



# angry monk

reflections on tibet

by Luc Schaedler

Switzerland 2005

1:1,85 • 35mm • color • 97 minutes

OV with German subtitles

Completed, August 2005

## Synopsis

Tibet – the mystical roof of the world, peopled with enlightened monks? Only one of them wouldn't toe the line: Gendun Choephel, the errant monk who left the monastic life in 1934 in search of a new challenge. A free spirit and multifaceted individual, he was far ahead of his time and has since become a seminal figure, a symbol of hope for a free Tibet. A rebel and voluble critic of the establishment, Gendun Choephel kindled the anger of the Tibetan authorities.

The cinematic journey through time portrays the life of this unorthodox monk, revealing a face of old Tibet that goes against popular clichés. The film makes an abundance of unique and rare historical footage available to the general public for the first time. But it does not dwell on the past;

rather it skilfully oscillates between tradition and modernity. Archival images of ancient caravans and monasteries give way to scenes of discos and multi-lane highways in Lhasa, where pilgrims prostrate themselves as they circle the holy temple. ANGRY MONK offers a fascinating insight into a country whose eventful past is refracted in the multiplicity and contradictions of everyday life.

Ultimately, this road movie also tells the story of a man who left home to search for something that could have liberated traditional Tibet from its rigidity. An outsider who was always open to new things, he eventually became a stranger in his homeland and homeless in foreign lands – a wanderer between worlds.

### FILM CONTACT

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## Motivation

The idea for the film ANGRY MONK – REFLECTIONS ON TIBET originated during several trips to China, Tibet and India between 1988 and 1999. Without being aware of it, I travelled to the same places that the protagonist of the movie visited 50 years before. Since 1988 I have been studying the country of Tibet and how the western world perceives it. And I repeatedly came across the name of Gendun Choephel.

Gendun Choephel (1903-51) was a wanderer between worlds – at once a dreamer, a rebel and a researcher. He lived in a time that was decisive for the future of his country, between the British colonial invasion of 1903 and the occupation by the Chinese army in 1951. At that time Tibet wasn't the inaccessible Shangri-La that people often claim, but a torn country on the verge of big changes. Tibet's attempts to introduce a new social structure and to find its own way into the twentieth century failed because of the resistance of the conservative nobility and the monasteries.

As Tibet moved towards isolation, Gendun Choephel was open to new experiences. We can trace his path through his writings, articles, pictures and sketches. He looked at his own society in a critical way, was interested in political issues and tried to apply them to everyday life; he was, therefore, the initiator of critical and intellectual thought within Tibetan society.

During his last years, Gendun Choephel became a role model for many young Tibetans in Chinese-occupied Tibet and also for those in exile in India. While their parents lost Tibet, the younger generation looked for role models that would allow a critical view of their own society. But the western world only slowly became aware of Choephel because his life story doesn't mesh with our rigid image of Tibet, which prefers to portray Tibetans as victims rather than the makers of their own history.

Luc Schaedler

## Interview with Luc Schaedler

### Why did you chose the title ANGRY MONK?

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.



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**If we go back briefly 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



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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.

Interview by Till Brockmann, June 8, 2005



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## Gendun Choephel – Stations of his life

### Childhood in Eastern Tibet (1903-1927)

Gendun Choephel was born 1903 in a small village in eastern Tibet, near the silk road, at the Chinese border, in a remote region populated by nomads. This region was inhabited by Muslims, Chinese and Tibetans that were constantly fighting each other. The villages often were attacked and looted by warlords. In this explosive and mixed cultural climate Gendun Choephel started to be interested in his Tibetan identity early on. He received a traditional education as a monk in the most important monastery of the region, where he developed a friendship with an American missionary that the other monks and his family resented. In 1927 he left the monastery and moved to Lhasa with a caravan of merchants.

### Monastery education in Lhasa (1927-34)

In Lhasa Gendun Choephel studied in Drepung, the biggest monastery in the world. His rebellious attempts to bypass the monastery's rules annoyed the other monks. Ultimately, monastic life suffocated him too much in Lhasa as well and he left the monastery. Afterwards he survived as a portrait painter and artist for rich aristocrats in Lhasa. In 1934 he met Rahul Sankrityayan, an Indian researcher of Buddhist teachings who also was a communist activist for the Indian struggle for independence from British colonialists.

### Journey across Tibet (1934-1938)

Rahul Sankrityayan and Gendun Choephel travelled together across Tibet searching for old texts that were destroyed in India centuries earlier but had survived in remote monasteries in Tibet. For Rahul, historical research is part of his political fight; for him researching history is the key to the present. Gendun Choephel was Rahul's translator as well as his mediator for Tibetan culture. At the same time the fascinating stories about India awoke his curiosity.

### Journey across India (1938-1946)

In India, Gendun Choephel was confronted with a foreign world. For the first time he saw a railway and other technological achievements. India was then undergoing radical changes and, contrary to Tibet, the Indians took their destiny into their own hands. The fight for independence was at its peak. Gendun Choephel's view of his own culture started to change; in India he experienced the most creative phase of his life. He travelled across the country as a Buddhist pilgrim, lived in the crowded city of Calcutta, saw the ocean, visited brothels and libraries, wrote his first newspaper articles and translated the Kamasutra in Tibetan, enriching it with his own experiences. He sent many of his writings, notes and sketches back to Tibet in order to convey his impressions of a foreign world.

### Return to Tibet (1946-51)

In 1946 Gendun Choephel returned to Tibet passing through the Indian-Tibetan border town of Kalimpong which, next to British and Chinese agents, was a nest of radical Tibetans who fell out of grace with Lhasa's government. In 1939 they founded the Tibetan Revolutionary Party. Choephel got acquainted with the party and designed their logo: a sickle crossed by a sword. The Tibetan Revolutionary Party's goal was to overthrow the tyrannical regime in Lhasa. When Gendun Choephel arrived in Lhasa the Tibetan government was already informed about his political activities. He began to write the political history of Tibet but this attempt was abruptly stopped by his arrest. He was accused of insurrection and thrown in jail for three years. In 1949 he was freed. But his heart was broken and he drowned his desperation in alcohol. Soon afterwards the Chinese army overran the Tibetan troops in eastern Tibet and, in 1951, shortly after the occupation of Lhasa by the Chinese army, Gendun Choephel died. Supposedly he commented on the political events of his era in this way: "Now we're fucked!"

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## Gendun Choephel – Extracts of his texts

«Sponsored by kings and ministers the colonialists sent out a great army of bandits, calling them traders. They introduced new forms of living, but their laws were only good for the educated and wealthy. As for the poor, their small livelihoods are sucked like blood from all their offices. It is in this way that the so-called wonders of the world were built, such as railroads and high buildings.

I am an astute beggar, who spent his life listening.  
I know what I'm talking about.»

On British colonialism, Calcutta 1941

«In Tibet, everything that is old  
Is a work of Buddha  
And everything that is new  
Is a work of the Devil  
This is the sad tradition of our country»

Poem, Tibet 1946

«In olden days, even in Europe, the world was thought to be flat. And when some intelligent people claimed the opposite, they were exposed to various difficulties, such as being burnt alive. Today, even in Buddhist countries everybody knows, that the world is round. However in Tibet, we still stubbornly state that the world is flat.»

Newspaper article, *Tibet Mirror*, Kalimpong, 1938

«As for me – I have little shame I love women.  
Every man has a woman. Every woman has a man.  
Both in their mind desire sexual union. What chance is there for clean behaviour? If natural passions are openly banned, unnatural passions will grow in secrecy. No law of religion – no law of morality can suppress the natural passion of mankind.»

Foreword of a *Kamasutra* translation,  
Kalkutta 1939

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## The interviewees

**Golok Jigme, 85, travel companion: from the same region as Gendun Choephel. In the early 1940s he and Choephel travelled as pilgrims across India. He died in Kathmandu shortly after the interview.**

As we travelled around in India, I never thought that he was a reincarnated lama. he was definitely an intelligent person, very sharp. But he would smoke, drink and fuck with women. but at first I thought, because he fucked with women, that he wasn't learned.

**Thubten Wangpo, 75, teacher: he met Gendun Choephel once when he was 17. This encounter influenced his whole life. He is a retired teacher and lives in Lhasa.**

In those times the Tibetans accepted only tradition. For instance, they forbade soccer. They claimed that soccer players would kick the head of the holy Buddha. If a person did something new, you could be sure it would be prohibited. But a society needs to progress; it can't stagnate.

**Tsering Shakya, 46, historian: teaches modern Tibetan history at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). He lives in London with his family.**

Gendun Choephel was an ordinary monk, who came to India and saw the changes that were taking place in the outside world. And he reflects on the stagnation of Tibet and this you can see in his writings, in his poems, that he reflects on this change and the need for change in Tibet.

**Tashi Tsering, 45, researcher: director of the Amnye Machen Institut (AMI) in India, which is dedicated to the study of Tibetan laymen's history. He lives in India and New Zealand.**

No Tibetan had written the political history of Tibet before. In his book he writes that Tibet and China are two independent unities. Sometimes China attacked Tibet and sometimes Tibet made war against China and even conquered its capital city. He described how the Tibetans besieged the Chinese; he wrote about Tibet's power at that time and about how the Tibetans defeated the Chinese army. Unlike the historians before him, he based his writings on ancient Dunhuang documents.

**Alak Yongtsin, 98, schoolfriend: has lived his whole life in eastern Tibet. He was sent to a Chinese gulag for a few years. Today he lives in a remote monastery in eastern Tibet.**

He became famous when he built little boats with mechanical parts from old clocks. He told me that it should be possible to build a mill that isn't powered by water.

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## Crew

### Luc Schaedler Director, Author

1963 born in Zurich  
Since 1986 working for Kino Xenix  
Study of ethnology and film science at the  
University of Zurich  
Various film series and articles on Tibet and  
Buddhism  
Lectureships in visual anthropology at the  
University of Zurich

2005 ANGRY MONK – REFLECTIONS ON TIBET  
(97 min.)  
1997 MADE IN HONG KONG (75 min.)

### Martin Witz Editor

1956 born in Zurich  
Study of German and folklore at the University of  
Zurich  
Since 1983 scriptwriter and sound recordist, free-  
lance

2005 WER WAR KAFKA by Richard Dindo  
2004 FERDINAND HODLER – DAS HERZ IST MEIN  
AUGE by Heinz Bütler  
2003 ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS – DEM TOD INS  
GESICHT SEHEN by Stefan Haupt  
2002 VON WERRA by Werner Schweizer  
2001 WAR PHOTOGRAPHER by Christian Frei

### Kathrin Plüss Editor

1954 born in Switzerland  
Study of history and ethnology at the University of  
Zurich  
Since 1981 filmeditor, freelance

2005 WHITE TERROR by Daniel Schweizer  
2003 GOTTFRIED SEMPER by Karin Reiss  
2003 SKINHEAD ATTITUDE by Daniel Schweizer  
2002 VON WERRA by Werner Schweizer  
2001 BIG MAC Small World by Peter Guyer

### Filip Zumbrunn Camera

1969 born in Zurich  
Since 1997 cameraman, freelance  
2005 Swiss film award for best camera for STRÄHL

2005 GROUNDING by Michael Steiner  
2004 UNSER AMERIKA by Kristina Konrad  
2003 HÖLLENTOUR by Pepe Danquart  
2003 STRÄHL by Manuel Flurin Hendry

### Salome Pitschen Additional editing

1966 born in Basel  
Studies in German Literature and Film  
Since 1995 a freelance filmer and editor

### Yonten Interviews editing

1978 born in East Tibet  
1991 escape to Switzerland  
Since 2005 student at the filmschool in Luzern



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## Technical information

Documentary: Switzerland 2005

Length: 97 min. (TV-Version, 52 min. in planning)

Language versions: Tibetan/German with German subtitles and Tibetan/English with English subtitles

Shooting locations: Tibet, India, China

Shot on: Mini DV (Transfer on 35mm, Dolby SR)

## Credits

Production	angry monk productions
Co-production	SF DRS, suissimage
Written, directed and produced by	Luc Schaedler
Research, Interviews	Yangdon Dhondup
Camera	Filip Zumbrunn
Edited by	Martin Witz Kathrin Plüss
Sound design	Roland Widmer, Zentralton
Music	Roland Widmer, Heinz Rohrer, Loten Namling
Narration	Thomas Sarbacher, Loten Namling, Phil Hayes
Rough cut	Salome Pitschen
Interviews editing	Yonten
Adviser Editing	Josy Meier
Dubbing Mixer	Dieter Lengacher, Magnetix
Color Correction	Paul Avondet, Andromeda Film
Faz 35mm	Schwarz Film AG
Graphic design	C. Besuchet, Golok Design
Distribution	Xenix Filmdistribution GmbH, Zürich

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