

***Kekexili – Mountain Patrol* (15)**

13th October 2008

Director: **Chuan Lu**
China/Hong Kong 2004

Running time : 88 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Duobuji** (Ri Tai), **Zhang Lei** (Ga Yu), **Qi Liang** (Liu Dong), **Xueying Zhao** (Leng Xue).

SCRIPT: **Chuan Lu**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Yu Cao**. EDITING: **Teng Yun**. MUSIC: **Lao Zai**.

On the high plateaux of Tibet, the native antelope is being hunted to extinction for its prized wool; only an ill-equipped, self-funded band of patrolmen stands between it and the poachers, who will not balk at murdering them in order to be able to continue the slaughter. A journalist from Beijing arrives to cover the story of such a killing and joins them on a punitive expedition.

Films about poaching are few and far between. One thinks of Tarzan protecting the elephant, or the impotent efforts of the gamekeeper in *La Règle du Jeu*. Straight-on environmental handlings of the subject are hard to find outside the TV documentary. What is striking about *Mountain Patrol* is its documentary feel, albeit within a fictional form, that of the eco-thriller. *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972) had some of its extremity of experience in a harsh environment. The film opens with an ambush by poachers of a patrol member. Straight away we are thrust into a reality where it is not only the animals who are endangered, but even the hapless volunteers who seek to protect them. Chuan Lu's screenplay is based on actual incidents, and one feels the immediacy in the location cinematography, the avoidance of generic shorthand in the narrative, and the use of local actors.

Kekexili is a 45,000-square-kilometre wilderness situated 4,500 metres above sea level. In the 1980s the chinu antelope wool became prized for its softness and in a matter of years the population of the animal had dropped from around 1 million to 10,000. In 1993 the patrol was established, and in 1996 the murder of a volunteer made national headlines.

In an astonishingly economical running time Lu communicates the dedication of these people, who sometimes do not see their families for months at a time, and are absurdly underfunded, while at the same time unfolding a drama that grips like *Ice Cold in Alex*.

The film charts the departure, progress and survival of the patrol, during which the journalist is made aware of the desperate task faced by a handful of men searching for their quarry in such a space and in such conditions. He is of course our surrogate.

In a sense Lu's experience of making the film followed a similar trajectory. The shoot was supposed to take three months but ended up needing twice that time, by which point the crew of more than 100 had been halved by sickness and defections. The altitude led to exhaustion, sickness and nosebleeds; there was no special equipment and the camera had to be protected from the sand and wind with plastic sheeting and/or the crew. One scene taking place in a freezing cold river took over a week to film, with the actors practically weeping with the cold after each take. After three months, with winter closing in, the crew determined to strike. Just before, the producer from Columbia Pictures, Alex Graf, had been killed outright in a car accident... Inspired by the inhospitable but majestic landscape, as well as by the bravery and commitment of the patrolmen he had interviewed, Lu persevered.

Lucky for us that he did, compressing the drama of several years into a narrative spanning seventeen days through the mincer of a shared experience rivalling those of Werner Herzog in the Amazon! Originally wanting to end on an upbeat note, Lu changed his mind when he heard of another killing, this time of the patrol leader. What he gives us is a Pyrrhic victory, with the antelope numbers on the increase, thanks to the efforts of the press and the institution of more government-funded patrols, but a suspicion that the illegal trade continues.

David Clare