



## Film Review: 'Paths of the Soul'

September 29, 2015 | 02:21AM PT

### Zhang Yang's road movie is an extraordinary chronicle of a 1,200-mile pilgrimage in Tibet.

[Richard Kuipers](#)

There's never been a road movie quite like "[Paths of the Soul](#)," an extraordinary chronicle of ordinary Tibetan citizens undertaking a 1,200-mile pilgrimage to Lhasa. Much more than simply a long walk down National Highway 318, this act of Buddhist devotion requires participants to prostrate themselves every few yards while trucks and cars zoom past. Filmed in simple documentary fashion and performed with immaculate conviction by a non-professional cast, the pic, helmed by [Zhang Yang](#) ("Shower," "Getting Home") is a stirring study in faith and spirituality that will inspire many viewers to think about big and small questions of life. A difficult commercial path lies ahead, but fests everywhere will welcome this one-of-a-kind item.

Even though the film offers no comment on the touchy topic of Tibetan political history, it's still worth mentioning that the onscreen title of "Paths of the Soul" is shown in Tibetan script, and is preceded by the official seal of China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television. Given that many Chinese films with religious and spiritual themes have met with disapproval at the official level, it's interesting to note the unhindered production and exhibition, thus far, of Zhang's film.

Simplicity is the key to every aspect of the movie. Keeping his [camera](#) at a distance and rarely indulging in closeups, Zhang gently shows how Buddhist beliefs and practices are woven into every facet of life in a remote village in Mangkang County, part of China's Tibet Autonomous Region. It seems perfectly natural when Nyima (Nyima Zadui) and his uncle, Yang (Yang Pei), have a very relaxed conversation and decide the time is right for a pilgrimage to Lhasa. For Yang, the trip is especially important: His brother died before being able to make the journey, and Yang himself has never traveled beyond his village.

Eventually an 11-member party takes shape. Although the inclusion of pregnant woman Tstring (Tstring Chodron) and young girl Gyatso (Gyatso) seems somewhat improbable on first impression, the pure and uplifting motivations of everyone involved are never in doubt. Personal spiritual fulfilment is just part of the process: The higher goal is to pray for the well-being and happiness of others. For young male participants Rigzin (Rigzin Jigme) and Mu Qu (Mu Qu), the trip to Lhasa is very much about honoring two people who died while building a house in the village.

Viewers unfamiliar with the actual procedure of this particular pilgrimage will be amazed and astonished by what happens once a supply wagon is hitched to a rickety tractor and the legwork commences. Wearing long aprons made of animal skin and protective wooden boards affixed to palms of hands the pilgrims take a few steps before "diving" onto the ground. This is followed by touching the earth with the forehead and clapping the boards together to complete the ritual. This movement can perhaps best be described as "bodysurfing" on solid ground.

Through rain, snow and blistering heat, and at altitudes of 12,000 feet, the seven-month trek continues. In one amazing sequence, Gyatso and her father, Seba (Seba Jiangcuo), are showered by rocks and stones tumbling down a cliff. If the line between documentary and fiction weren't blurred enough already, it becomes indiscernible as the actors continue their prostrations, narrowly avoiding major injuries in the process. At another point the group shows its unwavering devotion by cheerfully "swimming" across a flooded section of road.

Counterbalancing the slow progress and physically punishing nature of the pilgrimage are illuminating and inspiring stops along the way. In a lovely sequence, the group is given shelter by a kind old farmer and repay him by plowing his barley fields. The birth of Tstring's baby will melt many viewers' hearts, and there's a positively exquisite scene in which the group dance and sing with unbridled joy while camped on a verdant riverbank worthy of a Renoir painting.

The pace ramps up slightly and very effectively as the group strikes financial problems just short of Lhasa. With pragmatism to match their devotion, they simply stop for a while to work as laborers and car-wash attendants before pressing on to the final destination. Sequences in Lhasa include beautifully filmed visits to sacred temples and fascinating conversations with holy men.

Though credited as screenwriter, Zhang declares in the production notes that "there was no script," and "everything was unknown." Many viewers will experience a similar sense of discovery and wonder as the lengthy journey unfolds. Importantly, the film at no stage feels even remotely like a Buddhist recruitment exercise.

Cinematographer Guo Daming delivers any number of beautifully framed wide shots showing the 11 hardy devotees inching their way across landscapes varying from dusty and desolate plains to magnificently green pastures and forests. The absence of a music score only enhances the film's message about striving for serenity and peacefulness. All other technical work is first-rate.

## Film Review: 'Paths of the Soul'

Reviewed online, Adelaide, Australia, Sept. 26, 2015. (In Toronto Film Festival — Contemporary World Cinema; Busan Film Festival — A Window on Asian Cinema.) Running time: **115 MIN.** (Original title: "Kang rinpoche")

### Production

(China) A Helichengguang Intl. Culture Media Co., LETV Pictures Co., Le Shi Intl. Information & Technology Corp., Kunrunghaohong Investment Co., Mai Song Film Investment Co., Maisongjingzhi Film Culture Co., Maisongliwei Culture Communication Co. production. (International sales: Asian Shadows, Hong Kong.) Produced by Zhang Yang. Executive [producers](#). Li Li, Zhang Zhao, Gao Fei, Yu Rongcai.

### Crew

Directed, written by Zhang Yang. [Camera](#) (color, widescreen, HD), Guo Daming; [editor](#), Wei Le; sound (Dolby 5.1), Yang Jiang; visual effects supervisor, Rita Shi; visual effects, More Visual Production Co.; line producer, Cheng Zhenyou; assistant director, Qu Jia.

### With

Yang Pei, Nyima Zadui, Tsewang Dolkar, Tstring Chodron, Seba Jiangcuo, Renqing Wangyal, Dawa Tashi, Jiangcuo Wangdui, Rigzin Jigme, Mu Qu, Gyatso, Dingzi Dengda, Suolang Nima. (Tibetan dialogue)

## 'Paths of the Soul': TIFF Review

1:30 PM PDT 9/20/2015 by Deborah Young



Courtesy of Toronto International Film Festival

The Bottom Line A one of its kind journey for true believers.

Venue Toronto Film Festival (World Cinema)

Director, screenwriter Zhang Yang

### **The visual record of an extraordinary pilgrimage on the road to Tibet.**

Premiering in Toronto, where the director's 1999 *Shower* won a Fipresci prize, *Paths of the Soul* (*Kang Rinpoche*) is filmmaker **Zhang Yang**'s rigorously conceived and realistically shot study of a devout family of Chinese Buddhists who makes a 1,000-mile pilgrimage to Tibet's holy mount on foot, bowing to the ground every few steps of the way. Blurring the confines between documentary and fiction, it takes the empathetic viewer on an incredible journey that can be almost as painful to follow vicariously from a theater seat as it must have been on the pilgrims. This is an very limited audience film, yet being one of a kind, it should make festival friends on a wide scale.

This portrait of such otherworldly devotion brings to mind **Philippe Witjes** and **Valerie Berteau**'s stirring documentary *Himself He Cooks*, about the simple humility of those who cook a meal for 50,000 pilgrims every day of the year at the Golden Temple of Amritsar. Here the wonder lies not just in the numbers, but in the fact that the pilgrimage takes place in China, not a country usually associated with spiritual guidance, and involves Tibet, to boot.

Festival veteran Zhang (*Sunflower*, *Quitting*, *Getting Home*) adopts the plainest documentary style to follow his non-professional actors on their grueling journey, which is apparently modeled after real pilgrimages. The first scenes in a village in Yunnan province introduce Nyima (**Nyima Zadui**), who will lead the group over mountain roads, in sunshine, rain or snow, as they wend their way to the Tibetan capital of Lhasa. The original impetus comes from his aging uncle **Yang Pei**, who has a burning desire to make the trip once in his lifetime. Soon others join in to cleanse the bad karma from their lives or, strikingly, to pray for the happiness of other people. A little improbably, a heavily pregnant woman and a young girl join the group, making eleven pilgrims who begin the trek from their native village.

Nothing prepares the viewer for this sight. With Nyima driving a farm tractor that pulls a little wagon of provisions, the others take four or five steps down the paved highway before prostrating themselves on the ground. The ritual bowing includes an thick leather apron and blocks of wood to clap and

protect the hands as the pilgrim stretches out on the road. This is repeated over and over, every few steps, for many months.

Progress is slow; the story-telling is unrushed. While the trip is not exactly eventful, things do happen. Nyima calls time out when the pregnant woman goes into labor and delivers her baby in a local hospital — a blessed event, considering he's born on a holy pilgrimage. The weather turns bad, the tractor turns over, but the pilgrims proceed without missing a beat. They pull the cart uphill and go on prostrating themselves against the backdrop of the high Himalayan landscape, at an altitude of 12,000 feet. Their top speed is 6 miles a day.

Impressive as their devotion is on the road, it exceeds every expectation when they finally reach Lhasa and visit the temples. Not having the money to proceed to the sacred Kang Mountain, they take laborers' jobs right there on the spot, while others agree to walk around the temple and perform 100,000 prostrations, for pay, in the place of a lame old lady.

Appropriate to its subject, the shooting style is deliberately contained, until Zhang lets the stops out in a spectacular finale.

*Production companies: Helichenguang Intl. Culture Media, LETV Pictures, Le Shi Intl. Information & Technology, KunRunGaoHong Investment Co.*

*Cast: Yang Pei, Nyima Zadui, Tsewang Dolkar, Tsring Chodron, Seba Jiangcuo*

*Director, producer, screenwriter: Zhang Yang*

*Director of photography: Guo Daming*

*Editor: Wei Le*

*Sales Agent: Asian Shadows*

*115 minutes*

## Busan: Zhang Yang takes 'Paths Of The Soul'

4 October, 2015 | By [Liz Shackleton](#)



The latest feature from Beijing-based filmmaker Zhang Yang is the ultimate road movie – following a group of Tibetan Buddhists as they make a 2,000km pilgrimage to and from Lhasa, prostrating themselves every few metres of the way.

Known for wry social dramas such as *Shower* (1999), *Getting Home* (2007) and *Full Circle* (2012), Zhang has taken a different turn with *Paths Of The Soul*, which is his most realistic film to date, and yet tackles the subject of how faith can result in extraordinary endurance.

Sold internationally by Hong Kong-based Asian Shadows, *Paths Of The Soul* received its world premiere at this year's Toronto International Film Festival and is screening in Busan's A Window On Asian Cinema section.

**Q: Why did you decide to tackle the subject of faith and pilgrimage in China?**

A: I'm not a Buddhist myself but I'm interested in the religion and wanted to do some research to understand more. I first saw people making this pilgrimage more than ten years ago and wanted to understand their motivations.

**Q: Did you film around a real pilgrimage?**

A: No, it's not a documentary, but it's been made in a documentary style. I've had the characters in my mind for a long time, based on real people I've met – old people, young people, and a pregnant woman who was doing the pilgrimage. I also met a group of pilgrims with a four-month-old baby, who had actually been born on the road. I wanted to include all these characters, but make it real, so I went

looking for a small village on the Tibet-Yunnan border and finally found a place in Mangkang County that contained all these characters.

The first thing I had to do was convince them to be in the film. They thought it was a good thing to do the pilgrimage, but they didn't know anything about cinema or how to make a film.

**Q: How long did you spend shooting?**

A: Altogether it was about nine months of shooting but spread over one year. I wanted to capture all four seasons. The reason this couldn't be a real pilgrimage is because most pilgrims cover about ten kilometres in a day, but we just did about one kilometre. We also needed to keep moving back and forwards on the route to capture the best light. Also we wanted to incorporate characters or situations that we met along the way, and there were times when I just didn't have any inspiration, so we stopped shooting, and I would just spend a few days talking to these people and observe their day-to-day life.

**Q: Was it difficult to raise finance for such an unusual project?**

A: Very difficult – but I convinced the investor of my last film, *Full Circle*, even though he'd asked me to make a more commercial film. When we started shooting, not all the money arrived, so we had to find some other investors because we didn't want to lose the characters and the seasons. I found a company from Yunnan that has nothing to do with cinema, a friend who works in real estate and LeTV also came on board. The Yunnan investor wasn't concerned with recoupment, so that lessened the risk for the other companies. The budget was very low – the minimum it can be for a project like this.

**Q: What was the most difficult part of the production process? Was it shooting at high altitudes in winter?**

A: Probably the most difficult part was working with non-professional actors. We spent a whole year with them and there were many times when they questioned what we were doing. In the autumn they wanted to take a break to work on their farms, so we had to give them some vacation. The extreme conditions were not so tough because I'd selected the team carefully and in the end they all enjoyed this life. Most shoots are tense and tightly scheduled but this was a unique opportunity for us to spend a year on the road and really live this life.

**Q: So you didn't have a schedule or a script?**

A: Not really – we didn't really know what was going to happen next. But we did have a deadline as I was making another Tibetan film after this one so had to finish the process by June. The second one is a Western set in Tibet, based on two novels by Tibetan writer Zhaxi Dawa who wrote in the Magic Realism style in the 1980s. It's in post-production and should be released next year.

**Q: As this film touches on two sensitive subjects – Tibet and religion – did it have any trouble with censorship? Will it receive a theatrical release in China?**

A: From the beginning, I never really thought the film would have a problem. Although it explores the subject of faith, it doesn't deal with politics or the relationship between China and Tibet. It's just a film showing the daily life of Tibetan people. We're hoping for a theatrical release but have to be realistic about the fact that it probably won't get a huge amount of screens.

**Q: What are you doing next? Will you make your investor happy and start to make more commercial films?**

A: I won't make a commercial film just for the sake of the box office. For me, cinema is personal expression and you must say what you want to say. Of course I'd like to work with bigger budgets, but to do that now in China, you also need big stars and different subject matter. The film I shot in Tibet after *Paths Of The Soul* is something I wrote in 2007 but wasn't happy with the script until now. Hopefully, [*Paths Of The Soul*] will raise awareness for the second film when it's released next year.