

Dreaming Lhasa

A film by Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam

Color, 90 Minutes, India/UK, 2005
1:1.85, 35mm

In English and Tibetan w/English Subtitles



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Synopsis

Karma, a Tibetan filmmaker from New York, goes to Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama's exile headquarters in northern India, to make a documentary about former political prisoners who have escaped from Tibet. She wants to reconnect with her roots but is also escaping a deteriorating relationship back home.

One of Karma's interviewees is Dhondup, an enigmatic ex-monk who has just escaped from Tibet. He confides in her that his real reason for coming to India is to fulfill his dying mother's last wish, to deliver a charm box to a long-missing resistance fighter. Karma finds herself unwittingly falling in love with Dhondup even as she is sucked into the passion of his quest, which becomes a journey into Tibet's fractured past and a voyage of self-discovery.

"For many in the West, Tibet is the last romantic place left on earth. But beyond the stately mountain ranges, saffron robes and timeless traditions lies a struggle unfolding very much in the here and now.

Dreaming Lhasa is the first film to capture both the majesty of Tibetan Buddhist culture and the complexity of its ties to the outside world."

- Cameron Bailey, Toronto International Film Festival

"The beauty and lyricism of this film is transformative, evoking the splendour of nature and humanity in metaphysical, historical and culturally specific terms."

- Tammy Stone, The Festival Daily, Toronto

Ritu Sarin - Producer and Co-Director

Tenzing Sonam - Writer and Co-Director

Ritu was born in New Delhi. She finished her schooling in London and did her undergraduate studies in Delhi University. After graduation, she worked in Europe for three years, representing the Tea Board of India. Having always had a passion for the cinema, she then did an MFA in Film and Video from the California College of the Arts in Oakland.

Tenzing was born in Darjeeling in northeastern India of Tibetan refugee parents. After graduating from Delhi University, he worked for a year in the Tibetan Government-in-exile in Dharamsala. He then travelled for a few years, spending time in Switzerland, New York, Scottsdale and Los Angeles before ending up at the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California in Berkeley, where he specialized in documentary filmmaking.

Tenzin Chokyi Gyatso - Karma

Tenzin Chokyi was born in India. She immigrated with her parents to America at the age of four and grew up in Warrenton, a small lumbering community in Oregon. Since 1991, she has lived in Fairfax, Virginia. After graduating in International Business from George Washington University in 1996, she joined Chevy Chase Bank. She has always been interested in acting and seized her opportunity by responding to the casting call for *Dreaming Lhasa* and auditioning for the role of Karma. Back at her bank job again, she nevertheless hopes to develop her acting career.

Jampa Kalsang - Dhondup

Born and brought up in Kathmandu, Nepal. Jampa's first experience as an actor came when he played an important role in the film, *Windhorse*. He then worked on the French production, *Himalaya*, both as an actor and as assistant director. Subsequently, he worked as an assistant on *Samsara*, in which he also had a small role. Besides acting, Jampa is keenly interested in the whole process of filmmaking and hopes to direct his own film in the future. In his spare time, he is an avid guitar player and performs a range of Western and Tibetan songs.

Tenzin Jigme - Jigme

Tenzin Jigme was born in Dharamsala, India. He studied at the Tibetan Children's Village before devoting himself fulltime to music. He plays lead guitar with the Dharamsala-based rock band, JJI Exile Brothers, which he formed with his two brothers. Playing original songs that combine Western rock and traditional Tibetan influences with politically conscious lyrics, JJI Exile Brothers are popular among the exile Tibetan youth. Selected from nearly 100 applicants who auditioned for the role, this is Tenzin Jigme's first and only acting experience.

Phuntsok Namgyal Dhumkhang

Phuntsok Namgyal was an official in the Tibetan Government in Lhasa before following the Dalai Lama into exile in 1959. In India, he served for many years in the Tibetan government-in-exile. Later, he turned his attention to his first love, traditional Tibetan music and calligraphy. For a few of years in the nineties, he lived in London and earned a living busking in the Underground, singing traditional Tibetan songs and playing the Tibetan lute called a dranyen! He now lives in Dharamsala. This is his first acting experience.

Tsering Topgyal Phurpatsang

Tsering Topgyal comes from a chieftain family in Eastern Tibet. Following the Chinese invasion, he joined the local resistance and was subsequently arrested by the Chinese. He spent nearly 20 years in prison before being released in the early eighties. He fled to India shortly afterwards and now works for the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala. He has never acted before.

Tenzin Wangdrak

Tenzin Wangdrak was a member of the Chushi Gangdruk (Four Rivers Six Ranges) resistance organization that fought the Chinese in Tibet in the late fifties. Following his escape to India in 1959, he became the Dalai Lama's personal driver for many years until his retirement a few years ago. He still lives close to the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. This is the first time he has ever acted.

Notes on the Film

Dreaming Lhasa is the first dramatic feature film by documentary filmmakers Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam. It is also the first internationally recognized feature film by a Tibetan to explore the contemporary reality of Tibet. Although the film is set among the exile community in India the story it tells has resonances beyond just the Tibetan experience; it touches upon the larger questions of cultural identity, dislocation and loss that are very much a part of today's post-modern world.

Ritu and Tenzing have been making documentaries on Tibetan subjects for many years but their longtime desire was to make a feature film that would tackle comprehensively the issues closest to their heart – the political and cultural reality of Tibet under Chinese occupation, the in-between world of the younger generation of refugees who have never seen their homeland, and the gradual dying out of the older generation whose memories of a free Tibet are the only living link to the past.

More than 45 years have passed since the Chinese invasion of Tibet forced the Dalai Lama and close to a hundred thousand Tibetans to flee their homeland. Two generations of Tibetans have grown up, either under Chinese rule or in exile. Today, China rules Tibet with an iron hand and all forms of dissent are ruthlessly

quashed. The goal of regaining a free Tibet – the *raison d'être* of the refugee community – seems further away than ever before. Where does this leave the Tibetans? Inside Tibet, Tibetans have no voice, no way of expressing themselves freely. In exile, the Tibetan community is relatively tiny and it is only recently that a small band of filmmakers has begun to take the first hesitant steps towards looking at its own situation. In this context, Ritu and Tenzing's first feature film is of particular significance as it captures some of the complexities and contradictions of being Tibetan at this crucial juncture in Tibet's history, and opens up these issues for reflection, both among Tibetans and for a larger audience.

The germ of the idea for the story came from a true-life incident: Tenzing's father, Lhamo Tsering, had been an important figure in the resistance movement against the Chinese and had served as the key liaison between the guerrilla forces and the CIA, which helped to train, arm and fund them from the late fifties to the end of the sixties. Tibet's armed struggle finally came to a close in 1974 and Tenzing's father spent nearly seven years in prison in Kathmandu as a result. In 1998, Ritu and Tenzing were commissioned by the BBC to make a documentary on this little-known piece of history, and while researching the film, heard the story of how one of the CIA-trained fighters – someone Tenzing had known as a child – had simply vanished without a trace some years after the end of the movement. What could have happened to him? Musings on his mysterious fate led to the framework on which the story of *Dreaming Lhasa* slowly evolved.

The central characters of Karma (the New York filmmaker) and Jigme (the lost rock musician in India), with their confused cultural identities, their efforts to find some meaningful connection with a homeland they have never seen, their desire to keep alive a political struggle that seems all but lost, stem directly from Tenzing's own experiences as a first-generation Tibetan exile who was born and brought up in India and then lived most of his adult life in the West before returning to Dharamsala.

The background to the character of Dhondup, the recent refugee from Tibet, grew out of a series of interviews that Ritu and Tenzing conducted in 1999 while making a short film, in which former political prisoners from Tibet – nuns, monks, ordinary men and women – described in graphic detail their ordeal while in Chinese custody for the simple offence of having demonstrated for Tibet's independence. These interviews had a profound impact on the filmmakers, so much so that some of the interviewees actually appear as themselves in the film, giving their real-life testimonies to Karma.

The older characters of Loga, Tse Topgyal and Ghen Rabga are drawn from the many former resistance fighters that Ritu and Tenzing interviewed while making their film on the CIA's involvement in Tibet. As the Tibetan struggle increasingly takes on a non-violent character, references to Tibet's armed struggle are gradually sidelined and the sacrifices made by these men are in danger of being forgotten, even by Tibetans themselves. Ritu and Tenzing were keen to pay tribute to these older Tibetans and their story is a key element in the film, forming as it does, the arc that leads from the past to the future.

Full Credit List

Directed by

RITU SARIN and TENZING SONAM

Produced by

RITU SARIN

Written by

TENZING SONAM

Executive Producers

JEREMY THOMAS

RICHARD GERE

RAJ SINGH

Director of Photography

RANJAN PALIT

Editor

PAUL DOSAJ

Music

ANDY SPENCE

Sound

PM SATHEESH

Associate Executive Producers

KLAUS HEBBEN

SANJIV SHARMA

ARUN and RUMMI SARIN

ANTHONY and MARIE LAURE ARIS

ELIZABETH CHATWIN

FRANCESCA VON HABSBURG

Cast

Dhondup JAMPA KALSANG

Karma TENZIN CHOKYI GYATSO

Jigme TENZIN JIGME

Loga PHUNTSOK NAMGYAL DHUMKHANG

Tse Topgyal TSERING TOPGYAL PHURPATSANG

Ghen Rabga TENZIN WANGDRAK

Dekyi LOBSANG CHOEDON

Penjor SONAM PHUNTSOK

Lee TSERING NGODUP

Tenzin JAMPA CHOEPHELL

The Oracle TSULTRIM DOLMA

Travel Agent SONAM WANGDUE

Long-haired Sweater Seller LOBSANG WANGYAL

Monk Attendant NGAWANG LODOE

Ghen Rabga's Granddaughter TASHI DOLMA RUBLING

Hunger Striker Wangpo TSERING DORJI

Receptionist TSERING DORJI BAWA

Old Man SHERAB SANGPO

Woman Reporter ANNIE THOMAS

American Girl MARIA RICCIUTI

Dekyi's Husband TEMPA DHONDEN

Protestor TASHI DORJEE

Kid 1 TENZIN JUGNEY

Kid 2 TENZIN RABGA

Kid 3 TENZIN NYISHEY

Bus Attendant SUMAN KUMAR

Sweater-Seller KHENRAB

Indian Disco Dancer SANDEEP DHINGRA

English Girl SARAH CUNNINGHAM

Samten's Mother NYIMA NAMDOL

Bass Guitarist TENZIN JAMYANG

Drummer TENZIN INGSEL

Sweeping Hermit GYALTSEN

Indian Bride SUMAN KUMARI

Shepherd Boy MANISH KUMAR

Former Political Prisoners from Tibet as themselves:
ANI NGAWANG JAMPA (Gutsa Prison, 1989-1991)
GYALTSEN PELSANG (Gutsa Prison, 1993-1995)
ANI TENZIN CHOEDON (Gutsa Prison, 1988)
PHUNTSOK WANGCHUK (Drapchi Prison, 1994-1999)

Tibetan Instruments performed by
TASHI D. SHARZUR (aka TECHUNG)

Atong Yo, Traditional Tibetan Song, performed by
KELSANG CHUKIE TETHONG

Production Designer RACHNA RASTOGI
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Associate Producer TENZIN DORJEE
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Karma's Style Consultant (NY) DECHEN WANGDU

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AAGE BHI JAANE NA TU

Written by Ravi and Sahir Ludhyanvi
Performed by Asha Bhosle
Courtesy of Saregama India Ltd.

MIDDLE EAST DUB

Written by Lloyd Brevett
Performed by The Skatalites
Courtesy of Motion Records, London

COME ON (DIRTROID REMIX)

Written by Andy Spence and L. Lofisoye, Copyright Control
Performed by Organic Audio
Vocals by Lola Olafisoye
Courtesy of Autoa Records 2004

I BELIEVE IN YOU

Written by Andy Spence, Copyright Control
Performed by Organic Audio
Courtesy of Autoa Records 2004

THE DREAM

Written by Jamyang, Jigme and Ingsel
Performed by Tenzin Jigme

LOVING PAUPER

Written by Dobby Dobson
Performed by Augustus Clarke
Courtesy of Motion Records, London

BLUE MOON REVISITED

Written by Timmins, Timmins, Hart and Rodgers
Performed by Cowboy Junkies
Courtesy of BMG (Canada) and EMI Music Publishing (UK)

GYA NAGPOE TA

Traditional Tibetan Song
Performed by Jampa Kalsang

TRIM

Written by Rick Smith and Karl Hyde
Performed by Underworld
Courtesy of V2 Music Ltd. and Sherlock Holmes Music Ltd.

WHISPERING DUB

Written by Lloyd Brevett and Lester Sterling
Performed by The Skatalites
Courtesy of Motion Records, London

MURDERER

Performed by Augustus Clarke
Courtesy of Motion Records, London

TENZIN YULU

Written and performed by Tenzin Woser
Courtesy of Tenzin Woser

MELODY PRAYER

Written by Jamyang, Jigme and Ingsel
Performed by JJI Exile Brothers

AMA LE HO
Traditional Tibetan Song
Performed by Tashi D. Sharzur (aka Techung)

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