

ABOUT LAN YU AND THE SONGS OF THE TAO

Located north of the Philippines and southeast of Taiwan's main island in the Pacific Ocean, the island of Lan Yu has an unusual history of contact with the outside world. For centuries, it was mostly avoided by Chinese and European seafarers due to difficult nautical conditions. Moreover, the ancestors of today's Tao were known for not always welcoming strangers and refusing to help shipwrecked people. They were therefore largely left alone.

In 1896, the Japanese, who had taken over Taiwan as a colony a year earlier, undertook an expedition to Lan Yu. Japanese scientists were thrilled to find an almost "pristine Stone Age culture". As a result, the Japanese colonial government set up a police station on the island and restricted access: from then on, only scientific personnel, especially ethnologists, were allowed to enter Lan Yu for research purposes. The Tao remained largely autonomous in their traditional way of life.

After the collapse of the Japanese empire, Lan Yu fell to Taiwan. Subsequently, a sinicising forced modernisation began, which led to a gradual, forced loss of culture. From the 1980s onwards, Lan Yu's isolated location prompted the Taiwanese government to store its residual nuclear waste on the island. This sparked a decades-long Tao activist resistance that saw a resurgence of indigenous cultural practices, as well as networking with other indigenous activists worldwide.

The singer featured in the videos, Siaman Vongayan (Chinese name: Kuo Chien-Ping 郭健平), is a leading activist in the local anti-nuclear movement. He is involved in various cultural projects and is currently trying to keep the traditional Tao chants alive in cooperation with an international team.

Traditional Tao chants on Lan Yu use only a few melodies, which are then adapted to ever new texts. These texts are mainly meant to contain practical information on farming, fishing, house-building, rituals, etc. and were often understood as a mixture of manual and knowledge archive - a kind of sung encyclopaedia. One learns the melodies by listening to them in childhood and youth, the lyrics can refer to new incidents - like the song sung in this installation about the shipwreck of a foreign, modern ship. Much emphasis is placed on the poetic quality of the texts.

The continuation of the poetic and especially the ritual singing traditions is threatened by the inevitable migration of younger Tao to Taiwan, who can neither attend secondary school nor find work opportunities on their home island - and also by the access to internet streaming services.