

Shangri-la Deconstructed: Representations of Tibet in the PRC and Pema Tseden's Films

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1. INTRODUCTION

The actual history of Tibetan cinematography only began during the 2000s, with the appearance of the first feature films by Pema Tseden (Tib. Pad ma Tshe brtan, Ch. Wanma Caidan 万玛才旦, b. 1969).¹ He was the first Tibetan director to graduate from the Beijing Film Academy and start to make movies in the People's Republic of China with a Tibetan crew and in the Tibetan language (Amdo dialect). Before that, only a few films could be considered to be "Tibetan" in the proper sense. It has to be noted that there are several filmmakers of Tibetan origin living in the diaspora, and "Tibetan films" (mostly documentaries) started to emerge in India or other countries as early as the 1980s.² However, because of the different conditions under which the films of these filmmakers were produced, and with regard to the different focus and target of these works, they will not be included in this study. Another large group of Tibet-related films, which are not going to be discussed, include the films by directors from the West. Although many of the directors cooperated with Tibetans, used Tibetan actors, who sometimes spoke Tibetan, and a minority of them even shot their films in Tibetan areas (but usually not in the PRC), these films represent a specific category, which in general presents the Western image of Tibet, something that is not the focus of this study.

Thus, the aim of this article is to compare the cinematic representations of Tibet in films that were made within the PRC, regardless of the degree of Tibetan participation in the production process, with the first three feature films of Pema Tseden. First, it will be necessary to define the terms "Tibetan film" and "Tibet-

¹ In this article the Wylie system of transliteration is used for Tibetan and the international *pinyin* transcription for Chinese. Tibetan personal names are always used in the customary form preferred by their owners (so that the names are easy to find on the internet and in other publicly accessible sources), with the Wylie transliteration in brackets along with important alternative forms of particular names (i.e., Chinese).

² Probably the most prolific and internationally acclaimed director from the diaspora is Tenzing Sonam (b. 1959), who lives in India and works closely with Ritu Sarin. He has produced several Tibet-related documentaries and a feature film, *Dreaming Lhasa*, directed by Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin. India/UK, 2005. Other directors, such as Ngawang Choephel (b. 1966), the author of the feature-length documentary *Tibet in Song*, directed by Ngawang Choephel, USA, 2010; and Tashi Wangchuk, are currently based in the USA. There are also a number of well-known directors from Bhutan (Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche [b. 1961], Neten Chokling [b. 1973]).

related film.” Following this, I will provide a brief overview of the most influential Tibet-related films, during which I will focus on several aspects: 1. The degree of Tibetan participation in the project; 2. The level of “knowledge about Tibet” that is evident, as well as the historical and ethnographical “accuracy” of the representation; 3. The ideology; 4. The use of stereotypes and clichés. In the second part of the article I will introduce Pema Tsenden and his filmography and will also provide a more detailed analysis of his first three feature films. The director has always emphasized his desire to “capture the reality of contemporary Tibet as perceived by Tibetans themselves.”³ It is true that even some of the Chinese directors who met Pema Tsenden as teachers during his studies at the Beijing Film Academy have stressed the importance of “authenticity” or the “genuine Tibetan perspective” in his films.⁴ I would like to demonstrate that these films should be regarded as intentional and self-conscious attempts to fight back against the earlier representations of Tibet within the PRC, as well as to show Tibet in a way that breaks away from the so far marginalized Tibetan perspective.

As pointed out by Françoise Robin, many important motifs in Pema Tsenden’s early films can be interpreted as a “performance of compassion” (Tib. *snying rje*), “a key virtue in Tibetan Buddhism.”⁵ She mentions, for example, the *tshe thar* ritual (“the liberation of life”), which appears in Pema Tsenden’s short film, *The Grassland*,⁶ and again in *The Silent Holy Stones*.⁷ The same theme occurs in relation to the popular Prince Drime Kunden (Tib. *Dri med kun ldan*), a character in one of the most well-known Tibetan operas. Quite lengthy parts of the opera are shown in *The Silent Holy Stones*, and it also plays the key role in his next film, *The Search*.⁸ F. Robin argues that it is a “counter-hegemonic” move,⁹ which can be interpreted on several levels: Primarily, it is an attempt to find an alternative to the “performance of backwardness,” which was, according to Robert Barnett,¹⁰ until quite recently “the only accepted

³ See, for example, Pema Tsenden, “Filmmaker Pema Tsenden (Wanma Caidan): Tibetan Films for Tibetan People” or the short portrait of the director for the Chinese State television station, “Wanma Caidan he ta de Zangyu dianying.”

⁴ For example, Huang Jianxin in the short portrait of Pema Tsenden for the CCTV 6 station said that: “We would never be able to shoot it like that, we can only use our own perspective to interpret the Tibetan life ... while his expression is totally natural, goes directly from his heart...” “Wanma Caidan he ta de Zangyu dianying.”

⁵ Françoise Robin, “Performing Compassion: A Counter-Hegemonic Strategy in Tibetan Cinema?,” 37–38.

⁶ *The Grassland*, dir. by Pema Tsenden, 2004.

⁷ *The Silent Holy Stones*, dir. by Pema Tsenden, 2005.

⁸ *The Search*, dir. by Pema Tsenden, 2009.

⁹ Françoise Robin, “Performing Compassion,” 37–38.

¹⁰ Robert Barnett, “Beyond the Collaborator-Martyr Model: Strategies of Compliance, Opportunism and Opposition Within Tibet,” 34. Quoted in Françoise Robin, “Performing Compassion,” 43.

type of public performance for Tibetans in the face of Chinese hegemony.”¹¹ As such, it is meaningfully oriented, both inwards towards the Tibetan community (“endo-compassion”), where it confirms the “self-ethnotype” that (certain) Tibetans have themselves created, based on this key Buddhist virtue, and outwards, towards the Chinese (“exo-compassion”), where it seeks to change the image of Tibetans as a “backward” and “fierce” “minority,” thus approximating the former president, Hu Jintao’s, notion of the “harmonious society” (Ch. *hexie shehui* 和谐社会), that was promoted in the PRC during the first decade of the third millennium.

Although Pema Tseden later focused on other aspects of Tibetan life, diverting his attention away from religion, which has become one of the most powerful stereotypes characterizing Tibetan society, he has still continued to make films which represent Tibet from the perspective of ordinary and marginalized people living in contemporary Tibet. This includes nomads (as in *The Grassland*), whose lives have been the subject of turbulent change in recent decades, to the only recently urbanized city-dwellers, who are portrayed in his later works. F. Robin writes: “... [I]ndependent Tibetan cinematographic discourse can be successfully called counter-hegemonic within the space imposed by the state.”¹² This is in accordance with my own “reading” of Pema Tseden’s films. I argue that they (at least *The Grassland* and the first three feature films) should be understood as the first cinematic contributions to be made to the modern Tibetan identity-discourse. They introduce the first genuine Tibetan voices to be heard in the PRC cinema, contesting the image of Tibet, its history, its culture and its people as represented in the officially supported media and mainstream popular culture. Thus, his films may be interpreted in terms of the minority process of “becoming-other,” which is characteristic of the postcolonial “minor cinema” introduced by G. Deleuze when developing his earlier concept of “minor literature.”¹³ Pema Tseden’s films have initiated a new and specifically Tibetan cinematic “minority discourse” within the PRC, based on the struggle “to define itself through the forces of domination and exclusion that occludes it.”¹⁴

So far, all of Pema Tseden’s films have been well received at international film festivals, both in China and abroad, and he has been awarded numerous prizes.¹⁵ The films have also been positively evaluated by Tibetan audiences,¹⁶ especially

¹¹ Ibid., 43.

¹² Ibid., 47.

¹³ In Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.

¹⁴ David N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*, 153.

¹⁵ For a full list of nominations and awards see “Pema Tseden. Awards,” IMDb, accessed April 25, 2016. <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm2120871/awards>.

¹⁶ As claimed by Pema Tseden in an interview with La Frances Hui (Asia Society, New York), April 10, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYCQHUJE-bo> (last accessed April 25, 2016).

among educated Tibetan circles within the PRC, where the example of Pema Tseden has set off a huge wave of interest in film art. This has resulted in more Tibetans enrolling at the Beijing Film Academy in the last ten years and tens of (semi) professional and non-professional DV films emerging since then, as witnessed by a number of scholars and the director himself.¹⁷ At the same time, he has gained a good reputation among the Tibetan diaspora, and many Tibetan intellectuals in exile have published positive reviews of his films, interpreting them from the nationalist perspective and focusing on his more or less open criticism of certain negative social aspects (for example, Tsering Shakya and Tenzing Sonam).¹⁸

Owing to the short history of cinema in Tibet, until quite recently limited academic attention has been paid to this phenomenon. It appears that only two Western scholars have systematically examined the development of Tibetan cinema from its early beginnings: Robert Barnett, whose research focuses on Tibetan performance art and media in general,¹⁹ and Françoise Robin, a scholar with an interest in modern Tibetan literature and, more recently, film.²⁰ As all Tibet-related films within the PRC are included in the broader category of so called “minority films” (Ch. *shaoshu minzu dianying* 少数民族电影), a number of studies exist which are dedicated to this general category. However, only Vanessa Frangville has systematically analyzed the changing representations of Tibet in the PRC cinema since the 1950s until now.²¹ So far, several conference events and panel discussions on Tibetan film and media have been organized,²² and a special film issue of the *Latse Journal* has been published by the Trace Foundation, organized by Françoise Robin as guest-editor.²³

¹⁷ See Pema Tseden’s article “A Brief Introduction to New Student Short Films in the Tibetan Language,” and Robert Barnett, “DV-made Tibet: Domestic Videos, Elite Films, and the Work of Pema Tseden.”

¹⁸ Tsering Shakya, “*Old Dog (Khyi rgan)*, directed by Pema Tseden and *The Sun Beaten Path (Dbus lam gyi nyi ma)*, directed by Sonthar Gyal”; Tenzing Sonam, “Quiet Storm: Pema Tseden and the Emergence of Tibetan Cinema.”

¹⁹ See, for example: Robert Barnett, “The Secret *Secret*: Cinema, Ethnicity and Seventeenth Century Tibetan-Mongolian Relations”; “DV-made Tibet.”

²⁰ See, for example: Françoise Robin, “Performing Compassion.”

²¹ See, for example: Vanessa Frangville, “Tibet in Debate”; “Minority Film and Tibet in the PRC.”

²² For example, the panel “Modern Tibetan Culture: Visual Representations and Film, TV, Internet, and Music” on the Eleventh Seminar of IATS, Bonn, Germany, 2006; the panel “Tibetan Cinema. Discovering a New Political and Cultural Language,” which took place in 2008 in Naples as a part of the conference series “Tibetan Arts in Transition: A Journey Through Theatre, Cinema, and Painting” (see <http://www.asia-ngo.org/en/images/eas/handbook%20arts.pdf>), or an “International symposium on Pema Tseden’s Films, Fictions, and Translations” in Hong Kong in October 2014 (see http://www.tran.hkbu.edu.hk/EN/Event/Int'lSymPemaTseden_Handbill.pdf).

²³ *Latse Journal* 7 (2011–2012).

2. “TIBET-RELATED” AND “TIBETAN” FILM

During the second half of the twentieth century Tibet became the object of many and various representations in art and popular culture. However, until quite recently very little has been heard from Tibetans themselves. As for the cinema, apart from a number of recent works representing the Tibetan diaspora, Tibet has been represented either through the perspective of the Chinese “civilizing project,”²⁴ in which propaganda and/or various strategies of “othering” have always played an important role, or through the eyes of people from the West for whom Tibet has quickly become just a piece of a colorful imaginary landscape, serving as an attractive setting for big Hollywood-style movies. But, how many of such works actually deserve the epithet “Tibetan”? As Robert Barnett writes in his article on the film *The Secret History of the Potala Palace*²⁵ (dir. by Zhang Yi 张一, b. 1930), published in 2002 as one of the first scholarly articles about Tibetan cinema to appear in Western academia, Tibet-themed films (produced within the PRC) are often discussed as a “subset ... within the genre of Chinese minority nationality films, a category, which has in the last two decades partly overlapped with, and perhaps been overshadowed by, the 1980s films of the ‘root-seeking’ school (Ch. *xungen pai* 寻根派),²⁶ through which Chinese artists sought, in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, to mine exotic and peripheral cultures within the Chinese ‘family of nationalities’ for post-Maoist experiences of self-discovery.”²⁷ The implication of this is that films considered to be “Tibetan” within this category, are often “Tibetan” only in the sense that they deal with the topic of Tibet, are set in Tibet, or are about Tibetans, but that they have no direct, or only very limited participation on the part of Tibetans. Robert Barnett suggests that for such films the term “Tibet-related films” should be used, instead of “Tibetan film.”²⁸

In order to discuss the difference between “Tibetan” and “Tibet-related” films, we need to differentiate between several levels of Tibetan participation in the production of such films. Until quite recently (approximately the past decade), Tibetans appeared almost exclusively as only the subject matter of such films; they

²⁴ The term “civilizing project” has been introduced by Stevan Harrell, *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*.

²⁵ *The Secret History of the Potala Palace*, dir. by Zhang Yi 张一, 1989.

²⁶ Here, R. Barnett probably has in mind the films by the so called “Fifth Generation” of filmmakers, whose early works were strongly influenced by the “root searching literature” movement (Ch. *xungen wenxue* 寻根文学). See, for example, Claire Huot, *China's New Cultural Scene. A Handbook of Changes*, 91–125.

²⁷ Robert Barnett, “The Secret Secret: Cinema, Ethnicity and Seventeenth Century Tibetan-Mongolian Relations,” 279.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 280.

did not actively participate in the production, for example, as directors, writers, or cinematographers.²⁹ In such cases, the main criteria might be described as “the extent to which the film is ‘about’ Tibet, the images it presents ‘about’ Tibet, and the extent to which it has ‘knowledge’ of Tibet, and is thus ‘Tibetan.’”³⁰ Barnett lists three main categories of “Tibet-related” films, which, as he suggests, form a chronological sequence in the history of Tibetan cinema: “[Films] made by Chinese artisans in Chinese; those with a significant proportion of Tibetan actors, but with Chinese production crews and Chinese writers, performed in either language; and those with entirely Tibetan crews, performers, writers and technicians.”³¹ Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering (alias Jangbu), one of the most distinguished contemporary Tibetan writers and intellectuals, himself a (co)writer and/or (co)director of several Tibetan documentaries, provides a more detailed categorization of “Tibet-related” films, differentiating between six categories.³² However, for our purposes, the three categories suggested by Barnett are fully sufficient, as they illustrate with great accuracy the actual development of film in Tibet.

The first Tibet-related films from the first category were produced as early as the beginning of the 1950s, probably the very first being *The Gold and Silver River Bank*³³ (dir. by Ling Zifeng 凌子风, b. 1917).³⁴ However, one of the most influential Chinese Tibet-related feature films, *The Serf*³⁵ (dir. by Li Jun 李俊, b. 1922), was made a decade later and belongs to the second category, as it is the first Chinese feature film with Tibetan participation.³⁶ It is one of the big Chinese propaganda movies, aimed at rewriting history in accordance with the communist ideology and celebrating the “liberation of Tibetan serfs” by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. *The Serf* was made in Tibet and with some Tibetan actors (who spoke Tibetan, but who were dubbed in Chinese for Chinese audiences). The “old Tibet” is here presented as a “hell on Earth,” from the point of view of suppressed classes, such as the poor peasants who had to serve the evil landlords,

²⁹ However, there are some exceptions, as for example Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering (Lce ngtshang rdo rje tshe ring, alias Jangbu, Ljang bu, b. 1963) or Tashi Dawa (Tib. Bkra shis Zla ba, Ch. Zhaxi Dawa 扎西达娃, b. 1959). Since the late 1990s they have been involved in several film projects with Chinese directors, acting as co-writers and advisers, as will be discussed in more detail later.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering, “Reflections on Tibetan Film,” 269.

³³ *The Gold and Silver Riverbank*, dir. by Ling Zifeng 凌子风, 1953.

³⁴ For the currently most complete list of Tibetan and Tibet-related PRC films, see Robert Barnett, “Tibetan Filmography/Videography,” 365–70.

³⁵ *The Serf*, dir. by Li Jun 李俊, 1963.

³⁶ Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering [Jangbu], “Reflections on Tibetan Film,” 275.

or the blacksmiths who were ostracized by society. The marginal position of the main protagonist, the serf Jampa, is even more emphasized by the fact that he is a mute,³⁷ only beginning to speak after his “liberation” by the Chinese. In the film, Tibetans are basically seen as savages who need to be liberated and ruled from outside. Notably, there is an emphasis on visual images of the Tibetan landscape and the natural environment, an important feature of all future Tibet-related films produced by people from outside Tibet. The image of Tibet as represented in this film is still very powerful in the PRC,³⁸ and the film is still screened on special occasions, as noted by Vanessa Frangville.³⁹

Another – in art circles relatively influential – film from the second category is *Horse Thief*⁴⁰ by the famous “Fifth Generation” filmmaker, Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮 (b. 1952), who represented the “root-seeking” trend in the Chinese cinema of the 1980s. Only Tibetan actors are used in this film (dubbed in Chinese, but with songs and prayers in Tibetan), and the visual elements are clearly embedded in the Tibetan cultural and religious traditions, but the script, directing and cinematography are completely Chinese, with no direct Tibetan contribution. As also noted by Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering, religious elements and practices are – in contrast to earlier representations, such as in *The Serf* – “not shown in a particularly negative light.”⁴¹ From both the visual and narrative points of view there is a big difference as to how Tibet is represented in films from the 1950s and 1960s when compared with *The Horse Thief*, even though the latter is a story from “old Tibet,” i.e., before the so called “liberation of serfs.”⁴² The protagonist is depicted as a free man, visually a “noble savage”-type nomad living with his family in a yak-hair tent in the vast grasslands. The simple story is about a man who violates the rules established by his community and sanctioned by the gods and spirits and who finally comes to his retribution. It is stylistically designed as a docudrama, reflecting Tibetan spiritual traditions and their interconnection with the uncompromising tribal traditions of “old Tibet.” Yet, for many viewers, the

³⁷ He is not mute from birth, but becomes so as a child following a series of brutal and humiliating mistreatment incidents at the hands of the landlord.

³⁸ Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering [Jangbu], “Reflections on Tibetan Film,” 273.

³⁹ Vanessa Frangville, “‘Minority Film’ and Tibet in the PRC,” 10.

⁴⁰ *The Horse Thief*, dir. by Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮, 1986.

⁴¹ Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering [Jangbu], “Reflections on Tibetan Film,” 277.

⁴² Reportedly, the Chinese dubbing and the setting of the story in the pre-1950 Tibet was one of the conditions the director had to accept before he was allowed to make the film about Tibet in a state-run studio. See Vanessa Frangville, “‘Minority Film’ and Tibet in the PRC,” 14. This fact may indicate the official authorities’ anxiety about such a representation of Tibetans, now the “liberated serfs,” as being somewhere between “barbarians” and “noble savages,” which is an image reserved for “old Tibet.”

story forms just a marginal part of a film that has a strong experimental quality, and which is clearly dominated by the visual aspect. At least one half of the entire film is dedicated to images of the barren, inhospitable Tibetan landscape, as well as to religious images and rituals that are often only loosely connected to the story but remain without comment. This type of interest in “Tibetan spirituality” and (partially invented) religious and tribal traditions is one of the signs of the general approach to the representation of Tibet from the 1980s onwards. The younger generation of Chinese artists from this period is fascinated by the “exotic and mysterious” nature of Tibet, which is often little more than the product of their own imaginations.⁴³ In any case, in the light of both the former and later representations, this film can still be seen as an exceptional attempt by the Han Chinese director to portray Tibet without the burden of propaganda, an attempt to avoid any overt ideological interpretations.

However, such a representation has been opposed by many Tibetan artists and intellectuals. Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering has formulated it quite explicitly. Firstly, Tibet is here represented by someone from outside its own cultural and religious traditions, i.e., by someone who does not fully understand Tibetan life and values. As he comments: While the young Chinese intellectuals of the post-Mao era were, during their “return to nature” (Tib. *rang byung khams la log ‘gro ba*),⁴⁴ searching, not so much for “roots” but for “a place to find peace of mind” “in accordance with their individual needs, they found their own Tibet.”⁴⁵ Secondly, although Chinese cultural productions about Tibet during the 1980s abandoned the overtly propagandistic tone and simple black-and-white images of good versus evil, the products – be they film, literature, music, fine arts or other – still reveal a kind of continuity in relation to the representations of Tibet associated with the era of early communism.⁴⁶ As asserted by Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering: “‘Tibet-related’ films are in the process of being transferred to another cultural zone or ethos, where they can continue to project propaganda images of Tibet inside and outside the PRC.”⁴⁷ This trend became much more evident during the 1990s and after the year 2000.

⁴³ For a more detailed analysis of the Chinese representations of Tibet during the 1980s and their symbolic ideology, see Kamila Hladíková, *The Exotic Other and Negotiation of Tibetan Self*.

⁴⁴ The “return to nature” (Tib. *rang byung khams la log ‘gro ba*) is an ambiguous term used by Jangbu instead of the “root-searching movement” (Ch. *xungen yundong* 寻根运动), which is usually mentioned in this context. However, it might be seen as a part of the “root-searching trend,” which in itself is quite a problematic term and includes many – often contradictory – aspects, with digging for the “roots” of Chinese culture finally turning more or less into a critique of tradition.

⁴⁵ Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering [Jangbu], “Reflections on Tibetan Film,” 277.

⁴⁶ See Kamila Hladíková, *The Exotic Other and Negotiation of Tibetan Self*.

⁴⁷ Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering [Jangbu], “Reflections on Tibetan Film,” 278.

Possibly the first film to be made with a predominantly Tibetan crew is *Songtsen Gampo*,⁴⁸ premiered in 1988 and directed by three Tibetans, Lobsang Tsering (Tib. Blo bzang tshe ring, Ch. Luosang Ciren 洛桑次仁),⁴⁹ Phurbu Tsering (Tib. Phur bu tshe ring, Ch. Pubu Ciren 普布次仁),⁵⁰ and Tendzin (Tib. Bstan 'dzin, Ch. Danzeng 丹增). The story is based on historical material and legends relating to the seventh century Tibetan king who married the Tang princess, Wencheng. This act is interpreted by official Chinese propaganda as a confirmation of the unity between the Tibetans and Chinese, and serves as the main argument behind the claim that Tibet has a long history of “being a part of China.” The film was adapted from a dramatic piece of the same name written by Huang Zhilong 黄志龙,⁵¹ a Han Chinese who was a long-term member of the Tibet Autonomous Regional Theatre Group (Tib. *Bod ljongs zlos gar tshogs pa*, Ch. *Xizang huaju tuan* 西藏话剧团), established in 1962 in Lhasa. The original play was published in 1982 and in June of the same year it was staged in Beijing by the Tibetan Theatre Group (in Chinese). The script for the film was adapted by Li Yang 李阳 and Migmar Tsering⁵² (Tib. Mig dmar tshe ring, Ch. Mingma Cairen 明玛才仁). The main role was played by a well-known Tibetan actor, a member of

⁴⁸ *Songtsen Gampo*, dir. by Lobsang Tsering, Phurbu Tsering, and Tendzin, 1988.

⁴⁹ Lobsang Tsering, who played the part of Sontsen Gampo's minister Thonmi Sambhota in this film, is also listed as assistant director in *The Female Living Buddha* (*Nü huofu*, dir. Li Wei, 1988).

⁵⁰ Two of them are (along with others) also listed as co-directors of the first performance of the original play in Beijing. “Songzan Ganbu,” Baike, accessed April 25, 2016. <http://www.baike.com/wiki/%E3%80%8A%E6%9D%BE%E8%B5%9E%E5%B9%B2%E5%B8%83%E3%80%8B>.

⁵¹ According to Robert Barnett, the play (of the same name) was banned after being performed in Beijing because “it had failed to emphasize sufficiently the role of the King's junior wife, the Tang Dynasty princess, Wencheng, officially depicted in Party histories as the harbinger of Sino-Tibetan unity” (but he states that it was in 1986(?)). See Robert Barnett, “The Secret Secret,” 305. He further writes that “a Chinese film director recognized quickly that the story had potential, and made a film version of [Songtsen Gampo], which was politically acceptable.” *Ibid.*, 335, note 64. However, several contemporary Chinese online sources indicate that the play was highly acclaimed because it “concentrated and clearly represented the creative strength of the Tibetan Theatre Group” (“Xizang zizhiq huajutuan juxing jiantuan 50 zhou nian qingzhuhui,” *Xizang zizhiq renmin zhengfu*, December 27, 2012, accessed April 25, 2016. <http://www.xizang.gov.cn/whys/63217.jhtml>), and it should even have been awarded an “excellent script prize” during the years 1980–81 (see “Songzan Ganbu,” Baike, accessed April 25, 2016. <http://www.baike.com/wiki/%E3%80%8A%E6%9D%BE%E8%B5%9E%E5%B9%B2%E5%B8%83%E3%80%8B>).

⁵² According to F. Robin, Migmar Tsering had been “especially trained in film making at the Beijing Film Academy and later became the head of Tibet Radio” (information she obtained in an unspecified oral interview in Toronto in 2011). Other information suggesting that someone of this name had filmed the ransacking of the Jokhang Temple in 1967 by the Red Guards appears in Tsering Woesser's book, *Xizang jiyi* [Forbidden Memory: Tibet During the Cultural Revolution], 119.

the Tibetan Theatre Group, Tashi Dhondup (Tib. Bkra shis don ‘grub, Ch. Zhaxi Dunzhu 扎西顿珠), with other parts also being played by Tibetans. However, the film was dubbed in Chinese for domestic distribution.

Chinese language sources consider this film to be an important milestone in the development of Tibetan “minority cinema” (*shaoshu minzu dianying*), representing another work (following *The Serf*) that confirms the official Chinese historical narrative about Sino-Tibetan relations. For example, the Chinese-language *Shijie dianying jianshang cidian* [Appreciation Dictionary of World Films] has emphasized that almost all of the crew members (including one of the cinematographers, the art designer and the music composer) are Tibetans. And it states: “As it is evident, *Songtsen Gampo* illustrates the shift from the self-introversion of the Tibetan nation towards the awareness of common roots with the Chinese [Zhonghua 中华] nation, which has its historical sources and is based on reality.”⁵³

As pointed out by Robert Barnett, a new step in the development of Tibetan cinema is marked by a 1989 film, *The Secret History of the Potala Palace*.⁵⁴ It is another film that fits into the second category, being a Chinese film with – in this case notably so – Tibetan involvement and the first one to be produced in Central Tibet. The film script was written by Huang Zhilong, the author of several plays about the history of Tibet, including the original drama *Songtsen Gampo*. The director, Zhang Yi, was invited from Chengdu by the production team, which consisted of members of the Tibetan Theatre Group in Lhasa. The majority of the actors were Tibetans and some of them actively participated in the making of the film. The story is based on historical records dealing with relations between the Tibetan leaders and the Hoshuud Mongols in the seventeenth century. In his article, Robert Barnett provides an in-depth analysis of the film, including the production process, the historical and social background, and the narratorial features. He focuses on the fact that the film was banned almost immediately after its first screening at the Central Nationalities Institute in Beijing. The aim of Barnett’s article is to find answers to the question of why the authorities did not approve the film for public screening within the PRC (the ban is still in place and only a handful of people have had the chance to see the film). As R. Barnett’s conclusion seems to suggest, the final decision on the part of the Chinese authorities regarding this film was negatively influenced by political circumstances and the events that took place in China and Tibet in 1989.⁵⁵ Another factor that might have contributed to

⁵³ Zheng Xuelai, *Shijie dianying jianshang cidian*, 673.

⁵⁴ Robert Barnett, “The Secret Secret.”

⁵⁵ The film was made within the relatively liberal second half of the 1980s, but was prepared for distribution only around the end of 1989, i.e., after the Tibetan uprising in Lhasa in March of the same year, which resulted in the imposition of Martial law, and after the Tian’an men Square Massacre, which brought to an end the several months of student protests in Beijing.

the ban, as argued by R. Barnett, is the fact that the Tibetan members of the Tibet Theatre Group were there not only as actors, but also had significant influence regarding the final shape of the film, and that by “celebrating” the Regent Sangye Gyatso, who was later openly condemned by the Communist Party as a “separatist chieftain,”⁵⁶ they “contest[ed] Chinese records of his rule.”⁵⁷

After a significant pause, which followed the politically turbulent year 1989, a new boom period in relation to Tibet-related films, both in the PRC and also in the West, started in the late 1990s.⁵⁸ On the Chinese side, three notable feature films emerged within the space of just three years. Although they are from different backgrounds, all were made by predominantly Chinese crews. The first one is the Chinese historical drama *Red River Valley*⁵⁹ (dir. by Feng Xiaoning 冯小宁, 1994).⁶⁰ This is a so called “main melody film” (*zhu xuanlü pian* 主旋律片),⁶¹ which clearly resonates with the near half-century long tradition of big propaganda movies, but also provides “a more attractive form of propaganda through the combination of political authority and market forces.”⁶² According to the distributors, the story is based on the book *Bayonets to Lhasa* (1961) by the British traveler Peter Fleming, but important changes were made in the script. *Red River Valley* depicts the history of Tibetan resistance against the British invaders led by Colonel Francis Younghusband at the beginning of the twentieth century. The film sets out to demonstrate that the reality of “Sino-Tibetan unity” has historical roots, and that the “Chinese brothers” assisted Tibetans in their fight against Western imperialism (something which is actually not confirmed in any historical records). Tibetans were not involved at any level of production, and almost all parts were played by Han Chinese, including the main Tibetan female character (who is not the main protagonist of the film,

⁵⁶ Ibid., 302.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 277.

⁵⁸ It should be mentioned that on both sides, China and the West, such a boom was partially motivated by political events, among which one of the key factors was the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in 1989. This event marked the beginning of a massive international campaign by the Tibetan community in exile for a resolution of the “Tibet question,” to which China responded by presenting her official standpoint, both internally and externally, and also by promoting the “Chinese version of Tibet” in popular art, the media and literature.

⁵⁹ *Red River Valley*, dir. by Feng Xiaoning 冯小宁, 1997.

⁶⁰ See Vanessa Frangville’s comparison of this film with the big Hollywood production of the same year, *Seven Years in Tibet* in Eadem, “Tibet in Debate,” and Robert Barnett’s study “Younghusband Redux.”

⁶¹ Vanessa Frangville translates this term as “major melody film.” Vanessa Frangville, “‘Minority Film’ and Tibet in the PRC,” 16. Some authors, however, talk about “mainstream film,” linking it directly with “propaganda film.” See, for example, Zhang Yingjin, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film*, 29.

⁶² Vanessa Frangville, “‘Minority Film’ and Tibet in the PRC,” 16.

that role being reserved for a Han Chinese girl). The focus in the film has clearly shifted towards Sino-Tibetan relations, proving evidence of the historical roots of “ethnic harmony” on both collective and individual levels. An important story-line addresses the love story between the Han Chinese girl and a young Tibetan man, which unfolds against the backdrop of major historical events, thus emphasizing the unity between Tibetan and Han. Both the recourse to a popular basic narrative level that focuses on a love story, as well as the emphasis on impressive visual images of the Tibetan landscape, attest to the authors’ aspirations regarding commercial success, not only in China, but also abroad.⁶³ However, the general message of the film lies in its interpretation of history in accordance with official Chinese ideology. Tibet, Tibetans and their history are here fully subordinated to the purposes of ideology and are highly stereotyped. Due to its narrative and visual features, as well as its character types, the film is much closer to a simple fairy-tale, or a popular historical TV drama without complicated ideological implications, rather than a serious account of the 1904 British invasion of Tibet as evidenced from British and Tibetan sources.

A different image of Tibet and Sino-Tibetan relations appears in a US-based diasporic film by the female director Joan Chen (Chen Chong 陈冲, b. 1961), known in English as *Xiu Xiu, the Sent-down Girl*⁶⁴ (the Chinese title is *Tianyu* 天浴 [“Celestial Bath”], according to the original short story of the same name by the female writer Yan Geling 严歌苓, b. 1958). The film has been banned in the PRC because of its unconventional critique of the brutal reality of the Cultural Revolution and motifs of sex and violence. This is in sharp contrast with the childish innocence of the main protagonist, the young girl Xiu Xiu, who is sent to the countryside in the northern part of the Tibetan plateau during the Cultural Revolution’s “sent-down movement.”⁶⁵ It is one of the most naturalistic images of the impact of the Cultural Revolution on the lives of ordinary people, as presented from the girl’s point of view. The only sympathetic male character is the fatherly figure of a “neutered” Tibetan herdsman, who tries to save Xiu Xiu from her countrymen. Reportedly, the film was shot in Tibetan locations, but without official permission, because it failed to gain the agreement of the authorities concerning the contents. Both the original short story and the film itself are strongly influenced by the “root-searching movement,” exhibiting

⁶³ The fact that outside China the film was often shown at events organized by official Chinese institutions proves the extent of the official interest in this film, as well as the emphasis on the promotion of the “official Chinese narrative” of Tibetan history and “national unity.”

⁶⁴ *Xiu Xiu, the Sent-down Girl*, dir. by Joan Chen, 1998.

⁶⁵ On the Chinese “sent-down movement,” see, for example, Michel Bonnin, *The Lost Generation: The Rustification of Chinese Youth, 1968–1980*.

many significant features that are typical of such representations of “minorities” in China at that time. This includes the setting of the film on the margins of the Chinese world, i.e., within a “primitive” grasslands culture (that eventually appears as the more “civilized” one), as well as the use of brutal motifs such as violent sex and death, and the portrayal of the passive and “impotent” nature of the Tibetan character.⁶⁶ However, unlike the conventional (mostly male-authored) “root-searching” stories from the PRC, this piece is highly critical, both in a cultural and political sense, and is sympathetic not only towards the innocent Han Chinese girl, but also to her Tibetan protector, who does not take part in the craziness of the Cultural Revolution.

The third film, *Yeshe Dolma*⁶⁷ (dir. by Xie Fei 谢飞, b. 1942) is probably the first Chinese Tibetan-language⁶⁸ feature film approved for distribution in China and abroad where the script is co-written by a Tibetan, although it is written in Chinese.⁶⁹ The author is the well-known Lhasa-based half-Han half-Tibetan Sinophone writer, Tashi Dawa, whose short stories from the mid-1980s, written in the style of “Tibetan magical realism,” gained considerable attention in China and in the West.⁷⁰ The script is based on his short story “Darkness”

⁶⁶ Although in China Tibetans are in general perceived as a “ferocious” “macho minority” (especially those from the Kham area, see, e.g., Susan Blum, *Portraits of “Primitives”*), the motifs of castration or impotence that are often used in Chinese literature of the 1980s and 1990s and which are imbued with symbolic meanings, as shown for example by Kam Louie (*Theorizing Chinese Masculinity*), are not unusual in Tibet-related works. These are employed as a symbolical means of counterbalancing the perceived nature of Tibetan “hyper-masculinity” (for example, in Ma Jian and Ma Yuan’s short stories, see Hladíková, *The Exotic Other and Negotiation of Tibetan Self*).

⁶⁷ *Yeshe Dolma*, dir. by Xie Fei 谢飞, 2000.

⁶⁸ This time, two language versions of the film were made, with the Tibetan version also intended for screening abroad, where the film was presented as a “Tibetan movie” with “all Tibetan actors” and in the “original Tibetan language.” This was stated, for example, on a poster used to promote the screening of the film by the Confucius Institute in the USA (see “Film Screening of ‘Song of Tibet,’” Confucius Institute at George Mason University, accessed October 17, 2015, <http://confucius.gmu.edu/upload/song-of-tibet.pdf>). Ironically, all the Tibetan names appear in the film synopsis in their sinicized form, i.e., in *pinyin* rather than in Tibetan.

⁶⁹ See Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering, “Reflections on Tibetan Film,” 278.

⁷⁰ Tashi Dawa’s short stories have been analyzed by Alice Grünfelder, *Tashi Dawa und die neuere tibetische Literatur*; Patricia Schiaffini, *Tashi Dawa: Magical Realism and Contested Identity in Modern Tibet*; and Lara Maconi *Frontières de l’imaginaire*. Some of them were translated into Western languages, including English, German, French, Italian and Czech, and a few of them also appeared in Tibetan translation. However, the general reception of his work among Tibetan intellectuals has been rather negative. See, for example, Yangdon Dhondup, “In Search for their Ancestors: Contemporary Writing from Tibet,” 10; Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, *Tashi Dawa: Magical Realism and Contested Identity in Modern Tibet*, 219; his “magical realist” style (also

(*Ming* 冥).⁷¹ The majority of actors are Tibetans, but the production crew is almost entirely Chinese. The story is set in Lhasa, where the film was shot on site, with numerous shots of the Barkhor, the Jokhang Temple and the Potala. The film opens with a brief shot of the Potala set in a background of snow-covered hills, followed by a sequence of religious activities carried out around the Barkhor and in the Jokhang. The film is a romance, set in the period before Chinese occupation, with contemporary Tibet serving only as the frame for the narration of an old woman's love story from the time of her youth, which involves three men from different social class backgrounds. The story, which is shared by a grandmother with her granddaughter, provides a glimpse into several important periods of modern Tibetan history, including the arrival of the Chinese army, the Dalai Lama's escape to exile and the Cultural Revolution. The narration culminates in reconciliation between the four old people whose fortunes of life and mutual emotions have been so complex in the past, although they have all subsequently achieved peace of mind. However, while the scenes from contemporary Tibet, which pay considerable attention to the everyday religious activities of Tibetans, can be labeled as more or less realistic, the sections set in the past align the film much more closely with other similar Tibet-related films made by the Chinese production teams around the same time. This includes the strictly ideological interpretation of history, as well as the introduction of many clichés about Tibet that were common in mainstream Chinese society and the media, such as the beautiful, "promiscuous" female protagonist who is skilled in singing the popular Sixth Dalai Lama's love songs.

During the 2000s a number of similar Tibet-related films appeared, combining propaganda with commercially attractive motifs and images, often made as the result of cooperation between Han Chinese and Tibetans. Some of them were co-produced with foreign involvement, namely *Snow Flower*⁷² (dir. by Dai Wei 戴玮), *Love Song of Kangding*⁷³ (dir. by Jiang Ping 江平, b. 1961), and *Once Upon a Time in Tibet*⁷⁴ (dir. by Dai Wei). The scripts for both films directed by the female director Dai Wei were co-written by Tashi Dawa. *Once Upon a Time in Tibet*, and another film of somewhat different rank, *Mountain Patrol*⁷⁵ (dir. Lu Chuan 陆川,

adopted by some Han Chinese writers, such as Mo Yan) has more than probably influenced the experimental writings of some Tibetophone writers, e.g., Jangbu or Pema Tsenden. For more information on "Tibetan magical realism," see Franz Xaver Erhard's article "Magical Realism and Tibetan Literature."

⁷¹ Zhaxi Dawa, *Xizang yinmi suiyue*.

⁷² *Snow Flower*, dir. by Dai Wei 戴玮, 2008.

⁷³ *Love Song of Kangding*, dir. by Jiang Ping 江平, 2010.

⁷⁴ *Once Upon a Time in Tibet*, dir. by Dai Wei. China, 2010.

⁷⁵ *Mountain Patrol*, dir. by Lu Chuan 陆川, 2004.

b. 1971), were screened abroad with a degree of success, mainly at international film festivals, and were also released as DVDs in some countries. *Once upon a Time in Tibet* was predominantly a Chinese production. The locations were shot in Tibet and Tibetan characters speak Tibetan, but the main Tibetan parts are played by Chinese actors. As with the *Red River Valley* it is another historical saga conforming to the Chinese interpretation of Tibetan history and reflecting many stereotypes and clichés, as will be discussed below.

Apart from *Mountain Patrol*, the other three films have several common features, be it their setting (contemporary Tibet serving just as the frame for a parallel story from the past), their story (everlasting love that overcomes all hardships), their narrative features or visual elements, as also noted by Vanessa Frangville. In her evaluation of the films from the late 1990s and 2000s, she emphasizes two important analogies: “the primitiveness and backwardness as positive attributes from which the ‘overmodernized’ Han can learn,” and “the encounters between Han and Tibetans, often result[ing] in redemption of a lost Han,”⁷⁶ which is a powerful means of promoting the notion of “ethnic harmony.” In contrast, *Mountain Patrol* is the only Chinese Tibet-related film that takes place in the present, and the only one which does not revolve around a love story. It focuses on an environmental issue and tells the story of the “mountain patrols” established by local Tibetans in far northern Tibet to fight against poachers killing endangered animals for fur. The film is inspired by real events. However, the main protagonist is a Han Chinese journalist who is sent from Beijing to investigate the story of the local “patrol,” so the basic approach adopted by the film is that of an “outsider’s gaze,” not the “Tibetan perspective.”

The beginning of the new millennium meant a breakthrough in the third category of films, i.e., those made completely by Tibetans. In 2003 and 2004 the first short films by Pema Tseden appeared and in 2005 his first feature-length film was released, both in China and abroad.⁷⁷ In 2006 another two Tibet-related films were released: the Taiwan-produced *Milarepa*,⁷⁸ directed and written by

⁷⁶ Vanessa Frangville, “‘Minority Film’ and Tibet in the PRC,” 17.

⁷⁷ Around this time, Tibetan DV films started to appear, usually not for public distribution, but sometimes accessible on the internet, such as *The Girl Lhari*, dir. by Rigdan Gyamtso, written by Khamo Gyal, 2005. Françoise Robin provides the story-line of this film in her article: Françoise Robin, “Performing Compassion.” She also mentions several other Tibetan video films made about the same time, all from Amdo, such as *The Coral Necklace*, dir. by Shide Nyima (*Zhi bde nyi ma*), 2006; and *The Ewe Goes to Central Tibet* (Tib. *Ma mo 'i dbus lam*), dir. by Rigdan Gyamtso, 2007. The so far most detailed introduction of recent Tibetan DV films is Robert Barnett’s “DV-made Tibet,” published in 2015.

⁷⁸ *Milarepa*, dir. by Sonam, 2006.

Sonam Tulku (bSod nams), and *Prince of the Himalyas*,⁷⁹ a Tibetan version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, directed by Sherwood Hu (Hu Xuehua 胡雪桦, b. 1967) and co-written by Dorje Tsering and Tashi Dawa.

After the first three films by Pema Tseden (2005, 2009, 2011), which are the main focus of this article and will thus be discussed separately, a new star appeared on the Tibetan film scene, the former painter and cinematographer Sonthar Gyal (Tib. Zon thar rgyal, Ch. Song Taijia 松太加, b. 1974), who had previously cooperated with Pema Tseden on two of his films. His authorial debut (both as writer and director) was released in 2011. The official English title, *The Sun Beaten Path*,⁸⁰ (probably intentionally) does not tell us much about the contents of the film and does not reveal any specific connection with Tibet; however, this is not the case with both the Tibetan and Chinese titles. The Tibetan title, *Dbus lam gyi nyi ma*, is the most concrete of the three language versions and can be translated directly as “the sun over the road to Ü” (i.e., Central Tibet). Thus it explains the leading motif of the whole film, i.e., the motif of pilgrimage to Lhasa, the center of Tibetan Buddhism. This is not only not apparent from the English title, but also is not explained in the film at all (which means that non-Tibetan audiences may never fathom the spiritual background of the story, which is evident only for those familiar with Tibet, Tibetan religion and culture). So while for Western audiences it is just a “road movie,” for Tibetans it is a Buddhist pilgrimage, during which, as in Pema Tseden's earlier films, the notion of “compassion” is emphasized, although it is not the religious faith as such that actually brings about the salvation for the main protagonist. This is achieved by the actions of an old man, who shows compassion for the young boy and helps him to overcome his personal hardships.

Sonthar Gyal's latest film was released in 2015; *The River*⁸¹ had its premiere at the Berlinale in January 2015, where it appeared in the category of films for children and youth.⁸²

⁷⁹ *Prince of the Himalayas*, dir. by Sherwood Hu, 2006.

⁸⁰ *The Sun Beaten Path*, dir. by Sonthar Gyal, 2010.

⁸¹ *River*, dir. by Sonthar Gyal, 2015.

⁸² The film has already been screened at several festivals in Europe, including the Zlín Film Festival in the Czech Republic. Notably, on the Zlín Festival's webpage, Sonthar Gyal is introduced as a “Chinese scriptwriter and director born in the region of Tibet” and the language of the film is indicated as “Mandarin” (sic!). “About Film: River (2015),” 56th International Film Festival for Children and Youth, accessed September 12, 2015. <http://www.zlínfest.cz/en/film-detail?id=5590>.

3. NEW TIBETAN CINEMA AND PEMA TSEDEN

Pema Tseden is currently the leading figure associated with independent Tibetan cinema productions made in the PRC.⁸³ He was born in 1969 in Trika county (Tib. Khri ga, Ch. Guide) in Tsolho (Tib. mTsho lho, Ch. Hainan), a prefecture in Amdo which is a part of Qinghai province. He went through a regular Tibetan language based education in his native region and, after several years of teaching in a village school, he enrolled at the Northwest Nationalities Institute in Lanzhou, Gansu Province, where he studied Tibetan language and literature and translation. During this time he wrote almost fifty short stories and novellas, mostly in Tibetan, but occasionally he also published works in Chinese. In 2002 he gained a grant from the Trace Foundation based in New York, which enabled him to go to the Beijing Film Academy, where he studied first acting (2002–2004) and later directing (2006–2008). During his studies he made two short films, *The Silent Holy Stones*⁸⁴ and *The Grassland*. The first short film was later made into a feature-length film under the same name, which was released in 2005 as “the first film about Tibet by Tibetans.”⁸⁵ The film won the Chinese official, state-funded Golden Rooster Award for the best directorial debut and the Asian New Talent Award at the Shanghai International Film Festival. As the first Tibetan film in the PRC, it was released for screening abroad, although only at international film festivals rather than for a wider distribution. Over the next ten years, Pema Tseden completed several larger and minor film projects, among them three other feature films, *The Search*, *Old Dog*,⁸⁶ and a more commercially-oriented title set in an unspecified period, *The Sacred Arrow*.⁸⁷ In 2015 a new film by Pema Tseden appeared. The world premiere of *Tharlo*⁸⁸ was at the beginning of September 2015 at the Venice Film Festival, and the world rights for the film have been secured by the Hong Kong-based company, Asian Shadows. For the first time, a professional actor, the popular comedian Shide Nyima, had been invited to play the main protagonist, Tharlo. By early 2016 the film had been awarded several international prizes, including the Taiwanese Golden Horse Award for the best screenplay. In this paper I will analyze the first three films (the latter two made exclusively with a Tibetan crew), which can all be considered to have made a

⁸³ By “independent” I mean that it is funded from private sources and/or from abroad and does not get any financial support from official Chinese institutions or state-owned companies.

⁸⁴ *The Silent Holy Stones*, dir. by Pema Tseden, 2003. Short feature.

⁸⁵ As it was introduced, for example, for the screening at the festival Film Asia in Prague, 2006.

⁸⁶ *Old Dog*, dir. by Pema Tseden, 2011.

⁸⁷ *Sacred Arrow*, dir. by Pema Tseden, 2014.

⁸⁸ *Tharlo*, dir. by Pema Tseden, 2015.

remarkable attempt to represent everyday life in contemporary Tibet (or Amdo, to be more precise). All of Pema Tseden's films take place and are shot in rural Amdo, with a largely Tibetan crew and with non-professional actors speaking in the local Amdo dialect. For internal distribution, the films are supplied with Chinese subtitles rather than Chinese dubbing (something very unusual in China), which helps to preserve the original authenticity. Although the definition quality is low, the first three feature films are freely available online in the original language, accompanied by Chinese subtitles.

The first film, *The Silent Holy Stones*, was written and directed by Pema Tseden (at that time under his Sinicized name, Wanma Caidan). While all the actors and many crew members were Tibetans, the more technical positions, such as camera or editing, were reserved for Chinese (Du Jie 杜杰 camera, Li Fang 李方 and Zhou Yifu 周壹夫 editing). The film features a seemingly absurd blend of tradition and modernity, narrating the life of a young monk from a rural family in Amdo. The plot covers a period of several days around Losar, the Tibetan New Year, when the monk is taken home by his father to spend the holiday with his family. There, he is allowed to watch a few episodes of a popular TV series based on a well known classical Chinese novel *Xiyou ji* 西游记 (*A Journey to the West*, also known under the title *Monkey King*). The boy monk wishes that his teacher and the young *tulku* (incarnated lama) from his small monastery could also have the opportunity to watch the series, and his father agrees to carry the TV set across the mountains to the monastery, where the monks and lamas can watch several episodes during the Losar.

There are several important features that differentiate this film from any of the so far mentioned Tibet-related films from the first and second categories (but some of which are present in films from the third category). Firstly, it deals with contemporary Tibet and its current situation, while the majority of the previously mentioned films have a historical setting. Secondly, although the main focus of the film is not religion as such, it is a clearly dominating theme here, including the fact that the main protagonist is a monk, and all other characters are either monks or Buddhists. Moreover, the leitmotif of the film is a Buddhist story about the pilgrimage of the Chinese monk Xuanzang to India during the Tang Dynasty. Another important difference is that there are no important female characters, while in most of the Tibet-related films produced in China female characters play a significant role, usually being represented in a very stereotypical manner, either as beautiful and sexually attractive (as in the *Red River Valley* or *Yeshe Dolma*) or weak, vulnerable and clearly subordinated to men (as in *The Horse Thief*, *Xiu Xiu*, *the Sent-down Girl*, where the female character is Han Chinese, or in *Once upon a Time in Tibet*). As for the visual aspect, there is no specific emphasis on the "beautiful" or "hostile" Tibetan landscape, no "dark" or "primitive" interiors, images which we

see in so many Tibet-related films. There are basically two settings, one for static and the other for dynamic scenes. The static scenes are shot in the interiors, places, where people live, either within the monastery or in the homes of villagers. The rooms are relatively well-illuminated by natural light, usually there is a dominant Tibetan-style long wooden table with wooden benches, and on the other end of the table, in the centre of the shot, there is a modern TV set, the main focus of the story. The dynamic scenes show the characters on the journey, either going to or from the monastery as they journey across a mountain pass. Here, the camera provides a series of fixed-frame shots of the Tibetan landscape as the characters move forward, but the landscape is strikingly different from the conventional images that usually appear in Tibet-related films. Here it seems that no specific attention is paid to the landscape they are traveling through: there are no majestic and high snow-capped mountains, no vast green grasslands, just a wind-lashed, barren and yellow plain, sometimes with brown hillocks with white stains of snow on the horizon, which are sometimes even obscured by fog or a high front horizon, etc.

The characters are neither heroic nor tragic, they do not suffer due to any handicap (such as the eunuch in *Xiu Xiu, the Sent-down Girl*, or the “cursed woman” Yongcuo in *Once upon a Time in Tibet*) or the cruel and primitive abuse by barbarians, or even the hard life they lead or any other tragic fate. They are Buddhists, but moderately modern (they have electricity and TV with a VCD set, and they like to watch it). They have their simple everyday joys and sorrows, and the film does not show them in any kind of extreme situations, but rather in their usual routine of life, reflecting the slow dynamics of a society in transition. According to the India-based Tibetan filmmaker Tenzing Sonam, the film “operated at a deeply humanistic level and was imbued with a sense of nostalgia for dying traditions and stoic acceptance of the inevitability of change.”⁸⁹ The main theme of the film, the “dying [of] traditions,” is emphasized by the title, which refers to the still *mani* stones with inscribed mantras, and is symbolically expressed through the minor character of an old stone-cutter who has died among his *mani* stones, abandoned by his son.

The same slow dynamics are also characteristics found in the second feature-length film, *The Search*, where the story proper is even more marginal than in *The Silent Holy Stones*. In this case the Tibetan and English titles are much more ambiguous than the Chinese: *Xunzhao Zhimei Gendeng* translates as “searching for Drime Kunden,” and refers both to the actual story, which is a “road movie” about searching for actors for a film version of the well-known Tibetan opera, and also to the symbolic message inherent in the film. The actual opera is *The Biography*

⁸⁹ Tenzing Sonam, “Quiet Storm: Pema Tseden and the Emergence of Tibetan Cinema,” 37.

of *Drime Kunden* (Tib. *Dri med kun ldan gyi rnam thar*), based on the original Sanskrit text of *Viśvāntara Jātaka*, one of the stories from the previous lives of the historical Buddha. The prince, Drime Kunden, the son of a wealthy family, represents the ideal of generosity (Tib. *sbyin pa*), one of the most important virtues in Tibetan Buddhism. He agrees without hesitation to give away all his wealth, and then even his eyes, his wife and children to strangers who ask for them. Thus, on a symbolical level, the film is about searching for the Buddhist ideal, the embodiment of generosity and compassion, a “true Tibetan” possessing the “true virtues” of Tibetan Buddhism. The original ambiguous title, *The Search* (sometimes even translated as “*Soul-searching*”), thus leaves more space for various interpretations concerning the concrete and abstract, real and symbolical target(s) of the search.

Pema Tsenden’s second film is clearly and intentionally experimental in all important aspects, such as the story and its narration, the visual elements and techniques, the sound, etc. Critics, scholars⁹⁰ and the author himself⁹¹ point out that his style is informed by the Asian “New Wave” cinema movement and inspired by works of such directors as Hou Hsiao-hsien (b. 1947, Taiwan), Jia Zhangke (b. 1970, PRC) and Abbas Kiarostami (b. 1940, Iran). In his interview for the Asia Society, Pema Tsenden explains that his style is inspired by traditional Tibetan *thangka* painting, which enables the artist to “tell stories” visually, or “to tell an entire story in one single *thangka*.”⁹² Technically, it has developed into a specific visual style of film, characterized by extremely long and uninterrupted fixed-frame shots, a significant absence of close-ups, and distinctive framing emphasizing the distance between the characters and the audience. Among the most commonly used types of shot are those showing a group of people from a long distance, or even from behind, so that we cannot see their facial expressions, often framed by an object hindering the full view, such as a door or window frames, the walls of a courtyard and the like, and shots showing people in/from a moving car, either from behind, or through the window, etc. Pema Tsenden believes that this style is somehow close to a specifically “Tibetan aesthetics” and “reflects the Tibetan way of thinking.”⁹³ This visual style is even more emphasized by the sound, which is based exclusively on “real” natural sounds accompanied by Tibetan-style music played on the radio of the car in which the film crew is traveling throughout Amdo.⁹⁴ These are all pieces of a carefully built mosaic

⁹⁰ Françoise Robin, “Performing Compassion,” 41; Tenzing Sonam, “Quiet Storm.”

⁹¹ Pema Tsenden, “Filmmaker Pema Tsenden (Wanma Caidan): Tibetan Films for Tibetan People.”

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ As pointed out by Tenzing Sonam, the soundtrack consists mostly of traditional Tibetan songs from Central Tibet, interpreted by an exiled singer, Techung, and not by local Amdo music. See Tenzing Sonam, “Quiet Storm,” 41.

of contemporary (Amdo) Tibetan society, where different influences, different ideologies and different life-styles mingle together.

The characters are even less individualized than in *The Silent Holy Stones*, to the extent that there are no “main” and “supporting” roles, as there are no “main” and “supporting” stories. Instead, in Tenzing Sonam’s words, the film is formed by an “elliptical narrative arc,”⁹⁵ i.e., the telling of multiple stories of many people who appear on the screen, some only briefly or vaguely, some being assigned more detail, but never in the form of a full life-story, which would enable us to get closer to the characters, in the physical (as expressed through the long takes and almost absolute absence of close ups), as well as the psychological sense. Again, we find only small and marginal stories about small and marginal people, something that is in evident contrast with the tragic or excessive stories about the sublime background of the “grand narratives” of history, as illustrated by the grandeur of majestic Tibetan nature, a feature that is so typical of many Tibet-related films produced in China.

The only female character here is a girl, whose face is covered with a scarf, which means that we never see anything more than a pair of dark eyes. She is one of the few relatively important characters, as she is traveling with the film crew for a while. Yet, her story remains obscure throughout the film, intentionally provoking the viewer’s curiosity. Why does she never remove her scarf? Is she beautiful? What happened between her and her boyfriend? Will they be reunited? Nothing in the film gives any clues. In my understanding, the girl and her “love story” should be seen as a direct contrast to the dominant representation of Tibet, especially in the recently produced big Hollywood-like Chinese films that represent the Chinese interpretation of Tibetan history. In films such as *Red River Valley*, *The Song of Tibet*, *Snow Flower* or *Once Upon a Time in Tibet* the plot is always based on a grand love story, the female characters are always beautiful and sexually attractive, sometimes even frivolous. On the contrary, this girl is so shy that she never takes off the scarf covering her face, and although she has an angelic voice, it is hard to persuade her to sing even a few lines from the opera or to say a few words. This obviously contrasts with the singing and dancing “minorities” that occupy the Chinese media. If we can speak about a love story at all in her case, it is obviously neither the big sublime love that overcomes all hardships, nor a tragic love that leaves no eyes dry.

In this light, we can view Pema Tseden’s cinematic representations of Tibet as a kind of counter-discourse against the Chinese (and possibly also Western) representations. This is further confirmed by his third feature film, the *Old Dog* (2011). It is perfectly possible to see the three films as a trilogy, designed to capture

⁹⁵ Ibid., 38.

the way of life in contemporary Tibetan areas in Amdo. Even though the Chinese presence is never explicitly expressed in any of the three films (in fact, the first Han Chinese character – played by a Tibetan – appears only in the *Old Dog*), it is expressed symbolically; only in the *Old Dog* does it become very palpable. In *The Silent Holy Stones* it is represented not only by means of the Chinese TV series but, in particular, through the use of a dialogue between the young monk and his elder brother, who is studying Chinese in the town. The older boy clearly thinks that to study Tibetan is of no use, and that it is much more useful to study Chinese, as it will enable him to live in town and do business there. According to Tenzing Sonam, this dialogue shows the “fragility of Tibetan culture within the context of this other, larger reality, looming just outside the frame of the film.”⁹⁶ In *The Search* there are many broken pieces, which together illustrate the omnipresence of a dominant culture that is able to suppress any spark of life in those people living on the margins of this dominant culture. For example, this is witnessed in the huge concrete complex of a boarding school for Tibetan children, along with their mechanical mass exercises to the accompaniment of low quality reproduced music. The same message is conveyed in the questions from the film crew about the opera adepts’ knowledge of Tibetan, or the depressing atmosphere in a Tibetan *Nangma*-style bar whose visitors are all desperately drunk young men. In the *Old Dog* this invisible omnipresence and associated feelings of depression and frustration grow into an all-pervading sense of absurdity. If in the previous film, *The Search*, the dominant feature was the formal experiment, in *Old Dog* it is this absurdity that penetrates even the small details of personal lives.⁹⁷

As in Pema Tsenden’s earlier films, the story and the plot are very simple, without a great deal of action or dramatic twists – the only surprise comes at the end of the film, with an unexpected ending. There are two main characters, a father and his son, a well-known pattern from early Tibetan short stories from the 1980s and 1990s, where the father/mother represents the rigidity of the “old society,” deeply rooted in traditions that are influenced by religious concepts labeled as “feudal superstition” by both the official authorities and progressive Tibetan intellectuals, with the son’s/daughter’s “modern” behavior and thinking leading to a generational conflict.⁹⁸ In the *Old Dog* we can see a notable shift

⁹⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁹⁷ Perhaps, here we can see a parallel with independent Chinese urban cinema of the so called “Sixth Generation filmmakers” from the turn of the 21st century, i.e., films by Jia Zhangke, Zhang Yuan (张元, b. 1963), Ning Ying (宁瀛, b. 1959) and others. Basically, their style and approach inspired Pema Tsenden, a member of the same generation, while he was studying at the Beijing Film Academy.

⁹⁸ For an analysis of this generational conflict in modern Tibetan literature, see Riika Virtanen, “Development and Urban Space in Contemporary Tibetan Literature.”

from this stereotype. The film follows the dealings of the two protagonists with a Han Chinese “businessman” in relation to their old dog, a Tibetan mastiff, the most precious possession of the family. The son wants to take the opportunity of the rich urban Chinese “craze” for such dogs, and plans to sell the dog for a huge sum of money. However, his father stubbornly rejects the idea of selling the dog under any circumstances. While the father’s character can well be considered as representing the “old generation,” the image of the son as a representative of the “new generation” of modern Tibetans is quite disturbing. Visually, a Tibetan macho-type with long hair who is seen riding his motorbike, the son is soon exposed as an impotent husband who is incapable of giving his father the desired offspring and one who refuses to admit the fact or to undergo medical treatment. He is portrayed as a drunkard who physically attacks his young wife.⁹⁹

The growing sense of absurdity in the film stems not only from the dialogues between the father and the son and from their meetings with the Chinese businessman, but is also tightly connected to the environment, where the scenes take place, and to the overall atmosphere. Basically, there are two different settings, i.e., spheres, which can be, in a certain sense, characterized by opposing qualities, such as “home” and “town.” On many occasions, the camera follows the protagonists, either the son on his motorbike, or the father on his horse, slowly moving along the muddy road of a Tibetan township, passing numerous construction sites where Chinese “Tibetan-style” buildings made of concrete rise up from a mixture of mud, dust and dung. Other images include inappropriately lofty government buildings, with piles of garbage, young boys playing billiards in the street, and goats, pigs and stray dogs roaming around. The scenes associated with the “dog deal” take place at a “scrapyard where mastiffs are chained to the rusting remains of hulking tankers.”¹⁰⁰ But even the sphere of “home,” a small house on the grasslands, is not a pleasant or comfortable place. A dusty road lined with metal fences leads across the green grasslands, divided up into sections by even more fencing, towards a small house, where the family of three lives. The most dominant element of the interior scenes is a big flat-screen TV, watched in silence by family members. In one sequence, there is an absurd scene where the family is sitting together watching an aggressive Chinese commercial, when the

⁹⁹ Again, as in *Xiu Xiu, the Sent-down Girl*, the symbolical “emasculatation” of a Tibetan male character appears. It resonates with the representation of masculinity in many contemporary Tibetan films, as pointed out by Robert Barnett, who calls these films “Tibetan tales of failed manhood.” Robert Barnett, “DV-made Tibet,” 150. However, in this case it can be interpreted more specifically as how impossible it is for Tibetans to pass on their traditional culture, as well as their vulnerability in a Chinese-dominated world.

¹⁰⁰ Tenzing Sonam, “Quiet Storm,” 42.

TV signal is suddenly interrupted. In one shot, we observe through a glass door how the daughter-in-law, after a while, leaves the scene as tension mounts, soon to be followed by the son who comes to turn off the TV even though his father is still sitting in front of it.

Social life in the township strictly follows the rules set by the Chinese, as is evident from the scenes where both the son, and later the father, needs to search for their relative, who is an officer in the local police station, in order to negotiate with the Chinese businessman about the price of the dog. Without these “*guanxi*” (connections) their ability to speak basic Chinese is of no use. And again, when the son’s wife needs to go to the local hospital for a health check-up, the family has to ask her sister, a teacher at the local school and the policeman’s wife, to accompany her. In exchange, they invite the policeman for a meal and supply his family with fresh butter. The ordinary Tibetans, nomads and herders, have thus become strangers in their own homeland, as their social abilities and general orientation is not sufficient to deal with everyday challenges of urban life and a Sinicized society.

The image of contemporary life in Tibet in the *Old Dog* is even more depressing, because, as pointed out by Tenzing Sonam: “There is none of the solace of religion or extended family life that infused Pema Tsenden’s earlier films.”¹⁰¹ In fact, there was hardly a great deal of this in *The Search*. I view this fact as a rather natural consequence of the author’s evolution and maturation. His first two films, the short film *The Grassland*, and *The Silent Holy Stones*, both strive to capture the role of religion in the everyday life of Tibetans. As one of the constituent parts of Tibetan identity, it was a natural choice in his first attempts to represent Tibet from a Tibetan point of view. At the same time, it provided an element typically associated with Tibet in the eyes of outsiders from China and the West, thus allowing the film to be more in accordance with their expectations. But, following *The Search* (which was made after another story about a monk had been rejected for filming by the authorities, as mentioned by the director in an interview¹⁰²), a film that arouses more questions concerning the role of Buddhism in contemporary Tibetan society than it provides answers, a more realistic and less symbolic theme appeared. This allowed more space for the exploration of future perspectives of Tibetans within the PRC and bespeaks the growing self-confidence of an author who is willing to depict Tibet from the “Tibetan perspective” rather than by accommodating the expectations of Chinese and Western audiences. However, the *Old Dog* invites its viewers to apply a variety of metaphorical and allegorical meanings. One of the most evident metaphors is the

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Pema Tsenden, “Filmmaker Pema Tsenden (Wanma Caidan): Tibetan Films for Tibetan People.”

metaphor of fences, which in Tsering Shakya's words "become a metaphor in the film for confinement and for state encroachment on local lives."¹⁰³ If we continue with allegorical interpretations, we might be tempted to view the story of the old Tibetan man stubbornly refusing to sell his old dog to the Chinese for a huge amount of money, as hiding a covert nationalistic message. It speaks not only of the "national character" of Tibetans, but also about their fate in a contemporary commercialized Chinese society.

4. CONCLUSION

There are several thematic elements in Pema Tsenden's films that can be seen as important aspects through which the Tibetan-ness is expressed. This is in contrast with the dominant and officially proclaimed Chinese perspective of Tibet, as is represented in various cultural products that effectively blend the official ideology with market forces. Among them, the most notable are: the relationship between the past/the present, religion, the environment, character stereotypes, and the emphasis on/absence of "ethnic harmony," in the sense of peaceful co-existence and cooperation between Han Chinese and Tibetans.¹⁰⁴

As a rule, within the PRC it has always been problematic to work on themes that reflect contemporary society. This is the same for any type of art, including the medium of film. Particularly in certain periods (such as the beginning of the 1990s, after the 1989 Tian'an men massacre), many artists have been forced to give up contemporary themes and turn to history, through which they have sometimes been able to speak out in an allegorical form. In the case of Tibet, the scope of "forbidden topics" is even wider, as is evident from the available material. In Tibet-related cinematography, contemporary themes are extremely rare. But, as an exception, all of Pema Tsenden's films are stories set in contemporary Amdo. Although the director himself has mentioned the problem of censorship in several interviews, where he has also described the complicated process of approval in relation to film topics, he has obviously been much more successful in this process than have many others.¹⁰⁵ With his films he has gained a unique opportunity to

¹⁰³ Tsering Shakya, "Old Dog (*Khyi rgan*), directed by Pema Tsenden and *The Sun Beaten Path* (*Dbus lam gyi nyi ma*), directed by Sonthar Gyal."

¹⁰⁴ Such representations started with the "liberation of Tibetan serfs" by the Red Army in *The Serf*. Many of the more recent films depict encounters or even love affairs between Han Chinese and Tibetans (the best example is the *Red River Valley*), but such motifs have so far not appeared in any of the Tibetan films from Tibetan production teams, as also noted by Robert Barnett, "DV-made Tibet," 151.

¹⁰⁵ Interviews: Pema Tsenden, "Filmmaker Pema Tsenden (Wanma Caidan)"; or idem, "Tharlo (Orizzonti)."

provide an insider's perspective on the lives of ordinary people in contemporary Tibet, and has become the first director to focus on Tibet who is considered "authentic," both in the PRC and in the West. Although it is quite evident that he always walks a thin line, he has again proven his desire to portray Tibet "from the Tibetan point of view" with his last film, *Tharlo*, which demonstrates a profound knowledge of Tibetan culture and society and his informed understanding of contemporary problems – something which, more or less, all Chinese production Tibet-related films have failed to achieve.

Religion, or in particular Buddhism, has always been seen by Tibetans themselves as one of the most important factors that determine their Tibetan identity, and this is especially so since the second half of the twentieth century, when the need for self-determination has been more urgent.¹⁰⁶ For decades, it has also been inseparably connected with Western representations and images of Tibet,¹⁰⁷ and it has always had a specific place in the Chinese visions of Tibet, where the evaluation of religion has roughly oscillated between the belief that it is the most evil cause of Tibetan backwardness and a position where it is regarded as pure spirituality, the source of wisdom and life energy for the "over-modernized Han," as previously shown by V. Frangville.¹⁰⁸ Despite this ideological ambiguity in the representation of Tibetan Buddhism in China, there are only a small number of religious motifs with positive connotations in the Tibet-related Chinese films discussed above. Most of these motifs can be associated with cruelty and "barbaric customs," or at least with ignorance and backwardness. In several post-Cultural Revolution films we can see scenes of bloody religious rituals, for example in *Red River Valley*, as well as in two older films mentioned by V. Frangville.¹⁰⁹ In *The Third Goddess* (*Di san nüshen* 第三女神, dir. Liu Yuhe 刘玉河, 1982) and *The Snow Lotus from the Icy Mountain* (*Bingshan xuelian* 冰山雪莲, dir. Xiang Lin 向霖, 1978), young girls are brutally killed either for the amusement of local landlords or as a sacrifice to gods.¹¹⁰ Some films show scenes from the so called "sky burial,"¹¹¹ where human bodies are offered to vultures (it is an

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, Dawa Norbu, "'Otherness' and the Modern Tibetan Identity," 10–11.

¹⁰⁷ Different aspects of the Western, as well as Chinese, perception and representation of Tibet are discussed, for example, in Thierry Dodin and Hanz Räther, *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections and Fantasies*, or Shen Weirog, Wang Liping, "Background Books and a Book's Background."

¹⁰⁸ Vanessa Frangville, "'Minority Film' and Tibet in the PRC," 17.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹⁰ However, it should be noted that in the *Red River Valley* the human sacrifice is carried out not by Tibetans, but by a Han Chinese (?) community.

¹¹¹ The so called "Sky burial" (Tib. *bya gtor*, or "scattering to the birds," Ch. *tian zang* 天葬) is a funeral practice that is wide-spread in Tibet, during which the dead body is cut into pieces and offered as food to vultures.

important motif in both “root-searching films,” *The Horse Thief* and *Xiu Xiu, the Sent-down Girl*). But in general, little attention is paid to Buddhism or to the everyday religious practices of Tibetans in any of the above mentioned Tibet-related Chinese films, apart from *The Horse Thief* and *Yeshe Dolma*.

Tibetan films authored by native Tibetans provide a very different picture of religion and its place in everyday life. The first films by Pema Tsenden, including the short film *Grassland*, are specifically focused on this topic, as has been demonstrated in the previous chapter. The key notion here is the notion of compassion, as demonstrated by such motifs as the *tshé thar* ritual or the motifs connected to the story of Prince Drime Kunden. The notion of Buddhist compassion is in direct opposition to the brutal motifs shown in Chinese films about Tibet, and is intended to show Tibetans as a peaceful and humanistic nation in contrast to the Chinese representations of Tibetans as “fierce and barbarous.” In these films, Buddhism is shown as a part of the everyday life of the ordinary people, but it remains as just one of the many aspects of contemporary society, and is not over-stressed. In Pema Tsenden’s later films (*The Old Dog*, *Tharlo*), religion is no longer present and the directorial attention has turned to other aspects of Tibetan life, departing completely from the originally Western clichés associated with Tibetan spirituality, and this has become a notable part of the self-presentation of the Tibetan exile community in relation to the West.¹¹²

One of the most important visual elements in all of the Tibet-related films is the “majestic” landscape – the snowy mountains, the vast green grasslands, the blue lakes. Only a small number of such films depict the urban environment and human settlements are often represented in the form of nomad tents, dark primitive cabins, and the huge stone-built manor houses of the aristocracy. In contrast, in Pema Tsenden’s films we almost never see Hollywood-style grand images of the pristine Tibetan wilderness. The visualization of Tibetan landscapes serves to illustrate Pema Tsenden’s evolution as a director, moving from more conventional depictions of high plateau grasslands in his earlier films (*Grassland*, *Silent Holy Stones*) to images that show the penetration of Chinese-style modernity into the Tibetan countryside, so typical of his later films, especially the *Old Dog*. If there is an open landscape, it is often dominated by a new blacktop road (or metal fences), and the view is blurred by clouds or fog. The most common picture, as presented in *The Search* and the *Old Dog*, is that of a shabby village or township lined with garbage piles or a bleak and desolate township full of mud, dominated by unattractive construction sites. Obviously, this is a picture of today’s Tibet and not a marketing brochure produced by a tourism authority. In accordance

¹¹² As suggested, for example, by Toni Huber, “Shangri-la in Exile: Representation of Tibetan Identity and Transnational Culture.”

with this approach, the people represented in Pema Tseden's movies are not beautiful young girls and proud, self-confident macho men, singing and dancing in colorful costumes, but ordinary people – young and old monks, school children in uniforms, policemen, herders, drunken young men, and so on.

As is evident from this comparison, as the first Tibetan director in the PRC, Pema Tseden has assumed the role of a realist critic, whose main aim is to “demystify” Tibet, to de-construct the “myth of Shangri-la” that has been misused in the name of colonialism and propaganda so many times in recent decades – both Western and Chinese. This image has now lost its power and the marginalized voices have started to be heard. The evolution of Pema Tseden as a director, from the colorful, spiritually tuned short film *Grassland* to a social “drama of absurd,” *Old Dog* (and recently a bitter black-and-white social exploration in the form of *Tharlo*), shows that his art can be viewed as a knowledgeable and intentional process of maturation, through which he has challenged the established picture of Tibet, both in China and in the West.

Postscript

While this article has been undergoing editing, two academic journals have published special issues featuring Pema Tseden's films: *Dongwu xueshu* 东吴学术 [Soochow Academic] 29 (2015), no. 4; *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 10 (2016), no. 2.

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“Wanma Caidan he ta de Zangyu dianying 万玛才旦和他的藏族电影” [Pema Tseden and his Tibetan films]. Short portrait of the director by CCTV6. Beijing, 2009. Accessed October 4, 2015. <http://tv.cntv.cn/video/C14360/d9dfcf9246f84f4d82b7c887d9761f35>.

Xiu Xiu, the Sent-down Girl (or *Celestial Bath*, Ch. *Tianyu* 天浴). Dir. by Joan Chen (Chen Chong 陈冲). Hong Kong, USA, Taiwan, Stratosphere Entertainment, 1998. 99 min. In Chinese.

Yeshe Dolma (or *Song of Tibet*, Ch. *Yixi Zhuoma* 益西卓玛, Tib. *Ye shes sGrol ma*). Dir. by Xie Fei 谢飞. Tibet (China), Shangdong Film, Beijing Film Studio, and Beijing Siji Changqing Film and Culture, 2000. 104/108 min. Versions in Chinese and Tibetan.

religious with the political. Furthermore, they also reflect the deep-seated anxieties of Hindu Right politics regarding female free will, the subversive potential of love, pliable and ambiguous religious identities, and syncretic socio-religious practices, all of which continue to exist in different forms.

KEYWORDS

conversions | love | desire | Muslims | Hindus

Adina Zemanek

317–347

Daughters of the Motherland and (Wo)men of the World. Global Mobility in *Shishang* (*Trends/Cosmopolitan*), 1993–2008

The present paper undertakes a discourse analysis of *Shishang* (the PRC edition of *Cosmopolitan*) and assesses the extent to which this magazine promotes Western consumerism instead of strengthening a local national character, as Chinese scholars impute. I explore the evolution of *Shishang*'s approach to globalization, as reflected in articles from 1993 to 2008, and focus on global mobility as a dimension of the image of women constructed in the magazine. Throughout this period, *Shishang* seeks to stimulate the imagination of its readers (in Arjun Appadurai's terms) by presenting them with experiences, attitudes and life scenarios that increasingly conform to John Tomlison's concept of cosmopolitanism and Aihwa Ong's idea of flexible citizenship. The PRC's *Cosmo* women "link up with the tracks of the world" by actively pursuing career development and self-fulfillment in a global context while opportunistically employing available resources, a process accompanied by a growing openness to and understanding of other cultures. *Shishang* not only depicts them as women of the world, but also strongly emphasizes their Chineseness, thus doubly complying with the ideological task of the media in the PRC. My study thus proves the above-mentioned criticism to be largely unfounded, but not entirely so – *Shishang*'s recent issues promote a model of lifestyle whose overt rejection of materialism in favor of spiritual values are built upon the consumption of expensive global tourism experiences.

KEYWORDS

Shishang | woman image | global mobility | cosmopolitanism | flexible citizenship | nationalism

Kamila Hladíková

349–380

Shangri-la Deconstructed: Representations of Tibet in the PRC and Pema Tsenden's Films

The aim of this article is to compare the cinematic representations of Tibet in Chinese Tibet-related cinematography with the first three films made by the Tibetan filmmaker Pema Tsenden (Tib. Pad ma Tshe brtan, Ch. Wanma Caidan 万玛才旦) in an attempt to define "Tibetan films" in contrast to "Tibet-related films," which are a broader category

including films made with no direct or only partial Tibetan participation. I argue that Pema Tseden's first three feature films should be understood as the first cinematic contributions to be made to modern Tibetan identity-discourse. They present the first genuine Tibetan voices to be heard in the PRC cinema, contesting the images of Tibet, its history, its culture and its people, that have appeared in the officially supported media and mainstream popular culture. Pema Tseden has thus successfully de-constructed the "myth of Shangri-la" that has been misused so many times during recent decades in the name of colonialism and propaganda – both Western and Chinese.

KEYWORDS

Tibet | China | Tibetan film | Tibet-related film | minority film | Chinese cinema | Tibetan cinema | Pema Tseden | Pad ma Tshe brtan | Wanma Caidan | identity | representation of Tibet

Rostislav Berezkin

381–412

Precious Scroll of the Ten Kings in the Suzhou Area of China: with Changshu Funerary Storytelling as an Example

This paper examines the connections to be found between the cult of the Ten Kings of the underworld and the practice of *baojuan* storytelling ("telling scriptures," or scroll recitation) in the Suzhou area of Jiangsu province. In some places, notably the city of Changshu, the stories devoted to the Ten Kings are recited during funerary services for the dead and are combined with the ritual actions aimed at salvation of the dead soul (i.e., with the object of obtaining a better form of rebirth for the deceased in the next life). These practices and related narratives have local specifics. They have been known since the 19th century, but rarely have been documented in historical sources. This paper is largely based on the results of the author's fieldwork in several areas of Suzhou, where this storytelling has survived until the present, in addition to materials preserved in libraries. It focuses on discussion of the origins, special features, and religious affiliation of these funerary performances, taking the Changshu tradition as an example. The author also analyzes the meaning of this ritualized storytelling in comparison with funerary rites and performances in other areas of China and applies to it universal ritual theory. Funerary *baojuan* performances constitute a part of the complex "ritual event" that involves several groups of religious specialists and texts and rituals of different origins, and that has important social functions in the communities in which they are practiced.

KEYWORDS

baojuan (precious scrolls) | Chinese Buddhism | folk beliefs | storytelling | rituals | folklore

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