

## Angry Monk

*Angry Monk: Reflections on Tibet.* Written, directed and produced by Luc Schaedler, Angry Monk Productions, 2005. English, German, French, and Tibetan versions; DVD, 97 mins., +75 mins. of “bonus material,” viz: interview with director (30 mins.), unpublished interviews and film footage (30 mins.), TV reports, trailer. Also the film (only) is available on PAL; no country code; and NTSC. Also a CD-ROM of the Ph.D. thesis (586 pp.); complete presentation and critical discussion of the research materials (interview and translations). International distribution and sales details for DVD and CD-ROM, please contact: [dvd@angrymonk.ch](mailto:dvd@angrymonk.ch) or <http://www.angrymonk.ch>

The 2005 film *Angry Monk: Reflections on Tibet*, written and directed by the Swiss documentary filmmaker and visual anthropologist Luc Schaedler, perhaps finally brings to fruition the global apotheosis of the iconoclastic 20th century Tibetan intellectual and former Buddhist monk, Gendun Chopel (1903–1951; hereafter, GC). The outcome of years of travel, research, and interviews with Tibetan and Western scholars and acquaintances of GC, Schaedler’s film is structured as a road movie, in which the camera (posing as the eye of a Western tourist in the early 2000s) retraces both GC’s and Schaedler’s own travels through Tibet and South Asia.

On the way, Schaedler draws on filmed interviews, archival footage, and photos (including the few extant photos of GC), and GC’s extant drawings, paintings and first-person prose and poetry to portray this controversial man who was marginalized and vilified by the Tibetan Buddhist elite during his lifetime. As such, the film depicts GC as an “angry monk” and as a skeptical and discerning “Wanderer between [traditional and modern] worlds.” Thus, as Schaedler’s narration asserts, the film presents GC as a “key” to understanding modern Tibet. Schaedler then took the film on the international film festival circuit, in part expressly to combat Westerners’ overly romanticized visions of Buddhist Tibet. As the film’s website and bonus materials proudly document, *Angry Monk* was selected to be shown at the prestigious Vancouver and Sundance film festivals in 2006, and reviews of the film have extolled its “refreshingly” unromantic and realist eye on Tibet’s painful encounter with modernity.

*Angry Monk* is indeed a provocative and masterfully edited video montage and distilled history of 20th-century Tibet, showcasing both rare archival footage and wonderful on-camera interviews (the bonus materials include more), as well as

Filip Zumbunn's gorgeous cinematography in Tibet, captured undercover with the camera of a tourist. However, I found that ultimately the very elusiveness of the figure of GC both here and elsewhere contributes to a profoundly ambivalent and problematic portrayal of "Tibet" and "modernity" that in many ways runs counter to Schaedler's filmic efforts to identify with GC and with contemporary Tibetans in the People's Republic of China (PRC) sympathetically. I was left contemplating the limits of film genres of realist representation for portraying the exquisite complexities of such massive sociohistorical transformations in the face of the sound bite, pastiche aesthetics of global image markets.

In both the narration and his filmed personal interview in the bonus materials, Schaedler makes clear that he is well aware of the particular conundrum the phenomenon of GC represents for would-be documentarists. As Donald Lopez [2006] put it, GC's too-short life was bracketed by two of the main defining moments in 20th-century Tibet: the 1904 British imperial incursion to Lhasa to "open" trade, and the 1951 Chinese communist invasion of Central Tibet to incorporate it into the new PRC nation-state. As a young monk, GC's unconventional intellect and voracious appetite for learning ran him afoul of the Geluk sect of the Tibetan Buddhist establishment, which he had joined. He eventually turned to the lay life and Western sciences encountered on his travels in India—the "new reasoning," as he called it—for inspiration to reform and strengthen his beloved homeland. Yet he ended up imprisoned as a subversive by the tense and besieged Tibetan government in Lhasa in 1947, and he died in despair and alcoholism shortly after his release in 1951, just as the Chinese People's Liberation Army was marching into Lhasa.

However, with China's post-Mao reforms in the early 1980s, GC's star has been rising among Tibetan and Western intellectuals both inside and outside the PRC. Since then, he has been posthumously recognized as a misunderstood visionary and a founder of modern Tibetan literature. Biographies in several languages have since been published, as well as his collected writings in Tibetan. By 2006, several of his major works—including his final, enigmatic critical treatise on the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy [Lopez 2006]—have been translated into English. The search for GC is on. As Felix Holmgren [2006] put it, "he is a hero not of his own age, but of ours, the age of partial and painful globalization."

Schaedler's film fully participates in this recent phenomenon, even as it is firmly ensconced in much older Western media genres probing "the enigma of Tibet" since the region remained at the peripheries of European colonial reach. *Angry Monk* asserts that the figure of GC brings us closer to that longed-for understanding. Yet, as Schaedler laments in his filmed interview with a strangely silent, off-camera interlocutor, GC for him is a "phantom" because he is not "visually tangible" due to the paucity of photographs. Thus, he says, his filmic portrayal can only use him as a "projection surface" on which to consider the question of Tibet then and now.

But I would suggest that the ambivalent and problematic nature of *Angry Monk* derives less from GC's material inaccessibility than from Schaedler's unacknowledged Western and secular humanist modernism. This viewpoint is instantiated not only in the voice-over narrative but also in Schaedler's video

and audio tropes, which distance his position from GC's time and cosmos even as he attempts to conflate them. Indeed, as Peter Bishop [1989] long ago pointed out, Tibet has for centuries figured as a privileged destination in Westerners' modernist celebration of the individual self as manifest in first-person travel narratives.

What GC provides in the search for Tibet in the film is then a personal Tibetan avatar (the on-camera self "follows in his footsteps"), a "discerning" subject through which Schaedler can voice his critique of old Tibet and his historical explanation for its failure to establish a modern and independent Tibetan state. For example, the opening line of the film's English-language trailer selects as the paradigmatic voice of GC his decontextualized comment translated from the Tibetan, sounding like a familiar argument for the separation of church and state: "In Tibet, religion and politics are completely mixed up. If you mix sugar and salt, can you really eat that?" Thus the film must both tell a story of historical change *and* conflate GC's subjectivity with that of the present-day camera-self. Even as Schaedler himself strangely recedes from view and sound (he never appears on screen, and others read his first-person narration and conduct interviews), the film exploits the modernist empiricism of photographic realism—Schaedler says he seeks a "raw" or "unadorned" vision—to construct an imagined geography and "inner journey" that collapses GC's experience into Schaedler's (and presumably ours). After all, there are no *specific* routes, past or present, represented in the film, only a general vertical movement (scaling up and out) between nodal cities. No images, except a few stills of GC, are dated, leaving only visual and aural indexes to distinguish between a generic, traditional old Tibet and a generic, modern "now."

Yet GC himself would not necessarily have endorsed the modernist story that Schaedler wants to tell here. In fact, I would suggest that, as a brilliant and charismatic yet marginalized figure during his lifetime, GC embodied a very old problem of recognition among Tibetans. Competing claims to Buddhist translocal authority amid intensifying jurisdictional conflicts in Inner Asia could render suspect the status of a lama, or enlightened teacher. GC's own childhood recognition as a Nyingma sect incarnate lama was problematic. Schaedler's filmed informants echo some of the uncertainty around his status as a Buddhist scholar and teacher. But part of GC's charismatic prowess was his capacity to shape-shift along the centuries-old lines of the Buddhist trickster tantrist, master debater, and anticlerical scholar-critic. GC always was a moving target, even to himself. But what is new in his posthumous rise to fame is that he now serves as a catalyst for competing searches for an ideally modern *sovereignty* of self and polity—a painful journey born above all in the tragedy of Tibetan exile. The modernist search for a sovereign social body [Hardt and Negri 2004] can then allow for a fortuitous if problematic convergence of discourses among Tibetan exiled intellectuals and Westerners. In recent years the stakes of these collaborations are higher, with the Dalai Lama in his early 70s, the rise of the PRC in the global political economy, and the PRC's "Great Develop the West" campaign targeting Tibetan regions.

To my mind, *Angry Monk* reflects one recent strand of such collaborations—it selectively represents GC and Tibet by voicing an emerging secularist and

economistic discourse expressing a profound ambivalence toward Tibetans' seeming penchant for "tradition" or "superstition," which has kept them dominated, ignorant, and backward while others progress. For example, Jamyang Norbu, an exiled Tibetan scholar and nationalist who is interviewed in the film, recently published online a vitriolic two-part diatribe titled, "Enduring Phobias and Superstitions in Tibetan Society" [phayul.com, March 2005]. Schaedler's film then draws on the filmed commentary of certain Tibetan intellectuals to compensate for the phantom that is GC by concretizing the tradition/modernity divide. He does this by placing GC and the camera-self on the valorized side of the modern self-conscious and sovereign subject: GC sees through to modernist and political realities just as "we" do now (witness the loving attention given to GC's beautiful, almost photographic portrait of a Tibetan aristocrat and its juxtaposition with filmed footage of the same person, to demonstrate GC's realist eye).

Most importantly, Schaedler's evocative filmic effects serve a problematic historical argument that directs the lion's share of modernist blame for Tibet's lack of independence to the internal "conservative forces" of Tibetan elites in Lhasa, where Buddhist monastic practices, overly entangled with government affairs, had become nothing but an "empty ritual." Just after celebrating GC's realist portraits in the film, the narrator echoes the filmed interviews with Jamyang Norbu and others to assert that, after the death of the progressive 13th Dalai Lama, conservative monks and aristocrats closed Tibet off, bringing "stagnation and internal paralysis. Instead of finding its own way into the 20th century, the country retreated into time-honored Buddhist rituals." Such rituals, especially Geluk monasticism, then come to stand for the pernicious drag of "tradition." This is most evident in the striking visual and aural contrasts separating then from now. Only the color footage from the 2000s gets to be "raw"—unadorned with added sound or music—while silent footage from old Tibet, even when depicting everyday lay life, is most often layered over with either the sounds of Buddhist singing bowls or the ponderous, guttural, and, in this context, sinister-sounding chanting of monk assemblies. Significantly, the only music added to scenes from the 2000s is incessant guitar plucking that mimics Tibetan Amdo folk music. Introduced with the first images of GC, it represents his (and Schaedler's) *secular* subjectivities and forms the soundtrack for the traveling, "discerning" self of the film, fading in over the monks' chants when GC and the camera are on the move.

GC's untimely death at the hands of the Lhasa government then stands for the tragedy of the modern, secular Tibetan nation that never was. In ways similar to the virulent "anti-superstition" discourses that emerged at the turn of the 20th century among late-Qing Chinese intellectuals, the film reflects the inward-looking critique of Tibetan intellectuals facing anew a modernist crisis of sovereignty. Yet this critique does not necessarily capture the experiences of the vast majority of Tibetans in and outside the PRC who are strongly grounded in ritual worlds. Further, the focus on purely internal forces as the main cause of contemporary Tibetan "backwardness" echoes both British imperial and Chinese communist discourses, and elides the profoundly geopolitical dynamics that have produced Tibetan experiences *and* active ritualized agencies past

and present [Tuttle 2005; Makley 2007]. The blame heaped on the Tibetan government and the monastic system in the 1930s and '40s ignores the "Great Game" among the British, Russian, and Chinese states that rendered Tibet's undefined status a strategic *asset* to those states [Anand, forthcoming]. Such historical complexities muddy any neat tradition/ritual-modernity/secular divide, but they are difficult to capture filmically. Most importantly, the modernist slant on "ritual" distances the narrative from the very subjects the film would represent. Indeed, it does not jibe well with the other story represented in the film: that Tibetans across regions have been enthusiastically revitalizing lay and monastic ritual practices, even in the face of state repression. Are we to now blame them for their blind "backwardness" in the face of intensifying globalization pressures? That would take us uncomfortably close to Chinese social scientists' and state officials' pronouncements about Tibetans' seeming lack of economic commonsense since the 1980s reforms.

Finally, GC himself was a much more nuanced transitional figure than this focus on him as secular avatar for Schaedler would have it. To be fair, Schaedler in the bonus materials laments that he did not include much on GC's unswerving commitment to Buddhism, but that inclusion would have changed the nature of the narrative itself. As Lopez [2006] and other biographers have pointed out, GC was *not* the self that would seem familiar to a Western modernist sensibility. Instead, his anticlerical critique coexisted with a conventional grounding in Tibetan Buddhist tantric ritual technologies, and he interpreted the unhappy shifts he saw within the Buddhist idiom as the inevitable degradation of the Dharma. As his monk friend Golok Jigme remembers in the film, when the PLA advanced into Lhasa in 1951, GC cried and lamented what he saw as the impending loss of monks and Buddhism. I would suggest that the self and the Tibet GC sought were not necessarily those sought by Schaedler and other modernist critics. Instead, his travels were in large part a Buddhist pilgrimage—he searched for a Tibet in which someone with his eclectic vision and experience could achieve recognition as a lama. He did achieve this in a small way at the end of his short life. The tragedy is that, given the painful legacy of the post-imperial Great Game in Inner Asia, neither his nor any of the other Tibetan visions for an alternative future could withstand the onslaught of others' nation-state building projects.

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Cover: The Red God procession in his sacred carriage (Photo © Kesang Tseten, 2005).



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