

FILM REVIEWS

Home to Tibet

PRODUCED, WRITTEN, AND DIRECTED BY ALAN DATER AND LISA MERTON

NEW DAY FILMS
22D HOLLYWOOD AVE.
HOHOKUS, NJ 07423

1995. 55 MINUTES. COLOR

Home to Tibet, produced, written, and directed by Alan Dater and Lisa Merton, is both satisfying as a narrative of the archetypal journey, and beautiful as a filmic record of the unbeatable landscape of Tibet and the indomitable spirit of its people.

The film opens with rapid cutting from one stunning scene to another of religious moments that underlie a statement made later, "Our [Tibetan] cultural

identity is inseparable from Buddhism." Cut to the hills of Massachusetts, where Sonam Lama is now a stonemason. As a voice on the soundtrack tells us about the forty-five-year occupation of his country, the camera shows us his chisel splitting the rock, suggesting Communist Chinese power breaking religious Tibetan culture.

His story of having escaped from his village in the remote province of Qum during the Cultural Revolution, and his second attempt (the first having ended in failure) to return to his native land to see his sister who had brought him up, who is "the only family he has left," is a heart warming tale, and his personal history is indeed inseparable from the tragic history of

his nation. The video handles the double narrative gracefully, juxtaposing archival footage from Chinese propaganda films and Tibetan sources with the day-to-day efforts of Sonam to get into Tibet. He travels to Pune (India) to receive blessings and help from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, to Majnuka Till to see a monk from his own village, to Bodhgaya, a high holy place for Buddhists, to Clement Town, one of forty Tibetan settlements in India, to see his old teacher, and then Kathmandu (Nepal) where he asks for a divination as to the chances of his success in entering and exiting Tibet safely, before the final crossing into Tibet by way of the rough auto road over the Himalayas. It is clearly a spiritual journey as well as an arduous physical one, and the cinematic pacing and

where old footage brings back the joyful color and intense life of nearly 12,000 monks, followed immediately by the present: panning shots of the utter desolation of the landscape, ruined shells of buildings, the dust color of the vast and bare mountains. We hear as well of the 5,000 monks at Sera, where only 100 are left. We are told that these institutions of learning and teaching no longer perform any meaningful educational function; they have become essentially tourist attractions. One ritual not shown in the film, which seems to have a continued life, fiercely guarded by the priests against viewing, is the "sky burial." I have seen from Drepung the telltale signs of eagles wheeling in the cold clear air.

I recommend this film for

DATER AND MERTON SHOW US THE OPPRESSION OF THE TIBETANS BY THE CHINESE. ONE OF THE MOST TELLING SCENES IS OF GANDEN, WHERE OLD FOOTAGE BRINGS BACK THE JOYFUL COLOR AND INTENSE LIFE OF NEARLY 12,000 MONKS, FOLLOWED IMMEDIATELY BY THE PRESENT: PANNING SHOTS OF THE UTTER DESOLATION OF THE LANDSCAPE, RUINED SHELLS OF BUILDINGS, THE DUST COLOR OF THE VAST AND BARE MOUNTAINS.

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rhythm build effectively.

The climax is the reunion with his sister. He is astonished at how old she has grown, and he tells her so with unadorned honesty. He asks why her hands are "so bad," to which her whispered answer is "Work." We the viewers are less astonished by the hard labor that she has done than by her voicelessness. We hear the raspy vestige of what must once have been a normal voice, and the film does not explain how she arrived at her loss of it. It becomes a fitting metaphor for the condition of the Tibetan people under Chinese Communist domination.

Dater and Merton show us the oppression of the Tibetans by the Chinese. One of the most telling scenes is of Ganden,

college classes on East Asian history and political science in general, but also for cross-disciplinary courses on multiculturalism, cultural identity, comparative religion, and colonialism. In many ways, *Home to Tibet* is a film about education, about how, forced to be without it, a culture can be reduced to ashes. The Dalai Lama tells Sonam how important education is, how necessary it is for democracy. This provides the structural thread. In the end, Sonam brings with him, when he leaves, his niece and the eight-year-old daughter of another cousin. They will go to one of the settlements in India where they will be taught to read and write in their own language and learn about their own rich heritage.

Because I have observed

the Tibetan situation firsthand, I can attest to the even-handed, even understated approach of the filmmakers, though we know exactly where their sympathy lies. (The International Campaign for Tibet is gratefully acknowledged.)

But there is no effort to oversimplify the clash of cultures. The complexity of the situation communicates itself, for example, when the monk in Kathmandu performs his divination: this is precisely what the Chinese "claim they are liberating" the Tibetans from—religious "superstition." The viewer of the film begins to have an inkling of the psychic distance that separates the two very different cultures, perhaps unbridgeable space, closed to mediation. Is memorizing the sutras "useful" and "practical" in the real world? Does turning prayer wheels, stringing up prayer flags, making offerings, performing prostrations, constitute the chief purpose of life? Is religion "necessary"? The official Chinese policy reflect-

ing the authoritarian, Confucian, secular, pragmatic outlook of thousands of years of Chinese culture is squarely at odds with the desires of the Tibetan people.

Students, especially those still in high school, may need to have these complex issues simplified and decoded for them. At some point, of course, they must learn to develop their critical abilities and become independent thinkers. The narrative will be easy to follow, but it may be helpful for their instructors to prepare them to understand some of the cultural issues of belief, and self-determination.

Phebe Chao

PHEBE CHAO has been on the faculty at Harvard University and Bennington College. She writes on literature, film, and TV. Chao has been to Tibet and travelled extensively in other parts of Asia.

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