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Ironic indigenous primitivism: Taiwan's first 'native feature' in an era of ethnic tourism

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How do contemporary indigenous filmmakers regard primitivism? By way of reply, this article examines Laha Mebow's appropriation of a primitive Sayun in her 2011 film *Finding Sayun*. 'The beautiful maiden' Sayun was used in the 1943 Japanese film *Sayon's Bell* to promote wartime mobilization in Taiwan, and has been used since the 1990s in local branding. Mebow seems ambivalent about Sayun: she identifies with Sayun, or at least with the Sayun in *Finding Sayun*, yet never loses critical distance. Mebow's ambivalence plays out as generic hybridity: *Finding Sayun* is at once a metafilm, a documentary and a search for roots. Her ambivalence also plays out as irony, and this article argues that, in an era of ethnic tourism, ironic indigenous primitivism is a tactic of packaging a community and then getting a viewer or visitor to open up the package and see what's inside.

Keywords: Taiwan; primitivism; indigenous film; *Sayon's Bell*; ethnic tourism; authenticity

The tragic tale of the Taiwan Atayal maiden Sayun (Japanese: Sayon; Pinyin: Shayun, Shayang or Sharong), who was swept away carrying her teacher's luggage over a raging river and later immortalized in the Japanese propaganda film *Sayon no Kane/Sayon's Bell* (Shimizu Hiroshi, 1943), continues to receive scholarly attention in the context of colonial discourse. Leo Ching regards *Sayon's Bell* as employing a 'tactic of idealizing primitivity in the making of civility' for the purpose of 'total mobilization' (2001, 154). Local scholars have tried to demythologize Sayun, hoping to open up space for the Atayal (one of Taiwan's 16 officially recognized indigenous peoples) to express their own modern indigenous perspectives on Sayun. However, Sayun's re-emergence in the past two decades in local branding and cultural production has not been studied. This article is in part a study of Sayun's resurrection. It examines – to adapt Leo Ching's turn of phrase – a tactic of idealizing primitivity in the branding of a community for the purpose of ethnic tourism. This tactic is employed most subtly in Taiwan's first theatre-release 'native feature' (Wood 2008), Atayal director Laha Mebow's *Bu yiyang de yueguang: Xunzhao Shayun/ Under a Different Moonlight: Finding Sayun* (Chen Chieh-yao, 2011). The subtlety of *Finding Sayun* lies in its irony: it is a work of ironic indigenous primitivism. As such, it is an indigenous appropriation of primitivism, i.e., a system of images and narratives about a pristine origin invented by modern people as a way of escaping or understanding modernity and typically projected upon 'primitive' peoples (whom we now refer to as aboriginal or indigenous). *Finding Sayun* is ironic in that it plays with audience expectations, employing juxtapositions that create distance and ambiguity, in general not saying what it has to say directly. In its irony, the film self-consciously constructs an open-ended

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modern indigenous identity: the term *xunzhao* in the film's title could be translated as 'seeking': *Seeking Sayun* instead of *Finding Sayun*.

Finding Sayun's tactic of ironic indigenous primitivism can be placed in a wider context of contemporary primitivism (Torgovnick 1998), both in Taiwan and around the world, both in cultural production and in tourism. Since the 1980s in Taiwan, indigenous artists and writers have contested Chinese representations of indigenous people and created self-representations in art (Harrell and Liu 2006) and literature (Chiu 2009); but only in the past decade and a half have indigenous directors been able to film themselves, and until Laha Mebow only as video documentarians.[1] Meanwhile, non-indigenous directors in Taiwan continue to produce primitivist films, as they did throughout the postwar period (to be briefly discussed below). *Dengdai feiyu/Fishing Luck* (Tseng Wen-Chen, 2007), for instance, primitivized Orchid Island, the home of Taiwan's Yami or Tao aborigines. As explained by the scholar Anita Chang, the female Han Chinese protagonist of *Fishing Luck* tries to transcend her high-tech urban self in a romance with a native man in the realm of the 'exotic and mystical' (2009, 646). Chang asks, 'How would an indigenous director resignify the codes of primitivism...?' (651). One might expect an indigenous director to expose primitivist appearance and reveal indigenous reality. Indeed, *Finding Sayun* does set up and refuse to satisfy expectations for primitive romance with Sayun, then morphs into a village documentary. But then Mebow seems to recuperate a primitive image of Sayun for contemporary indigenous identity construction or village branding. What is going on?

Mebow's recuperative move recalls Lucas Bessire's argument that indigenous filmmakers like Zacharias Kunuk '[talk] back to primitivism' by 'triggering and contradicting' (2003, 832, 836) primitivist clichés, only to take primitivism as 'a model of self-representation' (Prins 1997, 244; quoted in Bessire 2003, 833).[2] In other words, indigenous people sometimes self-primitivize. But since indigenous people come to primitivism as 'spectators' (Chow 1995, 9), they are more likely to become self-conscious about or critical of primitivism, especially since primitivism usually refers to their 'tribal', supposedly 'primitive' ancestors. As a result, although modern indigenous people may find primitivist fantasy personally meaningful or useful in self-presentation, they are likely to be ambivalent towards it. In *Finding Sayun*, indigenous ambivalence towards primitivism plays out as generic hybridity: *Finding Sayun* is a metafilm, a village documentary and a quest for identity in the primitive past, where each aspect of its generic identity interrogates the others. Yet, unlike *Ataranjuat: The Fast Runner* (Zacharias Kunuk, 2001), which surely convinced very few people to visit Igloolik, *Finding Sayun* has to be discussed in the context of ethnic tourism. In a small country like Taiwan, domestic tourism is always an issue in indigenous representations; and given the convenience of air travel, so is Japanese or cross-Strait tourism. *Finding Sayun* in part participates in village branding, but does so ironically, which takes it beyond branding into the uncharted territory of postmodern (i.e. open-ended) identity construction. The film's use of irony distinguishes it from *Ataranjuat*, which challenged the audience by employing a 'hard' primitivism of privation, instead of a 'soft' primitivism of blissful ease that is more to the average viewer's taste (for 'hard' and 'soft' primitivism, see Lovejoy and Boas [1935] 1997, 10). *Finding Sayun*'s irony also distinguishes it from primitivist productions for a mass audience: as blockbusters like *Saideke Balai/Seediq Bale* (Wei Te-sheng, 2011) and *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) overshadow indigenous cultural production locally and globally, Laha Mebow's *Finding Sayun* is a sophisticated film deserving recognition and engagement.

I begin with a history of Taiwan's indigenous peoples and, since there is so little on the topic in English, a treatment of their cinematic representation.[3] I then trace the

colonial and commercial representation of Sayun in cinema from the Japanese period to the present day, before conducting a detailed filmic analysis of *Finding Sayun*. I conclude with the issue of authenticity, asking why seemingly 'inauthentic' primitivist images might be meaningful to a filmmaker like Laha Mebow.

Taiwan's indigenous peoples and their cinematic representation

Taiwan has been inhabited for thousands of years. After Chinese settlers were brought to Taiwan during the Dutch period (1624–1662), Taiwan arguably became a 'settler society', with a settler population displacing an 'indigenous' population, comparable to the United States (Shepherd 1993, 443–446). During the Japanese era (1895–1945), the indigenous peoples were initially courted, but later on subdued, especially under Governor General Samata Sakuma (1906–1915) and again after the Wushe Incident in 1930 (Barclay 2005). They were later indoctrinated into the imperial cause through productions like *Sayon's Bell*. In the postwar period, the Kuomintang adapted a Japanese anthropological classification based on linguistic, ethnic and 'racial' criteria, while by the end of the Second World War, Taiwan's indigenous people were self-consciously making identity claims within a system invented by imperialists (Harrison 2001). State economic policy in the postwar period was to raise the standard of living in the mountains, the most indigenous part of Taiwan, up to the level of the plains, often by promoting tourism in tribal theme parks. In the 1960s and 1970s, Taiwan's indigenous peoples suffered 'the replacement of artistically-enhanced daily use goods with cheap commodities purchased on the market, and a considerable degree of demoralization' (Harrell and Liu 2006, 4). They went to work in the big cities and around the world on fishing vessels. State cultural policy was Sinification, but in the 1980s, people asserted the value of traditional cultural identities at a time when indigenous lifestyles, which had always been historical processes, were changing particularly dramatically. Politically, the local indigenous movement is both centripetal, with calls for pan-indigenous action, and centrifugal: for most of the postwar period, nine groups were recognized, while as of 26 June 2014, there are 16. There is an ongoing struggle for self-governance (Simon and Awi 2013). Meanwhile, aboriginal people have achieved recognition in popular culture, especially the singer A-mei (or more recently A-mit, in accordance with Puyuma pronunciation), seeming to confirm the popular idea that by nature indigenous people excel at singing and dancing. Since the 1980s, many aboriginal cultural producers, including Laha Mebow, have participated in a 'return to the village' movement. Some have started ethnic tourism ventures (Hipwell 2007), often with hunting activities.

State policies and popular perceptions have informed the cinematic representation of Taiwan's indigenous peoples. In the Japanese era, a film about Wu Feng, a Confucian official who supposedly sacrificed himself to convince the savages to stop headhunting, was made in order to calm the restless natives down in the aftermath of the Wushe Incident. In the postwar period, Wu Feng was the subject of Taiwan's first colour film, *Wu Feng* (Bu Wancang, 1962, on which see Davis 2007, 1). Wu Feng is a father figure, not a lover, but the state had celebrated high mountain development through a love story about an aboriginal woman and a Chinese man in *Hehuan shan shang/On Mount Hehuan* (Pan Lei, 1958), made by the Ministry of National Defense's own film studio (Sterk 2010, 51–52). Shaw Brothers made several commercial indigenous-Chinese romance films with an economic subtext: *Hei senlin/Black Forest* (Yuen Chau-fung, 1964) promoted logging and *Lanyu zhi ge/Song of Orchid Island* (Pan Lei, 1965) promoted tourism. Since the 1980s, a number of movies have dealt with indigenous social problems, most notably

Lao Mo de dierge chuntian/The Second Spring of Mr. Mo (Li You-ning, 1984), about poor indigenous parents selling their daughters into marriage with aging veterans of the Chinese civil war (Sterk 2010, 53–54), and *Liangge youqijiang/The Two Sign Painters* (Lu Kan-ping, 1990), about the plight of indigenous labourers in the big city. However, representations of indigenous villages have tended to remain romantic, idealizing the countryside and the past. In *Linghun de lücheng/Everlasting Moments* (Chen Wen-Pin, 2011), for instance, life for urban aborigines is bleak, and a trip home turns out to be a communion with the ancestors, a trip into the tribal past.

Laha Mebow's *Finding Sayun* keeps its distance on the tribal past and offers the indigenous present instead. But to appreciate its take on the present, we have to understand the figure that focuses it: Sayun.

'Sayun fever': 'packaging' Sayun from 1938 to 2011

Sayun was born on 18 January 1922 in the mountain village of Ryohen (Pinyin: Liuxing). She finished primary schooling in Japanese. She did not undergo the traditional rite of passage of facial tattooing, which had been forbidden by the colonial authorities. When the Japanese teacher assigned to Ryohen was drafted in the second year of the Sino-Japanese war, Sayun helped to carry his luggage down the mountain. While crossing a river about a kilometre from the road to Taipei on 27 September 1938, she fell into the water. The luggage was found floating downstream, but Sayun's body never turned up.

A sad story, to be sure, but one would have assumed that would be the end of it. However, over the next few years, Sayun became a screen for imperialist projections. As an Atayal, Sayun seemed to atone for the Wushe Incident, an attack on Japanese colonists carried out by six Atayal (now recognized as Seediq) villages approximately 100 km south-west (as the crow flies) of Ryohen in 1930. As a young maiden, she seemed to exemplify the kind of ardent devotion the authorities wanted to inspire in potential volunteer soldiers (Chou 1991, 44–49).

A short report appeared in the *Taiwan Nichinichi Shimpo/Taiwan Daily News* two days after Sayun's death. A memorial service attended by the official in charge of aboriginal affairs was held in Ryohen on 26 November. The following February, a stone stele was erected on the shore of the river with an inscription celebrating Sayun's patriotism. Two years later, in February 1941, Sayun appeared again, on stage, when her classmate Matsumura Miyoku sang a song about her sacrifice at an imperial military variety show in Taipei. The performance was attended by Governor General Hasegawa Kiyoshi, who was apparently so touched that, on 14 April 1941, he presented a bell to her family. He was quoted in *Asahi Shimbun* as saying that Sayun's bell would call Taiwan's aborigines to arms (Yang 2012, 57, fn 7). The bell was moved up to Ryohen.

The Governor General seeded an efflorescence of primitivist cultural production. The painter Shiozuki Toho, who had painted sultry Gauguinesque Taiwanese aboriginal maidens in the 1930s, visited Ryohen in May 1941 and displayed an oil painting (discussed below), of Sayun at the Holy War Art Exhibition in July 1941. There were popular songs, including 'Sayon no Kane'/'The Bell of Sayon' (Lin 2011, 147).[4] There was a play, a Chinese language novel based on the play and a Japanese translation of the novel (Shimomura 2006). Most famously, there was a 1943 feature film, *Sayon no kane/Sayon's Bell*, shot not in Ryohen, but close to Wushe. Sayun was played by the queen of Japanese wartime propaganda, Li Xianglan.

In *Sayon no kane*, footage of bridges and machines, signifying imported modernity, alternates with bucolic scenes in which Sayun minds children and herds ducks, as if to

assure the viewer that the village is civilized while satisfying the desire for primitive beauty. Sayun speaks unaccented Japanese but wears colourful aboriginal attire. Most importantly, she represents a civilizing influence on the men in the community. Two young men come into conflict in what seems to be a nascent love triangle, or a love quadrangle, as Sayun may have a crush on the Japanese teacher.[5] But everyone's romantic yearnings are sublimated into service: one young man is called to fight, and Sayun assures the other that his time will soon come. After her martyrdom, Sayun's devotion to the teacher is generalized into devotion to the emperor. The melody of 'The Bell of Sayon' is played at Sayun's funeral, before Sayun rises from the dead and leads a rousing chorus calling Taiwan's volunteer soldiers to arms: Taiwan Jun! While the ideological intent of the film appears transparent, the scholar Lin Pei-yin allows the director 'an oblique response to colonialism' (2011, 149), in that he includes primitive elements (animals, children, fire dances, and Li Xianglan in ersatz ethnic garb) despite the official policy of modernization.

The Kuomintang had no use for Sayun. For a while after the war, ordinary Taiwanese people remembered 'The Bell of Sayon' and *Sayon's Bell*. In 1958, Sayun's story was adapted into a Taiwanese language film, which is no longer extant. Not freighted with a civilizing or imperial mission, the film played up Sayun's tale as romantic martyrdom: she died for love. (Judging from the poster, the Japanese teacher had turned into a Kuomintang officer [Lin Liang-zhe 2007, 54–55], so perhaps there was a political subtext.) In 1959, a Taiwanese language popular song about Sayun was released, only to be banned simply because it was about the colonial era. The Mandarin popular song 'Yiyang de yueguang'/'Moonlight Nocturne' lifted the tune from 'The Bell of Sayon' without mentioning Sayun, who faded from public consciousness. In Nan-ao Township, in which Ryohen was located, the stone stele was moved to make way for a new road and at some point was defaced. The bell simply disappeared.

In the early 1990s, Sayun was reborn. In November 1991, after having stumbled upon the 29 September 1938 newspaper article, the historian Chou Wan-yao published an insightful analysis of the imperial appropriation of Sayun's story (Chou 1991; revised in 2004). A local school, Wuta Elementary (located in Nan-ao Township), included Sayun's story in a textbook about local history and culture. In 1993 – the international year of the world's indigenous peoples and the fiftieth anniversary of *Sayon's Bell* – the Japan Broadcasting Corporation ran a documentary in which a young Japanese woman visits Nan-ao, in Ilan County, only to discover that the incident behind the film is ultimately enigmatic. In 1994, there was a storm of Sayun-related activities in Taiwan. There was an aboriginal film festival for which *Sayon's Bell* was subtitled in Chinese and taken on tour. An issue of the National Film Archive's journal *Dianying Xinshang/Film Appreciation* was dedicated to Sayun. In June 1994 the Ilan County government sponsored a conference on Sayun's legacy. A report on the conference was entitled 'The "Myth" of Sayun' (Chen 1994).

As local scholars demythologized Sayun, Wuta Village (where Sayon's stele is located), Nan-ao Township and Ilan County used Sayun's name, her bell and the song 'The Bell of Sayon' to draw tourists. A bridge over the river into which Sayun fell was christened Sayun's Bridge. The three million NTD (100,000 USD) Sayun Memorial Park was completed in Wuta in June 1998, with a concrete belfry and a new bell to replace the one that had gone missing. In 2003, the Ilan County magistrate Liu Shou-cheng endorsed what he called 'Sayun tourism', indicating that Sayun should be properly 'packaged' to avoid any 'waste of tourism resources'. He suggested ringing the bell and playing 'The Bell of Sayon' on the hour to please Japanese tourists (*Lianhebao/United Daily News*, 26 February 2003, 21). Presumably, one busload of tourists an hour would be good for the local economy, although the tour bus operators are not indigenous-owned, nor is the

rest stop – the Hot Pepper Cultural Center – next door. Newspaper reports encouraged local people to make the trip to see Sayun, eat a jalapeno and enjoy everything else Wuta Village and Nan-ao Township had to offer.

The Sayun Memorial Park was complemented by cultural production. The popular entertainer Peng Chia-chia released a Taiwanese language song about Sayun in 2004 with a video in which Sayun takes a romantic walk with her teacher in the moonlit woods. The domestic sleeper hit *Lianxiqu/Island Etude* (Chen Huai-en, 2006), about a young deaf man on a bicycle trip around the island, includes a scene in which a bus tour visits the Sayun Memorial Park. As the tour guide tells the story in Taiwanese, describing Sayun's death as an important event in Ilan County's history, the film cuts to shots of Sayun and classmates sending the teacher off, with the theme from 'The Bell of Sayon' playing in the background. Then it cuts back to the present: children swimming under Sayun's Bridge, followed by the reverse shot of the deaf cyclist standing on the bridge looking down at the children, and finally five old ladies somewhere else singing 'The Bell of Sayon'. How the deaf man can hear any of this is anyone's guess, but he seems to be enjoying himself, and newspaper travel features promised enjoyment to people who made the pilgrimage to spots in the film, including the Sayun Memorial Park.

There is opposition in the local Atayal community to the narrow focus on Sayun in village and township marketing. In 1998, an Ilan County Councillor named Chiang Ming-shun claimed that Ilan County had come down with a bad case of 'Sayun fever' (*Lianhebao/United Daily News*, 24 March 1998, 13). Apparently, an oil painting of Sayun was hanging in the Nan-ao Township office at that time. According to Chiang, who is himself Atayal, the Sayun Memorial Park was a complete waste of money. He added, in an interview he gave me during my fieldwork in August 2013, that if Sayun had behaved as represented in *Sayon's Bell* (flirting with her teacher or worse) she would have committed a crime against Gaya, the Atayal term for the cosmic moral order. To Chiang, Sayun's death was a tragic accident, nothing more. Now that Chiang is mayor of Nan-ao, there is no longer a picture of Sayun in the township office. In 2008, Chiang opened a museum of Atayal culture that puts Sayun's story into historical context. Sayun should be nothing more than a short footnote in Nan-ao's history. Part of the meaning of Sayun's story for local people is the fact that most Atayal soldiers who volunteered to fight for the Emperor did not return (*Nan-ao xiang jianshi* 2002, 297).

Chiang Ming-shun's effort to put Sayun into historical perspective is still lost on most outsiders. A case in point is Lin Ko-hsiao, the former director of Taishin Financial Holdings and a famous mountaineer. Lin discovered that the melody from his favourite classic song, 'Moonlight Nocturne', was lifted from 'The Bell of Sayon'. When he heard it played at Sayun's funeral in *Sayon's Bell*, a new depth of sentimentality was added to the song. He started to visit Nan-ao and get to know the local people and terrain. He ultimately wrote a book, *Zhaolu: Yueguang Shayun Klesan/Finding the Way: Moonlight, Sayun, Klesan* (2009) (Klesan being a term for the Atayal people who migrated from Nantou County to Ilan County). In this book, Lin asserts that he does not want to listen to people talk about the historical record, that he is not looking for the real Sayun. (His words are quoted at the beginning of *Finding Sayun*.) For Lin Ko-hsiao, Sayun is a symbol, a voyager along a road to modernity, Sayun's road, which Lin Ko-hsiao identifies with the road the Taiwanese nation is collectively taking. This road led both ways. For Lin Ko-hsiao it led into an imagined past and into the world of nature. The whole book is replete with primitivism and ambivalence about the Taiwan miracle, to which Lin Ko-hsiao, as a successful banker, contributed. The road Lin Ko-hsiao took was ultimately fatal: he died in a mountain climbing accident in January 2011.

At the end of his book, Lin Ko-hsiao mentions meeting a group of young people who since 2005 had organized annual hikes up to the old village of Ryohen, including two cousins, Yagu Yuraw (Chen Peng-ling) and Laha Mebow (Chen Chieh-yao). Yagu Yuraw wrote a Master's thesis entitled 'Xunhui xiaoshi de Ryohen buluo'/'Recovering the Lost Ryohen Tribe' (Chen Peng-ling 2010). Since graduation, she has returned to Nan-ao to serve as director of the Chin-yueh village community development association. Chin-yueh is the village to which Sayun's family moved after the war. In my interview with her, also in August 2013, she stated that she considers Sayun part of the village identity; through her efforts, Sayun has been inscribed upon the local landscape. There is now a Sayun Kitchen, a place for elders to teach young people how to prepare traditional food. There is also another – a third – bell of Sayun, which Yagu Yuraw claims is meaningful to the villagers. Yagu Yuraw also claims that for the residents of Ryohen, Sayun's bell was not a call to arms, but a marker of the rhythm of modern life. People's purposes remained their own, not the emperor's. Today, the bell in the village is rung on special occasions. In the abstract of her thesis, Yagu Yuraw takes a stand against village tourism; as development association director, she has reconsidered her stance on tourism, but her projection of Sayun upon the contemporary village of Chin-yueh has been to enrich daily life, not just to have something to show tour groups on the way to the waterfall further up the road.

Her cousin Laha Mebow grew up in Taichung, now lives in Taipei, but makes frequent visits to Nan-ao, where her father lives. She went to Shih Hsin University, which has a well-regarded media production programme and where she was classmates with Umin Boya and Mayaw Biho (see note 1). Since the 2000s, Laha Mebow has acted, directed television documentaries and assistant directed mainstream entertainment films produced by Skyfilms, establishing the contacts that would allow her to make a film of her own. Her first feature film, *Finding Sayun*, is also a Skyfilms production. The film was funded publicly and privately. It received the public support Anita Chang called for at the end of her article on *Fishing Luck*, including from the Council of Indigenous Peoples but also from Ilan County. Privately it received money from a parking lot company owned by Lin Ko-hsiao. Not surprising, *Finding Sayun* was marketed to a wide audience as a 'heartwarming' film. In the Facebook marketing for the film, there were advertisements for local bed and breakfasts. It would be easy to argue that the film is so feel-good because the producer wanted to sell tickets and because Ilan County wanted to support the local economy. There is something to this argument. But there is more to *Finding Sayun* than that. Sayun turns out to be personally meaningful for Laha Mebow. Laha Mebow is the granddaughter of Matsumura Miyoku, the woman who performed for the Governor General in February 1941, without whom Sayun would not be widely remembered today. Released on Friday 25 November, a day before the 73rd anniversary of Sayun's memorial service, Mebow's film is a kind of commemoration. Moreover, Laha Mebow's profile picture on Facebook is from the mural of Sayun in the film (discussed below). Yet, unlike Lin Ko-hsiao, Laha Mebow has a critical distance on Sayun, as the following analysis of *Finding Sayun* demonstrates.

Laha Mebow's ironic take on the story of Sayun

A beautiful Taiwanese assistant director, Little Ru, goes to the airport to greet two cameramen from mainland China. They are the three members of a crew doing pre-production for a director in Beijing who wants to set a colonial romance in Sayun's hometown. On the way down the east coast, they happen to catch on video a worker's fatal fall from a

truck, and this worker just happens to be from Chin-yueh. They show the footage to the worker's widow, and secure the assistance of local leaders, one of whom, a successful businessman named Yuming, is in love with the widow. They begin casting local people for the romance film, soon finding a hero – Yugan, Yuming's nephew – and a heroine. The heroine is even named Sayun, which turns out to be a common Atayal name. They have found Sayun already! But it turns out both are too busy – Yugan with his soccer and Sayun with her studies – to bother with a Chinese director's silly romance. And so the pre-production stalls. But the assistant director hangs around and shoots documentary-style scenes of daily life in the village. The storyline for the longest time seems to have been lost; the film does not submit to a traditional Hollywood three-act analysis. But two thirds of the way in, another narrative forms. Little Ru, Yugan, Yugan's grandfather and Yugan's friend A-Guo take a trip to the old village of Ryohen. The grandfather had claimed Sayun was his girlfriend, suggesting that the climb is a quest for Sayun, but when they arrive in Ryohen, it becomes clear that he was joking.

As this summary suggests, Laha Mebow's film is a generic hybrid in three acts, at once metafilm, documentary and drama. Each act serves a function: (1) To raise awareness about the production of indigenous images in colonial or commercial films, especially images of 'primitive romance'; (2) To document the everyday worlds and the ongoing lives of three different generations in a contemporary indigenous village; (3) To beguile potential visitors with a compelling quest for roots and a blissful image of traditional life. Yet the scepticism cultivated by the metafilm should colour viewer reception of the documentary and the quest.

Act 1: *Finding Sayun* as metafilm

A metafilm is a film about filmmaking. Structurally it is a film within a film. There are several films within *Finding Sayun*. First, there are casting interview videos for the Sayun romance the film crew in the film fails to make. These videos appear at the beginning of the film, before the assistant director greets the two crew members from Beijing, before the audience has any narrative context. The videos themselves lack village context: the backdrop for the videos is a plain wall. When you realize that a film crew has swooped into the village to do pre-production for a colonial romance film, the situation seems ominous. The local people had no inclination to make a movie. They are going along with the outsiders. Moreover, the casting interviews recall a colonial or more generally governmental situation of data gathering (how old are you? how tall? what are your hobbies? who is your favourite singer?) for the purposes of administrative control or commercial manipulation. The metaphor would be of framing, forcing aboriginal appearances into an aspect ratio and indigenous data into boxes on a form. Yugan's grandfather, amusingly, keeps walking out of frame, refusing to answer any questions. The people who do answer come across as entirely typical, perhaps because they are unwilling to reveal personal quirks. The girl named Sayun, for instance, plays the piano in church, hopes to get into a good college and likes A-mei. The situation ends up seeming rather less sinister if we consider that Laha Mebow has made a local production, with amateur actors who would probably have been happy to have a chance to act in a film. Still, *Finding Sayun* does not conceal the social tension that a camera brings to a village. Little Ru – the assistant director – keeps trying to shoot Yugan, but turns the camera off when Yugan uses sarcasm, when, for instance, he calls her a *paparazza*. Little Ru knows where the boundaries are: she knows, for instance, not to bring the camera along on a visit to the local karaoke hangout.

It is at the local hangout – which is given the nostalgic Japanese name of Shun's Place – that the successful older gentleman Yuming (Yugan's uncle) tells them the story of Sayun as a tragic teacher–student romance. As he is relating the tragedy, the scene switches from Shun's Place to Ryohen, from the present to Sayun's last year, as if Yuming's story-telling has conjured up a montage film in the minds of his listeners. We see Sayun in the classroom, Sayun walking with her teacher, the teacher dallying by the stream in which Sayun drowned. It is supposed to be a teacher–student romance, but in these sepia-tinted scenes Sayun seems much too young for romance: she is 12 or 13 years old at most. In this way, the visuals undermine the voiceover, in an ironic juxtaposition. Yuming's romantic, or even pederastic, interpretation is problematized in several other ways. First, by the implication that Yuming is not saying what he means, that he is telling the story of Sayun in order to get his own feelings off his chest in an oblique way. Like the teacher in Yuming's version of the story, he is in love with a younger woman – the widow – and has been since grade school. Second, and more explicitly, a series of interviews at the end of the film, edited documentary-style, interrogates the idea of a student–teacher romance. One interviewee claims there was no romance, then says she doesn't know and that nobody knows. Various guesses at Sayun's age are offered, from 12 to over 20, and the typical interpretations of Sayun's motivation for carrying the luggage down the mountain are related: that she went willingly, that she was doing labour duty, with the implication that we just don't know. Third, in regards to Grandpa's claim that he was Sayun's boyfriend, there is a second sepia-tinted video with voiceover by Little Ru, who imagines the events of 1938 while listening to Grandpa's fireside account: we see two boys fighting, presumably over Sayun, a scene of a group of children saying goodbye to the teacher, and Sayun falling into the river. We might assume that Grandpa was one of the two boys. Yet the timing does not work out. Grandpa is 75 years old in the film, so if the main narrative is set in 2009 (the year in which the film was shot), Grandpa would have been born in 1934, and would have been about four years old in 1938, the year Sayun died. He does claim that Sayun was his girlfriend, and shows Little Ru a picture of his elementary class. (Grandpa would have been 11 years old in 1945.) But seeing that Sayun is a common Atayal girl's name, he must have been referring to another Sayun. In other words, the film sets the viewer up for a colonial romance that, it goes on to make abundantly clear, just does not make any sense.

The film appeals to and disappoints expectations for indigenous romance in the present as well. The nascent romance between Yugan and Sayun does not go anywhere in two respects: they refuse to participate in the Chinese director's film, and though Sayun likes Yugan she will not date him unless they both get into college. Like the Sayun in the film *Sayon's Bell*, she plays a civilizing role, by telling Yugan to come to church more often and encouraging him to study. Yugan's friend A-Guo might have competed for Sayun's affections, just as the two Atayal youths competed for Li Xianglan's affections in *Sayon's Bell*. For a viewer familiar with *Sayon's Bell*, *Finding Sayun* suggests a parallel love triangle in the present, then fails to develop it. Little Ru does not get involved with anyone either, nor does the romance between Yuming and the widow go anywhere. Instead of indigenous romance, Laha Mebow offers a documentary-style presentation of daily life.

Act 2: *Finding Sayun* as village documentary

The second act of *Finding Sayun* consists of scenes of leisure and work from village life. In many respects the villagers are typically Taiwanese: they ride scooters, sing karaoke, practise hip hop dancing and wear mass-produced skull, Japanese anime, VANS, AIG

Manchester United, 'vintage-style' t-shirts and so on. At least the 'vintage-style' t-shirt is worn with ironic impact, by Sayun (though perhaps the irony is not intended by Sayun, but only by *Finding Sayun* or Laha Mebow). Other scenes convey the country lifestyle of indigenous children: they swim in a waterfall pool, wear rubber boots as the main form of footwear, and hunt. There is a great deal of hunting ethnography in the film. Yugan and his friends wear wicker baskets on their backs as they set off to trap wild boars. Yugan shoots flying squirrels with a homemade rifle in the middle of the night, wearing a headlamp to blind the creatures before picking them off, picking them up and roasting them over an open fire. On the trip up to the old village, Grandpa conducts a hunter's wine scattering ritual to show respect to the ancestral spirits, and Little Ru, A-Guo, Yugan and Grandpa make themselves taro leaf hats, eat rattan hearts and stay in a hunting hut. In one of the outtakes, Yugan and Sayun feast on fresh honeycomb. *Finding Sayun* also represents the linguistic conditions in the village. Parents can speak Atayal, but while their children may go by Atayal names (Yugan is an Atayal name; A-Guo, Chinese) for the most part they cannot speak Atayal. There is also a scene that illustrates the socioeconomic conditions in the tribal village. Little Ru and a little girl use Little Ru's Macbook to surf an internet shopping website called Payeasy. Little Ru asks the girl, would you like to buy any of these beautiful clothes? This initially seems to be a product placement, but is actually a critical comment: Little Ru realizes the girl only wears hand-me-downs, that her family is simply too poor to afford brand name fashion, let alone Apple computers. It would be ironic if Apple or Payeasy expected these scenes to sell anything. Yugan imagines feeding and clothing himself extra-economically (as did the male protagonist of *Fishing Luck*) but the effect of his primitivist fantasy is ironically a further reminder of his reliance on markets for daily necessities. Other issues are treated more obliquely: alcoholism, for instance. The pastor in church quotes the Bible (Ephesians 5, 18–19) to exhort people not to binge on wine, but nobody ever appears drunk on screen. The film avoids village politics.

In addition to daily life, the film weaves strands of narrative development into the social fabric of the village, which is patterned generationally:

(1) Young indigenous students like Sayun, Yugan and A-Guo: Yugan hopes to get into college on the strength of his soccer skills; his friend A-Guo is unwilling to obey his father and move to Taipei, but Taipei is where his future lies, as the director implies in an extreme long shot in which a Taipei-bound train bisects the Nan-ao valley.
(2) Members of their parents' generation engage in low-pay, high-risk labour, for instance the worker who dies at the beginning of the film. Of course the film represents other opportunities for members of this generation, in the figure of Yuming.
(3) Their grandparents' generation has never been to the big city. Rather than the wider world, the minds of the older people are on the old village of Ryohen or daily life in Chin-yueh.

Instead of a primitive or indigenous romance that is consummated in accordance with audience expectations, then, *Finding Sayun* spins an unfinished web of interrelated lives. The film seems to offer a documentary-style authenticity. Yet Laha Mebow is hardly making a naïve authenticity claim; she does not claim to show the viewer that this is how the village is. In the figure of Little Ru, the film draws attention to the observer, both within the film and by implication the viewer in the theatre. Little Ru is an avatar for the

director Laha Mebow, an outsider who did not grow up in the village but wants to learn more about it. In anthropological terms, she is a participant-observer video ethnographer: Little Ru buys herself a pair of rubber boots and goes hunting. In terms of Bill Nichols' typology, the documentary in *Finding Sayun* would count as participatory and reflexive (Nichols 2010). There is a deliberately unfinished quality to its representation of the indigenous village of Chin-yueh. The same is true of the quest to recover the primitive past, which begins two thirds of the way into the film.

Act 3: *Finding Sayun* as primitivist quest

The third part of *Finding Sayun*'s generic identity is dramatic, but anticlimactic. It is an unsuccessful attempt to recover a past wholeness as a narrative – a journey to a place, Ryohen – and as an image: the mural on the wall of Shun's Place.

The narrative search for roots in *Finding Sayun* is the trek up to the old village of Ryohen in the last third of the film. Little Ru gets up early in the morning carrying a prosumer camera (the only way to get footage away from the plains on a shoestring budget), with which she shoots another film within the film. On the way up, she scurries around to get editable footage. Grandpa and Yugan go hunting at night, in the moonlight: this is the scene to which the title of the film, *Under a Different Moonlight*, refers, in a rare, unromantic (i.e., not about love) use of the moonlight motif in a retelling of Sayun's story. It may sound like an attempt to evoke the primitive alterity of the wilderness experience, a realm of primordial fullness before the trauma of history began. But the moonlit wild in *Finding Sayun* is familiar – not wild – to the characters, and they enter it knowing they will soon return to society.

When they get up to the old village of Ryohen, it becomes clear that the trip is simply a final homecoming for Grandpa, a chance to say goodbye to his parents and his native place, not an entry into a primitive realm or a search for Sayun. During Grandpa's valediction, the camera pans across the landscape, revealing almost no traces of human habitation, except for slate houses almost completely overgrown with grass. This was once the home of several hundred people! Yugan embraces his grandfather from behind. Yugan is later interviewed (another documentary trope) as saying that he feels no particular attachment to Ryohen, because it has never been home for him. Yugan's quest is to achieve the adulthood he perceives in the person of his grandfather, who is not long for this world. The primitivist narrative of a quest for roots ends enigmatically in a barren high mountain field with no particular meaning in the lives of the younger generation. The field is a possible palimpsest, but the director does not project anything upon it. After all, Laha Mebow might have tried to reimagine the past while they were there. (If it was feasible for the sepia-tinted Sayun scenes, why not for scenes of Ryohen as Grandpa remembers it?) But she does not. The film leads us to anticipate a recreated memory as a substitute for the reality that has been lost, without giving satisfaction, and yet the scene is all the more powerful as a result.

In another scene, Laha Mebow does seem to offer an idealized substitute for the past: Sayun in her original setting, seen in the mural in *Finding Sayun* (Figure 1), which I have juxtaposed with Shiotsuki Toho's 1941 oil painting (Figure 2).

In Figure 1, Shiotsuki Toho's Sayun, untattooed yet wearing generically tribal attire, sits on a black base staring at the bell that she holds in her hands. The colours are all in the same range, from the pale yellows and oranges of the background to the dark orange of the bell and the figure's skin tone: Shiotsuki Toho's Sayun is of the earth. Yet the background is impressionist, and while there does seem to be evidence of the local built

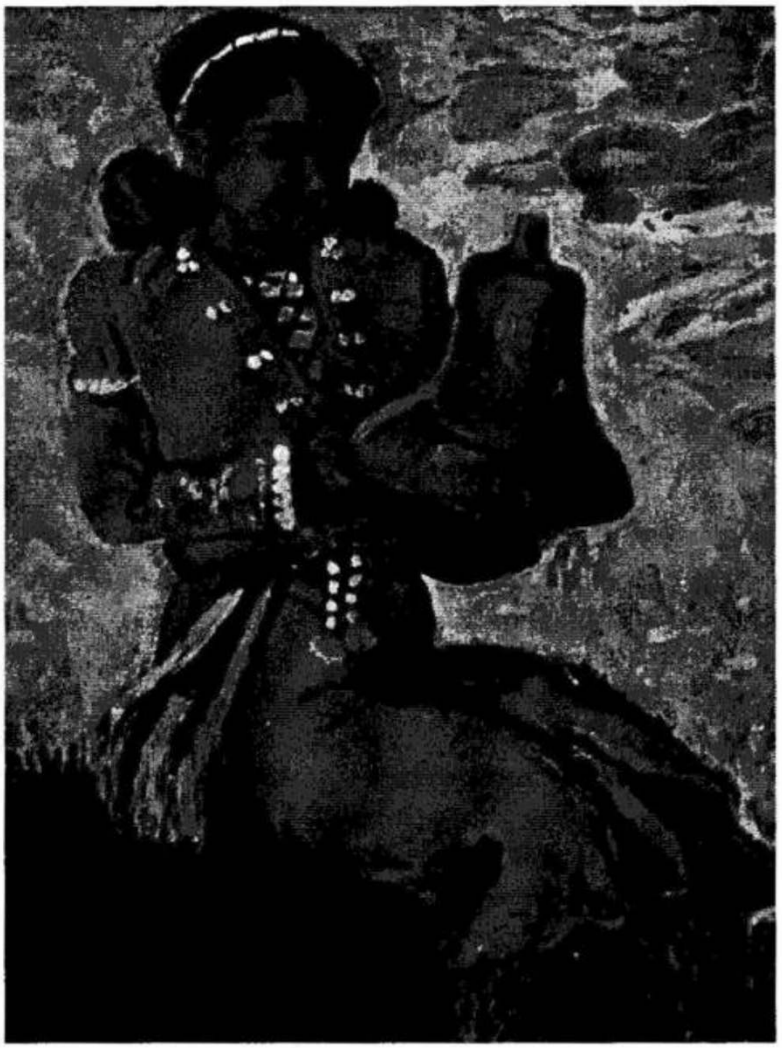

Figure 1. Shiotsuki Toho's Sayon.

environment, the focus is on the figure, not the ground. There is, by contrast, no contrast in clarity between the figure and ground in Figure 2, the mural. The maiden in the mural painting, who is tattooed, unlike the historical Sayun, is placed in a context of daily life. The mural was painted for the film by an Atayal contemporary of Laha Mebow, Hayung Miru, a former factory worker who painted his way out of the factory into a place in contemporary Taiwanese indigenous pop and public art. In this particular work, a traditional aboriginal maiden – whom Yagu Yuraw called Sayun and Laha Mebow described as 'the gaze of the director in the film' – stands in an idealized traditional village in the mountains. It is a primitivist image, of a free and easy lifestyle in an original home, without attention to ethnographic or historical detail: besides the facial tattoos (which Sayun did not have), a 'traditional' Atayal woman would never have walked around topless. But placed in its filmic setting, the mural changes in meaning. In the film, the mural is juxtaposed with the widow standing in front, looking anxiously and expectantly at Yuming, while her poor son stares at the ground. There seems to be an ironic contrast between the contemporary social reality and the fantasy of the mural. The film would seem to be exposing the mural as unreal.

While there is something to this interpretation, it is not the whole story. If we attend to the mise-en-scene, we can see how artfully Laha Mebow has suggested a material, and by implication an imaginative, interaction between the two worlds – the world of the mural and the world of the film's diegesis. Holding a pestle, Sayun (inside the mural) stands by

Figure 2. Hayung Miru's Sayun.

a mortar used to pound the millet in the sacks at the lower left (outside the mural) into millet cakes and wine to be served in Shun's Place. These two worlds interact with a third world, the world of the film crew, revealed by the light at the lower right, which also illuminates the diegetic world and the world of the mural. This is the only moment in the film where the world of Laha Mebow's film crew (not Little Ru's film crew), which is the world of the audience, is inscribed in the film. We should also notice, in this regard, that Sayun returns the gaze. Whereas in Shiotsuki Toho's painting, Sayun only has eyes for an object, a gift from the Governor General asking aboriginal people in Taiwan for an even greater gift, the Sayun in the mural gazes confidently at the viewer. Standing in front of the widow, Yuming looks away; an intent gaze is hard to face. Yuming and the widow do not, like the audience, seem aware that Sayun is looking on, in a kind of dramatic irony. Viewers who notice Sayun's gaze may well come to feel uncertain about whether Sayun is welcoming or interrogating them. Perhaps the irony of the juxtaposition applies in the other direction as well; perhaps Sayun is asking modern aborigines, and modern people in general, why they live as they do, or if they live as they should. In this way, primitivism interrogates modernity as much as it is interrogated by modernity. Still, it is hard to take Sayun in the mural entirely seriously, because of her conspicuous inauthenticity.

Conclusion: authenticity and irony in ethnic tourism

Scholars tend to portray the attempt to achieve authenticity in contemporary ethnic tourism as an anxious response to globalization. For Lu Hsin-yi, global modernity has led to a 'worldwide irruption of displacement anxiety as well as place consciousness' (2002, 21) and a 'collective search for authenticity in Taiwan' (2). In *Discourses of the Vanishing*, Marilyn Ivy has written about a similar 'search to find authentic survivals' (1995, 241) in Japan, a search that often yields only a 'substitute

presence' (10). This substitute presence 'inevitably announces the absence it means to cover up, thus provoking anxiety' (10) and even creating 'uncanny' effects (106–107). Tim Oakes, a scholar of domestic tourism in mainland China, has a more positive outlook. Whereas Lu and Ivy study Taiwanese and Japanese tourists in search of older versions of themselves, Oakes studies Han Chinese visitors to ethnic minority villages. Oakes notes that 'ethnic minority culture' has been portrayed 'as an exotic and primitive source of vitality for modern China as it faces the cool onrush of global capitalism and the McWorld', but claims that ethnic minority tourist villages are not necessarily 'inauthentic', because tourism can become 'an important factor in the on-going construction of place identity' (Oakes 1997, 42). Oakes's optimism seems to stem from the attitudes of the people who inhabit or run the tourist villages. But he never mentions a sense of irony in the people he studies. Neither do Lu or Ivy.[6] All three scholars use the term 'ironic', of course, but always to refer to their own observations. My study of the use of irony in *Finding Sayun* should be a reminder that we should not as scholars underestimate the sophistication of the people engaged in ethnic tourism.

Laha Mebow may share the anxiety about modernity and globalization of which scholars of authenticity-based tourism write. Like many indigenous cultural producers in Taiwan, she has gone back to the village, perhaps in search of herself, perhaps as an escape from the city. But clearly she does not assume that a trip to Chin-yueh is a trip into the past. *Finding Sayun* does not try to locate a substitute presence that represents the past. Laha Mebow is no naïve nativist searching for herself in an idealized, atemporal construction of tradition. If she does seem to use a romantic, primitivist image to package her village, she goes out of her way to get viewers and potential visitors to be more self-critical. She does so via ironic juxtaposition. By ironic juxtaposition, the romantic, primitivist image of Sayun is exposed as inauthentic, i.e., of historically and ethnographically inaccurate, but it does not thereby turn into an anxiety-inducing, uncanny, haunting presence, such as Marilyn Ivy describes. Rather, it has become mundane, an authentic part of Chin-yueh village: in another scene in the film, A-Guo and Yugan eat instant noodles in front of the mural, as if nothing could be more normal. Sayun looks on, a benevolent presence. If 'finding' is the right translation for the title of the film, it is meant ironically, because the Atayal characters in the film are not even looking for Sayun, certainly not for the Sayun who died on 27 September 1938. If they are looking for anything, it is for themselves. While outsiders come searching for Sayun, the people of Chin-yueh village get on with daily life.

As does the viewer of *Finding Sayun*, who is also a potential visitor to Chin-yueh. If you make the trip you will find there is not actually a restaurant called Shun's Place – the building in the film is someone's house – and although the local restaurant does have a karaoke machine, it does not seem to be a pub, as in the film. The waterfall where the young people go swimming in the film is in reality littered with garbage left by busloads of tourists and even local people. Still, *Finding Sayun* has encouraged a visitor to Chin-yueh to be more critical about what he or she expects to see in an indigenous village. What Mebow shows viewers may not be the whole story (which would of course be impossible to represent), but she refuses to cater to mainstream viewer or tourist tastes, or caters to them ironically, setting up expectations she has no intention of fulfilling, so that the tourists will, like Little Ru, who had no idea what she was getting herself into, walk away with something more precious than the satisfaction of their expectations: a better sense of the motivations behind a visit to an indigenous village as well as the possibilities of aboriginal modernity.

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Notes

1. The Seediq heartthrob actor Umin Boya has been directing television movies since 2007, and is now known for his starring role in *Seediq Bale* (Wei Te-sheng, 2011) and for directing *Kano* (2013), but *Finding Sayun* remains the first theatre release in Taiwan by an indigenous director. The pre-eminent indigenous documentary filmmaker is Mayaw Biho, now director of Taiwan Indigenous Television (TITV).
2. In *Primitive Passions*, Rey Chow argues that primitivism is not limited to the 'first world'. She writes: 'In the "third world," there is a similar movement to primitivize' (Chow 1995, 21). Chow claims that Fifth Generation Chinese filmmakers located the primitive roots of China's culture in women, children and the folk and displayed these emblems of the Chinese primitive to the world. In this article I am dealing with an example from the 'fourth world', the world of indigenous minorities living on the margins of settler nations.
3. There is by contrast a lot of research on ethnic minority film in China by Han Chinese directors (Yau 1989). As for ethnic minority directors, Lo Kwai-cheung discusses how ethnically Tibetan directors are 'appropriating fantasized images of their culture' (2013, 176), though seemingly for more explicitly political purposes than Laha Mebow.
4. Following Lin Pei-yin's usage, I term the song 'The Bell of Sayon', the film *Sayon's Bell*. Otherwise I use the Romanization selected by Laha Mebow: Sayun.
5. Laha Mebow thinks *Sayon's Bell* presents the relationship between Sayun and the teacher as a romance, and at any rate in the postwar period it was usually construed that way.
6. Rey Chow argues that Zhang Yimou has a sense of irony, or that his heroine Judou has a sense of irony, in '*quoting the cliché*' of the female body in its 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (1995, 167; italics original). Laha Mebow has a similar sense of irony.

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