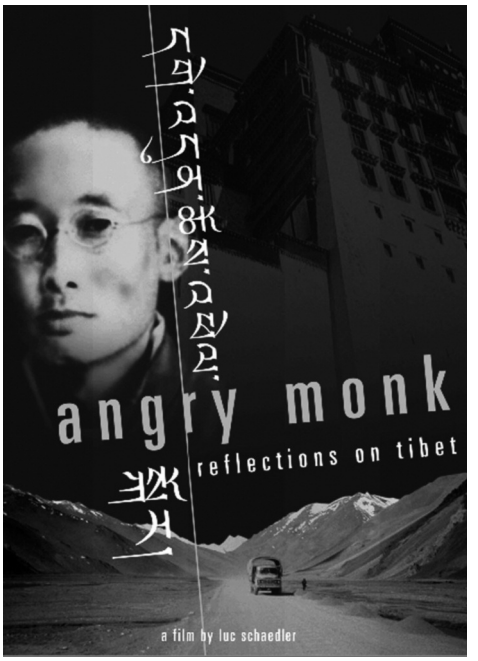
ANGRY MONK
Reflections on Tibet

DIRECTED AND PRODUCED
BY LUC SCHAEDLER
DISTRIBUTED BY
FIRST RUN/ICARUS FILMS
DVD, 97 MINUTES, COLOR, 2005

Reviewed by Andrew Quintman



Luc Schaedler's rich and timely film *Angry Monk: Reflections on Tibet* opens with a series of contrasting and provocative images: Tibetan boys toss firecrackers in an alleyway of the old Tibetan capital as a pair of monks walk by. A devout pilgrim prostrates himself across Lhasa's trash-ridden streets, narrowly avoiding the late-night taxi traffic. Caretakers of the country's holiest shrine segue into Tibetan line-dancers performing to electronic music in a local nightclub. A woman stares blankly toward the camera as she stands before a billboard of the Potala Palace—formerly the Dalai Lama's winter residence—capped with the tri-lingual caption: "Thank you for your support and help from Beijing." Young men play a video game whose background features a golden Buddha reclining in the posture of his passing away. How, the film seems to ask even before its title appears, are we to make sense of the complex and composite images that encapsulate contemporary Tibet?

The key to understanding these seeming contradictions arrives in the form of the documentary's subject, Gendun Chophel (1903–1951), the iconoclastic scholar, author, and artist now remembered as one of Tibet's leading intellectual voices of the twentieth century. Chophel lived during a tumultuous period of Tibet's contact with the outside world, squeezed between the British invasion of Tibet in 1904 and the Chinese occupation of Lhasa in 1951. His interest in foreign traditions of literature, religion, and science would eventually lead him far from the conservative Tibetan Buddhist milieu into which he was born. He later became an ardent critic of the rigid orthodoxy he felt had stifled Tibet's engagement with the modern world, a sentiment captured in his poem entitled "Visions of a Cosmopolitan": "Everything old is renowned as divinely inspired. / Everything new is thought to be conjuring of demons."

Ordained as a Buddhist monk in his youth, Gendun Chophel trained at one of Lhasa's premier monastic universities where he proved himself a brilliant scholar and a skillful dialectician. A growing disaffection with religious authority, however, led him to attack the established positions taken by his teachers. Leaving the monastery and his vows behind, he spent the next sixteen years traveling through southern Tibet, India, and Sri Lanka. Chophel translated texts from Sanskrit and Pali into Tibetan, and wrote articles for the first Tibetan newspaper based in Northeast India, in one instance arguing (against the traditional Tibetan Buddhist view) that the world was indeed spherical. He witnessed the effects of British colonial rule, as well as the rise of Indian nationalism, and was inspired to become a member of the Maha Bodhi Society, the Indian Buddhist organization founded in 1891 by the Sinhalese nationalist Anagārika Dharmapāla. His collected writings span an impressive range of subjects, including detailed accounts of his travels, erudite philosophical treatises, a history of early Tibet, and an excursus on the erotic arts, the latter of which he claims to have based upon personal research conducted in the brothels of Calcutta. In Schaedler's hands, the life story of Gendun Chophel thus becomes a mirror reflecting Tibet's encounter with the modern world, and with modernity.

As a biographical documentary, *Angry Monk* presents an illuminating, if incomplete, portrait of one of Tibet's most compelling and influential contemporary figures. The film visits many of the locations central to events in Gendun Chophel's life: his village in far eastern Tibet, the monasteries and temples of Lhasa, Indian railway lines and pilgrimage centers. Interviews with Chophel's distant family members, surviving friends, and a bevy of contemporary Tibetan scholars evoke the man in unexpectedly frank terms. The monk Golok Jigme, Gendun Chophel's travel companion in India for example, staves off fits of laughter as he recalls, "[Chophel] didn't really act like the incarnation of a lama. He was definitely intelligent, very sharp indeed. But he smoked, drank, and screwed women."

More important for use in the classroom, however, is the film's broader historical narrative, which locates Tibet through its social and political relationships with neighboring China and India. Schaedler abandons the seamless and largely ahistorical descriptions common to many representations of the Himalayan region. In their place, he splices together early black and white reel footage with scenes of contemporary Tibetan life, both religious and secular. His eye for unusual, and frequently discordant, images creates a deeply granular portrait of modern Tibetan history, one that dispels the myth of Tibet as a haven of peace and spirituality in a manner that Gendun Chophel would likely have admired. The documentary thus serves as a fine supplement to readings on early twentieth century Tibet, India, and South Asia, as well as Buddhism in Tibet and the Indian subcontinent.

If there is a flaw in the film's execution, it is that Gendun Chophel remains something of a phantom. As Schaedler acknowledges, only six grainy photographs (and no film footage) of the scholar remain. Yet, we would like to hear more about Chophel's contributions to Tibetan culture as an author, as a scholar of Buddhist traditions, as an artist, as an anthropologist, as a cartographer, and more recently, as a role model for a new generation of Tibetans living both in Tibet and in exile. Finally, at more than ninety minutes, the film may run a bit long for screening during a single class period.

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A monk in Eastern Tibet shows off his shortwave radio. Although Tibet is widely imagined to have been cut off from the world, isolated by high mountains and broad plateaus, its traditions of religious, economic, and cultural exchange extend back to at least the seventh century. Tibetans continue to tune in to world events through broadcasts of the BBC and Voice of America.

The real conundrum of *Angry Monk*, however, may be its title. For most of his life, Gendun Chophel lived not as a celibate monk, but a layman uninhibited by social or religious mores. Although his principal teacher called him "the madman" (referring to his unorthodox philosophical views), he rarely appears angry in the sense of outright hostility. The film's Tibetan title noted on the DVD menu (*Yid byung ba'i grwa pa*), translates somewhat ironically into English as "The World-Weary Monk"—standard Buddhist language describing someone who has renounced all mundane affairs. Nevertheless, Chophel's life ended abruptly. Returning to Tibet after his travels abroad, he was imprisoned and possibly tortured on the fabricated charge of counterfeiting currency; rumors also circulated that he was a Fascist or a Communist, and that he served as a spy for the Russian or Kuomintang government. After his release several years later, he was, by some accounts, a man broken down by the conservative forces he had criticized and then devoured by signs of alcoholism. He died shortly thereafter, possibly of liver disease.

The World-Weary Monk may seem an incongruous epithet for Tibet's first modern intellectual, but it appears to capture the mood late in his career. Indeed, Chophel's writings often reflect a certain weariness, and perhaps bitterness too, that his progressive views remained under-appreciated or overlooked. Toward the end of the film, renowned Tibetan artist Amdo Jampa recalls once asking Gendun Chophel, "Are you afraid of death?" "No, not of death," came the reply. "But I have failed in life. All my knowledge will fade into oblivion." In this case, at least, *Angry Monk* proves him wrong. ■

ANDREW QUINTMAN received his PhD in Buddhist Studies from the University of Michigan and was recently appointed to Princeton University's Society of Fellows in the Liberal Arts as the Cotsen-Mellon Fellow in the History of the Book. His research interests include the religious literature and visual culture of Tibet and the Himalayas. Current projects include a book-length study of Tibet's eleventh-century mendicant poet Milarepa and a new translation of *The Life of Milarepa* to be published by Penguin Classics.

CHINA FROM THE INSIDE

DIRECTED BY JONATHAN LEWIS
DISTRIBUTED BY PBS HOME VIDEO
DVD, 240 MINUTES, COLOR, 2006

Reviewed by Jeffrey R. Johnson

How shall we describe the scope, pace, and consequences of change in contemporary China for students in American classrooms? *China from the Inside*, a four-hour Jonathan Lewis documentary that originally aired on PBS in January 2007, is a valuable resource for teachers who embrace this challenge. Lewis' goal was to obtain candid perspectives on politics, gender, and the environment.

The four episodes of the documentary, "Power and the People," "Women of the Country," "Shifting Nature," and "Freedom and Justice," provide faces and voices of those wrestling with the major issues, humanizing the statistics. As the introduction to each episode reminds us, Lewis and his crew had impressive access to both Communist Party officials and dissident intellectuals, along with workers and farmers for whom the rewards of economic development are often at best attenuated.

Voters at polling booths in Liuqian village, Shandong Province, where there was a 96 percent turnout to elect the village head and village committee members. Some believe village elections are China's first steps to democracy; others that they enable the Communist Party to tighten its hold in the countryside—the candidates were all approved by the Party.
Photo credit: Jonathan Lewis

I tend to use films in segments, to underscore lectured material, or, more often, as prompts for class discussions or role-playing activities. Lewis has introduced key issues through such a variety of individuals that his documentary is very useful for these tasks. There are many instructive moments. Tears well in the eyes of the daughter of an AIDS patient infected due to a combination of government incompetence and corruption. An independent candidate knocks a chunk out of a slate of Party-approved candidates, gaining election to his village council. A gathering of Uyghur women becomes vocal on gender issues, but only after their husbands are shooed away. An environmentalist pro-