

THE UNWINKING GAZE

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR JOSHUA DUGDALE

This film is covering an extraordinarily sensitive issue. What were the reasons behind the decision to make this film?

Well, I had always been curious about this person who was seen as the head Buddhist yet who has always been seen as the victim of a repressive regime in China. It has always seemed like the ultimate modern day parable of good vs evil, but my human curiosity has always wondered about the Chinese propaganda. What exactly is a Splittist? Was the Dalai Lama a wolf in monks clothing? I knew that plenty of films had been made on the Dalai Lama but none had aspired to this observational documentary format. The opportunity arose and we started filming.

We are seeing the Dalai Lama in a completely different light. Why has it taken so long for this type of film to be made?

Access and patience!

How did you obtain the access?

It is a long story which is probably best not to recount here.

I found the film absolutely fascinating but tell me how significant do you think the film is?

Well in some ways it is not for me to say but I would say the significance is twofold. Firstly it is the first time we have ever really seen the efforts of the Dalai Lama in resolving this issue; and through his efforts we are able to make an informed decision about his sincerity and I think the significance of that will be apparent in China if not the rest of the world. Secondly it is the first time that we actually come to understand the thinking of the Chinese government through the reporting process of the envoys to the Dalai Lama. Instead of the usual rhetoric that comes the way of the rest of the world, we are party to the very real and genuine concerns of the Chinese Communist Party in how they can move forward.

One of the most important moments in the film is towards the end when we hear from the Envoys recounting their discussions with the Chinese representative. One part really stuck out where the Chinese representative told the Dalai Lama's envoy how he had been reading the Dalai Lama's speeches and in it he read that the Dalai Lama had been talking about independence. It is an extraordinary moment because as most people in the West know the Dalai Lama on behalf of the Tibetan people had given up their claim for independence back in the 80s. As the discussion continues, it emerges that actually the Chinese had mistranslated freedom for independence! I wonder how often the world has been shaped on the basis of mistranslations!

The name is strange. Is Unwinking in the dictionary? Why did you decide to call the film the Unwinking Gaze.

We were filming in Bodh Gaya, in India, the place where Buddha actually attained enlightenment which forms the ultimate goal for the Buddhist faith and I spotted a sign, which is in the film, which says. The Lord Buddha sat here for three days with his gaze Unwinking and after discussion with some colleagues we decided that the title was appropriate for a number of reasons but not least because of the Dalai Lama's refusal to budge from his non-violent strategy...

The core issue is the negotiations or non-negotiations with China. Where do you think this process is going?

Very difficult to say. Nobody really knows I mean trying to understand what the Chinese government strategy is famously difficult. There are a lot of people out there who are attempting to analyse the moves of the government and probably none of them know. What is apparent however is that they are very concerned about the instability in China right now and where that will take them. There are so many protests going on as the gap between the rich and poor widens, that their first aim I believe is to have control and to achieve stability. But I believe there is a real debate for the first time in Beijing about whether to bring the Dalai Lama back or not.

Yes, the importance of this film could be huge. You would think that a Chinese audience would find it revelatory to see how hard the Dalai Lama is working in order to obtain a resolution. Your film is obviously very timely. It is also a big responsibility.

Yes, and that is one of the reasons why it took so long. It is absolutely vital that we made an accurate portrayal but the potential is enormous.

With the Chinese government the perceived wisdom has always been that the Dalai Lama is a threat to the Communist regime. Do you mean to say that they are rethinking on this?

Well I don't know – I am merely a westerner looking in from the outside but I have spoken to people who know the issue very well and have contacts high up in Beijing and I think there is increasingly a view that sees the Dalai Lama as an opportunity rather than a threat. From my own point of view I can only speak from my time spent with him, but what is clear is that if any Tibetan can provide leadership for that people then it is him. Not only does he have the legitimacy but also he has exceptional clarity of view. So many times he would tell me that it is right to proceed slowly and the Communist government need to be careful about the way that the issue is played. If ever there was a partner for ensuring that a good deal could be made between the Tibetans and Chinese where both parties feel that they haven't been sold down the river then it is the Dalai Lama. It is important that the Chinese are fully aware of having someone who can unite the Tibetan people behind a particular point of view, and that point of view which is so conciliatory to the Chinese point of view has great support only on account of the Dalai Lama being the man behind it. And if you can't deal with him then who will you be able to deal with in the future. Thankfully so far there have been no rabble-rousers who have succeeded in talking the more radical Tibetans into more radical solutions.

So when the Chinese talk of splittism – that the Dalai Lama wants to split Tibet from China there is no basis?

Well this was one of the reasons why I wanted to make the film. I was curious how the public view of the Dalai Lama as shaped by Beijing was so certain that he wanted independence. Could they actually be right? Was the Dalai Lama tricking them into doing a deal which would involve the eventual collapse of China?

One of the problems that the Chinese face, I believe, is that the need to make a proper informed decision on the basis of lots of factors. It is clear that they understand the issue very well in some ways but to complete the picture to make a proper informed decision for the good of all citizens of China, they must have a dialogue with the man himself directly. How can they know what sort of man the Dalai Lama is without asking himself the direct questions that they must want to ask? Otherwise how on earth can they be sure they are making the right decision. And I am not talking about the right decision for the Communist Party; I am talking about the right decision for China because if they get it wrong the consequences could be catastrophic. Who would their partner be in resolving the Tibet problem? This was an extremely important motivation for me because I knew that the Dalai Lama had never really been seen in this light before. In the entire period

that the Dalai Lama has been in exile he has never met one of the high-ranking members of the Chinese government. That to me was extraordinary. I thought – so if they won't meet him then perhaps we can try and address their concerns, see if they have a basis or not and in effect take the Dalai Lama to them.

With this film you have very deliberately not used a voice over. Why?

Yes it made life quite difficult. How can you explain the history and the context of Tibet without a voice over as well as make the fly on the wall documentary that was my objective? To be honest I decided not to have a voice over because I thought it was important the Dalai Lama's voice was heard with as little distortion as possible. I think people have to make their own minds when they hear the Dalai Lama's own words and I think it is easier and less manipulative to do without the need of a voice over. Of course making a film like this one cannot avoid manipulating the subject matter because every cut requires a decision which affects the general impression of the viewer but my feeling was that to do the subject justice there would be more merit in allowing the viewer to make their own mind up rather than be directed by some unknown voice. It was extremely important to me to make sure that on an issue as sensitive and as well documented with propaganda from various sides that this was as independent as possible.

There is a moment in the film where you have been asked to leave the room yet the Dalai Lama has left his microphone on. Yet, you decided to use this footage. Some people might say that was a sneaky thing to do.

Well yes, I can understand that point of view and to a degree it was sneaky. However my answer to the question is simply this. I am a journalist and my aim is to get to the truth of the issue. My personal feeling is that nobody in a position where their decisions affect others should be free from scrutiny no matter who they are. I am completely independent from the Tibet movement and my job in this film was to extract the truth and I had a recording, which I believe enlightened the viewer further about the politics of the Tibet issue. I think it was important not only for myself to ensure that behind the façade there wasn't some conspiracy to trick the Chinese but also for the viewer too, to ensure that we weren't actually being hoodwinked. However having said that had the Private Office asked for me to remove that part of the film then I would have done so.

Did they ask you to remove it?

After I explained the reasons, they understood why I had included the footage and allowed me to leave it in.

This film is very political. Did you set out to make it so political?

The original idea was to make a portrait film set against the backdrop of the talks with China. I think we have achieved that but from a personal point of view as the film developed it was clearly the political side, which was the most interesting. I thought that there was such an enormous discrepancy between what the Dalai Lama was saying and some of the interpretation and action of his message, and to be honest there is a lot of bad Indian journalism which I think can distort that message, that I thought the focus should be in the main political.

How did the Dalai Lama feel about it?

Funnily enough I don't think he has seen the film. Both of his Private Secretaries have seen it. When the first rough cut was finished, Tenzin Geyche his principal PS was visibly unhappy as he clearly thought I had focussed on the politics of the issue too much. It was clear that he passed this on to the Dalai Lama as I had a discussion with HHDL where he was anxious that the film prioritised his work accurately - that he was only 20% political. I told him that there are plenty of films out there on HHDL that have looked at this aspect of

his work and avoided the politics yet it was clear to me that the predicament of the Dalai Lama is very real and very difficult and nobody had accurately portrayed that on a day to day basis. I mean people know the basic problem – he is in exile and doesn't want to be - but do they know the day to day issues and efforts that he is put through whilst trying to be true to his Buddhist teaching? After we talked it through he understood much better what I was trying to do and agreed that it was a good basis for a film on him.

There is one fascinating moment in the film after the Belgian government have caved in to Chinese pressure and asked him not to go to Belgium and you say how long the people who invited him to Belgium have been waiting for him and how disappointed they are. His reaction was very interesting.

That's right. He laughed and then drove off. I could see that he wasn't happy that I had asked that question. His laughter is well known but there is no doubt that he uses it as a tool to deflect hard questions. Remember he is both a religious and political leader and within that dynamic there are lots of issues that are very hard to resolve. But even within the political sphere he walks a tightrope. Maintaining the line for the Tibetans constituency without offending the Chinese is a daily battle for HHDL and that is the nub of what I was just talking about. His predicament. You have to remember that everywhere the Dalai Lama goes the Chinese complain. They complain to the head of every country he goes to. They complain to every organisation that gives him a forum to speak despite their being such demand in the West and elsewhere to hear his message. They even told Liverpool Town Council that they were going to remove Liverpool's twinning with Shanghai if they didn't revoke their lunch invitation to Liverpool Town Hall. To my knowledge he wasn't there to speak, merely to eat. There is a substantial amount of bullying that goes on which not only is very unpleasant but also makes his job of selling his strategy to his own people that much more difficult. I don't believe that this is in the interests of the Chinese government. You have to remember that the Tibetans revere their leader to an extraordinary degree. Many believe that he is the manifestation of the Buddha of Compassion. The Chinese behaviour towards their leader therefore is not exactly endearing them to the Tibetan people. I mean we know what happens in the Islamic world when the prophet Mohammed is gently questioned by the secular media – I think the world would be in flames if Mohammed was attacked in the same way that the Chinese attack the Dalai Lama, and when the Dalai Lama is engaging in a political process his job is being made that much more difficult but still he persists. I have absolutely no doubt that if the exiled leader of the Tibetans did not have such a strict moral compass and clear direction of his policy of non-violence then the Tibet issue would have become violent many years ago. This is a man who meditates on compassion every day for anything between 2 – 4 hours. That is he actually envisages in his mind the Chinese who might have tortured Tibetans in jail, or the Chinese leaders who make the decisions that affect his people so and as he does so evokes feelings of compassion towards them. Forgiveness is a powerful therapeutic tool and I imagine it is the only way a man in his position is able to move on and remain so positive.

He always seemed much happier when he was not discussing politics and then when he did it was almost like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Yes well that tells its own story doesn't it.

Interview: Sophie Edwards