

China's Other Face Revealed

Documentary Traces Tibetan Monk's Story of 33 Years Under Torture, Imprisonment

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Aug. 9, 2008

With the eyes of the world focused on the lavish opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, first-time filmmaker Makoto Sasa would like those eyes to see a much different face of China in her documentary, "Fire Under the Snow."

"Fire Under the Snow" movingly chronicles the life of Palden Gyatso, a Tibetan monk who survived 33 years of torture and imprisonment by Chinese authorities. The documentary -- shot in Tibet, Italy and India, where Gyatso now lives -- opened Friday, and its timing with the Olympics is more serendipitous than intentional. The film is part of [DocuWeek](#) in New York now, to be followed by a run in Los Angeles starting Aug. 22.

And while Sasa, who grew up in Tokyo and now lives in New York City, would like her film "to really tell people what's happening inside China, to not forget about the human rights situation," her original motivation for making the film was largely personal.

As a young girl, "I was very interested in Tibetan Buddhism," she told ABCNews.com. "I was born a Buddhist, but I never really knew what it meant. Although in Japan you do have some really strict monasteries, the monks we know from funerals and family gatherings drive Mercedes Benz's, they have wives, they're smoking cigarettes."

One night, on Japanese TV, she "saw some lay Tibetan people, not monks, in the act of prostration. As you say prayers and walk, you throw your body on the ground." The act, to Sasa, was "pure" and "divine."

"That gave me the sense of giving up your ego, and that was when I understood what Buddhism is really about," continued Sasa, who's now 35. "That image was, how do you say it in English? My 'Aha!' moment."

Fast forward to college, in Japan: "I heard the story about this monk who was in prison under the Chinese government," said Sasa, "and I couldn't believe anybody could survive 33 years of torture and imprisonment. I came from a country where after the war, everything kind of settled.

My parents' generation built up everything; people were living peacefully."

Fast forward again, to New York, where Sasa was studying filmmaking and media studies (after nixing architecture, because she "couldn't deal with physics"). "I didn't speak English, I didn't have friends, I was lonely," she said. "And I always remembered the monk's story."

And when she read Palden Gyatso's autobiography, "Fire Under the Snow: Testimony of a Tibetan Monk," "I couldn't sleep. Within three months, I was there."

That was in February 2005, and "there" meant "a small room" in Dharamsala, India, not far from the Dalai Lama's palace (Gyatso had fled Tibet, an arduous 20-day walk over the Himalayas, in 1992).

"As soon as he came to the door, I started crying," said Sasa. "I told him, 'I want to thank you for surviving, and for being an inspiration for my life.'"

The film includes interviews with Gyatso, now 77, and Tibetan activists and experts. Archival footage provides a brief history of China's relationship with Tibet, beginning with the Chinese invasion in 1950, and its crackdown in 1959 following an anti-Chinese and anti-Communist uprising in Lhasa.

When Sasa saw on the news one night that Gyatso was on a hunger strike in Turin, Italy, during the 2006 Winter Olympics, she was on a plane with her camera the next day. Inside Tibet, she interviewed former prisoners, their stories a stark contrast to the hauntingly beautiful shots of the mountains and countryside. (Sasa entered Tibet on a tourist visa and declines to give many details of her trip for fear of jeopardizing those living there.)

Gyatso is engaging, charming and riveting, his story horrifying: He was arrested several times and would be imprisoned for years, first on charges of marching in protest during the Lhasa uprising, later on charges of being a spy for India, of refusing to denounce the Dalai Lama, of posting a sign that advocated independence for Tibet, of trying to flee for Nepal. He was hung "naked like a light bulb from the ceiling," he says in the film, and beaten with iron bars. He says

an electric cattle prod was shoved down his throat, causing him to lose his sense of taste and several teeth.

In making the film, said Sasa, "our fear was that people might get tired of watching one old man's story. It's not sex, drugs, rock and roll. But we took the risk." Packed houses at the Tribeca Film Festival, where the film premiered in April, with Gyatso in attendance, no doubt allayed her fears. (The film's producers are planning on a wide theatrical release for next spring.)

"Just watching his face gives you inspiration, his voice, the look in his eyes," said Sasa. "He is very, very determined, very strong-willed. But he has this really interesting side where he smiles like a 3-year-old boy very innocently. When he's asked a question about Tibet, he has to be very precise and very strict. And the next moment, he's smiling like a kid."

During the filming, the Tibetan monk and the Japanese filmmaker, 40 years apart in age, got on famously. "He teased me, like I'm his granddaughter," said Sasa. Famously, that is, after they overcame an initial difference when filming first began, in India. "He always wakes up at 4:30 in the morning," she added. "He wanted to start interviews at 5:30."

Sasa and her two-person crew persuaded him that 8 a.m. was really the better time.