

## Review of Pemi Tshewang Tashi and The Next Guardian

This week I had the pleasure of attending the premieres of two Bhutanese films: *The Legend of Pemi Tshewang Tashi* and *The Next Guardian*. They gave me some respite from the political frenzy which has gripped the nation.

*The Legend of Pemi Tshewang Tashi*, a project of the Loden entrepreneur Tharchen and his iBest team, takes Bhutanese cinematography to a whole new level. Combining creativity and culture, innovation and history, art and entertainment, the film brings one of the most celebrated Bhutanese stories to the big screen in the form of a beautifully crafted animation. Bhutan's history is filled with stories of heroism, tragedy, deception, betrayal and such other themes which make great subjects for films. Yet, the constraints on resources and skills have hindered filmmakers from enacting historical scenes. Tharchen and a large team of animation artists have managed to overcome this challenge and present to us a much loved story with impressive visuals and good dialogues.



The ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi, the chamberlain of Wangdue Dzongpon who made his fateful journey to fight the troops of Jakar Penlop Pema Tenzin in the nineteenth century, is known to most Bhutanese. Before this thrilling oral literature was written down, it was chanted as a *lozey* ballad or sung as a song. In the 20th century, the *lozey* was written down and has also been translated into English. A recent film has also integrated the story into a larger plot. With Tharchen's film, the legend of Pemi Tshewang Tashi has found yet another medium and storyteller, a truly powerful and compelling one, to reach a much larger audience. It will be screened during Thimphu Tshechu and the subsequent weekends. It is a film Bhutanese, both young and old, will enjoy for its creativity and aesthetics in visualizing a much loved traditional story, and when subtitles are added, will also draw much international attention.

In contrast, Arun Bhattarai and Dorottya Zurbó's *The Next Guardian* is a documentary which has already drawn the international audience, having been screened at dozens of venues around the world. It is an enchanting documentary revolving around the lives of the teenage son and daughter of the Chakhar Lama's family in Bumthang. The siblings are close and very nimble lovers of football. The film tells the story of Bhutan's transition today and shows the divergent life goals, aspirations, expectations, interests and occupations of the two generations of Bhutanese in a rural setting.



Modern education and globalisation has led to cultural and linguistic divides between the generations of children, parents and grandparents in most families in Bhutan. The film captures the fissures and tensions resulting from such intergenerational gaps although the directors chose not to include the grandfather, who is still alive and respected by the locals. It underscores the tension felt by the protagonists between the religious duties of the family and the lures of modern life,

including football, and the hope of finding a solution by sending the next guardian of the temple, Gyembo, to undertake monastic training.

It is cinematographically a simple documentary but it effectively reveals the complexity of contemporary life in Bhutan and touches on Bhutanese take sexuality. It makes one think and see the socio-cultural nuances, and ponder on what may be the best way to smoothly pass down our cultural roles and practices while also remaining abreast with developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The film is a collaboration between a Bhutanese and Hungarian directors, and it was particularly satisfying for me to know this as I was involved in launching the friendship between Bhutan and Hungary in Budapest some seven years ago.

The two films, though very different in content and technical production, made me reflect on Bhutan's past, the changes we are going through now with digital revolution and the ways in which digital and audiovisual tools can be used for telling our stories. To this effect, both films successfully blend education with entertainment, and culture with creativity. Almost every time I discuss Bhutanese films and their financial viability with my friends in film industry, I encourage them to make films worthy of and appropriate for wider international audience, particularly those who are today enamoured by the exotic image of Bhutan. There are many films now made with such scope and the two films reviewed here belong to that league.