

MOUNTAIN PATROL: KEKEXILI

Country: China
Running Time: 85 minutes
Certificate: 15
UK Release date: 29 September 2006

In Mandarin and Tibetan with English subtitles.

Writer/Director: Lu Chuan
Cinematography: Cao Yu
Music: Zai Lao
Producer: Wang Zhongjun
Starring: Duo Bujie
Zhang Lei
Qi Liang
Zhao Xueying
Ma Zhanlin



The soft wool of a rare Tibetan antelope, the chiru, has been so highly prized that the animal which numbered some million in 1900 is threatened with being hunted to extinction. There is only way to harvest the animal's wool, known as "shahtoosh": it has to be killed. It typically takes three animals just to make a shawl. International trade in shahtoosh has been banned since 1975, however policing the Chiru's remote natural habitat in the high Tibetan plateau called Kekexili (pronounced Cur-cur-shee-lee) was left for a long time up to under resourced volunteer game wardens.



Tibetans in a cat-and-mouse game with the poachers.

The film is both an action and a survival story rolled into one. The inhospitable beauty of the sparse landscape, captured in stunning cinemascope, sets the film apart.

The life of the characters in "Mountain Patrol: Kekexili," sees them away from home for two or three years at a stretch. They belong to a band of armed men, who patrol the desolate Kekexili region of Tibet in mud-covered Jeeps and military vehicles. Their existence is sanctioned by the government, but you are not "officially employed" and they have not been paid in a year.

Their leader observes, "We are short of men, short of money, short of guns." They are four miles above sea level, the air is thin, the sun pitiless, and they cannot see a living thing on the



horizon. Yet there are others out there, better equipped, ready to kill you. Why do you dedicate your life and endure this misery for such a cause? The movie contains no idealistic speeches, and the patrol members are not tree-huggers.



What is remarkable is that this film is based on a true story, and filmed on the actual locations. Nearly everyone in Lu's cast and crew suffered altitude sickness during the shoot, and many were hospitalised for a time (including the director). These are hard, violent men, risking their lives to save an animal species. In appearance and behaviour, they could be commandos, insurgents, terrorists. The poachers are no less desperate, and yet in a strange way, the patrol and the poachers feel a bond; they are the only humans on this high plateau, both drawn there by a fascination for the antelope, and they share an existence no one else knows.

The patrol leader explains that when they capture antelope pelts from the poachers, they sometimes sell them, because it is the only way to finance their operation. He explains that technically they lack the power to arrest the poachers, although in this country where anyone can disappear without a question, the measures they take are not closely scrutinised. When after long intervals they return to their wives and families, the women seem to accept their mission, although some wives, even in Tibet, might reasonably ask why their husband must leave his family unprovided for while roaming around in search of poachers.

One of the American distributors of the film is the National Geographic, and in its landscapes and ethnographic insights, this looks at times like a documentary. But it plays like a Western, involving foes who are equally hard and unsparing.

The film has received considerable praise, as well as a growing number of prestigious awards. These included the 'Special Jury' award at the Tokyo International Film Festival, the 'Best Picture' award at the 2004 Golden Horse (which in itself was remarkable, given that mainland Chinese films are rarely allowed into competition at the Taiwanese awards show), and nominations for Best Director and an award for the cinematography by Cao Yu.

It is perhaps inevitable that a film that is set in Tibet has had people debating whether or not this film is pro-Chinese propaganda aimed at showing the "good" that accompanied the Chinese occupation of Tibet.



"Mountain Patrol" is a Chinese film, which raises questions that are hard to answer. Is it designed to paint a positive picture of China's occupation of Tibet? Or can it be read as a parable: Protecting the antelope from poachers is the same as protecting Tibet from Chinese poaching? Because there are no ideological speeches, because the movies of the patrolmen are expressed in actions instead of words, we cannot be sure.

While some may choose to concentrate on the Tibet: China aspect, I see *Mountain Patrol* as an adventure story with a message, and an opportunity to peer through a window I might otherwise have bypassed.

Iain McGlashan