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International Buddhist Film Festival

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Imagine this: you're raised as an ordinary kid in Iowa or Nova Scotia or Rome. Like other kids, you drink, go to the movies, try to pick up girls... with one major difference. You're also the chosen holy successor of a high-ranking Buddhist lama.

Such are the intensely personal predicaments of Gesar Mukpo, Yeshe Norbu and a startling number of other young subjects depicted in not one but three feature-length films included in this year's International Buddhist Film Festival. The annual event, which debuts in Hong Kong from March 16 to May 12 under the joint auspices of the IBFF, Asia Society Hong Kong Center and the Robert HN Ho Family Foundation, features 13 films approaching Buddhist themes from a variety of angles.

The films, both fictional and documentary, come from nine different countries and cover a wide spectrum – from a stop-motion depiction of the arrival of Buddhism in Japan to a drama about struggling Nepalese nuns and a thrilling murder-mystery set in a Thai monastery. But a surprising number of the entries are particularly concerned with the complicated relationship between the ancient practice of Buddhism and its much younger Western cousin, the diaspora.

One notable member of this diaspora was the

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controversial Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the 11th

Trugpa tulku and the founder of the Western Buddhist

sect. Shan of two films at

the festival as Sign up

his father's fo

decided to turn his story into a documentary, Tulku. "The

initial struggle was how does this have some kind of

message that's relevant and meaningful to people who

aren't in my exact same situation?," says Mukpo, who

believes the themes explored in Tulku have proved to be

very universal. "A lot of traditions have been abandoned

by youths around the world. Young people are trying to

hash out their own values and show the older generation

that it's okay to change. To go back to where you came

from and talk to your relatives is always a meaningful

experience, no matter where you're from."

Jennifer Fox directs My Reincarnation, which follows the 20-year struggle of Yoshi Norbu, son of high Tibetan Buddhist Master Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, to come to terms with his legacy. The film has been screened in 52 American cities, as well as in Germany and Switzerland, and was recently selected as the lead documentary in an upcoming PBS series on faith. Like Mukpo, Fox was deeply invested in articulating the universality of the subject. She says: "The reason the film took 20 years to make is that I was looking for a story container that would make it accessible to anyone – and that is the father-son story. You don't need to be a Buddhist to recognise that. It's the classic story of the prodigal son. I wasn't interested in making a film for the converted. I was only interested in making a film that would reach out to other people – not to teach but to give them contact with some of these valuable teachings."

The 13 films showcased in the festival cover a vast area of time and space, yet what unites them as a cohesive series is their consistent dedication to sharing the profound set of principles that sustain the Buddhist tradition.

Maddie Gressel

International Buddhist Film Festival 2012 Hong Kong

runs from Mar 16-May 12 at Asia Society Hong Kong Center's Miller Theater. For more details, visit www.asiasociety.org/IBFF.

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