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Taking the Long View: The Life of Shiing-shen Chern ★★★

(2011) 54 min. DVD: \$24.95 (\$149 w/PPR). Zala Films (dist. by Mathematical Sciences Research Institute).

A biographical film about one of the preeminent mathematicians of the 20th century might sound forbidding, but George Csicsery's tribute to Shiing-shen Chern (1911–2004)—a major figure in the field of differential geometry—is quite accessible despite occasional retreats into technical jargon by the many colleagues and admirers interviewed here. Born in China in the year imperial rule ended, Chern displayed mathematical talent early on before leaving his country, first for Europe and then for positions in the U.S. at the University of Chicago and UC Berkeley. Chern is perhaps best known for his important revision to the Gauss-Bonnet theorem on curvature, but for the most part, the documentary concentrates on Chern's life, emphasizing his unassuming personality, quiet encouragement he gave to students, and his work in fashioning cultural and educational ties between the West and China as the latter emerged from Maoist insularity. As the title indicates, one of Chern's dominant traits was patience; he established goals and worked toward them with great humility and honesty, earning the admiration of peers, students, and even politicians. DVD extras include six featurettes. Although this will be of special interest to mathematicians, it can also easily be recommended for general viewers. Aud: C, P. (F. Swietek)