

The Making of “Taking the Long View”

by George Csicsery

The very first scene I ever filmed at MSRI was on September 11, 2000, and it was a discussion between S. S. Chern and mathematicians Robert Osserman, the institute’s then-director David Eisenbud, and deputy director, Joe Buhler. Chern’s colleagues knew that he was moving back to China for the remainder of his life, and that this was a last chance to capture something on video with him in Berkeley for posterity. We taped the discussion and everyone forgot it. It was the only time I ever met Chern in person. The footage remained unused in a box until 2010. The happy result is that there are now several sequences in *Taking the Long View: The Life of Shing-shen Chern*, of Chern telling his own story in English. Having him speak in the film brings him to life, as if he were interviewed especially for this film.

Although I knew very little about Chern’s mathematical work when I started working on the film in 2010, there were other areas of his life and thought that opened up a very exciting tale spanning most of the 20th century and great swathes of history. Behind the mathematical achievements, I saw an epic story combining elements of Chinese, European, and American history with ancient Chinese philosophy—all embodied in the life of one man.

As I got to know Chern through the many interviews we filmed in the United States, China, and Germany, I gradually discovered that I was better prepared for this project than I had first imagined. I had studied Comparative Religions at university, specializing in Chinese philosophy and religions, with a particular emphasis on the writings of Lao-Tzu. I soon saw Chern’s life as a near perfect rendition of Lao-Tzu’s admonitions to accomplish great things by taking a low-key steady approach. His strategy to ride out adversity in order to create something lasting and worthwhile soon emerged for me as a great theme for the film.

To me Chern was very close to the iconic classical taoist scholar; a man who could command without giving orders, who could sway decisions with his mere presence, and who could produce fantastic creations by conveying his approval and encouragement. But in Taoism there is always an enigma. I will never know if my film has contributed to the creation of a myth, or if the man everyone described to me really existed in such exemplary form. Myth or reality, mathematicians and countless others will remain grateful to Chern for a long time to come.

George Csicsery
Oakland, California
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