Angry Monk: Reflections on Tibet

Luc Schaedler, dir. 97 min. Brooklyn: First Run/Icarus Films, 2005.

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Billed as a road movie, *Angry Monk* follows the life and travels of Gendun Choephel (1903–51), who is "arguably the most important Tibetan intellectual of the twentieth century" (Lopez 2006:3). Born in the northeastern region of Greater Tibet (a.k.a. Amdo, present-day Qinghai province), Choephel received his primary education at a local monastery (1907–20), continued his studies at Labrang Monastery in Gansu province (1920–27), and finally entered Lhasa's famed Drepung Monastery (1927–34).

To his great credit, director Luc Schaedler depicts the unfolding of Choephel's life as an ongoing dialectic between circumstance and temperament. We learn that the young novice's curiosity and imagination were sparked by a passing acquaintance with an unnamed U.S. missionary in Labrang during the 1920s. More important, his increasing frustration with scholastic authorities in Lhasa coincided with the death of the 13th Dalai Lama (Thubten Gyatso, 1876–1933) and the failure of ongoing attempts to modernize Tibet's political structure, military, and economy. Doctrinal retrenchment within prominent centers of learning soon followed, which precipitated Choephel's departure from Drepung in 1934.

Having left monastic life, Choephel encountered a kindred spirit in Rahul Sankrityayan (1893–1963), an Indian nationalist and Marxist polymath who had come to Tibet in search of ancient Buddhist texts that were no longer extant in India. After assisting in this scholarly endeavor, Choephel followed Sankrityayan back to India. For the next 12 years (1935–46), he traveled widely across the subcontinent, experiencing firsthand the social, political, and economic realities of colonial modernity. His long-simmering dissatisfaction with the dogmas of "old Tibet" informed his embrace of cultural iconoclasm and renovation, both of which were wedded (within the context of British India) to anticolonial resistance.

In India, Choephel's writings and behavior were largely geared toward questioning the cultural status quo and enlarging the acceptable bounds of Tibetan identity. He immersed himself in the study of modern history and began work on his *White Annals* (1978), an unfinished history of Tibet's militant expansion in the sixth and seventh centuries. He wrote the *Treatise on Passion* (published as *Tibetan Arts of Love,* 1992), a Tibetan adaptation of the *Kama Sutra,* while drinking and smoking and frequenting Calcutta's brothels.

All this, along with certain political acquaintances, aroused suspicions within Lhasa's clerical hierarchy. After returning to Lhasa in 1946, Choephel was arrested by Tibetan authorities on charges of being a Communist spy. He spent three years in a prison beneath the Potala Palace before being released in 1949. He died shortly thereafter, in poor health and relative disgrace.

Choephel's story belies more conventional visions of Tibet as a romantically mysterious land of magic and spirituality, untouched by time or larger forces of history. Indeed, director Schaedler's intent is to force us to reconsider our (mis)perceptions of Tibet, both past and present. In this respect, *Angry Monk* is similar to a number of recent English-language works on the same subject (Goldstein 2004; Goldstein et al. 2004; Powers 2004; Tuttle 2005), any of which might complement the film in a classroom setting.

But what distinguishes *Angry Monk* is its visual power and elegance. Throughout the film, Schaedler exhibits a fine ethnographic sensibility, presenting seemingly contradictory sights and sounds of daily life in contemporary Tibet for our consideration. He deftly interweaves scenes of young Tibetans printing and reciting sutras and engaging in philosophical debates as well as dancing in bars and nightclubs or playing pool, soccer, and video games. Equally important, we hear the voices of Tibetan poets, writers, and scholars as well as Choephel's classmates, relatives, and close companions. They express such sentiments as "what people in the West find fascinating, the mysterious Tibet, for me it's stagnating." The cumulative effect is to provide a useful counterpoint to what we may have come to expect. Instead of simply viewing Tibetans as meditating monks or passive victims of religious or political persecution, we also see them as critics of their own culture and active agents of history.

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