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MOVIE REVIEW

Documentary on Tibet is sweeping and devastating

Footage in "Cry of the Snow Lion" shows strength and persistence in the wake of brutality.

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"Tibet: Cry of the Snow Lion," the most comprehensive and devastating documentary yet on that tragic country, ends with a note of optimism from the Dalai Lama in the face of the suffering and oppression of his people. However, the breadth and depth that director Tom Peosay and writers Sue Peosay and Victoria Mudd have brought to their film suggest how bleak the prospects really are for the Tibetan people. Since the Chinese invaded Tibet, which has a population of 6 million, in the wake of the Communist Revolution more than half a century ago, an estimated 1.2 million Tibetans have died in the course of a brutal occupation, and approximately 3,000 people risk their lives every year hiking over the Himalayas to escape.

The filmmakers repeatedly make the point that whoever controls Tibet — vast, remote, yet strategically located and rich in natural resources — dominates Asia, and in that light it is understandable that China would hold on to it so tightly. Over the course of a decade the filmmakers made nine trips to Tibet, working under near-constant surveillance. The picture that emerges from what they were able to photograph and glean from 38 interviewees suggests strongly that the Chinese are involved in nothing less than genocide. Archival images of Chinese brutality, accounts of unspeakable torture and images of the widespread destruction of Tibet's architectural, religious and cultural heritage are considerably more extensive than in previous documentaries.

The portrait of present-day Lhasa is especially disheart-



ening — it's akin to witnessing the fall of Babylon.

The Chinese may be restoring the legendary Potala Palace — and charging admission to even Tibetans — but at its base is a big Mobil Oil sign. Entire historic neighborhoods are being bulldozed for ugly retail and residential structures to accommodate the ongoing incursion of Chinese, while Tibetans are forced into slums and youths are unable to get jobs. Metropolitan Lhasa is bustling and garish — and boasts a red-light district with more than 600 brothels.

Yet "Tibet" asserts the nurturing strength and persistence of Tibetan Buddhism even under Chinese scrutiny — and the systematic looting and destruction of 6,000 monasteries, repositories of treasures of art, culture and learning. In exile the Dalai Lama has emerged as a world spiritual leader and he has ensured the preservation of Tibetan culture in Dharamsala, India, where Tibetans have managed to send 11,000 of their children, with little hope that they will see them again.

In the course of this harrowing and illuminating film, the central question emerges as to whether a religion that preaches nonviolence and compassion can prevail over the overwhelming force of the market economy and international trade, which makes the U.S. such a huge consumer of Chinese goods. The best, most realistic assessment of the plight of the Tibetan people is made by an observer who remarks that the Chinese must free themselves before they can free the Tibetans. ♦