

THREE TIBETAN FILMS BY PUHUA DONGZHI

REVIEWED BY GERALD ROCHE

AS EDUCATORS, AND SPECIFICALLY AS EDUCATORS WITH A SPECIAL INTEREST IN ASIA, one of our major tasks is to represent the world to our students. In lieu of taking them around the globe, we explore with them the facts, figures, images, texts, sounds, and so on that stand in place of the real world.

Given this fact, it is not insignificant that one of the most important recent debates amongst critical thinkers has focused on a so-called 'crisis of representation.' This debate focuses on the production of texts, and how this process often relates more to the context of production rather than what is being represented. This questioning has, to some extent, eroded our once unassailable confidence in texts.

As educators, this assault on the integrity of texts has left us in a difficult position. We cannot give Asia, itself, to our students, and *must* rely on mediation. If all texts are suspect, however, how are we supposed to maintain any semblance of integrity as educators with a commitment to our students'

The Perfection of Wisdom

DVD, 27 MINUTES, COLOR, 2006

ENGLISH SUBTITLES

Tibetan Village Wedding

DVD, 35 MINUTES, COLOR, 2005

ENGLISH SUBTITLES

Tibetan Woman's Life

DVD, 52 MINUTES, COLOR, 2006

ENGLISH SUBTITLES

All three films are available at Lulu.com:

http://www.lulu.com/puhua_dongzhi



growth and learning? One option is to employ as educational devices any of the increasingly common range of 'native' representations available to us.

Puhua Dongzhi's movies offer such a chance for educators interested in teaching about Tibet. These three films give a window into the Tibetan world from a Tibetan perspective. *The Perfection of Wisdom* follows Puhua Dongzhi's brother during a monastic ritual in which he receives a degree known as the Perfection of Wisdom. *Tibetan Village Wedding* documents a traditional wedding in a Tibetan village in Xunhua Salar Autonomous County, Haidong Region, Qinghai Province, Peoples Republic of China.

THE REAL STRENGTH IN BOTH OF THESE FILMS IS THE 'fly on the wall' perspective that the filmmaker gives the viewer. Puhua Dongzhi is intimately involved with the participants of both films. This gives viewers a rare first-person perspective. Despite some aesthetic and technical flaws, the films are highly valuable as ethnographic documents, providing rich and intimate detail.

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**These films allow us to not only give a unique view of
Tibetan daily life, but should also inspire discussion about who represents
what to whom and why**

Puhua Dongzhi's third film, *Tibetan Woman's Life*, is a more sophisticated and developed work. A definite cinematic aesthetic emerges in this film, and makes it more than simply a work of ethnographic documentation. This film shows a day in the life of a Tibetan woman in an agricultural village, from sunrise to sunset. Again, Puhua Dongzhi is intimately associated with all the 'cast' of the film, and once more is able to offer a view from the standpoint of near invisibility.

A significant development in *Tibetan Woman's Life* is that the subject of the film actually addresses the viewer, and we gain some insight into the protagonist's thoughts and feelings. In the first two films, Puhua Dongzhi translates (in summary form) everything that happens or is said, with English subtitles. We therefore receive a heavily mediated version of events and of people's feelings about them. In *Tibetan Woman's Life*, although most of the action and dia-

logue *are* translated, the last word, literally, belongs to the protagonist. She expresses her thoughts about life as a rural Tibetan woman. This development allows the viewer a much more personal and direct understanding of the film's subject.

AS A MATTER OF INTEREST, I SHOWED THIS FILM TO A GROUP OF female Tibetan college students, and their comments were as consistent as they were poignant. They first commented that if the filmmaker had been a woman, it would have allowed a more critical view of a Tibetan woman's life, rather than the merely descriptive account that the film offers. Secondly, the students were concerned that the film would be taken as somehow representative of all Tibetan women's lives. Each student could point out a multitude of differences between their life and the life of this woman—even students from the same county, but especially women from nomadic areas. The students' comments demonstrate that even

though an emic/etic divide exists between different cultures, these fissures also run through every culture as well.

There is, indeed, a real danger that *Tibetan Woman's Life* will be taken by many as an iconographic 'native' insight into Tibetan life. As educators, however, this danger represents a significant opportunity for us. These films allow us to not only give a unique view of Tibetan daily life, but should also inspire discussion about who represents what to whom and why. In this sense, these films are invaluable teaching resources for anyone who is interested in educating about Tibet, or about the different ways in which Asia is represented. ■

GERALD ROCHE currently teaches English at the Qinghai Normal University. He is also director of the Tibetan Endangered Music Project, which aims to record, archive, and disseminate endangered traditional Tibetan music. He is interested in studying and recording regional diversity within Tibetan culture, particularly as it relates to music.

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