

REVIEW: *RIVER*

Reviewed by Phun tshogs dbang rgyal (Independent Scholar)



Zon thar rgyal རོན་ཐར་རྒྱལ། (director and screenplay); Wang Meng 王猛 (cinematographer); Stag rtse don 'grub ལྷག་ཙེ་དོན་འགྲུབ། (artistic director); Gdugs dkar tshe ring གདུག་ལམ་དཀར་ཚེ་རིང་། (sound & music); Sangs rgyas སངས་རྒྱལ། and Alexandra Sun (producers); Pad ma tshe brtan པད་མ་ཚེ་བརྟན། and Du Qingchun 杜庆春 (co-producers); Kong Jinglei 孔劲蕾 (editor); and Rig 'dzin sgrol ma རིག་འཛིན་སྒྲོལ་མ།, Dbyangs can lha mo དབྱུངས་ལམ་ལྷ་མོ།, and Gu ru tshe brtan གུ་རུ་ཚེ་བརྟན། (performers). 2015. *Gtsang po* གཙང་པོ། [*River*]. Drama Films. 93.50 minutes. English subtitles.

Zon thar rgyal (b. 1974) is an A mdo Tibetan artist, cinematographer, artistic director, screenwriter, director, and filmmaker. He grew up in a herding area in 'Ba' (Tongde) County, Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, China. Zon thar rgyal trained in the production of *thang ga*, a traditional form of Tibetan religious art. His major was Fine Arts while a student at Mtsho sngon Normal University. He later studied at Beijing Film Academy en route to becoming a prominent member of the first generation of Tibetan filmmakers.¹

From 1994-2002 he was an artist, producing such works as *Life Series* and *Red Series*. In 2002, he began to make films including *Grassland* (2004) and *Flares Wafting in 1983* (2008). He also worked with Pad ma tshe brtan as a cinematographer and artistic director on

Phun tshogs dbang rgyal. 2017. Review: *River*. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 45:210-220.

¹ <https://goo.gl/teOBSV>, accessed 6 April 2016.

*The Silent Holy Stones*¹ (2005), *The Search* (2007), and *Old Dog* (2011).² Zon thar rgyal "became a member of the APSA [Asia Pacific Screen Awards] Academy when he was nominated for Achievement in Cinematography in 2011 for his work on *Old Dog*."³

His directorial debut, *The Sun Beaten Path* (2011), premiered at Locarno and won numerous awards including the Vancouver International Film Festival's prestigious Dragons & Tigers Award for Young Cinema and The 35th Hong Kong International Film festivals 2011-Special Mention Winner.⁴

River, the focus of this review, made its world premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival on 11 February 2015 and was shown at the 18th Shanghai International Film Festival on 28 May 2015. On 10 December 2015 in Lha sa, Zon thar rgyal showed *River* with his first film, *The Sun Beaten Path*. "The film has won more than 13 awards domestically and overseas since its completion."⁵ As of March 2016, *River* was unavailable online and DVDs were unavailable for purchase.

River is the second film directed and written by Zon thar rgyal. It features non-professional Tibetan performers and all the dialogues are in A mdo Tibetan. It was shot in Mtsho lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture over a three-year period and features all the four seasons.

Zon thar rgyal says that inspiration for *River* came with the arrival of his second child (a son), which made his daughter very uncomfortable. "At first I just wanted to make a simple movie for children as a gift for my daughter,"⁶ he said during an interview in Lha sa. Later, however, the film became more elaborate with the addition of a grandfather, creating a story that embraces three generations.

The main characters are the grandfather known as Thub bstan chos 'phel (monk's name) and Gsar brje skyabs (layman's name), played by Mkhas grub. Thub bstan chos 'phel was a monk until the Culture Revolution (1966-1976), became a layman, married, had a son,

¹ He was the associate cinematographer (person communication), 2016.

² <https://movie.douban.com/celebrity/1324493/>, accessed 12 April 2016.

³ <https://goo.gl/scsCKL>, accessed 3 April 2016.

⁴ <https://movie.douban.com/celebrity/1324493/>, accessed 5 April 2016.

⁵ <http://tinyurl.com/zmg1zcz>, accessed 5 April 2016.

⁶ <https://goo.gl/kFIjWS>, accessed 12 April 2016.

and then later left his family and became a meditator, living in a room fashioned out of a rocky mountainside in a remote location. Thub bstan chos 'phel is locally considered a holy, great meditator. When he falls ill, every family's representative visits, except for Gu ru.

I want to pause and comment on the name Gsar brje skyabs because it is such a clever choice. Not only does it reflect revolutionary names (I have a cousin (b. 1973), for example, named Gsar brje 'Revolution') of the Culture Revolution era, it is also packed with irony as used here. It translates as 'Protected by the Revolution'.¹ In fact, Thub bstan chos 'phel's life, like the lives of millions of others in China, was drastically altered by the Culture Revolution in ways they did not want and it is highly unlikely he felt that the Revolution protected him from anything.

The son, Gu ru (played by Gu ru tshe brtan), is in his thirties and hates his father because he refused Gu ru's dying mother's last wish, which was to see her husband.

Gu ru's wife, Rig sgrol (played by singer Rig 'dzin sgrol ma), is about the same age as Gu ru. Typically, she works hard, is constantly busy with housework, and shows flashes of fierce independence.

Dbyings can lha mo (real name), the youngest performer, is in the process of being weaned. Gu ru and Rig sgrol's only child, she is distraught when she learns that her mother is pregnant, believing that this is why she is being weaned. Dbyings can lha mo's constant playmate, Rgya khra 'Brown Variegated Lamb', is an orphan. She also has a yellow-brown teddy bear that her father buys for her. The teddy bear features prominently in the narrative when Rig sgrol tells Dbyings can lha mo that no matter what she plants this year, there will be many of it the next year. Naïvely, she then plants the teddy bear in her family's field in the hope of growing more teddy bears by the next Spring.

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The film begins with a black screen and the sound of a river that soon becomes the sound of a motorcycle engine. Gu ru, a drunk, dark-

¹ 'Gsar brje' = 'revolution'. 'Skyabs' = 'refuge' 'safe direction', <http://tinyurl.com/hxgeq6e>, accessed 7 April 2016.

completed man clad in a thick Tibetan robe sings while sitting behind a man on a moving motorcycle. They soon stop. While the driver gets off the motorcycle and urinates by the side of the road, Gu ru stands up and then unsteadily drives off.

The erstwhile driver comments to himself that driving while drunk is not a good idea, and then Gu ru falls. The other man runs to him, picks him up in his arms, and sees blood oozing from his injured face as Gu ru mumbles, "Four years. It's been four years. Should I go see him?"

The man says nothing.

We see the yellow teddy bear Gu ru bought for his daughter in his robe pouch.

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Dbyangs can lha mo feels she does not get enough parental love and then begins to feel what love her parents do have for her is being lost when she realizes that her mother is pregnant. This realization is especially painful when Rig sgrol smears stove soot on her nipples.

Gu ru, who has not seen his father for four years, seems uncaring about his daughter's feelings, throwing "Get off!" "Go home by yourself!" "Stay there!" at her.

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Several children play with Dbyangs can lha mo's teddy bear. They throw it into the sky and laugh joyfully, but Dbyangs can lha mo is unhappy because the other children will not let her play and do not return the teddy bear to her. She explains the situation to her mother, who says, "It doesn't matter. They'll return it after playing with it."

Dbyangs can lha mo returns to the children and tells them to return her teddy bear, saying three times, "I'm going to tell my mother."

The children ignore her.

Though the ground is still frozen, Gu ru moves to the summer pasture in late Spring, despite objections from Rig sgrol, who says that moving will entail a bumpy ride in a tractor trailer, which is bad for her, given her pregnancy. Gu ru is unmoved and tells her that if she does

not want to come, he will go and take their daughter with him. Rig sgrol then unhappily comes.

The day the family sets out, two children run after the tractor and throw Dbyangs can lha mo's teddy bear to her - a touching moment emphasizing children's sense of compassion.

The same night Gu ru's family reaches the summer pasture, a ewe is attacked and terribly injured by wolves. Gu ru kills it to put it out of its misery, leaving the ewe's lamb orphaned. Gu ru attaches a tit to a yak horn and uses it to feed the lamb. Dbyangs can lha mo pleads with her mother to give the lamb, Rgya khra, more milk and even filches milk from her mother's milk bucket so the lamb will have more.

The strong tie between the little girl and the lamb is emphasized in one scene in which Dbyangs can lha mo lies alone on the ground in her family's black-yak hair tent, looking at the sun shining through the tent's skyhole. Dbyangs can lha mo holds the horn used to feed the orphan lamb and swallows a bit of milk from the horn. Later, she ties her red hair string around Rgya khra's rope, murmuring, "You will be pretty after I tie my hair string to your rope."

Time passes, the lamb grows older, and one morning Gu ru puts Rgya khra with the flock, despite Dbyangs can lha mo's objections. That same day at dusk, Gu ru drives the flock home. Dbyangs can lha mo calls to Rgya khra many times, but the lamb does not appear. Despite her parents' insistence that she come for dinner, she refuses and leans on the fence, waiting. She does not return home until darkness falls.

Though Gu ru saw wolves killing Rgya khra, he hides this from his daughter and, the next day, takes Dbyangs can lha mo and pretends to search for Rgya khra (A mdo dialect: Rgya khya). Later, Dbyangs can lha mo finds the lamb's carcass close to a mountain deity altar near her home, her red hair string still on its carcass. Heavy with sadness, she heads home and does not talk for a long while.

One day, Rig sgrol sees her daughter lying on the ground near the tent and tells Gu ru, adding that a storm is brewing. Gu ru runs to her, his robe falling from his shoulders. Rig sgrol, obviously pregnant,

runs after Gu ru to her daughter. This scene, shot from a distance with an unmoving lens, emphasizes the parents' anxiety.

Gu ru makes three attempts to visit his father. Dbyangs can lha mo does not know that she has a grandfather till the day her father comes home and Rig sgröl scolds him because he did not call on his father, even though every other family in the local community sent a representative to visit. She feels humiliated and shamed because Gu ru is Thub bstan chos 'phel's son and has not shown filiality. While sobbing, she tells Gu ru that he should go see his father and prepares *rtsam pa* and bread for Gu ru to take to his father.

Gu ru and Dbyangs can lha mo mount Gu ru's motorcycle and head toward his father's meditation room. Gu ru has not been near his father's place for years and does not know the road very well. When they come to an ice-covered river, Gu ru tells his daughter to get off the motorcycle. She complies and walks across the ice to the other bank. Meanwhile the ice breaks, plunging Gu ru and the motorcycle into the frigid water. Gu ru scrambles out of the water and up onto the ice, removes his robe, and gives his daughter his *gzi 'agate'* and a package of cigarettes. He then returns to the motorcycle and unsuccessfully tries to pull it out of the water using his sash.

Fortunately, another man on a motorcycle comes and helps Gu ru get the motorcycle onto the ice. He also asks if they are going to visit Thub bstan chos 'phel.

Gu ru lies, saying he and his daughter are just visiting a local family. This angers Gu ru's daughter, who throws the agate and cigarettes onto the ice, and walks to a gully. She looks back to see if her father is following her. He is and she continues on.

In the next scene, we see Dbyangs can lha mo on the motorcycle behind her father. They proceed to the foot of a mountain and then see Gu ru's father's meditation room. Gu ru stops and tells Dbyangs can lha mo to go ahead and visit her grandfather. Dbyangs can lha mo does visit her grandfather, but does not take the *rtsam pa* and bread because it was soaked when the motorcycle fell into the river. They are now too heavy for her to carry.

The main reason Gu ru avoids seeing his father is the wounds on his face. He does not want his father to know that he hurt himself while he was drunk. Gu ru smokes, waiting for his daughter. When she returns, they mount the motorcycle and head for home. On the way, Gu ru stops the motorcycle and puts the *rtsam pa* and bread into a marmot hole.

Some days later, Gu ru takes his daughter and sets out for his father's meditation room. They stop by the marmot hole and retrieve the bag of bread, which is now moldy. Gu ru tosses the spoiled food into the nearby river and, not wanting to visit his father empty-handed, he and Dbyangs can lha mo return home.

Back at home, neither Dbyangs can lha mo nor Gu ru report exactly what happened to Rig srol, who assumes they visited her father-in-law.

Summer is coming. The frozen ground is warming. Other families in the community begin moving to the summer pasture.

One day, Dbyangs can lha mo is near the mountain deity altar not far her home. Two mischievous boys come and tease her. They say that Dbyangs can lha mo's father is a bad man who does not want his father.

Dbyangs can lha mo argues that her father is not a bad man, but the two boys keep repeating that he is until she cries and runs home.

Gu ru is fixing his motorcycle and asks what happened when he sees his daughter come home crying.

She ignores him, enters the tent, and loudly sobs to her mother that local children say her father is bad - a man who does not want to take care of her grandfather.

"No, your father isn't a bad man. Didn't you two go visit him?" Rig srol says gently.

The next scene is outside the tent. Rig srol is so upset that she wants to leave her daughter and husband. She feels humiliated and scorned by the community because her family does not visit Gu ru's father and do what local customs dictate - care for an ill elder.

Dbyangs can lha mo cries and begs her not to go as Gu ru drives his motorcycle in front of Rig srol and stops. She pushes him away

and he and his motorcycle fall to the ground. He stands up, gets back on the motorcycle, and explains that four years earlier when his mother was in the hospital, Gu ru begged his father to honor his dying mother's last wish but he refused. Rig sgröl now better understands Gu ru and embraces Dbyangs can lha mo, as Gu ru drives around them in circles, speaking loudly.

Gu ru now begins to consider forgiving his father.

Later, Dbyangs can lha mo and Gu ru visit Thub bstan chos 'phel in the County Hospital. The son suggests to his father that he stay in the hospital for some days, but Thub bstan chos 'phel refuses.

Dbyangs can lha mo leaves the hospital with her grandfather and Gu ru. All three get on the same motorcycle. As Gu ru gazes into a new mirror on his motorcycle, he notices that the wound on his face is healed. He also sees Dbyangs can lha mo sitting with her grandfather and talking. They head home and it seems that Gu ru has at last forgiven his father.

After some time, they come to a three-way intersection. One road is the one they are on, to the left is the road to their home, and the other road runs to the meditation room. The grandfather asks Gu ru to stop. He says that he wants to go to his meditation room. Instead, Gu ru suggests that he come home and convalesce for some days before returning to his retreat.

In response, Thub bstan chos 'phel and Dbyangs can lha mo get off the motorcycle. "My illness is not life-threatening and, even if it is, one must face death when it beckons. It is useless to resist!" Thub bstan chos 'phel declares.

Gu ru then leaves Dbyangs can lha mo with her grandfather on the road and heads home. However, it begins raining and he returns to find the little girl and her grandfather sheltering under a bridge. As soon as she hears Gu ru's motorcycle, Dbyangs can lha mo runs out and calls Gu ru to come join them.

Gu ru tells her to go back under the bridge and sit. He then faces the sky with closed eyes and ponders, seemingly forgiving his father. After the rain lets up, all three of them are again on the motorcycle, riding for home.

River ends happily. Dbyangs can lha mo no longer resents her mother for weaning her. She seems to understand this is due to her mother's pregnancy and accepts it. When she asks to see the new baby, Rig sgrol puts Dbyangs can lha mo's right hand on her belly and gazes at her with a satisfied, tender smile.

Dbyangs can lha mo, Gu ru, and Thub bstan chos 'phel are finally united, waiting for the river to become less turbulent. Thub bstan chos 'phel suggests to Gu ru that he remove his wet robe, but he does not listen. Dbyangs can lha mo and Thub bstan chos 'phel sit together on a big rock as Gu ru lies in front of them, supporting himself with his right elbow, looking to the east. Tears trickle from his left eye as he likely recalls his mother.

With a black screen, we hear Dbyangs can lha mo murmur into her grandfather's ear, "I'll bring many teddy bears next year when I visit you with the baby."

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Actors used their real names or short name forms, e.g., Rig sgrol/Rig 'dzin sgrol ma, and real names such as Dbyangs can lha mo. Moreover, Zon thar rgyal told me on WeChat that Mkhas grub was portraying events in his own life in *River*.

The film does have a few awkward moments. First, Gu ru's family gives milk to the orphan lamb, but where does it come from, given that the family has no yaks? Second, I was struck by the traditional Tibetan black yak-hair tent and the churn Rig sgrol used to make butter, which come across as unconvincing "Tibetan props," given the modern agricultural machinery (a large four-wheel tractor pulling a mechanical seeder) that Gu ru's family uses in their fields. A family that can afford to use modern farming machinery would likely not use a traditional churn because of the intense effort the latter requires. Instead, they would use an 'o 'khor milk separator.

I also wondered why Gu ru slaughtering the ewe in the traditional Tibetan way is featured, given the appeal the film will have for children.

From my experience, most Tibetan fathers have little discussion with family members about family affairs. Gu ru is typical,

making decisions and telling his wife later, e.g., Gu ru decides to move to the summer place earlier even though the ground is frozen without talking it over with his wife. When Rig sgrol learns Gu ru's decision, she can only acquiesce.

Forgiveness is an important theme in this film. Some argue it is best to ignore those who do you harm because this is the result of karma; that you did the exact same thing to the person who has mistreated you. Consequently, revenge or recalling the abuse is meaningless. Dbyangs can lha mo finally forgives her mother and accepts the new baby. Gu ru stops hating his father. Thub bstan chos 'phel cannot forgive himself for becoming a layman but, in the end he does forgive himself for not visiting his dying wife. He believes that in doing this he could become a great meditator and that praying for her rather than visiting her was the right course of action.

All the actors wear ordinary clothing throughout, A mdo dialect is spoken in the film, and the actors realistically express human emotions in ways that are familiar to me. This gave me a "Tibetan" feeling, which I was glad to experience because there are few such films.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

- 'ba' rdzong འབའ་རྫོང་།
 'o 'khor འོ་འཁོར།
 a mdo ཨ་མདོ།
 Beijing 北京
 dbyangs can lha mo དབྱངས་ཅན་ལྷ་མོ།
 Du Qingchun 杜庆春
 gdugs dkar tshe ring གདུགས་དཀར་ཚེ་རིང་།
 gsar brje skyabs གསར་བརྗེ་སྐྱབས།
 gtsang po གཙང་པོ།
 gu ru གུ་རུ།
 gu ru tshe brtan གུ་རུ་ཚེ་བརྟན།
 gzi གཟི།
 Hainan 海南
 Kong Jinglei 孔劲蕾
 Lhasa, lha sa ལྷ་ས།
 mkhas grub མཁས་གུབ།
 mtsho lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།
 mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན།
 pad ma tshe brtan པད་མ་ཚེ་བརྟན།
 phun tshogs dbang rgyal ཕུན་ཚོགས་དབང་རྒྱལ།
 Qinghai 青海
 rgya khra རྒྱ་ཁྲ།
 rgya khya རྒྱ་ཁྲ།
 rig 'dzin sgröl ma རིག་འཇིན་སྐྱོལ་མ།
 rig sgröl རིག་སྐྱོལ།
 rtsam pa རྩམ་པ།
 sangs rgyas སངས་རྒྱས།
 stag rtse don 'grub སྟག་རྩེ་དོན་འགྲུབ།
 thang ga ཐང་ག།
 thub bstan chos 'phel ཐུབ་བསྟན་ཚོས་འཕེལ།
 Tongde 同德
 Wang Meng 王猛
 zon thar rgyal ཟོན་ཐར་རྒྱལ།