Holy Hollywood, Tibetman!
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CELEBRITIES

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The Western world watches as Tibetan Buddhism takes center stage in the entertainment industry

No one wants to talk about it, except for those who have taken to activism. For these, speaking out serves their cause, and they do so passionately. Otherwise, the spiritual seekers in the land of celluloid make-believe want to keep secret...well, secret. "There are many, many people interested in Buddhism and Hinduism in Los Angeles," writer and producer Richard Rutowski, who works closely with producer Oliver Stone, told Hinduism Today recently. "But you will never hear anything about it, because it just becomes a subject for discussion in the media. And who wants that? It's a very personal thing."

But the secret is out--for Buddhism, at least--thanks to three major films and some avid lobbying by Tibetan rights advocates, especially Buddhist actor-turned-activist Richard Gere. Kundun and Seven Years in Tibet (two multi-million dollar productions) focus awareness on the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan struggle [see pages 22?23]. A third movie, Gere's Red Corner, takes a purely political tack, aiming to reproach and expose a corrupt Chinese government, in the process revealing in graphic scenes just what the Tibetan people are struggling against. And reports tell of a forthcoming movie by

Steven Seagal and Paul Wagner, The Wind Horse, which portrays modern-day Tibet. Wagner told CNN, "This is a movie that focuses on the value of modern Tibetan culture, and that culture is being destroyed."

Meanwhile, critical and at times harshly cynical journalists are having a field day. It will be a true test of endurance to see if the actors--and the Dharma--can survive unscathed. After all, this is the type of hype news-hounds howl for, and the hot Hollywood media spotlight has made even the boldest blush. Seven Years' star Brad Pitt complained, "You can sit there for an hour, and you can compliment this and feel that way about this positive thing. But if one thing is even borderline negative, that's what's there in the final print, no matter what you say." And Rutowski adds, "I get calls from some of the major magazines. But I don't talk to them anymore because they manipulate and take out of context what you say. You can try to talk about Buddhism to Time magazine, and you can look like an idiot. There is responsible media out there. But many of them are not responsible."

Major magazines have published articles that question the sincerity and motivation of the actors and the very ability of anyone involved in the movie industry even to recognize and understand a spiritual truth. It is no wonder Hollywood is seeking spiritual solace. "Hinduism and Buddhism both contain helpful roadmaps for living a life with some kind of integrity," offers Rutowski. "It seems natural that people in L.A., and particularly in the film business, would be interested in them. There is something very practical about Buddhism--and probably Hinduism too, and about meditation. It is very helpful, if for nothing else, for resolving stress and clarifying who you

are relative to the world around you."

Still, those who have been touched and changed by the Dharma also see some discrepancies. Screenwriter Becky Johnston called her experiences learning about Tibetan Buddhism in the course of working on Seven Years "earth shattering." Yet, in an interview with Tricycle magazine, she cautions not to underestimate the power of the ego. "I would never presume to say who is deluded and who isn't. However, I can tell you it looks pretty weird to me to see a big movie star walking around in Chinese satin robes with a fat cigar in his mouth. A lot of people here in Hollywood have egos the size of a whale. You can't fail to see the irony of putting practice about diminishing the ego through the Hollywood machine, which is really about making the ego more grandiose. The Hollywood machine can turn almost anything into a bloated example of ego running amok."

Of monks and men: For most everyone in the entertainment capital, this is a "non-issue." But surely no one feels that this is old news more than Richard Gere. He became a Buddhist 20 years ago. In April, 1997, on the popular CNN talk show, Larry King Live, he told the viewing world, "I was in my early 20s and life wasn't making sense. I had experimented with a lot of philosophical and spiritual systems, and I felt a great affinity for the Buddhist approach. I think mainly because it left responsibility totally on me for the state of my mind, and the state of my experience of myself and the world, and a very systematic approach to changing all of that--changing my mind, my heart, changing, therefore, the outside world as well."

Gere is without question the most forthright in confiding the role of his religion in his life as well as dedicating a great deal of his resources to its benefit. "I met His Holiness in '81 or '82 in Dharamsala, India," Gere told CNN interviewer Ron Tank in 1996. "As we became closer friends and had an easier dialogue, the Dalai Lama said, 'We really need the help from you Westerners.' And they obviously did."

Gere has met with the Dalai Lama countless times and travels to Dharamsala one to three times a year. He has held rallies, is on the board of the International Campaign for Tibet and has a foundation that supports Tibetan causes, among others. Recently, he has been promoting his cause through exhibitions of photographs he took while in Tibet as well as with a new book of these photos, Pilgrim (Bulfinch Press, New York). The venue for this spring's exhibition, Taipei, itself reveals the provocative approach he is taking. And this attitude is echoed among others. Rutowski comments, "The chit chat and the opinions about it mean nothing. I'm interested in the actions." All this has earned Gere--along with Brad Pitt, Harrison Ford, Melissa Mathison, Jean-Jacques Annaud (director of Seven Years) and Martin Scorsese (director of Kundun)--the distinction of being banned from ever entering China.

Yes, the Harrison Ford on that list is the one who played--among many more significant roles--Indiana Jones in Raiders of the Lost Ark and Temple of Doom. "I support Tibet publicly," Ford told George magazine's Josh Young. "I just don't make it a public issue. I have introduced the Dalai Lama on a couple of occasions, and I have privately supported and am involved in other efforts to redress the inequity of the situation, but I don't actively look for opportunities to advance

these issues." His wife, Melissa Mathison Ford, became deeply involved while researching the script for Kundun. She and her husband met with the Dalai Lama several times to check the accuracy of the story.

But the highly revered Dalai Lama is not this movement's sole support and cause. "Lamas have come here from many different lineages," Rutowski told Hinduism Today. "The Karmapa came here in the 70s and did extensive empowerments--major Black Hat ceremonies all over California. This is not something that's just sprouted in the last two or three years. I mean, the Hindus have been here forever! Paramahansa Yogananda has been here since the '30s or '40s. Back then, it was a more underground relationship, particularly with Hinduism. But it was a strong influence."

And the appearance of monks in the media is not limited to movie theaters. An episode of the hour-long TV drama Dangerous Minds featured a group of Buddhists monks who convinced an angry high-school youth about the power of chastity and non-violence. In that show, the monks created and dissolved a Tibetan sand mandala along with the students, and one of the teachers revealed that he was a Buddhist and taught the angry student basic meditation.

Shrugging aside the cynics, Rutowski affirms that Hollywood's adherents are sincere. "It looks like people are just jumping on a trend," he explains. "But anyone who goes deeper understands that to really do a Buddhist practice takes much more dedication. I don't think it is that easy a path, myself. It takes some serious commitment. It's not just going to church

on Sunday. You have to be ready to really take a look at yourself. Most of the people I know in L.A. are very genuine. Many of them have been into it for a long time. It has just become known recently. But I'm not sure there is any more of a significant number of people interested here than anywhere else. Still, something has changed. It has ripened. Maybe the fruit is being borne now."

EPICS

Disney's Lama

Using Tibetans, not stars, Hollywood daringly tells a true tale of one nation's loss and its living spirit

By Lavina Melwani, New York
lassiwithlavina.com

With a cinematographic helping hand from noted director Martin Scorsese, Walt Disney and Touchstone Pictures have attempted to do for Tibet that which, years ago, Richard Attenborough did for India. Through the latest multi-million dollar Disney-backed motion picture, Kundun, the tragic and heroic historical account of the Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual leader of six million Tibetan Buddhists, has been brought to the attention of America's millions of movie-goers. While Disney's Kundun and Attenborough's Gandhi differ significantly in style and content, the impact of the films in the Western media and populace--spreading awareness of each nation's struggles and generating compassion for their millions of people and their leaders--is identical. An important difference, of course, is that the Dalai Lama lives and the Tibetan people are still in the midst of their struggle.

Kundun, which means "the Presence," is the story of Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, following his divine recognition when he was just two-and-a-half years old up to 1959, when his holy homeland was invaded by the communist hordes of chairman Mao Zedong and he was forced to seek exile in India. Told through the young eyes of His Holiness, Kundun charts his extraordinary growth from a giggling child into a figure who raises the world's consciousness about the Buddhist society of the spirit, the plight of Tibet and the sufferings endured by his people. It is the story of a boy imbued with the insight and wisdom of centuries, whose will proves indomitable, spirit inviolate and compassion inexhaustible. Says author Pico Iyer, "It's an inspiring and remarkably serious film as far from Hollywood as anything I've ever seen. And yet all of us know it is a 28-million-dollar production."

Screenwriter Melissa Mathison Ford, wife of mega action-actor Harrison Ford and perhaps most famous for the film E.T., wrote the screenplay after more than fifteen personal meetings with the Dalai Lama. Intimate details of events which took place when he was a child were confided to Mathison and were incorporated into the film. Initially, Mathison was drawn to the sheer story-telling potential. But soon she began to see deeper dimensions. She explains in an interview with Tricycle magazine, "Anyone who went to work on this movie to do just another job came out of it with an expanded consciousness. My original intention was to write about a little boy who becomes the Dalai Lama. It's a great story. I didn't know anything about the history of Tibet. But as time went on, I met the Dalai Lama, I became politically active for Tibet and became more aware of Buddhism and became conscious of who His Holiness is. That changed the emphasis of the movie. It was no longer about a boy who loses his country, or even

just about a people's loss. It became a story about universal loss. The movie became an act of devotion on my part."

The film is already being hyped as an Oscar contender, although there is nothing glitzy about it. There is not a single Hollywood star in the film! Instead, Kundun uses Tibetan refugees to play the multifarious roles. Not one of them is a professional actor. Yet, Mathison and Scorsese were dually impressed. "These people have an incredible passion for sharing their story with the world," said Scorsese. And Mathison stressed, "You could not find actors who could play these parts the way our cast did. The emotion that is generated from inside of them is amazing. Everyone who plays a part in the film has played a part in the history of Tibet. It's their story, and they all have a stake in it."

The Dalai Lama is played at different stages of his life by four actors. Tenzin Thuthob Tsarong, who plays the 24-year-old Dalai Lama, bears a striking resemblance to His Holiness. Three Tibetans who were part of the Dalai Lama's life in Tibet were consulted on the costume design and religious and ceremonial matters. Since the film could not be shot in Tibet--and India delayed permission to the point of refusal--the landscapes of this forgotten land were recreated in Morocco. The magnificent Potala palace was duplicated from scratch, and everything from the hairstyles to the intricate costumes are faithful to the originals.

The film will certainly inform and influence those who knew or cared little about Tibet's plight earlier. And, in a way reminiscent of Gandhi, it will impress the wisdom and

persistent power of a strictly nonviolent approach to diplomacy. Even as the Chinese armies march into Tibet, the young Kundun refuses to return violence with violence and holds firm to his dharma. But as Mathison told Tricycle, "It's very dangerous to use a movie for a political agenda, or even to think that a movie can lead to political action. But in this case, I think that if people are moved by the past, that they will be moved by the present. I would love for people to leave the theater asking themselves, 'Where is the Dalai Lama now? What's happening in Tibet now? And what can I do?' "

Kundun is a moving experience for everyone, be they Buddhist or not. There is a universality to this story, and viewers come away with a sense of sadness and loss, for something glorious has been interred in Tibet. For the Tibetans, of course, this is a film which pulls at their heartstrings, giving them a glimpse of their lost homeland, which many have seen only in their dreams.

Tenzin Lodoe, who acts in the film and grew up in India, reflects, "This will probably be the closest thing I'm ever going to see of the Tibet that my parents knew. It could be the closest thing to Tibet that I'll ever see in my life. As I left the set on my last day, I wondered when I would walk on the real steps of the Potala."

CINEMATOGRAPHY

Together in Tibet

The boyhood bond that reached beyond borders

Months before Kundun incarnated into US movie theaters, TriStar Pictures delivered their own dramatized encounter with

a young Dalai Lama--Seven Years in Tibet. Although there is some overlap, the two films do not compete. They focus on separate historical figures and tell two unique tales. Kundun's main character is the Dalai Lama, and it's story is his life. Seven Years follows famous Austrian mountaineer Heinrich Harrer through his arduous expedition over the Himalayas, finally landing in the court of His Holiness, where he begins a deeper, spiritual and emotional journey.

In the fall of 1939, Harrer and his countryman Peter Aufschnaiter set out to climb Nanga Parbat, one of the highest peaks in the Himalayas. The self-centered Harrer, whose sole preoccupation was the achievement of fame and glory, would experience a pain-induced emotional awakening on his fantastic journey that would take him from the heights of conquest to the depths of internment in a British prisoner-of-war camp, then from escape and a harrowing two-year trek through the Himalayas to refuge in the mysterious Tibetan city of Lhasa.

As a stranger in a strange land which few Westerners had ever visited, Harrer--who was expertly played by Brad Pitt in a role far from his typical teen heart-throb parts--was befriended by the young Dalai Lama and later was asked to tutor the spiritual leader of millions in English, geography and the ways of the Western world. He would eventually spend seven years in Tibet, during a period of tremendous political upheaval in that country, graced with the friendship and the spiritual enlightenment of the young Dalai Lama. As the deep and abiding bond between these two isolated, lonely people evolved, the selfish and egotistical Harrer experienced selflessness for the first time, allowing him to complete the

emotional transformation which began on his way to Lhasa.

To director Jean-Jacques Annaud, that quest for self-esteem and inner peace is the whole story of the film. He explains, "Harrer is a man who leaves his country very famous, with lots of possessions, but very unhappy. He returns with no possessions but himself. And he is very happy. It was important to understand that money and success meant nothing compared to self respect."

The suspense and drama of Harrer's Himalayan trek is captivating, but the true spiritual heart of the film begins beating when Harrer begins to interact with His Holiness, who is played exceptionally by young Jamyang Wangchuck. Here, in the last half of the film, we feel we are in Lhasa as we witness Harrer struggle to adopt Tibetan religious protocols and to adjust to the entirely religious approach to living. Screen-writer Becky Johnston hopes that, "people will be affected by the power of the place and by the awareness that another culture so antithetical to our own can exist on earth."

Seven Years is a welcome relief from Tinseltown's usually inane offerings. Its spiritual lessons are subtle, yet compelling. They are found in the context of a fascinating tale of true adventure and a one-of-a-kind encounter with a real-life religious legend.