the Han couldn't take away - the Miao took deep pride in singing for nature and spirituality, which is also their only oral history. With the arrival of western missionaries in the 1930s, Christian hymns brought consolation and gradually, the ghosts disappeared, as well as the folklore of their past...Then today, a communist propaganda official accidentally discovers the choir and decides to turn it into a national sensation. Together with the choir, Ping and Sheng are about to take on a journey that may reshape their future and possibly also reconnect them to the past.

On the wild mountaintop where faith, politics, and love merge, *Singing in the Wilderness* is an aching fable that captures the struggle of a community to maintain its own values while opening up to modernity and the larger Han dominated society. The film relates to everyone whose community was once culturally, spiritually or physically colonized and raises questions for all of us who are caught in the dilemma of money and meaning, past and present, minority and majority nowadays.

Press

“A touching and rewarding example of deceptively low-key political documentary”

Screen Daily

“Rather remarkably, Dongnan Chen gained the trust of both the villagers and government officials, who gave her access to candid moments and intimate conversations.”

The Film Verdict

“Singing in the Wilderness” is a sad and beautiful documentary about the power of music and the most painful changes in today's society.”

ERR News

“The work has the great ability not to sanction bad and good in a definite way. The result is a poetic language that is not limited to being a documentary and seeks something more.”

Close-up

“The double colonization suffered by a traditional choir of an ethnic minority that has lost its identity, converted into interpreters of religious hymns and now used by communist propaganda as an example of tradition, but changing its repertoire for western songs.”

En Primera Fila

“IFFR 2022: Asia in focus at the International Film Festival Rotterdam“

TheReelBits

“Focusing on a small village in southern China, the director creates a small portrait of life (and its weights) into depths of the real China.”

Cinephilia

“Pointedly and eloquently, Dongnan Chen creates the portrait of a people who have been persecuted for centuries... the presentation of this rather unknown issue is quite good, while the critique, quite accurate.”

Asian Movie Pulse

Director's statement

I first came to Little Well in 2014 when the choir was at rehearsal. Villagers just came back from the farmland with muddy hands and shoes. All the happiness and hardships in life were chanted in the name of God. But then I realized the seemingly peace is trying to protect a tragic secret: Miaos' thousands of years of suffering from wars with the Han, which is universally the same experience for many minorities in China. Even "the Miao" is an official Chinese term given to them, but there's nothing left in their memory to call themselves anything else.

So when the Han is trying to hijack the only thing they have left – singing, by turning the choir into a commercial product, I know this story has to be told. This is a film about double-colonization, when the Han took their home, the western missionaries took over their memory and then the Han came again to take over their faith and land altogether. After all that happened, who were they and who are they now? We have seen many films about communities fighting to reclaim their heritage but this is a fresh look into a community who doesn't even remember what they should reclaim and what belongs to them. But through their singing, I feel connected to their souls.

I've been making documentaries about China's ethnic minorities - Muslim Uighurs from Xinjiang who came to eastern metropolises to pickpocket, Buddhist Dai who could no longer find anyone willing to sit in the temple under the economic boom thus imported monks from Myanmar, and this time the Miao Choir in the upland. For me, it was an intended escape at the beginning of every filming, to run away from the singular ideology and lifestyle in the mainstream, and to look for alternative freedom in the wilderness. But they all turned out to be the same story that resonates with the actualities in my own life.

After the failed political movements in the 80s, the disillusionment for the system was soon submerged by excitement for miraculous economic development. Miracle happens to Little Well too. Farmers from a remote village get onto the stage of Lincoln Center in New York. Everyone is crazed by the boisterous celebration of success and prosperity, however below the surface, there's an unspoken unease within all of us, just like the ghosts in Little Well.



Key Personnels

Director/producer/editor/sound

Dongnan Chen's debut film, *THE TRAIL FROM XINJIANG*, a profile of three pickpockets from China's far west, has been widely screened at festivals, universities and museums worldwide, and though censored in China, it has become one of the most watched documentaries underground. *SOUND OF VISION*, an experimental short following a blind man's exploration of New York was nominated for an Emmy award, premiered at HotDocs and broadcasted on PBS POV. *SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS*, her first feature documentary, is supported by Sundance, DMZ, Xining First International Film Festival etc. She is a graduate from the documentary program at New York University.

Producer

VIOLET DU FENG is an Emmy Award winning documentary film producer. She is one of the 2018 Sundance Non-fiction Producing Fellows, which she participated in with the project "*Singing in the Wilderness*". Feng produced "*Confucian Dream*", which premiered at 2019 Hot Docs and won a Special Jury Award at Karlovy Vary; she co-produced "*Our Time Machine*", world premiering at 2019 Tribeca Film Festival. She produced "*Maine-land*", which received a Special Jury Award of SXSW and a US theatrical release; "*Please Remember Me*" premiered at 2015 IDFA Film Festival and received three awards at China's biggest documentary film festival GZDoc in 2016. The film had a theatrical release in China with the first doc impact campaign of China. She is the Executive Producer of "*24th Street*", nominated for Best Documentary Feature at IDFA 2017.

Producer

Qi Zhao is a Sundance and Emmy awards winning documentary filmmaker in Beijing. His feature works include *LAST TRAIN HOME* (2011 Emmy Awards), *CHINA HEAVYWEIGHT* (2012 Golden Horse Award), *FALLEN CITY* (2013 Sundance nomination) and *THE CHINESE MAYOR* (2015 Sundance Special Jury Prize), *THE INVISIBLE SHORE* (2020 Busan International Film Festival).

He also worked as an executive director and commissioning editor in China Central Television for 19 years. He produced over 800 documentaries covering culture, history, politics and environment. He served as Chairman of ABU (Asian Pacific Broadcasters Union) Prize in 2010, and was nominated executive producer to supervise the CARE project, an international co-production among over 15 Asian countries from 2012 to 2013.

Director of Photography

JISONG LI has 25 years of experience as a cinematographer and has filmed for over 500 projects appearing on China's mainstream broadcasters. He is the DP for TV documentary series including *A Bite of China*, *Ports of China*, *Design for China*, *A Chronicle History of the World*, etc. He also works on commercials for clients including Cisco, Land Rover, Dupont and Lululemon.

Editor

EMELIE MAHDAVIAN lives and works in the American West, where she has been shooting her current documentary *BITTERBRUSH*. Emelie was the producer, writer and editor of *MIDNIGHT TRAVELER*, which won a Special Jury Prize at Sundance and was nominated for Best Documentary at the Gotham Awards. She was nominated (with Su Kim) for Best Production at the Cinema Eye Honors and won Best Editing at Salem Film Festival. She is currently editing *DREAMS OF DARAA* (dir. Reilly Dowd), *SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS* (dir. Dongnan Chen) and *BASELINE 2020* (dir. John Sutter). Previous to these works, she was a professional dancer whose dance film work has

screened at museums and festivals. She studied at London Film School and has a Ph.D. from UC Davis. She is currently a Producer-in-Residence at the University of Utah.

Composer

CHAD CANNON is a composer interested in the intersection of cultures, history, and human stories. His score to the Academy Award- winning Netflix documentary *American Factory* has been called “stirring” (NY Times) and “graceful” (Washington Post) and was nominated for a Cinema Eye Honors Award for Outstanding Original Score. The film is the first release by Barack and Michelle Obama’s Higher Ground Productions. Chad’s debut soundtracks also received global recognition: in 2017, *Paper Lanterns*, lauded as “haunting, mystical” by The Japan Times, received two IFMCA (International Film Music Critics Awards) nominations for Best Original Score for a Documentary and Breakthrough Composer of the Year, while *Cairo Declaration*, co-composed with Xiaogang Ye, received China’s highest film prize, the Golden Rooster Award for Best Music. The PBS documentary *CyberWork* and *the American Dream*, with a symphonic Americana score by Chad, also aired nationally in 2019, reaching an estimated 90 million households and garnering him another IFMCA nomination in 2020.

Story Consultant

KEITH FULTON directs both documentary and fiction films, among them *Lost in La Mancha*, shortlisted for the Academy Award for Best Documentary and winner of the Evening Standard’s Peter Sellers Award for Best Comedy; *Brothers of the Head*, winner of the Michael Powell Award for Best British Feature; and *Malkovich’s Mail*, an original documentary special for AMC. *La Mancha* and *Brothers* were distributed theatrically by IFC Films in the U.S. and screened at international film festivals including: Berlin, Toronto, Telluride, Chicago, IDFA, Edinburgh, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Tribeca, SXSW, San Francisco, and Cinema Jove Valencia. Fulton holds an MFA in Radio-TV-Film from Temple University, has attended the Sundance Institute’s Feature Film Screenwriters Lab, and is a current fellow of the Sundance Documentary Film Program. He has collaborated with co-director Lou Pepe for over 20 years. As Low Key Pictures they have received commissions from the Gates and Participant Foundations to create documentary programming about public education, including *The New Teacher Experience* (WNET, www.TeachingChannel.org) and the web-series *I Am Education* (www.TakePart.com). Fulton’s interest in education also extends to practice, and he actively participates as an instructor and mentor in Temple University’s L.A. Study-Away program for aspiring young filmmakers.

Consulting Editor

NANFU WANG’s debut film *Hooligan Sparrow* premiered at Sundance Film Festival in 2016 and was shortlisted for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 2017. Her second film, *I Am Another You*, premiered at SXSW Film Festival in 2017 and won two special jury awards, and her third film, *One Child Nation*, won the Grand Jury Prize for Documentary Feature at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival.

The film is a selection of

New Director New Films, US, 2022
International Film Festival Rotterdam, Netherlands, 2022
Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, USA, 2022
Montreal International Documentary Film Festival, Canada, 2021
DMZ International Documentary Film Festival, South Korea, 2021
FIRST International Film Festival, China, 2021
Thessaloniki International Film Festival, Greece, 2021

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Fresh Pitch
CNEX Chinese Doc Forum
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NHK, Nippon Hoso Kyokai
PTS, Public Television Service Foundation
KBS, Korean Broadcasting System





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