

Film Review: Fire Under the Snow

Bottom Line: A harrowing and inspiring personal account of political activism and persecution.

By Justin Lowe

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Covering much of the history of modern Tibet from a dissident's personal perspective, Makoto Sasa's docu "Fire Under the Snow" relates the journey of Tibetan monk Palden Gyatso from brutal imprisonment in his homeland to freedom in exile. The film recently completed Academy Award-qualifying runs in New York and Los Angeles. Despite such prestigious placement, the audience for a theatrical release would clearly be confined to major metropolitan specialty venues; a potentially larger viewership could await on broadcast outlets.

As related in his book, "The Autobiography of a Tibetan Monk" -- which covers much of the same material as the film -- Gyatso, 77, was born in western Tibet in 1933 when the country was still independent and entered a monastery to become a monk at 18. A decade after China's invasion of Tibet, Gyatso was arrested and imprisoned in 1959 for independence-related activities. A failed escape attempt led to a doubling of his sentence, which was quickly followed by re-arrest and further prison time.

During his long years of incarceration, Gyatso affectingly relates how his captors repeatedly and brutally tortured him with beatings, psychological coercion and even electrocution. After 33 years in Chinese jails and labor camps, he finally slipped out of Tibet in 1992 to join the exile Tibetan community in India.

In the years since, Gyatso has relentlessly advocated for the rights of Tibetan political prisoners and championed autonomy. Footage of his 2006 hunger strike attempting to persuade the International Olympic Committee to refuse China the 2008 games is particularly disconcerting in the context of the recent competition.

Shooting in a straightforward reportorial style, Sasa sticks close to Gyatso for most of the running time, incorporating interviews with his acquaintances and other human rights activists alongside scenes of his daily life and advocacy activities. Aside from Gyatso's personal material, much of the archival footage is similar or identical to images that have appeared in news reports and other Tibet-related docus.

If not for Gyatso's traumatic personal experiences and passionate human rights advocacy, the film's literalism would likely overwhelm its relevance and timeliness. While "Fire Under the Snow" presents a passable primer on China's human rights abuses in Tibet by offering a unique point of view on the ordeals of Tibetan political prisoners, it breaks little new ground on the

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macro level.

Production company: Argot Pictures Director: Makoto Sasa.

Screenwriter: Aaron Mendez. Producers: Makoto Sasa, Jim Browne, Vladan Nikolic. Executive Producer: Maura Moynihan.

Directors of photography: Vladimir Subotic, Lincoln Maguire, Makoto Sasa. Editor: Milica Zec.