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'TIBET: CRY OF THE SNOW LION'



Documentary. Directed by Tom Peosay. Written by Sue Peosay and Victoria Mudd. (Not rated. 100 minutes. At the Opera Plaza and Act One and Two in Berkeley.)

Documentaries can be informative, entertaining and provocative, but rare is the documentary that makes you feel so engaged (and enraged) that it prompts you to action somehow. "Tibet: Cry of the Snow Lion" is that kind of film -- at least for anyone who doesn't know much about the brutal history of the Himalayan land.

Since 1950, when China sent troops to subdue the formerly independent state, Tibetans have lived under the shadow of Beijing, subjugated by a military authority that has banned the Tibetan language in schools, banned photos of the Dalai Lama, arrested and tortured dissident monks, killed thousands and repopulated the region with non-Tibetan Chinese. Jeane Kirkpatrick, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, says in the documentary that "ethnic cleansing has been under way for 20 years" in Tibet.

Using archival footage and previously unseen still photos, filmmaker Tom Peosay shows some of this violence, including scenes of monks being kicked, hit with rifle butts and forced to wear torture implements. Interviews with monks who fled Tibet for India and other countries give a tearful voice to anguished Tibetans. Their plight was made worse, Peosay reminds us, by their betrayal at the hands of Washington, which financed an army of Tibetan rebels for years (via the CIA) before the Nixon administration pulled the plug in an effort to appease Mao Zedong.

What gives Tibetans hope is their Buddhist religion (Peosay shows Tibetans praying and doing rituals in shrines that are visually breathtaking), their commitment to a nonviolent solution and their resolve (symbolized by the Dalai Lama, Tibetans' spiritual leader) to keep bringing their cause to the world's attention. Peosay, who spent 10 years making the documentary, includes the comments of Chinese diplomats who castigate the Dalai Lama and defend Beijing's handling of Tibet -- but these diplomats' strained rationalizations are in stark contrast to the powerful pleas of Tibetans who Peosay shows protesting for a "Free Tibet."

"Tibet: Cry of the Snow Lion" features a phalanx of well-known Americans who advocate for Tibet, including Martin Sheen, who narrates the film; Susan Sarandon and Ed Harris, who do some of the voice-overs; and the group R.E.M., which is seen doing a benefit concert. As "Tibet" is released around the United States, it will undoubtedly inspire some viewers to join Sheen, Sarandon, Harris and R.E.M. in the Tibet movement. At a minimum, "Tibet" will change its audiences' perception of a state that has been blessed with beauty and majestic peaks and cursed with a strategic location that made it coveted by rulers from Mongolia, Britain, China and other countries. The history of Tibet is both sad and inspiring.

Advisory: This film contains some strong language and scenes of disturbing violence.-- Jonathan Curiel