VALLEY OF the HEROES 英雄谷

Discussion Guide

About this Guide

This guide is designed to be used in conjunction with the film **Valley of the Heroes**. It contains background information about the film and its subject matter, discussion questions, and additional resources. It has been written with classroom and community settings in mind, but can be used by anybody who would like to facilitate a screening and discussion about the film.

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Right Turning Conch Shell - a Tibetan auspicious symbol associated with heroism.

Filmmaker Statement

by Khashem Gyal

"When no one listens, no one tells, and when no one tells, no one learns, and thus when the elders die, so do the traditions and language."

This old Tibetan proverb sadly captures the current situation of Tibetan oral traditions and language. Each year sees the passing of precious aged people, and there is a decline in the number of children who speak Tibetan and understand their culture.

Tibetan civilization is characterized by a very strong oral and popular culture, combined with a sophisticated intellectual, religious, and philosophical literary production. Tibetan writing was created in the mid-7th century and is one of Asia's ancient scripts. The loss of ability to speak and read one's language would be a great disaster for Tibetans. Losing one's language is irretrievable and a huge threat to a culture. Once a language is lost, culture will also be jeopardized because the culture is richly embodied within its language.

With the development of modern society in Tibet, our lives have changed dramatically. We have witnessed shifts in the traditional social system, the transmission of culture, and the use of Tibetan language. In many Tibetan regions, government leaders think it is shameful to speak Tibetan during official meetings and in public places. Most schools use Chinese to teach while Tibetan is only used in Tibetan language class. Outside their home, people are often forced to speak Chinese because most businessmen are Chinese. Tibetans cannot even buy simple things from shops without using Chinese.

I first went to Hualong in 2009 as a volunteer teacher in the Local Education Aid Group from the Tibetan Studies College of Qinghai Nationalities University (LEAG). In my first class, I started teaching a Tibetan subject, and realized that three quarters of the students were unable to understand Tibetan at all. The other teachers and I had collected Tibetan folklore, riddles, songs, and dance to teach to the students. They were interested, but much of the time we had to explain in Chinese.

We wanted to have a good relationship with the community, so we decided to visit each family after class. We spoke with them about the language situation and made them aware of the serious consequences of losing a language. A number of the older people we talked to cried when we addressed them in Tibetan. Over the years, fewer people were able to understand them, and they were very excited about our effort to revive language and culture. This experience was deeply meaningful to me. I was so moved by the spirit of community in Hualong and inspired by my fellow teachers that I decided to make a film about the situation.

Tibetan language will soon become endangered in Hualong unless we do something for its preservation. We hope our film will create awareness of the problem of language loss among Tibetans, and also send a strong message to other ethnic minorities in China to preserve their language and strengthen local traditions and values. We also hope that the project itself can serve as a model for cultural preservation and be valuable to others who might want to follow our example.

Context for the Film

by Françoise Robin, Institut National des Langues et Civilisations (INALCO)

Valley of the Heroes introduces us to a Tibetan language revival project of which the director Khashem Gyal, himself a young Tibetan, is a participant. The film is set in Hualong County, in Qinghai province (China). While, to Westerners, Hualong appears to be located right in the heart of present day China, it is considered as belonging to the remote west by most Han Chinese who live in the eastern half of the country. For Tibetans, by contrast, it is located at the northeasternmost tip of the Tibetan world—its name being derived from Tibetan and meaning 'Valley of Heroes', giving its fitting title to the film. But, contrary to most Tibetan-inhabited areas in the People's Republic of China, Hualong has not been recognized as a Tibetan autonomous administrative unit, due to its ethnic composition: Tibetans now only make up 45% of the whole county population, the rest being mostly Huis (Chinese Muslims), as well Han Chinese (the ultra dominant ethnic group of China) and Salars (Turkic Muslims).

The consequence of being a relative minority in such an multiethnic environment is that provision for a Tibetan medium schooling system was denied to the area, contrary to many other Tibetan autonomous administrative units. The impact on local Tibetans has been severe: generation after generation, they have gradually lost their grasp of their own language, written and spoken, as it was being replaced by Chinese, the everyday language of both Huis and Hans and the medium of education. Add to this the impact of a regular influx of Han Chinese settlers, endowed with economic capital, and of state- and provincial-level television, which is now found in many houses. As a result, Tibetan, once the vibrant, prestigious and dominant lingua franca in the area, spoken even by non Tibetans, has been marginalized and lost its supremacy to Chinese—official statistics reveal that in 2010, one third of the persons officially registered as Tibetans were unable to speak their mother tongue.

The film focuses on a team of enthusiastic young Tibetan undergraduate volunteers spending their holiday in Hualong to teach Tibetan language and culture to the younger generation, via officially approved language classes. Introducing the Tibetan alphabet, reviving long forgotten songs endowed with rich cultural content, they are hoping to rescue Tibetan language in Hualong, which they consider in danger of disappearing soon.

This little-known intricate linguistic, religious and ethnic situation is well encapsulated in the film, through numerous interviews of Tibetans and non Tibetans alike, young and old, male and female, as well as village and public life scenes. The clever use of colours in subtitles (white in Tibetan, yellow in Chinese) shows a genuine concern, on the part of the filmmakers, to address an audience not familiar with these two languages or with the local situation. **Valley of the Heroes** thus contributes to enriching our knowledge of multilinguism and the challenges of language and cultural preservation in this part of Tibet. Last but not least, it introduces us to a new generation of committed Tibetan filmmakers from within Tibet who have recently discovered with enthusiasm the use and grammar of films. After years of being represented, and more often than not misrepresented, by non Tibetans, Tibetans have begun to explore self representation via films, exercising their agency in spite of economic and political constraints, and digging up topics which would have eluded persons less familiar with the area.

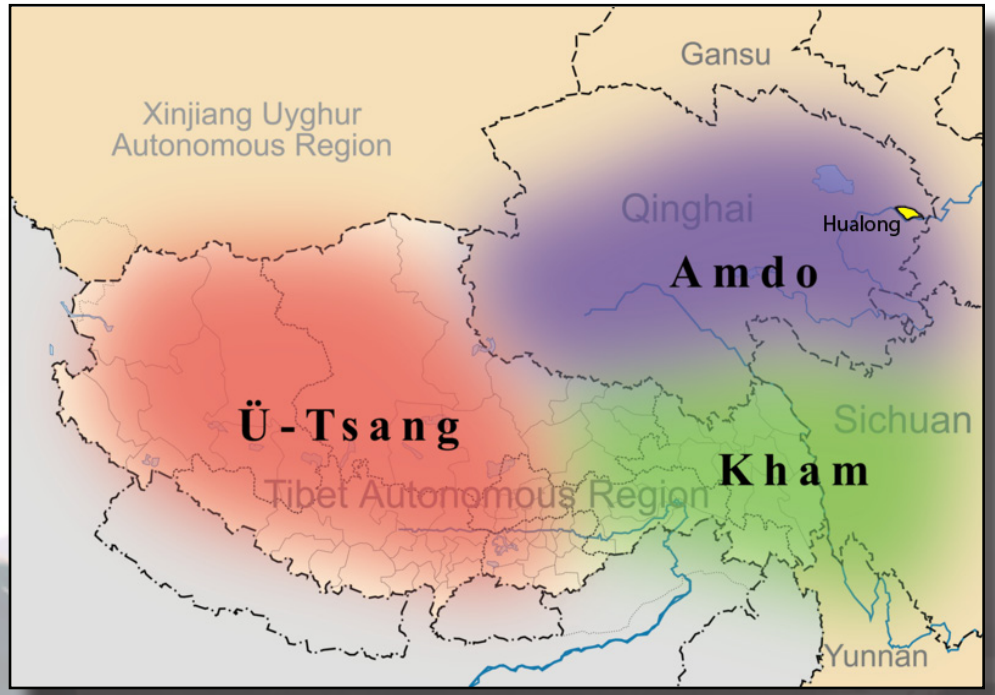
This documentary should thus be welcomed for what it reveals of a little known part of today's Tibet, and of the rise of committed Tibetan documentary filmmakers, in the politically sensitive but vibrant context of Tibetan cultural life today.

Disambiguation: What is Tibet?

What is Tibet? This question may seem straightforward, but it is actually quite complex. The word “Tibet” is politcally loaded, and therefore its meaning shifts depending who is speaking and what audience they have in mind (e.g. the Tibetan Autonomous Region, or the Tibetan Plateau). For the purposes of this discussion guide, when we use the word “Tibet”, we are referring to an ethno-cultural-linguistic region, where Tibetan culture is prominent and Tibetan is the traditional spoken language. This region covers the Tibetan Plateau, and extends beyond the Tibet Autonomous Region into other provinces of China (Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Gansu).

Geography

Tibet sits atop the Tibetan Plateau. With an average elevation of over 14,800 feet (4,500 meters) and a total land area of close to one million square miles, it is the world's highest and largest plateau, and often referred to as "The Roof of the World". Geographically, Tibet's borders are defined by the Central China Plain to the north and east, the Himalayas to the south, and the Kashmir region of India to the west.



Map from Wikipedia

Traditionally, Tibetans recognize Tibet as having three main regions: Ü-Tsang, Kham, and Amdo.

Ü-Tsang is the largest of Tibet's traditional provinces. Under the current Chinese administrative structure, Ü-Tsang makes up most of the Tibet Automous Region (TAR). It is also home to Lhasa, the historical capital of Tibet and current capital of the TAR.

Kham covers the southeastern portion of cultural Tibet. Its terrain is rugged, and features high ridges, deep river gorges, dense forests, and rolling grasslands. The Tibetans from this region are known as Khampas, and have a reputation for being fierce warriors.

Amdo makes up the northeastern portion of cultural Tibet. It is traditionally seen as a place of great learning and scholarship, and is the birthplace of the present (14th) Dalai Lama. Hualong Hui Autonomous County[1], the community where **Valley of the Heroes** was filmed, is located in eastern Amdo.

1 When a county or prefecture is designated as "Autonomous" it indicates that the area is associated with one or more ethnic groups. Hualong, for example, is recognized as a Hui (Chinese Muslim) autonomous county.

A Brief History of Hualong (Dpa'lung)

By Gyurmé, Tibetan Studies College of Qinghai Nationalities University

During the time of the ancient Tibetan Kingdom, the descendents of heroes resided in a valley, which later became known as Hualong ("Valley of the Heroes"). At some points in history, the region has also been called Bayan.

Nowadays, Hualong County falls under the administration of Haidong Prefecture in Qinghai Province. To the east, Hualong is bordered by Ka Ma Lok Monghuor Autonomous County (Minhe) and Ya Dzi Salar Autonomous County (Xunhua)[1] . To the south it is bordered by Jentsa County (Jianzha) in Malho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Huangnan), Trika County (Guide) in Tsolho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Hainan) and Kubum County (Huangzhong). In the north, Hualong borders Dékham County (Ping'an) and Drotsang County (Ledu). The area covers about 2,740 square kilometers in total.

The southeastern part of Hualong lies along the Yellow River, and is primarily an agricultural region, whereas the higher altitude northwestern regions sustain agriculture and some herding. In the northwest the weather is rather harsh. Here, the majority of the arable lands are in the mountains where there is no irrigation, so the crops depend mainly on summer rainfall. Thus the economic condition of the area is not promising.

Hualong County consists of several ethnic groups. The Hui (Chinese Muslim) people are the majority group, and there are also Tibetans, Han Chinese, Turkish Chinese Hui and Turkish Muslim Salar (an Islamic ethnic group that differs from the Hui people). According to the 2009 local census, the total population of Hualong County was 230,000 people, made up of 130,000 Hui, 60,000 Tibetans, and approximately 40,000 Han Chinese and Salar. The Tibetans in Hualong belong to sixteen different tribes. Ten of these tribes are in the north, and six are in the south.

According to artifacts unearthed in the region, archaeologists and historians believe that human habitation in Hualong began 5000 years ago, during the New Stone Age.

Prior to the seventh century, Hualong belonged to the Qiang people who were by then ruled by Axia[2]. From the seventh century to the ninth century, the region fell under the control of the Tibetan Kingdom. During this period, Hualong served as a military center and had interactions with neighboring ethnic groups, which enabled Tibetan culture to have a great impact on the surrounding area. After the mid-ninth century, when the Tibetan Kingdom broke into different kingdoms, Hualong came under the control of the Tsongkha Dynasty, Song Dynasty, Xixia Dynasty, Yuan Dynasty, Ming Dynasty and Qing Dynasty. During this period, the area was influenced by Chinese and Mongolian culture, but Tibetan Buddhism remained prominent.

In the past, Hualong was visited by great masters such as the Three Sages, Sakya Pandita, Choeje Dondru Rinchen, and Tsong Khapa. Because of this, many large and small monasteries emerged, such as the Dantig and Yangtig Buddhism centers, and Shachong monastery. During this period, great masters such as Lachen Gongba Rabsal and four of the Ganden Throne Holders were born in this area[3]. Due to the great contributions of these masters, Tibetan Buddhism thrived in Hualong, and its name became famous across the Tibetan Plateau.

According to historical documents, the Tibet Autonomous Region and Qinghai were invaded by general Nian Gengyao (1679-1726). Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799) also conquered Tibetans and Mongolians, and during these successive periods of suppression, culture and language in Hualong were seriously weakened. Later, the Qing Dynasty sent Chinese and other ethnic groups to settle in the region.

During the years immediately prior to 1949, General Ma Bufang (1903-1975) forcibly converted many Tibetans to Islam and did severe damage to local language, religion, customs and territory under the auspices of the Nationalist Party. At the time, many villages and tribes fled the area and are now settled in Tsolho (Hainan), Tsoshang (Haibei), Golok (Guoluo), Kanlho (Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures, and Huaris (Tianzhu) Tibetan Autonomous County. In these areas, the traditional names from Hualong have been preserved and remain intact.

Since the Chinese liberation in 1949, education and the local economy in Hualong have lagged behind other Tibetan areas, which in turn lag behind the rest of the Chinese economy. Additionally, since Muslims and Han Chinese are the region's dominant groups, Tibetan religion, customs, language, ideas and identity continue to be undermined and marginalized.

1 Editor's Note: In Tibet, places often have two names - one in Tibetan and another in Chinese. In this instance, the author uses the Tibetan name first, followed by the Chinese in parentheses.

2 Editor's Note: The Qiang people are ancient non-Chinese inhabitants of China, throught to be of Tibetan-Burmese origin.

3 The Ganden Tripa or "Holder of the Ganden Throne" is the title of the spiritual leader of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, held by the respective abbot of Ganden Monestary. The Ganden Tripa is an appointed office, not a reincarnate lineage and awarded based on hierarchical progression.

Qinghai Nationalities University Local Education Aid Group (LEAG)

by Khashem Gyal

Hualong is a Hui Autonomous County in northwestern China's Qinghai Province. It is 100km away from Xining, the capital city of Qinghai, and is home to many diverse ethnic groups, including Tibetans, Turkish Muslim Salar, Chinese Muslim Hui, and Han Chinese. According to the most recent census, the total population of Hualong is around 185,000, and roughly 20% are Tibetans.

Historically, Tibetan language and culture have thrived in Hualong, but today it is recognized as one of the most vulnerable areas on the Tibetan plateau. There are many reasons for this, one of which is the large influx of Han Chinese migrants who moved there after Chinese communists came to the area. During this so-called peaceful liberation, farmland and houses were given to the Han migrants, who have come to dominate the local resources, markets, education system, and social services. As a result, Tibetans became easily assimilated by mainstream Chinese culture, which has led to the loss of local Tibetan language and traditions. According to the Local Education Aid Group, over 30% of Tibetans in Hualong could not speak any Tibetan at all.

In 2009, Professor Jiume Dorje, from the Tibetan Studies College of Qinghai Nationalities University founded the Local Education Aid Group (LEAG). The aim of the group was to identify and address the problem of language loss, in hopes of lessening the rapid deterioration of Tibetan culture in Hualong. During the summer and winter recesses, LEAG sends dozens of volunteers from Qinghai Nationalities University, Qinghai Normal University, and the Tibetan Medical College of Qinghai University to teach Tibetan to the local children and villages of Hualong. The goal is to preserve and revive Tibetan language and cultural traditions, as well as raise awareness about cultural preservation.

In Tibetan culture, spoken language has always been an important means of transferring local knowledge, history, and traditional moral values from older generations to the young. Nowadays, very few young Tibetans in Hualong are able to understand the stories, folklore, and songs that their elders know. To address this, LEAG volunteers have collected a large volume of local Tibetan folklore, riddles, songs, and dances to share in the classroom. This approach helps the students learn Tibetan and reinforces local culture at the same time.

From 2009 to 2013, LEAG has established 56 teaching sites in Hualong, and enrolled over 800 volunteer teachers. During this period, over 9000 Tibetans have participated in the program, from elementary school students to adults. Despite the program's success, it still faces significant challenges. Support from local authorities has been insufficient, especially as language has become an increasingly sensitive topic in Amdo. Most classes are held in village temples or family homes, without adequate materials (blackboards, chalk, chairs, etc.). Despite this lack of infrastructure, LEAG has persisted due to the passion of both the teachers and the community, and remains a vital grassroots effort in the preservation of Tibetan language.

Discussion Questions and Activities

Discussion Questions

- What are your initial reactions to the film? Do you have any thoughts, impressions, observations, or questions that strike you as being particularly noteworthy?
- Did you learn anything new from this film? How has it changed your perceptions about Tibet, if at all? Give specific examples.
- How are the linguistic and cultural changes that are taking place in Tibet depicted in the film?
- How do you think China's urbanization and economic development have affected the Tibetan way of life?
- Why should we care if the Tibetan language is endangered? Would you feel the same way if English or your native language was vulnerable?
- How is language related to culture? What happens to a culture when younger generations do not learn their native language?
- How is language linked to freedom and control over one's own life? Why might a parent discourage their child from learning his/her native language? What do you think about this?
- What are some of the conditions and pressures that prevent Tibetan children from learning their native language?
- What possibilities do you see for young Tibetans to maintain their identity and still feel connected to mainstream culture?

Activities

- Mapping Exercise: Visit Hualong Hui Autonomous County using Google Earth or another mapping software. What do you notice about its geography? What major cities and landforms is it near to?
- Debate: Should we encourage saving all languages, or should we instead have everybody speak one language? Assign one group pro and another group con. Give them time to prepare.
- Take Home Assignment #1: Perhaps some of the students or people they know are experiencing similar circumstances to Tibetans in Hualong, where the language used at school, in businesses, at school, and around town is different from what their elders speak. Have students write about their experience and compare it to what is happening in Tibet.
- Take Home Assignment #2: Have students do a research project about their own community. What languages are spoken? What is their status? Who is speaking them? How do they coexist with English and other languages spoken in the area?

Recommended Resources

Websites

Amilolo
http://amilolofilm.weebly.com/
Official website for Valley of the Heroes. Learn more about the film and forthcoming projects from the Amilolo film group.

The Center for Research on Tibet
http://www.case.edu/affil/tibet/index.htm
An online resource for information about the history, society, language, ecology, and culture of Tibet.

Kham Film Project
http://www.khamfilmproject.org/
Learn more about Valley of the Heroes and watch additional films made by young Tibetans.

Machik
http://www.machik.org/
Learn more about how you can help to strengthen communities on the Tibetan plateau.

The Tibetan & Himalayan Library
http://www.thlib.org/
A collection of videos, texts, maps, and other resources relating to the Tibetan plateau and southern Himalayan regions.

Books

Bass, Catriona 1998 Education in Tibet: Policy and Practice since 1950, London: ZED books published in association with Tibet Information Network.

Goldstein, Melvyn. 1989 A History of Modern Tibet 1913-1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Goldstein, Melvyn. The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama. University of California Press: 1997.

Kapstein, Matthew. 2006 The Tibetans, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Films

No. 16 Barkhor South Street
1996. Tibet/China. Duan Jinchuan. 100 min.
A state-approved documentary that depicts with extraordinary vividness the everyday workings of a government committee that serves a neighborhood in Lhasa.

Old Dog
2012. Tibet/China. Pema Tseden. 88 min.
A powerful allegory of modern Tibet, featuring a nomad family who discovers that their dog is worth a fortune, but selling it comes at a terrible price.
http://icarusfilms.com/dgenerate/odog.html

The Search
2009. Tibet/China. Pema Tseden. 105 min.
A nuanced, sensitive look at contemporary Tibet that follows a director, his assistant, and a businessman as they scour the small villages of Amdo in search of actors to perform in a traditional Tibetan opera.
http://icarusfilms.com/dgenerate/sear.html

The Silent Holy Stones
2005. Tibet/China. Pema Tseden. 102 min.
A young lama returns home for Tibetan New Year, and tries to balance his strict training with explorations of the outside world through the novelty of television.
http://www.buddhistfilmfoundation.org/festival-media/the-silent-holy-stones/

The Sun Beaten Path
2011. Tibet/China. Sonthar Gyal. 89 min.
In the aftermath of a tragic motorcycle accident, a weary, weather-beaten traveler makes his way home from a guilt-ridden pilgrimage to Lhasa.

Summer Pasture
2010. Tibet/China/USA. Lynn True, Nelson Walker, Tsering Perlo. 85 min.
An intimate glimpse into the experience of a young nomad family struggling to reconcile their traditional way of life with a rapidly modernizing world.
http://www.summerpasturefilm.com/

DVD Purchase Information

DVDs for personal and public use may be purchased through Documentary Educational Resources:

Documentary Education Resources
101 Morse Street
Watertown, MA 02472

website: www.der.org
email: docued@der.org
phone: (617) 926-0491 or (800) 569-6621 (North America Only)
fax: (617) 926-9519