
Film Review

Dan Smyer Yü and Pema Tashi (dirs.), *Embrace* (Hangzhou, China: Dongyang Mirage CineMedia Production, 2011).¹

Embrace is, to my knowledge, the first documentary film that portrays key aspects of religious life among a category of Buddhist practitioners little known outside the Tibetan world, but still found all over the Tibetan plateau: lay tantric practitioners (Tib. *sngags pa* translated as 'tantric yogis' in the film).² It focuses more specifically on their actual and imagined sacred landscape and describes their eco-Buddhist worldview, religious tenets, and practice. Dan Smyer Yü's and Pema Tashi's skills combine to make this film a success. The former is a cultural anthropologist with a longtime interest in and familiarity with sacred landscapes and the local form of Tibetan Buddhism that is described in *Embrace*. Pema Tashi is a Tibetan graduate from the Beijing Film Academy with a solid anchoring in Tibetan life and a long acquaintance with the cultural and religious world portrayed in the film. Located in a farming village of Amdo in northeastern Tibet, the 55-minute film begins with Babu Tashi, a yogi-cum-traditional Tibetan doctor, who introduces minutely and confidently every mountain surrounding his community, accompanied by a full physical description of the local deity said to inhabit it. For this yogi, as well as for most of his fellow Tibetans, the world of local deities is invisible but nonetheless real. As humans do in their world, the deities enjoy kinship relations with one another in this sacred landscape, and Babu Tashi strives to explain them in detail. The film continues with a presentation of propitiation rituals that the community, through its *sngags pa* religious specialists, must regularly perform to secure a healthy relationship between them and the deities that they host. If hurt or neglected, the deities can retaliate and harm the human community. If properly propitiated, however, they protect the human community that dwells at their feet by securing plentiful harvests, good luck, earthly success, and good health.

These rituals are typical of pre-Buddhist Tibetan beliefs, in which mountains are considered as both the dwellings of gods and also the gods themselves, in a religious worldview that originally owed little to Buddhism. As a consequence, Buddhism scarcely suffuses the religious world introduced in the first ten minutes of the film; however, the third part is dedicated to soteriological, tantric Buddhist practice as it is fully integrated in the yogis' lives in superposition with their localized religious practice. Babu Tashi makes a clear distinction between these two realms; if the local, mountain-dwelling deities can ensure earthly benefit or harm to the human

1. This film is available from yp@chinakaiyuan.com.

2. Dorje Tsering Chenaktsang's pioneering *Tantric Yogi* (2005) portrays a similar, neighbouring community, but focuses not so much on the worldview and religious practice of the tantrists as on the preparations for a rare community ritual held every 60 years.

community that is associated with them, they can never serve as a vehicle for reaching the ultimate goal, enlightenment, he says. Enlightenment, also called Buddhahood or Liberation, is the fruit of years of Buddhist meditation in solitary places, not of propitiation of local deities-cum-mountains. As a caption explains:³ ‘Mountains are houses of the *lha* and *klu* [worldly deities that can bring benefit or harm to humans]; hermitages are the placentas of saints’. The film thus shows that these yogis do not only perform rituals aimed at pleasing and appeasing local deities for worldly benefits, but they also display a serene, deeply engrained knowledge of high tenets of Buddhist ethics and philosophy. After the evocation of such ‘pure’ Tibetan Buddhist contemplative practices, complete with superb wide-angle shots of solitary hermits meditating in remote and solitary mountain dwellings about the village, the film returns to a cultural space in which local and general forms of Buddhism meet in rituals aimed at stopping hail to protect harvest or inviting rain to counter drought. The yogis explain that developing the capacity for weather control, for which they are famous in the area, is cultivated through both a mastery of the general tenets of Buddhism combined with more local and practical forms of religious practice. Babu Tashi—who for two years as a youth occupied the position of village weather controller—asserts with a discreet smile, ‘If one has mastered *samadhi* [meditative absorption/contemplation], one can lead the clouds as easily as herding a flock of goats’.

The film’s focus then shifts from mountains to rivers. Just as mountains are the abode of local guardian deities, rivers are inhabited by underground creatures rendered in the subtitles as *Le* (reflecting the Amdo pronunciation of the word *klu*). The pacification and propitiation of the *klu* with Buddhist prayers and the aspiration of the yogi to reach Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings coupled in the offering ritual illustrates once again the intermingling of Buddhist tenets and extra-Buddhist beliefs. The film further discloses how the local, lay male, non-yogic community interacts with tantrists by taking part in the local religious life because they propitiate and make offerings to their own warrior deity (*dgra lha*). Here again, non-Buddhist practices intermingle with Buddhist beliefs: after throwing printed prayers in the air, horse racing, and burying a horn filled by yogis with various noxious substances, the locals take to trampling the horn, symbolizing their subduing of all evil influences for the period to come. These actions also illustrate the community’s hope to eliminate all evil while under the protection of their guardian deity and with the help of its yogis.

Non-religious everyday life is not the main focus of the film, but ordinary life does surface in a few scenes. For example, while Pema Norbu—Babu Tashi’s son—busies himself making ‘sacrificial cakes’ (*gtor ma*) for an offering to a local deity, he is shown chatting and joking with the elderly yogi sitting next to him. Another is busy reading something on his computer. The doctor-yogi is shown treating a local Muslim woman with the help of Tibetan medicine. The message from the filmmakers seems to be that these yogis, although deeply involved in traditional religious activities, are not cut off from today’s everyday or modern world. This is reinforced in the final part of the documentary. Babu Tashi introduces the viewer to what is called ‘Big-Bellied Deity’ who—according to his worldview—becomes one with the Earth. As a consequence, it suffers when humans mine the land, dig mountains, or undertake deforestation (these

3. My translation from the Tibetan text differs slightly from the English translation in the film.

are illustrated by grim shots of mines with which the area is rife). Hurt by these, Big-Bellied Deity has no option but to refuse and resist these assaults on its 'body', that is, the Earth. This resistance takes the shape of tsunamis, hurricanes, and other apparently random and arbitrary natural catastrophes. The eco-Buddhist tone is utilized to make connections beyond Tibet. The traditional vision of interdependence and sacred landscapes accords with some Western eco-philosophies that highlight global environmentalist perceptions about human responsibility for moral catastrophes. This may appear as the least convincing part of the film and is the place where the hands of the filmmakers are most visible.

The easy flow of speech and the eloquence with which practitioners explain their religious life without oversimplification testify to the close bonds and trust between the subjects and the filmmakers. Moreover, tantric practitioners interviewed in this film display a serene confidence in their practice. They exhibit a total assumption of its invisible, supernatural dimensions without self-demeaning statements, exuding a feeling of control and displaying excellent didactic skills when explaining their complex worldview to the filmmakers. They fluidly and precisely detail their religious practice and their vision of the inhabited landscapes. It is surprising that such a film could have been made by a Tibetan filmmaker from China, because so many Tibetans have experienced an anxiety caused by China's embrace of modernity. Moreover, celebrating esoteric and especially local Tibetan Buddhism is subject in such modern circumstances to ridicule as obsolete and unscientific—something to be discarded. But this film evidences a clear intention to display and possibly promote a specific religious worldview. This is possible only for someone who has successfully navigated these modern anxieties that confront many educated Tibetans.

This review would not be complete without some minor criticisms. Women are totally absent from this film, although one of the often-noted singularities of the religious practitioners called *sngags pa* is their belonging to the lay world: they marry and pass on their knowledge to their sons. Moreover, the community is portrayed as perfect, as if no conflicts ever affected it. Equally, the tedium of the everyday life of the yogis is seldom shown—possibly because it is not as fascinating as the religious activities portrayed in the film. The filial transmission of knowledge and training of the yogis is not explained. Last, but not least, issues of power and domination are not mentioned. This leads the viewer to suspect that this portrait idealizes a human community which, like any other, must be subject to power conflicts. These conflicts could be local—one could imagine that the authority of particular yogis could be contested or that father/son relationships may more often than not be strained—or global—the Chinese state has wreaked havoc among this community between the late 1950s and 1970s and discourages certain types of religious activities surveyed in the film. A map would have been helpful to situate the location in Tibet.

These minor quibbles, however, should not negate this film's intrinsic value. It offers a lesson on how landscape is understood and how tantric Buddhism is practiced by the *sngags pa* communities even in the present in the northeastern part of Tibet. The complexity, richness, and sophistication of the worldview presented in the film are carefully tackled by its thoughtful structure and didactic approach. Finally, it must be stressed that the film is a sheer pleasure for the senses. This owes a lot to the directors and also to the technical team, as indicated by the credits. The sound director, Dukar Tserang, and Sonthar Gyal, director of photography, are demanding and highly professional Tibetan filmmakers. Their touch is clearly visible in the film

through perfectly shot images and angles that are typical of Sonthar Gyal's cinematography. The well-adapted soundtrack composed by Dukar Tsering is a further mark of quality filmmaking. Director Smyer Yü, an ethnic Chinese himself, can thus be credited with having teamed with some of the most gifted film technicians to be found in Tibet today, another indication of his intimacy with and deep appreciation of what is still often seen, among Han Chinese in China, as a subaltern and backward ethnic group.

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