
Life and 'Reincarnation' in Tibet

By Tom Russo

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A son's ambivalence about his father's wish that he carry on the family business isn't new territory for film, as those requisite holiday viewings of "It's a Wonderful Life" just reminded us yet again. But what's different about the way this theme plays out in Jennifer Fox's documentary "My Reincarnation" is the people it involves: Tibetan Buddhist spiritual master Chögyal Namkhai Norbu and Yeshe, his Western-born, half-Italian son.

Recognized from birth as the reincarnation of a famed lama, Yeshe wants none of that legacy. It's a familiar domestic cold war, but one communicated partly through Buddhist philosophizing about life's impermanence.

Fox ("Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman") began recording the film's impressive 20-year narrative back in 1989, during a stint as an informal assistant to Norbu. The portrait she initially captures is of a personable, respected guru on the rise and a pretty typical youth irked by his father's attention to followers over family. Not that Yeshe is inclined to embrace his legacy to change that; he'd rather be a photographer or a musician than assume the role seen for him by Norbu, not to mention predestination. "I'm here, I'm living," Yeshe says. "I don't want to be the shadows of something, of someone."

As the film moves ahead 13 years, then an additional six, things begin to change. Yeshe, now a family man with a business career, gradually comes to accept that maybe following his father's path really is his calling. It's partly left to the viewer to decide whether the explanation is maturation, circumstance, destiny, Norbu's faltering health, or some combination. (Whichever, the visual payoff is a simply shot sequence in Tibet that's as modestly cinematic as the film's Italian scenery.)

The story and settings hold interest throughout, but at times the very lack of emotional connection that Yeshe laments in his father seems to hinder the film. Yeshe casually notes that he doesn't fully know what his new outlook means to Norbu - and neither do we. And while Fox does nice work, say, conveying the essence of Buddhist ceremony without over-elaborating, clarity is an issue elsewhere. We get some quick words from Yeshe about his spiritual epiphany, but it feels as though there's more to be said.

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