

Interview with Luc Schaedler

TILL BROCKMANN: Why did you chose the title ANGRY MONK?

LUC SCHAEDLER: A monk is not supposed to be angry. The title is thus contradictory and provocative and that's intentional; this contradiction is part of what the movie is about. The way the West sees Tibet has more to do with our own projections than with reality. Interestingly, in German and English there is a note of irony in the title which gets completely lost in the Tibetan translation. I found out that the title cannot really be translated into Tibetan. Apparently the combination of «angry» and «monk» is not planned...

What made you make a film about Tibet?

I travelled a lot in Asia and I often passed through Tibet. I first went to Tibet in 1989, shortly after the Tiananmen massacre in Beijing – during the time of the Lhasa uprisings. I also worked on Tibetan issues during my anthropology studies at university. A part of me is always on the road, seeking an encounter with all things foreign. My film is surely also the result of this personal interest, a way to give it a shape. But it also has purpose to actively participate in a specific discourse, the discussion that the West had long been having about Tibet.

Back to your travels: the film is structured like a journey. Did you plan that from the beginning or did it turn out that way during the editing?

It was the idea from the beginning. Somehow that's the point of the whole story. Because in a broader sense the whole life of Gendun Choephel, the central figure, was a journey. A journey from the border provinces to the city of Lhasa. From there he went abroad and came back again. Apart from this outer journey, there was the inner journey of a man who, agile-minded as he was, always remained «on the road». And furthermore, as already mentioned, the film is structured like that because I got to know Tibet as a traveller, too. Finally, a last aspect, the film is a dialogue with the past which is also a kind of travelling, time-travelling so to speak: the film moves back and forth between present and past that mirror each other...

... at present the Chinese have the say. Was it difficult to get a permit to film?

I was aware from the beginning that the authorities would have informants and therefore always knew what was going on. Thus, shooting secretly and getting an official permit for a bigger project were out of question. For that reason I had the idea to work with a small and unobtrusive team; actually, just the cameraman Filip Zumbrunn and me. We behaved like tourists, like teachers who wanted to show the video material to their students back home. Partly we were shooting the usual stuff: markets, monasteries, like all tourists do... (smiling), but we were really lucky, too; if we had been searched at some point and they would have found all the many videocassettes, who knows... But even if the film is critical of China, I clearly never meant to make a film against China. What I am interested in is the inner dynamics of Tibet and in this regard China is just one of the factors. After all I'm critical of Tibetan culture as well.

What do you mean by that?

First of all, I'm very critical of the one-sided way the West looks at Tibet: as a spiritual refuge, an inspiration for the mind... some managers even go to Buddhist monasteries to prepare for the next round of globalization debates. A lot of damage is done by reducing Tibet to a peace-loving pseudo-paradise, perceiving it as «Shangri-la» with all the Tibetans having a spiritual message ready for us. I believe this harms the struggle for Tibetan independence. Furthermore, I find the romanticizing of the past rather problematic, though Tibet gets idealized not only in the West but by Tibetans as well. For instance, hardly 5% of the people controlled the whole country and the mingling of religion and politics developed into an unholy alliance of the aristocracy and the monastic establishment. This prevented necessary reforms and a policy of openness. Such things are often forgotten. Gendun Choephel and many others as well, such as the predecessor of the present Dalai Lama, were open for change but they failed time and again with their ideas because of the opposition of conservative forces who of course defend their privileges.

Is this critical attitude intended to set your film off against other documentaries on Tibet?

Yes, of course. There are so many films full of admiration for the monasteries, for the lamaism and also for the nomadic society which has been celebrated as a remnant of an age-old, intact culture. Similarly, I dislike political reports that make us believe that Tibet is a destroyed culture and that any resistance against the Chinese is defeated or futile in the end. But the situation is more complex and indeed a paradox: on the one hand so much has been destroyed since the invasion in 1950, especially during the cultural revolution it was done with meticulous precision. On the other hand, the Tibetans prove every day that there is a life under the Chinese. They have preserved their culture and language, they have kept alive more than one thinks. For instance, many of Gendun Choephel's writings and paintings featured in my film, have been preserved in Tibet. In this sense Gendun Choephel becomes part of this «survival». What I mean to say is that the Tibetans shouldn't be perceived just as victims but as a people who have managed very cleverly to resist the Chinese and who will go on showing their subversive spirit.

I never intended to make a purely biographical film on Gendun Choephel, but he serves as a key to the understanding of the history and the complex present of Tibet. Choephel was a man with many sides who had fought for change and at the same time remained a Buddhist all his life. He never turned his back to his own culture. I deliberately chose to have only Tibetans speak about Gendun Choephel in my film: old people who knew him and other Tibetans of a later generation. At the end I cut out all the Western scholars and Tibet experts whom I had interviewed as well...

... and the Dalai Lama never got a chance to speak either...

I did this on purpose. Probably it would have been easy enough to get an interview with him. But I didn't want his presence to dominate the film and the other interview partners to be pushed to the background. No matter what he would have said about Gendun Choephel, it would have been a confirmation for many that the film is justified. I didn't want that, I didn't want to have this «official stamp». In my view it is very important that there is a parallel discussion on Tibet which doesn't rely exclusively on the voice of the Dalai Lama.