

TIBET

GONGBOO SAYRUNG (author); LOSANG SODNUM and TSEPAKGYAP (illustrations). *Tibetan Childhood*. <http://www.lulu.com/content/188312>, 2005. 144 pages. Numerous illustrations. Paperback, US\$8.99; download: 1 document, US\$1.58.

GUHRUH (author), TSEPAKGYAP (illustrations). *Jahzong: Tibetan Tribal Hero*. <http://www.lulu.com/content/186844>, 2005. 148 pages. Paperback US\$8.99; PDF (1765 kb), download: 1 document US\$1.50.

PUHUA DONGZHI. *Tibetan Village Wedding*. <http://www.lulu.com/content/208262>. 2005, DVD. (Tibetan soundtrack; English subtitles. 35 minutes. Color.), US\$14.00.

PUHUA DONGZHI. *The Perfection of Wisdom*. <http://www.lulu.com/content/208262>. 2005, DVD. (Tibetan soundtrack; English subtitles. 27 minutes. Color.), US\$14.00.

PUHUA DONGZHI. *Tibetan Woman's Life*. <http://people.lulu.com/users/index.php?fHomepage=236029>. 2005, DVD. (Tibetan soundtrack; English subtitles. 52 minutes. Color.) US\$16.99.

One of the most important debates within the social sciences in the late twentieth century focused on a so-called “crisis of representation.” The essential question was to what extent are academic representations merely canalized by previous texts, by the need to construct a coherent narrative, by assumptions of the author, and by overriding cultural and philosophical substructures. That is, to what extent is representation determined by factors external to what is being represented? Within anthropology, this controversy was reflected in debates about native anthropologists and the emic/etic distinction, later crystallised in *Writing Culture* (1986), and finalized with calls for the “end of anthropology” from such authors as BENTERRAK, MUECKE, and ROE (1996).

This concern with how and why certain representations are produced, has also been reflected within Tibetology. LOPEZ's *Prisoners of Shangrila* and Peter BISHOP's *Dreams of Power* deconstruct Western representations of Tibet by focusing on Western obsession with Tibet as a dumping ground for a myriad of fantasies and imaginings. In these and many other works, the West's fascination with Tibet has been dissected repeatedly. We have now reached a juncture where our fascination with our fascination has virtually eclipsed the possibility of actually talking about Tibet.

Given this intellectual climate, the release of two English language biographies and three ethnographic films by young Tibetans in China, is highly significant. Young author Guhruh has produced *Jahzong: Tibetan Tribal Leader*—an account of his grandfather. Another young author, Gongboo Sayrung, has written *Tibetan Childhood*—an autobiography of his childhood. In addition, film-maker Puhua Dongzhi has produced three short films about different aspects of Tibetan life: *The Perfection of Wisdom*, *Tibetan Village Wedding* and *Tibetan Woman's Life*.

Jahzong is the story of a tribal leader from Ngawa in Sichuan Province. In vivid detail, it lays bare the cycle of conflict that was an important part of traditional Tibetan life. Villages unite to form tribes, and feud with one another in a series of murderous pay-

backs. The author, Guruh, is the grandson of Jahzong, a man born into this world of constant feuds. Guhrh deftly tells the story of his grandfather's rise to power, and how this man strove for peace amongst warring factions in unsentimental and explicit detail reflecting the harsh reality of Tibetan village life at that time. It is devoid of the mild-mannered, pacifist Buddhists so often thrown up as realistic portrayals of Tibetan people. We see instead real, complex people, trapped within a cycle of violence, revenge and fear. Women are sent from the home to draw sniper bullets, children take up guns and men cut off their own hands in desperation. Although this portrayal is a useful antidote to certain of the more common misconceptions about Tibetan people, it would be an insult to the author as an artist to consider the work merely as evidence in anthropological debate. Beyond its use as ballast for lofty imaginations, *Jahzong* is a well-told and highly absorbing story thanks to the author's empathetic eye for his grandfather's character.

The autobiographical *Tibetan Childhood* is a much simpler story that tells the reader of Gongpoo Sayrung's childhood, growing up with his mother and uncle in the Tibetan countryside. It describes his struggles to be accepted by others as a fatherless son, and his difficulties in adapting to school life in town after a village childhood.

While as well written as *Jahzong*, *Tibetan Childhood* lacks the sense of excitement that accompanies Guhrh's narrative. Certain themes and scenes are repeated--Gongpoo Sayrung seems to be constantly clutching his uncle's finger, and is ceaselessly being told about being a real man. However, the wealth of detail about Tibetan rural life offered by the book provides enough novelty to keep the reader motivated to turn pages.

Puhua Dongzhi's movies give another window into the Tibetan world from a Tibetan perspective. *The Perfection of Wisdom* follows Puhua Dongzhi's brother during a monastic ritual in which he receives a degree known as the Perfection of Wisdom.

Tibetan Village Wedding documents a traditional wedding in a Tibetan village in Xunhua Salar Autonomous County, Haidong Region, Qinghai Province, PR China.

The real strength in both of these films is the "fly on the wall" perspective that the filmmaker gives the viewer. Puhua Dongzhi is intimately involved with the participants of both films. He gets very close to everything that is occurring, whilst remaining seemingly invisible. This gives viewers a rare first-person perspective. The weakness of these films is their somewhat amateurish quality. Some scenes are lost in darkness while others are overexposed. Despite these technical issues, the films are highly valuable as ethnographic documents, providing rich and intimate detail. In particular, *Tibetan Village Wedding* provides an excellent opportunity to observe certain of the many traditional Tibetan wedding songs, and how they relate to the general unfolding of the ceremony.

Puhua Dongzhi's next film, *Tibetan Woman's Life*, is a much more sophisticated and developed work. A definite cinematic aesthetic emerges in this film, and makes it more than simply a work of ethnographic documentation. Of particular note is Puhua Dongzhi's use of long and distant shots imparting a definite rhythm to the film. *Tibetan Woman's Life* shows a day in the life of a Tibetan woman in an agricultural village, from sunrise to sunset. Again, Puhua Dongzhi is intimately associated with all the "cast" of the film, and so once more he is able to offer a view from the standpoint of near invisibility. A real development in this film is that we hear the subject speak for the first time. In the first two films, Puhua Dongzhi glosses everything that happens or is written in English subtitles. In *Tibetan Woman's Life*, although most of the action and dialogue are glossed, the last word, literally, belongs to the protagonist, who reflects on her life as a rural Tibetan woman. This significant development allows the viewer much more insight into the subject.

As a matter of interest, I showed this film to a group of female Tibetan college students, and their comments were as consistent as they were poignant. They first comment-

ed that if the filmmaker had been a woman, it would have allowed a more critical view of a Tibetan woman's life, rather than the merely descriptive account that the film offers. Secondly, the students were concerned that the film would be taken as somehow representative of all Tibetan women's lives. Each student could point out a multitude of differences between their life and this woman's—even students from the same county, but especially women from nomad areas. The students' comments demonstrate that even though an emic/etic divide exists between different cultures, these fissures also run through every culture as well.

There is, indeed, a real danger that *Tibetan Woman's Life* will be taken by many as an iconographic 'native' insight into Tibetan life. This danger is equally present for all of these works. Whilst they do represent a vision that significantly differs and is less encumbered than Western representations of Tibet, they are by no means value free. What these books and films offer is a chance to re-envision, in a closer, more sensitive, and more human way, a part of the world and a group of people. Tibet has long been used as a malleable, imaginary space that serves the needs only of those doing the describing, rather than the people they are talking about. These books and films offer a refreshing alternative to such manipulative literature.

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