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# Review: "My Reincarnation" at the Webster University Film Series

BY ANDREW WYATT



American director Jennifer Fox's new documentary feature, *My Reincarnation*, is a product of the sort of long-term effort and passion that few film-makers seem capable of—or interested in—sustaining. (Only *Up* documentary series creator Michael Apted springs to mind as a prominent exception.) Shot over the course of twenty years by Fox herself, *My Reincarnation* presents a bracingly personal depiction of the lives of exiled Tibetan Buddhist master Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche and his Italian-born son, Yeshi. Fox was a nascent film-maker and Buddhist student when she began capturing footage of Namkhai Norbu and his family with a consumer-grade camera in 1988, quietly preserving everyday minutiae and private moments in a *vérité* style. Fox returned to visit with both the master and the son at several points over the following two decades, and gradually *My Reincarnation* emerged.

Contrary to the director's early ambitions, the resulting film is not focused primarily on Namkhai Norbu's efforts to preserve and disseminate Tibetan Buddhist traditions in the West, although those efforts provide a conspicuous backdrop and secondary narrative. The film's central story is one of a convoluted and often-exasperating parent-child relationship, a story in which Yeshi assumes the role of the proverbial prodigal son. The film proffers an unusually sustained depiction of emotional and spiritual evolution, where the narrative's most striking quality is the sheer ordinariness of its contours. Yeshi's experiences in the shadow of his sainted father are revealed as comparable to the travails of any adult child struggling to simultaneously break free from and connect with a parent.

My Reincarnation

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Winifred Moore Auditorium  
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*My Reincarnation* ushers the viewer into Namkhai Norbu's world after the man has already attained significant renown as a Buddhist teacher in the West, but it offers some brief context regarding his early life. Recognized from a young age as the reincarnation of high-ranking Buddhist lamas, he spent much of his youth studying in monasteries under the tutelage of contemporary religious luminaries. Following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, he relocated to Italy to teach Tibetan language and literature, and there he married an Italian woman and had two children. In the 1970s, Namkhai Norbu began a concerted effort to bring Tibetan Buddhist religious teachings to a Western audience, and by the time of Fox's entry into the story, he is attracting large crowds to his lectures and workshops.

While a 59-year-old Namkhai Norbu converses with rapt students and hangers-on, the camera catches glimpses of 18-year-old eldest son Yeshi lurking on the periphery. Skinny and acne-speckled, he possesses enormous, soulful eyes that convey his dissatisfaction long before we hear him confess as much in frank, melancholy interviews. He dreams of a "common" life characterized by a successful secular career and a close-knit family, ambitions complicated by his designation as a reincarnated master in his own right. The fact that his aspirations represent a mirror image of his revered, emotionally distant father does not seem lost on Yeshi, nor does it lessen his agitation to escape the destiny that has been foisted upon him.

At the heart of *My Reincarnation* is an admittedly well-worn, even mildewy tale of parent-child disconnection and reconciliation. However, the significant span of real-world time preserved in the film's footage lends this tale credibility and resonance. Narrative developments that would be unforgivably hackneyed in a fictional feature become appealingly authentic when captured in the lives of real people using a twenty-year exposure. One hesitates to call *My Reincarnation* good cinema—the deliberate, do-it-yourself crudity of Fox's formal approach is stubbornly television-like—but there is something undeniably engaging about the director's patient, perceptive storytelling. Early in the film, she seems to discern that the Westernized, ambivalent Yeshi contains the promise of a genuine character arc, compared to the genial but unfathomable Namkhai Norbu, whose eyes are perpetually searching the horizon for transcendent truths. The son's gradual progression from restless, resentful youth to middle-aged man who embraces the role of Buddhist teacher represents an evolution that is at once entirely unsurprising and altogether fascinating to witness.

If there is one element of *My Reincarnation* that invites the greatest reservation, it is the inherently conservative character of Yeshi's journey, which reinforces a suspect concept of religious destiny. While not exactly a work of Buddhist apologetics, the film pointedly refuses to interrogate the woollier aspects of Namkhai Norbu's self-help mini-empire. Fox's reluctance to engage with either the troublesome aspects of Buddhism's religious teachings or the faith's watered-down Western commodification lends an unfortunate streak of true-believer credulity to an otherwise a compelling, unique record of familial angst.

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