

Nomad nostalgia

Yenni Kwok in Hamburg



Photo: X Verleih

Sometimes you have to go far away to appreciate all the good things that are back home. For Mongolian filmmaker Byambasuren Davaa, it was a move to Germany that made her appreciate the uniqueness of her country's centuries-old nomadic tradition.

“My family often went off around the countryside during summer holidays when I was a kid,” says Davaa, who is finishing her studies at the Television and Film Academy in Munich. “I always looked forward to these holidays. But after being in Munich, the nomadic life suddenly looked peculiar.”

After the unexpected success of *The Story of the Weeping Camel*, a docu-feature Davaa co-directed with fellow student Luigi Falorni, it's no surprise she's returned to the land of nomads for her next project.

The Cave of the Yellow Dog, screening at the Pusan International Film Festival, which started this week, tells the story of a nomad girl, Nansal, who finds a puppy in the wild and hides it when her father won't let her keep it.

The film may have a simple story line, but it's irresistibly sweet and likely to delight both adults and children.

The movie title is a homage to an old Mongolian folk story. "My grandmother told me the story of the yellow dog when I was a little girl," says the 34-year-old director. "I wanted to make a simple story, and I found my story and the folk tale interacted well, so I decided to merge them."

Like her previous film, *The Cave of the Yellow Dog* features a real nomad family: a young couple and their three children. But whereas the camel film was shot in the barren Gobi Desert, Davaa chose to set her latest film amid the luscious green pastures of Mongolia.

Australian, New Zealand, Mexican, European and Asian distributors have snapped up the film, which is due to be released in Japan in December and in Taiwan next spring – "to coincide with the year of the dog", as the local distributor puts it.

Davaa and Falorni never expected their school project - an unusual tale about an albino baby camel rejected by its mother - to end up being seen millions of people in more than 80 countries.

The film won the Directors' Guild Award this year for best documentary, and was nominated at the Academy Awards. Its success might have surprised her, but Davaa says she can understand its popularity in the developed world. "Many foreigners see Mongolia with a certain nostalgic view - that the life there is the opposite of their own," she says. "Perhaps they're tired of their own civilisation, so they admire the wild nature of Mongolia and the people's relationship with nature."

The film has spurred overseas interest in Mongolia in a sometimes undesirable way. Much to her dismay, foreign tourists have tried to find the family portrayed in her first film.

However, *The Story of the Weeping Camel* failed to generate much interest in the country where it was made. "It was screened for only one week, and only 88 tickets were sold," Davaa says. "Films about nomads don't have an exotic charm for Mongolians. They tend to look to the west and prefer to see Hollywood blockbusters."

The Cave of the Yellow Dog, filmed as Davaa's final school project, has fared better. It attracted a good audience when it was screened in Ulan Bator last month. By then, many Mongolians had heard about the Oscar nomination and the director's fame around the world.

After working at Mongolian state television, Davaa went on to study at the University of Ulan Bator for several years. She read international law and later switched to study film. She went to Germany in 1999 and a year later started her film studies in Munich. "Like many other Mongolians, I was eager to go abroad," she says. "It didn't matter for me where I'd go."

Davaa is the first generation of her family to be born and raised in an urban environment. Her parents moved to the city in their teenage years and her family's story reflects the diminishing nomadic tradition. Davaa says the number of nomads has dwindled from 42 per cent of the population in 2000 to about 24 per cent now. Many nomads are moving to urban areas, where they expect to find an easier life, but instead face problems of unemployment, alcoholism and crime.

"I want to capture the nomadic lifestyle before it disappears," she says.

Like her first effort, *The Cave of the Yellow Dog* is a docu-feature. Davaa spent two weeks visiting one yurt after another before she found what she considered an ideal nomad family in the Batchuluuns who agreed to take part in the film. Although she had a script to guide the shooting, she was interested in getting natural and impromptu scenes. She and her crew patiently followed the amateur actors doing their usual chores and captured their spontaneous, warm interaction with each other.

Although she might be relatively new to filmmaking, *The Cave of the Yellow Dog* will see Davaa back in the Hollywood limelight because the Mongolian government has decided her docu-feature will be the country's official entry for best foreign film at next year's Academy Awards.

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