



October 1998

Orientalist Commercializations: Tibetan Buddhism in American Popular Film

Eve Mullen

Mississippi State University, elm67@ra.msstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

Recommended Citation

Mullen, Eve (1998) "Orientalist Commercializations: Tibetan Buddhism in American Popular Film," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol2/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Orientalist Commercializations: Tibetan Buddhism in American Popular Film

Abstract

Many contemporary American popular films are presenting us with particular views of Tibetan Buddhism and culture. Unfortunately, the views these movies present are often misleading. In this essay I will identify four false characterizations of Tibetan Buddhism, as described by Tibetologist Donald Lopez, characterizations that have been refuted by post-colonial scholarship. I will then show how these misleading characterizations make their way into three contemporary films, *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Kundun* and *Little Buddha*. Finally, I will offer an explanation for the American fascination with Tibet as Tibetan culture is represented in these films.

Tibetan religion and culture are experiencing an unparalleled popularity. Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan history are commonly the subjects of Hollywood films. Being in the American spotlight, however, means being subject to the sound byte culture in which we live. Quick quotables, rapid montages of images, and the crafting of simple stories are commonplace as the manners in which media consumers in America are accustomed to receiving information both in contexts of fictional entertainment and nonfictional news. Simplified, deceptive constructions of Tibet permeate our culture. To what ends are such presentations crafted? Why is the American public so accepting of these new craftings, and why do we now fall prey to the orientalism of the past and salvage paradigms refuted by post-colonial scholarship decades ago? To begin to answer these questions, this paper will: first, examine new age orientalism in the case of Tibet as Tibetologist Donald Lopez characterizes it; second, explore orientalist themes in the commercialization of Tibetan Buddhism in the American films *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Kundun* and *Little Buddha*; and third, offer an explication based on a psychological model of the commercial creators of such popularizations and the American society which consumes them.

We are not the first to witness crafted presentations of Tibetan culture. James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* was first published in 1933 at a time of violent upheaval in the Western world. The extreme popularity of the novel and subsequent

film of 1936 indicates a wish existing among the people at that time: it is no surprise that a down-spiraling civilization faced with its own horrors and impending world war would embrace a story of an idyllic, utopian civilization peacefully hidden among the Himalayas, where both social and physical ills were nonexistent and where eternally youthful citizens knew nothing of the waste brought on by violence. This civilization was Hilton's Shangri-La, a fictional land reflecting Hilton's understanding of the Tibetan Shambhala as a mysterious nation of esoteric people who occupy a "hidden" region on the highest plateau in the world. Now, in the last decade of our century, we again see the fantasy land of Shangri-La and nostalgia for a lost culture making popular appearances, this time not in the context of a Western world war, but amidst the near-extinction of Tibetan culture itself. Films focusing on Tibetan culture and history such as *Little Buddha*, *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun* provide movie-goers with Shangri-La. We are shown perfect Tibetan heroes and despicable Chinese villains. The lamas, Tibetan Buddhist monks, often are portrayed as beatifically smiling, superhuman beings. And the Westerners featured in our popular stories are inevitably depicted as authority figures, heroically rescuing the doomed culture of Tibet. To what wish in ourselves do these phenomena speak today?

Orientalism is defined briefly as Western distortions, purposeful or not, of Eastern traditions and culture, distortions which ultimately can be patronizing or

damaging to the studied cultures. In the field of religion, orientalism often is considered a dead topic, its scholarly perpetrators, inaccurate portrayals and gross generalizations having been denounced starting decades ago in post-colonial scholarship. In "New Age Orientalism: The Case of Tibet" written for *Tibetan Review* in May, 1994, renowned Tibetologist Donald Lopez, however, recognizes persisting elements of orientalism in the field and describes what he calls "new age orientalism" in *Tibetology* (16-20). In order to identify in contemporary American film the new age orientalism of which Lopez speaks, Lopez's four clearly defined characteristics of orientalism in scholarly writings are essential. First is the classic orientalist play of opposites, in which Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, emerging as objects of European and American fantasy, are treated as polluted, derivative and even demonic in opposition to an original root tradition, in this case the ancient Sanskrit texts of India, pure, pristine, authentic and holy. Western scholars projected the West's own past history onto these objects of study, thus setting up the Indian past as something to be recovered and salvaged as valuable to the West. The East's past was assumed to represent a pristine version of the West, resulting in what James Clifford and Edward Said identify as "nostalgia for ourselves." This play of opposites still operates in new age orientalism; the positions, however, are changed, creating anew the fantasy land of Shangri-La. Tibet becomes the perfect civilization, pristine, timeless, harmonious and holy as the home of true Buddhism and a true utopia. The Tibetan people become superhuman, perfect citizens under

a perfect leader. The new opposition becomes China the invader, godless and demonic, despotic and polluted. Chinese soldiers become subhuman murderers following the orders of subhuman leaders. The rescue roles are still in place, as well. However, this time the contemporary goal is not the rescue of the East for the West, but the rescue of Tibet from China, the East from the East.

The second of Lopez's characteristics of orientalism in the case of Tibet is the self-aggrandizing of the rescuers. The Tibetans themselves become voiceless non-agents in their own struggle for independence or survival. Instead, the Western rescuers are allowed to be the heroes of the Tibetan cause, edifying the American self-portrait as one of a strong, moral champion nation in which equality and justice are forever upheld. As this portrait raises western heroes, it damagingly lowers the Tibetans to a position of monopolized voicelessness.

Aggrandizement of the rescuers facilitates the third and fourth of Lopez's characteristics for orientalism; third is the gaining of authority or control over Tibet, and fourth is the justification of that authority. The orientalist at once transforms the Tibetan people into non-agents and points to their non-agency as justification for taking control. In general terms, this means control over Tibetan culture, religion, art, and history as areas of academic study and of philanthropic preservation and control over Tibetan survival in exile. Yet this process is not limited to academe and philanthropy. Examples of new age orientalism pervade

contemporary American films in which Tibetan history, images of Tibet, and the Tibetan people are scrutinized and utilized. Let us now turn to the most visible and popular of these films, *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Kundun* and *Little Buddha*.

All of Lopez's characteristics of new age orientalism are found in recent feature films focusing on Tibetan religion and history. American films are perfect mediums through which to project, both literally and psychologically, the orientalist play of opposites, rescue paradigm, Western authority over the East, and the justification of that authority. 1997's *Seven Years in Tibet*¹ recounts of the story of Heinrich Harrer's years in Tibet and actually parallels the history of Tibet-focused orientalism. When Harrer first enters the country, he exhibits the behavior of an authoritative father to the Tibetans' childlike state. Tibetans are depicted as innocent primitives without social graces, education or guile. They stick out their tongues at the outsider Harrer, as children on a playground might taunt a new classmate. The audience laughs at their lack of technology, automobiles, and especially movie theaters. Harrer is an arrogant Aryan, barely tolerant of having to exist in this primitive society, his only other option the Indian prison from which he just escaped. The play of opposites here is that of classic orientalism: Tibet is scorned as only an intermediate means to salvation for the West, in Harrer's case, as a temporary hindrance to finding final escape back to Austria. As the story progresses, Harrer takes control and seemingly teaches the Tibetans all they need

to know: he befriends the boy Dalai Lama and becomes his educator, teaching him about the outside world and the wonders and wars it holds. The audience later discovers that Harrer's teachings are vital for the regent's preparation against the Chinese invasion. For short periods of time, he rescues the Dalai Lama from the confines of the Lhasa Potala and the primitive religion that has imprisoned him there. And, yes, Harrer even builds him a movie theater.

Harrer, however, is later humbled. The psychological play unfolding in the character of Harrer revolves around his abandonment of his child, a son he does not know. China's invasion of Tibet and Tibet's struggle to survive are only the backdrops for the main events of Harrer's emotional evolution and his return to Europe. Harrer is humbled when the play of opposites suddenly changes: in the turning point of the film, the boy Dalai Lama recognizes the Westerner's longing to see in him his abandoned son. Harrer is told that he was never a father, nor will he ever be a father to him. Harrer is reduced to tears by the boy's words, his vulnerable, childlike state now overseen by Tibetan authority and control, embodied in the young Tibetan ruler and exemplified in his very adult speech. Harrer's inner scars, exposed by the boy regent, begin to be healed. Here, Tibet becomes the exalted, valuable culture in contrast to the murderous, demonic China. The Westerner who has played his part in the defense of pristine Tibet is cured of his emotional ills by Tibet's wisdom and can now return a whole man to his own life in Europe. And we,

the audience, have experienced one Westerner's rescue of Tibetan culture, now immortally archived in written text and Technicolor.

Consider Martin Scorsese's *Kundun*² a depiction of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's discovery, installment, and eventual flight to India after the Chinese invasion. Scorsese's film is, uncharacteristically for Scorsese, respectful of the religious and political institutions it depicts. As Philadelphia film critic Cindy Fuchs writes:

Where most previous Scorsese films took dead aim at various social and religious institutions, expectations or rituals, *Kundun*'s attitude is absolutely un-ironic: the Dalai Lama is good, the Chinese are bad, the spiritual life is unfathomable, and the material life is fraught with peril.³

The most ironic and pessimistic of directors has succumbed to the fantasy of utopian Tibet and her perfect leader. He even depicts the rats in the Potala as cute, even though the Dalai Lama remembered them as frightening in his autobiography on which the original *Kundun* script was based. Scorsese pans sweeping landscapes to the meditative music of Philip Glass; the characters quote Buddhist texts, often incomprehensible to American, non-Buddhist audiences. Scorsese shows us a faceless China, her waves of soldiers led by a Mao played with a creepy villainy bordering on pedophilia toward the young Dalai Lama and his innocent nation. Protagonists and antagonists, good guys and villains, are firmly established. He depicts the Dalai Lama as a perfect being, echoing the orientalist's projection of the

superhuman, that is, perfect citizens under a perfect leader. The Tibetan people generally recognize the Dalai Lama as an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara, a perfected being compassionately returning again and again to lead the Tibetan people, but Scorsese's depiction of the regent is still troubling to K. Togden, a Tibetan monk living in San Francisco. Consider this excerpt from Togden's letter to the quarterly magazine *Tricycle*, *The Buddhist Review*.

Like the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, I am a Buddhist monk who likes movies. I am also a practitioner of the deity Dorje Shugden, banned by His Holiness in 1996. I believe Hollywood's mythification of Tibet is influencing Westerners' views and attitudes toward this ban... What we are getting with *Kundun* is a perfectly pre-packaged image for Western consumption, presumably to advance the Tibetan cause... But now there is something of even greater concern happening as dharma practitioners are blinded by this image of His Holiness the Dalai Lama as god-king, the infallible savior, the last hope. This is a far cry from Buddha's advice to discriminating wisdom as our guiding light. As demonstrated by history, the consequences of such blind faith are disastrous, especially when placed upon someone who is a political leader.⁴

This Tibetan Buddhist monk, fired by the current Dorje Shugden debate, calls for "discriminating wisdom" to end the unrealistic portrayals of both Tibet and her leader in Hollywood, portrayals which affect everyone, including established dharma practitioners. In an attempt to bring levity to this complaint, the editors of *Tricycle* placed this letter under the heading, "Dalaiwood." Togden's complaint is a serious one, however. The initial motivation of the filmmakers, he presumes, is to aid in the Tibetan cause, perhaps to raise awareness about human rights abuses against the Tibetans. But Togden warns against the idealizations the filmmakers

rely upon because of the eventual damage they cause. They misrepresent their subject matter in order to fit the desires of audiences, and they further warp audiences' sensibilities regarding the reality of the subject matter. Togden's letter continues:

...as William Ellison correctly pointed out in your Winter 1997 issue, "pragmatic exiles and scholars tell us that the Real Tibet is gone, that it's too late for Hollywood to save Tibet, that the Chinese devastation is irreversible." In fact, the "Tibetan cause" as presented to us is much like the Titanic, doomed from the beginning...audiences are enjoying *Titanic* -- I believe much more than they will *Kundun*. Although *Titanic* contains a lot of fantasy and romance, it is much more honest..the movies about Tibet are not honest -- they purposely create a make-believe reality. If we fall for it, we know we are going to be disappointed in the end, sooner or later. Such sufferings arise from attachment and ignorance; the law of karma taught by Buddha is unforgiving and relentless.

The romanticization Togden recognizes is ultimately disappointing to people and defeating to any Tibetan cause that originally may have motivated the filmmakers. Filmmakers can market a portrayal of the Dalai Lama as perfect because audiences crave this portrayal. As journalist Pico Iyer once quipped, "Buddhism is caught between a halo and a light bulb...Will pop culture drag down Buddhism before Buddhism can raise up pop culture?"⁵

Will sensibilities change? Tibet may lose its place between our imposed fantasy of a lost utopia and the spotlight of Hollywood; the public American marketers rely upon now may move onto what the public sees as the next fad. Perhaps a new play of opposites elsewhere in the world will win the people's hearts

and replace the old, tired play of opposites between China and Tibet. The true horrors of history become film mythology, a passing interest on movie screens and CNN's Hollywood Minute. In the cases of both *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun*, the horrors of the Chinese invasion of Tibet nearly did not make it onto film at all. China did not allow filming in Tibet or the Himalayas and released a list of Hollywood influentials banned from China. Included in the list were the films' screenwriters, stars and directors. Not helping matters was Disney's president, Michael Eisner who, in response to China's threat of boycotting Disney because of the production *Kundun*, attempted to smooth things over by likening China's treatment of Tibet to the United States' treatment of Alaska.⁶ Togden's Buddhist warnings of karmic law in such matters of blurring reality for one's own short term goals are grounded, and his final plea is moving: "But this isn't another Hollywood movie. This is our reality, and it demands from us our commitment to freedom rather than to fantasy."

If we delve further into our American mythological ideals, we do find the attempt to rescue Tibetan culture heroic. It is this one, classic ideal of America as the land of the free, and as the land of the strong willing to fight in order to free the world from injustice, that is most evident in American activism surrounding the Tibetan cause. As Lopez points out, rescuers also become authority: in their roles as heroes, they assume control in order to be effective. With this control, however,

comes an appropriation of the culture being saved, reflected in the selective salvaging of artifacts and texts the authoritative rescuer has deemed worthy of being saved. And part of this control is the crafting of history to suit one's own goals and to motivate others. As we have seen, Hollywood's expert story-tellers sculpt the Tibetan story to fit specific expectations and agendas of American pop culture.

Little Buddha,⁷ starring Keanu Reeves as Gautama himself, offers another story of Western rescuers, this time in the form of a white, upper middle class, nuclear family. The film alternates between the story of Gautama Buddha's life in the sixth century, B.C.E., and the story of a contemporary west coast family whose small son is recognized by Tibetan monks living in the United States as the possible reincarnation of an important lama. As Reeves acts out the sometimes supernatural trials and victories of the Buddha, the small boy's parents make the difficult decision to let their son go abroad to take part in a foreign, distant Buddhist world. With their decision, and the boy's agreement, the Tibetan lama may be restored to his pupils who have waited years for his return. The story, however, ends not with the American boy being installed in the position. Other children from the distant Buddhist world win out in the reincarnation competition. The boy returns to his west coast home. This ending does not correspond with the rest of the film's drama. The audience is pulled into carefully crafted, rising suspense, only to be told that the boy is actually not the incarnated lama. The notable lack of an effective

denouement is indicative of the limits of our American fantasy of Shangri-La: Tibet as a distant, fantasy utopia is only a place in which to escape for a short time, and it is a place which must be kept distant for the fantasy to perpetuate. We like the idea of a Shangri-La that can provide a space where incarnations and magical events, such as those of the Buddha's life story, can exist, and we like to dream of that space, but we are not so open to staying there. It is nice to visit a nonmaterialist culture of selflessness, but it is nicer to return home to our comfortable luxuries and familiar individualism.

For proof of this selective acceptance of Tibetan Buddhism, consider a recent Oprah Winfrey interview with Carolyn Massey, the Seattle mother who gave up her son as the incarnation of a lama.⁸ Massey, a Tibetan Buddhist herself, lives in Seattle while her six year old son lives in a Nepalese monastery. This separation of mother and child is common to Tibetan monastery life, in which children installed as reborn teachers live an austere life of study from a very early age. While American audiences romanticize this life when Tibetans are the subjects, as in *Kundun* or *Seven Years...*, they flinch at it when the subject becomes an American child. Massey, even with the support of Winfrey, who continually called for open mindedness from her audience, was met with an onslaught of irate audience members, voicing their horror at Massey's "irresponsibility" and "lack of love and support" for her son. Massey's sister spoke angrily about her conversion from

Catholicism and her "cop out" from motherhood. Others during the hour chastised Massey for her distance from her son, with one person asking, "Why can't she move there and be with her son and give up her American materialism, too?" Our zeal for Tibet, or for our preconception of it, then, is not unlimited. Giving up materialism is a virtue we enjoy seeing in Tibetan culture, even one that satisfies or renews us, but is not one we approve of for ourselves. To toy with the idea of a nonmaterialist culture is romantic and entertaining. To act upon this idea for ourselves, however, is downright un-American.

Thus far we have discussed the variations on the themes and usages of the Shangri-La fantasy in America. We have analyzed the details of these usages and the general reasons behind their popularity in American film. I would like to offer a psychological model to aid in explaining the main root of our fascination with Tibet, a root that lies deeper within our psyche as a nation. If Westerners in 1933 embraced Hilton's Shangri-La to escape from the horrors of world war, for what similar ill do we seek a cure in the 1990's? Hilton's contemporaries suffered feelings of helplessness amidst escalating violence. This was the root of their fascination with Tibet. We just as adeptly project our needs onto Tibetan culture today. And we enjoy those projections as they are, in turn, reappropriated in the commercial media. America is a nation founded on oppression. And here at the end of the millennium, we still have not faced the horrors of our origins. Racism continues to

thrive. Internal violence continues to threaten our own peace. We are paralyzed by our inability to fix or even face honestly our own genocidal history. We want not to be the culture of oppression our history makes us; we want to be the liberators our ideals guide us to be. To avoid the darker realities of our national culture, we seek those things which would allow us not only to escape those realities but to surmount them, as well.

It is fitting, then, that we as a nation and culture turn our attentions to the other side of the world, to the racism, oppression and genocide contained in Tibet.⁹ Whereas our racisms are entangled in layers upon layers of our pluralistic society, theirs is perfectly identifiable: Chinese against Tibetan. If we doubt that, we need only to go to the movie theater to see the Tibetan Shangri-La, a perfect civilization where everyone is, or was, equal, and where the Chinese now create inequality. It is not enough for truth to motivate us to concern. We crave the romanticized exaggerations we see in popular films. Only the underdog will capture our hearts, and the villain's actions had better make a good plotline.¹⁰ Constructed versions of Tibetan history and culture are by-products of the Western gaze on Tibet now. As we turn our eyes to the Tibetan situation, we project the fantasies, simplifications, and desires for our own perfectibility onto the people and history we find. And our master story-tellers sculpt truth to fit the roles we demand to see. Americans may subconsciously believe it is too late to solve our own problems, but we still hold

our place as a country symbolizing equality and justice. Like religious practitioners setting out on a pilgrimage for renewal in belief, we set out for the movie theater to renew ourselves. America is not an underdog, but we identify with those who are. America is not a land of equality, but we do seek equality and justice for all.

There is an irony at the very root of our fascination: we turn to Tibet because we have no hope for our own situation, yet we depict Tibet as a civilization hopelessly lost. Our constructed Shangri-La turns us away even as we approach it. And as in the case of Carolyn Massey's son, we turn away when Shangri-La gets too close to us. Tibet's tragic situation becomes another passing fad as our morality plays about Shangri-La only allow us to see a Tibet in which intervention is impossible. Americans are left with only popular mythologies and new fads. We defeat both ourselves and Tibet.

¹ *Seven Years in Tibet*, dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud, with Brad Pitt and Jamyang Wangchuk, Columbia TriStar Pictures, 1997

² *Kundun*, dir. Martin Scorsese, with Jamyang Kunga Tenzin, Touchstone Pictures, 1997

³ Cindy Fuchs, "Movie Shorts: *Kundun*," *Philadelphia City Paper*, 16 January 1998, 65

⁴ K. Togden, letter, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, VII, 3 (Spring 1998): 8

⁵ Pico Iyer, Panel discussion: "Zen Buddhism and Popular Culture," *Asia Society*, New York City, 19 November 1997

⁶ "Dreams of Tibet," narr. Orville Schell, Documentary Consortium of public television stations, *Frontline*, PBS, 1997

⁷ *Little Buddha*, dir. Bernardo Bertolucci, with Keanu Reeves and Chris Isaak, Miramax Films, 1994.

⁸ "The Boy on the Throne," prod. Dianne Atkinson Hudson, *Oprah*, Harpo Productions, ABC, 17 March 1998

⁹ The timeliness of our fascination may also be a point of interest. The Dalai Lama's recent Nobel Peace Prize certainly resulted in more media attention for the Tibetan situation. Within American popular culture, however, the celebrity culture surrounding Tibet activism may be the main source of public attention. Actors Richard Gere, Harrison Ford and Steven Segal and musicians Philip Glass, Patti Smith and Adam Yauch are especially supportive and vocal about the Tibetan cause and Tibetan Buddhism. It is ironic that the celebrity culture, a generally egoistic segment of America, has latched onto ego-denying Tibetan Buddhism. Celebrities at once raise awareness about and associate themselves with Tibetan egolessness and nonmaterialism while remaining within their own narcissistic and materialist professional institution

¹⁰ Actor and co-founder of Tibet House New York, Richard Gere, provides an example of the characterization of a political situation in fictionalizing terminology. In a recent interview, he urged China to have "confidence to open up to video cameras" ("*Dreams of Tibet*," narr. Orville Schell, Documentary Consortium of public television stations, *Frontline*, PBS, 1997.). Gere uses an actor's individual psychological language to articulate an honesty he sees as a solution to a nation's political problem: as an actor must be honest in front of commercial cameras, so should China be in front of news cameras. Great political and human rights issues across international boundaries are translated into easily digestible Hollywood-speak.