Review

The new reasoning of Gendun Chopel

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Review of: *Angry Monk*, Directed by Luc Schaedler, Switzerland 2005, 97 minutes.

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The first few shots of the documentary film *Angry Monk* effectively shatter the common images of Tibet as either an otherworldly spiritual haven or a communist wasteland inhabited by a broken people. In their place, the juxtapositions of the film's opening sequence suggest a universe similar to those familiar from a certain class of representation of post-Independence India: a world of endlessly mutating forms; of ironic overlap of hi-tech and superstition; an amalgam of the medieval, the bombastically modern and the timeless.

The Swiss director Luc Schaedler attempts to survey 100 years of Tibetan experience, in all its trauma and contradictions. The film is scrupulously free of nostalgia and awestruck overtones, and is unsentimental whether discussing the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, the narrow-mindedness of pre-communist feudal Tibet, or the plight of the modern Tibetan diaspora. *Angry Monk* presupposes that its audience has already heard all about the ancient, exalted and unique culture of Tibet, and the film positions itself as a corrective to the admiring sigh that threatens to keep Tibet forever in a one-dimensional realm, sidelined from the changing map of history and geopolitics.

Schaedler portrays this 'other Tibet' by retracing the steps of Gendun Chopel, a man who died more than a half-century ago, having exerted little influence during his lifetime either in or out of Tibet. He was a brilliant and original scholar, but would have been remembered by few had it not been for his extensive travels in Southasia, and his numerous written accounts of his many years on the road.

By roughly sketching Chopel's life story, *Angry Monk* traverses considerable geographic and intellectual territory, from the remotest reaches of the Tibetan plateau all the way to Sri Lanka; from the provincial monastery where Chopel baffled his fellow monks with his unconventional views, to the turmoil of India's Independence struggle and the formation of the 1940s Chinese-friendly Tibetan Progressive Party. While following this route in the linear manner of a road movie, the film nevertheless weaves an intricate pattern where past and present, personal and public, regional and global reflect each other. As Chopel's dissent from Tibet's political and religious establishment grows, culminating in his imprisonment by the Lhasa government, the film delivers its critique of Tibetan society in the form of an insider's view – an evaluation that otherwise, given Tibet's tribulations and the director's inescapable identity as coloniser, could have come across as rather odious.

Indeed, some have seen *Angry Monk* as an act of violence against an already downtrodden people. The film in no way paints a full picture of Tibet's modern history or Gendun Chopel's life and œuvre,

but it does grant the Tibetans the dignity of being treated as inhabitants of the same planet as the rest of us – a nation among nations, for better and worse.

The main complaint – albeit an unfair one – that can be levelled against *Angry Monk* is this: had it been made by a Tibetan, it would have represented a milestone in Tibet's struggle for a renewed identity.

Hero of our age

Although the figure of Gendun Chopel is somewhat secondary to *Angry Monk*'s agenda, the choice of protagonist is almost self-evident. Chopel's reputation has been growing steadily for several decades; he is now not only widely regarded as one of the most important Tibetan intellectuals of the last century, but has also become a cultural hero for a generation of Tibetans. The Dalai Lama is only one among many admirers who name Gendun Chopel as their intellectual predecessor.

Wherein lay his greatness? One of Schaedler's interviewees expresses it succinctly: *"He introduced a new kind of knowledge to Tibet."* (Schaedler himself excessively dubs Chopel *"the initiator of critical and intellectual thought within Tibetan society."*) Present from an early age, Chopel's faculty for empirical and objective reasoning seems to have matured under the influence of Rahul Sankrityayan, a multilingual traveler, scholar, writer, Marxist and Independence fighter whom Chopel met in Lhasa in 1934, and with whom he subsequently traveled in Tibet, Nepal and India.

Sankrityayan, who had become a Buddhist monk in 1923, introduced Chopel to the circle of the Maha Bodhi Society, the single most important organisation in the early history of the Buddhist modernist movement. The Society worked energetically to revive pilgrimage to recently discovered ancient sites of Buddhist worship in India (such as Bodhgaya), and its ideology emphasised Buddhism's compatibility with modern science and ideals of social equity. Chopel was greatly impressed by the writings and deeds of the Society's then recently deceased founder, the Sri Lankan Anagarika Dharmapala, and adopted the rationalist and ecumenical programme of Dharmapala and his followers.

During his time in India, Chopel started writing articles and letters trying to offer other Tibetans a glimpse of the marvellous things he had seen and learned, and to urge them to study and accept the advantages of "*the new reasoning*", as he called science. He chided them for refusing to recognise that the world is round, and for failing to use rigorous logical reasoning to establish the location of ancient holy sites. (His own guidebook to Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Southasia included a chapter with information on relevant railroad routes and fares.) But his tone was often glum, and in a late poem he summed up his misgivings about the Tibetans' ability to accept change: *"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."*

Chopel, then, was Tibet's first apostle of scientific rationalism – not an achievement that necessarily stirs up more enthusiasm than can be contained in a footnote in a history book. Rather, it is Chopel's romantic sense of loneliness, his taste for iconoclasm and his victimisation by the Tibetan authorities, in conjunction with his novel ways of thinking, that make him an important point of reference so long after his death. For Tibetans dealing with the realities of occupation and exile, and for Tibet a*ficionados* who find few figures in Tibet's cultural pantheon with whom they can identify, Chopel seems to have left a secret trail across the Himalaya. He is a hero not of his own age, but of ours, the age of partial and painful globalisation: 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,"* in the words of *Angry Monk*'s press kit.

One episode, recounted in many versions, relates how Chopel was once approached by a group of Tibetan scholars who wanted to debate points of philosophy with him. When they arrived at the appointed location, they found Chopel smoking a cigarette, and dropping the ashes on the head of a Buddha statue. Chopel, who all his life had been known to be impossible to defeat in debate, proceeded to argue with the group of learned men about whether or not such behaviour was proper. With reportedly impeccable logic, he proved that indeed it was, and his opponents left bewildered and disgusted.

Such stories not only reinforce Chopel's oddball image. They also suggest a much-cherished Tibetan cultural type inherited from Southasian Tantrism: the 'crazy yogi', who transforms his consciousness through spontaneous behaviour and the deliberate breaking of taboos. While some conclude that Chopel was most likely such a highly advanced yogi, others ascribe to him almost superhuman abilities, or consider him a demon in disguise.

No eternal truths

Beyond cosmopolitan or spiritual projections, Chopel was nothing if not a stubborn seeker of truth, a 'wanderer between worlds' of knowledge. With the publication of *The Madman's Middle Way* [1], US Buddhist scholar Donald Lopez, Jr's long-awaited translation of The Adornment for Nagarjuna's Thought, Chopel's treatise on the nature of knowledge, English-language readers will be able to deepen their appreciation of Chopel's synthesising genius. Devoid of the formulaic cool characteristic of virtually all Tibetan philosophic writing, The Adornment's 250 short paragraphs – many quirky and witty – proclaim epistemological and metaphysical insights accumulated during 20 years of monastic studies and more than a decade of travel and research.

The power of Chopel's vision was not to be found merely in exhortations to Tibetans to abolish their old ways and emulate the West; he was, after all, as critical of European colonialism as he was of Tibet's feudalism. It also lay in the complete openness that allowed him to penetrate to the core of the canons of foreign thought he encountered during the course of his travels, and to that of his own intellectual heritage, while stripping away all that was inessential or antiquated. When using logical analysis, Chopel said, one should be like a goldsmith who throws everything – ore, sand and whatever else – into the furnace, confident that in the end only gold will remain.

"The intelligent person should accept, from any source, whatever he sees as well explained, regarding it as if it were his own. Such truths do not belong exclusively to anyone, since they are equally objective for all … as sunlight, for instance, works impersonally for everyone with sight." These words were not written by Gendun Chopel, but by the 7th century philosopher Chandrakirti. They reflect a half-millennium of inter-sectarian debate between Vedist, Jain and Buddhist thinkers, in the course of which the necessity of accepting the ultimate authority of logical reasoning became obvious.

Curiously, however, Chandrakirti is remembered and studied (in particular in Tibet, where his influence is of monumental importance) not for his objectivist pronouncements, but for his resolute and elegantly argued refusal to accept the existence of any objective basis for human beliefs and practices. This might seem inconsistent with the quote above, but for Chandrakirti and other Mahayana Buddhist philosophers, uncertainty is the necessary complement to rationality. For them, there is regularity and causality in the world only inasmuch as the things we experience are interrelated. And where everything is interrelated, there is only flux, with no room for eternal truths and foundations. Therefore, Chandrakirti says, let us use reasoning, and realise that all is fleeting, as in a dream.

It is this heritage – a sort of inverse of modern rationalism – that Gendun Chopel builds on in *The Adornment*. The text's discussions belong to a tradition that is distinctly Tibetan, but the flair and originality of their presentation lack precursors. In *The Madman's Middle Way*, Lopez's detailed commentary and inspired introduction open up the text's many historical and philosophical dimensions to patient readers new to the topic. Until Chopel's extensive travel writings are translated and published, this book is likely to remain the most important non-specialist English-language source for the study of Gendun Chopel and his thought.

P.S.

* From the Himal Southasian:

http://www.himalmag.com/2006/october/review_1.htm

Footnotes

[1] *The Madman's Middle Way:*
Reflections on reality of the modernist Tibetan monk
Gendun Chopel
by Donald S Lopez
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2006.