



## DOCUMENTARY NOTE

### Craft and Fieldwork

#### Making Baskets, Mallets, and Videos in Upland Southwest China

This note introduces two short documentary videos made from recordings collected with two Baiku Yao craftspeople living in Nandan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southwestern China. I discuss my background and approach to ethnographic documentary and contextualize my role as part of a binational research team. The first video features Mr. Li Guicai weaving a rice basket in Huali village and details the craftsman's practice. The second video follows Mr. Lu Bingzhao of Manjiang village as he makes a wooden mallet for a family member. While both documentaries foreground the creative process, they also provide a glimpse into the social lives of makers and the personal and cultural contexts of their craft work.

Keywords: Ethnographic documentary—videography—craft—Baiku Yao—basketry

In December 2017, I joined a team of folklorists from museums in the United States to conduct research in Guangxi, China as part of the China-US Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage Project, a collaborative initiative undertaken jointly by the China Folklore Society and the American Folklore Society since 2007. The team included craft and material culture scholars from the Michigan State University Museum, the Museum of International Folk Art (Santa Fe, New Mexico), and the Mathers Museum of World Cultures at Indiana University. This latter museum is where I served as the curator of Folklife and Cultural Heritage from 2015 to 2020. The US-based team members collaborated with folklorists and museum professionals from the Anthropology Museum of Guangxi (Nanning, China) and the Nandan Baiku Yao Ecomuseum (Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, China) to document the basket and textile traditions of the Baiku Yao people living in Nandan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. As a non-China specialist invited to join this ethnographic work, I wondered what I could offer our research team. Having little knowledge of the region, I embraced the “work” of fieldwork. I committed myself to documenting the creative processes of local makers. Like the craftspeople with whom we collaborated, I shared my craft of video ethnography.

In this documentary note, I introduce two short videos and share my approach to videography, not just as a visual documentation tool but as an ethnographic approach and a collaborative method. My introduction to the video documentation of craft began when I was an undergraduate at Indiana University. I took a class with folklorist and cultural anthropologist Jerome Mintz, who produced several black and white documentaries including *The Shoemaker* (1978) and *Perico the Bowmaker* (1987), which situated the production of traditional crafts within their social and cultural contexts. Although his films and instruction influenced my appreciation of ethnographic documentaries, it would be many years before I would start producing my own. In 2004, I was hired by Indiana University to direct Traditional Arts Indiana (TAI), a statewide public folk arts program. As the state folklorist for Indiana, I began work to identify, document, and support the folk and traditional artists working in the state. I recognize digital video as an effective tool for documenting traditional arts and sharing information with both the general public and a maker’s home community. At that time, as I was beginning my work at TAI, digital video cameras and DVD replication were becoming affordable, and free online distribution platforms

such as YouTube and Vimeo were beginning to emerge, positioning videography as an effective and affordable tool for public arts and humanities scholars.

My early video work was collaborative; I arranged and directed the video shoots and conducted ethnographic interviews, artists demonstrated their crafts and shared their insights and histories, and a videographer captured and edited the footage. Most of the early shoots were undertaken to make short documentaries for TAI's State Fair Masters award, a recognition of lifetime participants at the Indiana State Fair. From sheep shearers to quilters, I produced short video documentaries that heralded the lifetime achievements of the fair's most significant artisans, performers, and tradition bearers. Videographer Anders Lund partnered with me, helping me produce my first videos for the State Fair, as well as a series of videos with Indiana instrument makers. This later series focused on the creative processes that various builders used to make their instruments. When Anders moved away from Indiana, I began recording and editing my own documentary shorts, focusing on the various broom makers, blacksmiths, stone carvers, and other craftspeople I met through my work leading TAI.

In 2013, the Chipstone Foundation, a Wisconsin-based nonprofit dedicated to research on decorative arts in the United States, contracted me to produce a short documentary with master woodworker Randall O'Donnell, who lived near me in Indiana. I spent several weeks video recording O'Donnell as he made a reproduction of a seventeenth-century bible box from the Chipstone's collection. Making this thirteen-minute documentary helped me to hone a style that employed tight camera shots without background music, highlighting the sound of the tools in use and foregrounding the maker's craftsmanship. In 2015, I produced a video documentary for an exhibition with willow basket maker Viki Graber. The piece begins with sorting and clipping willows, and then follows her through the creation of a traditional stake-and-strand basket, like the ones that she learned to make from her father. The film uses a similar approach to that used in the earlier wooden box video—tight camera angles and natural work sounds. The willow basket documentary led to my invitation to join the research team in China. My colleagues wanted to have a thorough documentation of craft processes for the pieces that we would be collecting for the museums. My earlier documentary projects had allowed me to build my skills and to develop my approach for the work in Guangxi. As with my earlier films, I tried to foreground the artisans' command over their tools and materials, as well as to capture the poetry of motion in their creative practice. I worked in tandem with the makers, each of us independently experiencing the sense of flow in our craft. The two films, *A Rice Basket: Basketmaking in a Baiku Yao Community* (2019) and *The Mallet: Making a Maul in a Baiku Yao Community* (2018), present two elders skillfully making things useful to members of their community.

Working in the village cluster that is home to the Nandan Baiku Yao Ecomuseum in Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, the binational research team was too large to focus on one specific research topic at the same time. Based on my past work on basketry in the United States, I worked with a group focused on Baiku Yao basketry. Our team's first foray into the field was to Huali village to document Mr. Li Guicai making a rice basket. He was informed that folklorists from American museums, as well as



Figure 1. Still image captured from the *A Rice Basket* documentary, showing Li Guicai making a basket while his grandson watches television. Photograph by Jon Kay, December 14, 2017.

scholars from the Anthropology Museum of Guangxi and the local Nandan Baiku Yao Eco Museum, wanted to watch him make one of his special rice baskets. With the personal goal of completing the basket, Mr. Li had already started when we arrived, so I quickly began shooting. Wanting to capture every step in the process, I had little time to think about stowing my gear, let alone the best way to approach the subject. While the US-based team members worked to document the basket maker, our fellow researchers from the China-based museums documented us, documenting. This complex research collaboration presented a distinct set of challenges. From time to time, my fellow researchers crowded my camera, and the beeps and clicks of other cameras interrupted my soundtrack. These challenges were amplified by the natural context of the shoot, which is always associated with video in the field. Mr. Li worked by sunlight on the front edge of his home which opened to the street. This meant my options for shooting from the front were limited. Falling back on my method, I concentrated on close shots over his shoulder, all the while squeezing my fellow ethnographers out of the frame and focusing on the movement of his hands and the aesthetics of the craft. For the next day and a half, Mr. Li and I danced with the basket-making process. Just as he had to gather bamboo before beginning his craft, I was harvesting the raw material of what I hoped would be an ethnographic documentary.

Soon after I began shooting, word came from our local ecomuseum colleagues that government officials were coming for a special luncheon, and that we had to go back to the museum. I talked with the research team, and it was agreed that I would stay behind and continue shooting, so as not to lose the flow of the process. The elder basket maker and I worked through lunch, but Mr. Li's grandson came home to eat and to watch a few minutes of cartoons before returning to school. By the time the research team returned, the bottom and inner wall of the basket were nearly complete. Only taking one quick break in the middle of the day, Mr. Li worked

into the evening. As it grew dark, I set up two small battery-powered lights that I had purchased for evening and interior recording sessions. Under the glow of these LED lights, we worked until he finished the bottom half of the basket as well as its matching lid. Because of the limited space, I had abandoned my tripod earlier in the day, which made the camera easier to maneuver but more difficult to hold steady. Weighed down by an extra battery and a stereo microphone, I held the camera close to my body, trying to minimize the shake of my hands. That evening I backed up my video files to a solid-state hard drive and went to bed early, feeling stiff and sore from that first day of documentary recording.

The next morning, we arrived at Mr. Li's house as he was preparing bamboo splints for weaving. This was the step in the process that we had missed on the previous morning. Using his billhook, he first scored the bamboo around the end to the desired thickness, then proceeded to split the bamboo into lengths, before separating the outer waxy layer from the inner woody layer. With his bamboo prepared, he then wove an outer wrapper for the basket with handles and a decorative skirt. As discussed by Zhang and colleagues in the present volume, Mr. Li devoted an intense day and a half to making this basket, a type that Baiku Yao people use to carry and serve sticky rice.

Later that afternoon, I accompanied our team to Manjiang village to inventory the various types of baskets used in a local home. As the fieldworkers photographed and measured baskets, Mr. Lu Bingzhao, the patriarch of the family, came into the house and picked up a mallet, which he enthusiastically showed everyone before quickly going outside. I did not speak the local language, but I felt he had something he wanted to show us. I followed him outside to see him lay the mallet he had retrieved from the house on the trunk of a small, felled tree in order to get a rough measurement. He was going to make another mallet.

I grabbed a camera and began shooting. While I had abandoned my tripod for the rice basket documentary because of the constraints of Mr. Li's workspace, this time I did not even have it with me. I had brought my camera to take pictures rather than video footage, and I just happened to have my microphone in my camera bag. When I began, I did not think I was going to make a documentary. I was shooting as part of my ongoing documentation of craft in the region. However, I was moved by the maker's interaction with his family and friends as he worked. His grandchildren played nearby. A neighbor stopped to visit after picking greens. All the while, Mr. Lu worked as people came and went. With heavy chops, he used a billhook to quickly remove the excess wood. With the same tool, he then shaved the mallet's handle smooth using a pulling motion. Finally, just as he completed the mallet, his daughter-in-law arrived and carried away the mallet that he made for her. A tree became a tool, and the mallet became a gift, all within little more than an hour. I was told that mallets like the one he made are commonly used to pound rice straw for sandals and to drive poles into the ground that are used in warping a loom. The latter activity is an elaborate and demanding one that I witnessed the next day when a group of weavers prepared a loom for weaving.

In sharing these two short documentaries, I hope they are received like the craft objects that they present—that is, as artful gifts, reflecting both the personal and social facets of my own craft. I thank the binational research team for inviting me to

share in the important work of video ethnography. I am also appreciative of Mr. Li and Mr. Lu, who shared their talents with me.

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Jon Kay is director of Traditional Arts Indiana and an associate professor of folklore, both at Indiana University. He is the author of *Folk Art and Aging: Life-Story Objects and Their Makers* (2016) and editor of *The Expressive Lives of Elders: Folklore, Art, and Aging* (2018) and *Indiana Folk Arts: 200 Years of Tradition and Innovation* (2016). At Traditional Arts Indiana, he developed and administers a statewide apprenticeship program, a traveling exhibitions network, and the Indiana Heritage Fellowship awards. Kay also produces fieldwork-based documentaries about traditional arts and artists.

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