

THE HORSE THIEF

A Film by Tian Zhuangzhuang

Presented by

XI'AN FILM STUDIO

4K Restoration financed and made by

CHINA FILM ARCHIVE

International Sales

REDIANCE

SYNOPSIS

In 1923, tribesman Norbu steals horses to support his family. After committing a robbery, he and his family are banished by their tribe and live in exile. Norbu prays devotedly but to no avail. Sudden deaths of his loved ones begin shaking his Buddhist faith, and he steals horses again. When caught as a thief and almost beaten to death, Norbu crawls up to the sky burial ground with the last ounce of his strength.

My choice for the Number 1 film in the '90s.

Tian takes you inside a culture that, initially, felt as distant to me as the surface of the moon. And because he stays so simple and so specific, the point of view becomes universal. This is what life is all about: struggling to keep your family alive. "Horse Thief" was a real inspiration to me. It's that rare thing: a genuinely transcendental film.

— Martin Scorsese

RESTORATION NOTES

The restoration of *The Horse Thief* was financed and made by China Film Archive, with guidance from director Tian Zhuangzhuang and cinematographer Hou Yong. It was made possible through the use of the original camera negative and the Tibetan audio track collected by China Film Archive.

The film was originally released in Mandarin. The Tibetan audio track was retrieved from France, corroborated by director Tian Zhuangzhuang, and then remade to a 5.1 surround soundtrack.

All images have been scanned at 4K resolution. The restoration procedure involved the removal of dust and jitter, the use of color grading and high frame rate (48fps) technology.

TIAN ZHUANGZHUANG ON *THE HORSE THIEF* AND CANNES FILM FESTIVAL

April, 2019

In 1985, I was still a new director who just began making films. I remember that day when I was shooting *The Horse Thief* on the Sangke Grassland in Xiahe County of Gansu, and I suddenly got an invitation to attend the Cannes Film Festival. At that time, I had no idea what it meant to be invited to Cannes, and I had never been outside of my country. However, our shoot was on a two-month hold in wait for the spring grass to change colors by the season, so I took the chance and headed to France.

That year, three other directors went with me to Cannes. They were Ling Zifeng, Jue Wen, and Zhang Yimou, two of whom have already passed away by now. It was the first time for me to leave the country and attend a film festival. My tuxedo and camera were all borrowed, and I did not speak any foreign languages. I felt quite uneasy.

On the day of the opening ceremony, we had to walk the red carpet in suits and ties, and I felt very constricted. On that night, I decided to shift my focus onto watching more films instead. So I asked my Hong Kong friends to help me register a lot of badges, including market badge and press badge. The festival was very enthusiastic towards new directors, and welcomed our desire to make the best out of our experience there. In the end, I watched many films, and recorded every one of them in my notebook. I spent about 15 days there, and I jotted down more than 60 films.

When Father Was Away on Business directed by Emir Kusturica won the award that year. It was indeed an extraordinary film. As for me, I gained some understanding of Cannes, a place that many filmmakers long for. After the festival, I went back to the Tibetan region and finished shooting *The Horse Thief*.

When it was released, the film received a lot of criticism, among which were disputes from audience at home claiming that they could not understand the film. So I resorted to humor and told them that the film was made for the audience in the next century.

I don't know exactly how this film made it into Cannes Classics this year, but 34 years ago during the shoot of *The Horse Thief*, there indeed was a wonderful encounter with Cannes Film Festival.

34 years later, *The Horse Thief* crosses paths again with Cannes, and it brings me absolute joy to have the film screened in Cannes Classics. It's as if a unique tie exists between the film and the festival, and it is my great honor for it to be selected by Cannes. At the same time, I wish to give my gratitude to China Film Archive, who have contributed immensely in their restoration of *The Horse Thief*.

It is beyond my imagination that *The Horse Thief* still wins so much love and care from movie fans, which gives me encouragement and confidence in return. At present, I'm in preparation for a film, and I was so surprised to receive the news that the film I shot 34 years ago will be screened in Cannes this year. To me, it is just a gift of magic.

I wish my new film will be shot in success. It is inspired by a novella called *King of Trees* by Ah Cheng.

DIRECTOR'S BIO

Born in Beijing in 1952 and graduated from Beijing Film Academy, Tian Zhuangzhuang is one of the most prominent filmmakers of China's fifth generation. He was the former head of directing department at Beijing Film Academy. His films were awarded in major festivals, including Venice, Berlin, Tokyo and Shanghai.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

The Warrior and The Wolf, 2009

The Go Master, 2006

Delamu, 2004

Springtime in a Small Town, 2002

Li Lianying, the Imperial Eunuch, 1991

Unforgettable Life, 1988

Rock Kids, 1988

The Street Players, 1987

The Horse Thief, 1986

In September, 1984

On the Hunting Ground, 1984

INTERVIEW WITH TIAN ZHUANGZHUANG

(conducted on 1989 by Zhang Wei for *Contemporary Cinema*)

What inspired you to make *The Horse Thief* in the first place?

I shot part of *The Horse Thief* in the Labuleng Temple in the Gannan Tibetan region of Gansu. Temples are the epitome of Tibetan culture, where the philosophy, medicine, literature, art and such superstructure of Tibet all converge. Behind the design of these temples is a rational mind that creates with solemnity. Upon entering a Tibetan temple, one sees two rows of towering pillars inside the hall, and at eye level, he can only see the Buddha's legs ahead. It isn't until when he reaches the feet of the Buddha and looks up can he finally perceive the statue's upper body, and upon the sight of which he cannot help but be in awe of the Buddha's magnificence. When he turns around, he is met by the glares of the buck-toothed and livid-faced god figures on both sides, which then provokes a spiritual dependence back upon the Buddha. In fact, every detail in the architecture is designed to orchestrate one's soul.

That's why I shot Norbu kneeling and kow-towing with reels of more than 200 feet long. In the beginning, I was trying to figure out how to express the sovereignty of religion over men, and the piety of men towards religion. Eventually, I decided to use dissolves where the four seasons throughout which Norbu knelt and kow-towed devotedly are superimposed into four colors on the big screen. In the first half of the film, I shot many takes of men's supplication and consecration to god; in the latter half, I portrayed men's demise on their run towards the sky burial ground, as well as the protagonist's bloodstain and broadsword left on the snowfield. A certain type of men-god relationship lies somewhere in between.

In the original novel, Norbu seemed to have an epiphany in the end, where he set the arrow nest on fire. In my opinion, the power in a man's piety to god is immense. Having been religious throughout his life, Norbu had devoted his entire self to Buddha, that even upon regret, he would never have lit up the arrow

nest. Thus I changed that scene into a thunder that struck the arrow nest, with Norbu standing still in front of it, baffled at the big fire, as if showing suspicion towards god, while his wife instantly knelt down to pray.

Some wish to put you and Hou Yong together and call you both Sensationalists, perhaps from the certain natural and fluid aesthetics. How does the rational and the irrational integrate with each other in your creative process?

The best artist shall be an inadvertent one. He follows his good senses and only uses 70% of his effort. I was prompted by an impulse while shooting *The Horse Thief*, especially when I shot the resettlement scene. At that time, we saw the herdsmen moving out from the Sangke Grassland—perhaps they were relocating onto another meadow. Their yaks pulled their tents and baggage while the cattle and sheep streamed out from the valleys, among which the fragile livestock and rickety carts traveled in great onerosity, and the herdsmen in insipid silence. What an epic sight! We were overwhelmed by the gravity of that scene, and as opposed to my original plan of making eight shots within 50 feet long, I was so entranced by what was in front of me that I unknowingly shot a total of 2000 feet. In the end, instead of using 80 feet of the materials, I used 200 feet. What a spectacle we witnessed. Such was nation itself.

When we were notified by the tribe to shoot the scene of the tribesmen sticking in the arrows, our crew immediately packed up all of our belongings and set out for the mountain at night. By the time we reached the foot of the mountain, it was almost midnight of the second day. We prepared our equipment and began climbing up at one in the morning, and by nearly dawn some of our people were still climbing. At that time, we saw many horses trotting along the meandrous mountain path, and heard people on top of the mountain howling and yelping continuously amidst the sound of gunshots into the sky (all of these are parts of the arrow sticking ritual). From these sounds and sights I felt the inseparable relationship between men and the mountain, as well as men and god. If a helicopter had captured an aerial shot of the entire scene below, it would have been an amazing documentary!

Could you talk about your mental state while shooting *The Horse Thief*?

During the shooting of *The Horse Thief*, I was in a total state of despair. A person full of hope for the world can easily become hopeless. I often feel desperate when I find men's powerlessness towards their society, and even more so when I find the same in men towards nature. I'm a fatalist, and *The Horse Thief* is an autobiography. The beginning of *The Horse Thief* described men's revolt against nature and religion, following which was their defeat and ultimate demise in such a revolt that was useless, defenseless and hopeless. One was without arms in rebelling against such a supernatural power. No matter if people did not want to harm, beat and kill one another, under certain historical circumstances, they were deemed to do nothing but. In fact, compelled by the momentum of history, the anomaly was to not devastate one another. Facing such a supernatural force that was completely out of one's control, the feeling of despair, fear and joy emerged readily at the same time, which altogether yielded a sense of loneliness. However, hope and hopelessness always go hand in hand. A person with high hope easily falls into despair, and a person in despair can often find some lingering hope. As for me, I place my hope in the future. Norbu made his run to the sky burial ground, but when he exhausted his might in saving his child's life, didn't he do it for the future, too?

CREW

Director: Tian Zhuangzhuang

Script: Zhang Rui

Camera: Hou Yong, Zhao Fei

Art Design: Huo Jianqi

Music: Qu Xiaosong

Sound: Hui Dongzhi

Editor: Li Jingzhong, Li Kezhi

Assistant Director: Pan Peicheng

Lighting: Yao Zhuoxi

Props: Lei Xiaogang

Makeup: Liu Xiaoqiao

Costume: Xu Xiaoping

Set Design: Yang Jianping

Foley: Lu Shunfa

Pyro: Xu Ruixiang

Unit Production: Li Changqin

Vocal: Choir of China National Children's Center

Conductor: Yang Hongnian

Dubbing: Tibetan Language Translation and Dubbing Group of Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Studio

CAST

Tseshang Rinzhin As Norbu

Dan Jiji As Dolma

FILM QUALIFICATION

Original Title: Dao Ma Zei (盗马贼)

English Title: The Horse Thief

Year: 1986

Country: China

Language: Tibetan

Runtime: 88 minutes

Shooting Format: 35mm

Screening Format: DCP

Restoration Mode: 4K Restoration

Aspect Ratio: 2.39:1

Image: Color

Sound: 5.1

CONTACT

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