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# Constructing Tibetanness from the 'In-Between': Self-Representations of Hybrid Identity in Tibetan Fiction Films

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**Constructing Tibetanness from the 'In-Between': Self-Representations**

**of Hybrid Identity in Tibetan Fiction Films**

**by**

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**Abstract**


**Constructing Tibetanness from the 'In-Between': Self-Representations of Hybrid Identity in Tibetan Fiction Films**


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Tibet is a contested and ambiguous concept perched precariously between multiple and contradictory sociocultural and historical discourses. In this thesis, I examine self-representation in the liminal space of Tibet through twelve Tibetan feature films in order to determine how the filmmakers, crew, and actors use the poetics of film to construe Tibetan individual, cultural, religious, political, and national identity. These films, with Tibetan directors, Tibetan actors, and largely Tibetan crews, have been described in the press as "Tibetan." I adopt a neoformalist approach informed by postcolonial theory, especially Homi K. Bhabha's conception of hybridity, to examine Tibetan self-representations in fictional feature films.

The twelve films consistently make use of narrative structures in which protagonists embark on physical quests in order to locate ambiguous or unknowable entities. Their stories often take the form of road films, and emphasize internal yearning and development over external plot detail. Internal character development and identity

are conveyed through cultural performance of songs, theater, and storytelling that serve as narrational devices for self-expression and identity articulation. Thematically, identity is represented on these journeys through paradigms of tradition and modernity, complex hybridity, and disenfranchised masculinities. The thesis concludes with an analysis of the career and films of auteur Pema Tseden, an internationally respected auteur. In Tseden's films, the implications of liminality for Tibetan identity are dire, but the possibility for the processual and ongoing articulation and construction of Tibetanness through the medium of film are emphasized. This group of Tibetan film representations may not reveal an essential Tibetanness, but they do constituate an invaluable platform for critical deconstruction, formulation, articulation, and continual rearticulation of Tibetanness.

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# Introduction

We cannot continue as we are.
We cannot forget we are guests
Who have overstayed. I invite you
to living against (as we do).
It is not enough to have one tongue.
It cannot point to everything
and in every direction.

—Tibetan poet Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, *My rice tastes like the lake*

A promotional poster for the 1999 US theatrical release of Khyentse Norbu's fictional feature, *The Cup*, combines an image of rowdy young monks in Tibetan robes with the tagline, "Buddhism was their philosophy…but soccer was their religion." The poster conveys complex fissures and contradictions in its depiction of Tibetan identity. A philosophy of Buddhism and a religion of soccer are framed by the tagline as oppositional and mutually exclusive, yet coexistent.[1] In its inversion of what is typically understood as sacred or holy—Buddhism—and worldly or frivolous—soccer—the sentence draws attention to the oppositional coexistence of religion and secularism, as well as a reversal or disruption of traditional order in Tibet. Additionally, soccer, as an internationally popular sport by which nations interact and intersect, suggests the forces of globalization in contrast to the esoteric, regional character of Tibetan Buddhism.

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[1] The statement establishes opposition between Buddhism and soccer through the ellipsis, which places extra emphasis on the word that follows, "but." The mutual exclusivity of religion and sport, as they are traditionally defined, is suggested in the distinction between Buddhism as a "philosophy" and soccer as a "religion."

In the Western[2] imagination, Tibetans are a deeply spiritual people whose monks are envisaged in constant prayer and ritual. (Mi & Toncic, 2014) The tagline, however, subverts these beliefs about Tibetans. Through the juxtaposition of the holy and the secular, the slogan comically undermines Western concepts of Tibetans. The representation presented in the poster's words is in conversation with, and partly constituted by, the Western imagination.

Thus, the poster alludes to the many oppositional historical, sociocultural, economic, and political discourses that riddle contemporary identity politics in Tibet. In this thesis, I will examine self-representation in twelve Tibetan feature films in order to determine how the filmmakers, crew, and actors use the poetics[3] of film to construe Tibetan individual, cultural, religious, political, and national identity. In other words, how do these films, all of which have a Tibetan director, Tibetan actors, a largely Tibetan crew, and have been described in the press as "Tibetan," construe "Tibetanness"[4]. I explore these questions namely through attention to the films themselves. What do their narratives, characters, and forms indicate? The films examined are strictly fictional narrative features since these works allow for unique and specific affordances to filmmakers in their onscreen representations as compared to non-fiction, short film, and

[2] I use the term "Western" by convention and for the sake of clarity, but do not wish to reinforce it as more than a problematic construct.

[3] Though "poetics" and "aesthetics" are often used interchangeably, I follow film scholar David Bordwell's (1989) argument that poetics specifically "studies the finished work as the result of a process of construction—a process which includes a craft component… the more general principles according to which the work is composed, and its functions, effects, and uses." (p. 371)

[4] I here adopt postcolonial writer Dibyesh Anand's terminology. He writes, "The signifier 'Tibetan' is usually seen in terms of ontological essentialism. This often leads to a papering over of the socially constructed and politically contested nature of Tibetan cultural and political identity, or 'Tibetanness,' as it may conveniently be called." (2007, p. 87)

other genres of audiovisual media. I adopt a neoformalist approach informed by postcolonial theory, especially Homi K. Bhabha's conception of hybridity, to examine Tibetan self-representation.

Tibetan self-representations demand increased attention internationally. Tibet's ongoing political conflict involves a global array of interests, yet it remains, as through much of its history, shrouded by misconceptions in the West. Westerners characterize Tibet as a spiritual land of mysticism and refuge, its people old-fashioned and in touch with nature. Familiarity with Tibetan self-representation in the US is minimal and limited largely to its association with New Age subcultural movements and the carefully manicured, pacifist image of the 14th Dalai Lama. I contend that an examination of Tibetan self-representation widens limited conceptions of Tibet, which in turn enables more astute comprehension, judgment, and action in regard to Tibet's current situation. Americans' misconceptions are amplified by a lack of mainstream coverage of Tibet in contemporary US media, as well as a notable lack of attention to Tibet by media studies scholars.

In turn, this thesis attempts to bring attention to a body of films that have received little international recognition. These films are important as sociocultural and political artifacts, representations, and communications. They are works of thematic and stylistic consistency and coherency. These films together provide hitherto unavailable fictional representations of Tibet. While they are in many cases intended for international audiences, the Tibetan films most widely circulated outside of Tibet and China typically exhibit within the contained spheres of film festivals, colleges, museums, and cultural

institutions. They rarely garner any kind of theatrical release in the US. This thesis will draw attention to these oftentimes neglected or difficult-to-acquire titles.

The history of film and video technology and its use by Tibetans is a recent development of the twentieth century. Video and film was not entirely foreign to Tibetans, but only with digitization could films be circulated without a theatrical release or television broadcast through file sharing and unofficial DVDS. This meant that Tibetans could sidestep Chinese censorship of both script and final product. (Barnett, 2015) Initially, a relatively small number, approximately twenty-five, independent fiction films were made between 2005 and 2011, mostly circulated unofficially on the Internet. In 2005, self-styled auteur Pema Tseden's self-conscious art film feature debut, *The Silent Holy Stones*, garnered a small amount of international recognition and inspired a new wave of narrative fiction filmmakers. These filmmakers regarded their work as the "New Tibetan Cinema" and hoped that Tibetans could effectively represent themselves on film and have a body of films to claim as Tibetan. They were, like Tseden, from the Amdo region of Chinese-occupied Tibet, and were largely educated artists and poets. At the same time, several less educated men produced romantic dramas about nomad subcultures, generally circulated online. (Barnett, 2015)

With the growth of Tibetan filmmaking, new opportunities and possibilities for Tibetans to represent themselves have emerged. Tibetan filmmakers have seized on film and video to explore the question of what constitutes Tibetanness. This exploration is especially pertinent to Tibet—an ambiguous signifier that defies definitions and borders.

Tibet is an idea, which is not to deny its very real importance for many thousands of people.

Like all peoples, Tibet's early history was characterized by a loose affiliation of heterogeneous groups—warring factions, competing and hybrid religious beliefs, complex interactions with and incorporation of outside cultures, internal violence, and constant cultural change. (Van Schaik, 2011) The empire existed for over a thousand years amidst intermittent infighting and complex relations with the Chinese and Mongol empires around it. The discourse of nations arrived too late for Tibet to retain independence. The 13th Dalai Lama's attempts to concretize Tibet into a nation through large-scale reforms were resented and misunderstood by many Tibetans. His failure set the stage for the invasion of Tibet by the People's Liberation Army, the escape of the 14th Dalai Lama in 1959, and the establishment of a government-in-exile in Dharamsala. (Van Schaik, 2011) Thus, the history of Tibet is like that of any nation. Divided, heterogeneous, and constantly changing, Tibet's past does not suggest a singular, inherent, or essential Tibetanness.

Today, writers often distinguish between "political Tibet," which corresponds to the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) nested in the southwest part of China, and "ethnographic Tibet" which is a wider territory that shares Tibetan language and culture. This area includes the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan, as well as regions outside China in Bhutan, Nepal, Ladakh, and Sikkim. (Van Schaik, 2011)

Figure 0.1: Map of political and ethnographic Tibet, shown in yellow. (Image retrieved from http://churchandempire.blogspot.com/2008/12/buddhist-fundamentalists.html)

These regions, however, do not fully capture contemporary Tibet. With a recent history of abrupt changes in power relations, personal and collective agency, and self-definition, Tibetans find themselves in a liminal, diasporic state. Their connection to what many Tibetans believe to be their rightful land in contemporary China grows tenuous and their culture diffuses and intermingles with other cultures (most obviously, China, the USA, India, and Bhutan) in a complex, multitudinous manner.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The limited visibility of Tibetan fiction film internationally is undoubtedly a significant reason for the lack of English-language scholarship on the subject of Tibetan fiction features or Tibetan film more broadly. No full-length English-language book

specifically explores the topic. Tibetan scholar and prolific news media commentator Robert Barnett (2015) has most extensively addressed the subject in his detailed anthology book chapter—a survey on the use of film and video technology by Tibetans since approximately the year 2000. This text is useful as a reference for film titles and basic production information that is otherwise difficult to find in the English-language literature. More substantially, Barnett weaves recent industrial, technological, and sociological history with analyses of film content and themes. He identifies three primary categories of Tibetan fiction films: nomadic romances, religious biography, and dramas about the tension between modernity and tradition. Within these categories, Barnett notes the recurrence of motifs such as the road journey and the emasculated, tragic male figure. His observations, astute and accurate given the films I have viewed, are based on a presumably broad but unspecified selection of films, and conveyed with concision and brevity due to confines in length of a book chapter. This thesis elaborates on and extends his work on the content and themes of Tibetan fiction film in order to analyze how a sample of these films specifically articulate meanings, with particular emphasis on their implications for identity.

Journal articles and essays from edited collections occasionally include analysis of Tibetan film, namely the internationally and comparatively well-distributed *The Cup* (1999). *The Cup* nearly always discussed in combination with other non-Tibetan works, in order to compare film representations of Tibet in Hollywood films with those in a single Tibetan film. Cultural studies and film scholar Felicia Chan (2014) concludes, for instance, that *The Cup* (1999) resists representations that exotify Tibet, in opposition to

Hollywood films like *Kundun* and *Seven Years in Tibet*. Lopamudra Basu (2009), an English and postcolonial scholar, compares the same three films as Chan, as well as a novel. She argues similarly that *The Cup* resists the romanticized Western conception of Tibet as a transcendental land of wisdom in opposition to the other two films. Asian diasporic scholar, Sheng-mei Ma (2013), interprets *The Cup* from a psychoanalytic perspective. While these three essays are insightful contributions, they all concern the same film. I examine a far broader range of Tibetan films, with more attention to film form. The comparative focus employed by Chan and Basu is useful and necessary. However, these studies understand Tibetan representation namely in opposition to Western conceptions of Tibet; consequently, they fail to delve deeply into what constitutes Tibetan self-representation. Likewise, while Ma's use of psychoanalysis may be insightful, specific conditions in Tibet call for a critical theoretical approach that is appropriate to the Tibetan context. Postcolonial theory provides this, as a critical discourse resistant to modernist parochialism and instead concerned with the identity, agency, and politics of the dispossessed. Within this framework, I examine a substantially broader number of films in more depth than these three authors in order to understand Tibetan, rather than Western, self-representation on film. This unique approach, largely absent from the English-language literature on Tibetan cinema, is necessary for a deeper understanding of Tibetan self-representation.

Pema Tseden is the only recent Tibetan filmmaker about whom a scholarly article has been written in English. Anthropologist and occasional co-professor with Tseden, Dan Smyer Yu (2014), compares representations of Tibet in Tseden's films with those in

Western and Chinese films. Smyer Yu argues that the forces of globalization and modernization in Tseden's oeuvre are treated in a cinematic language that encapsulates Tibetan Buddhism. While I take up the theme of globalization and modernization in this thesis, I am more focused on identity and power than on the use of Buddhism as a tool for analysis.

Given this focus, I have turned to literature in postcolonial theory to frame my assertions. As International Relations scholar Dibyesh Anand (2007) writes, "postcolonialism seeks to combine participation in a progressive agential politics of identity with a metacritique of modernism for its parochial ideas and exclusionary practices disguised as universalism." (p. 4) The interrogation of identity, whether individual, cultural, or national, as construction and process within contested transnational spaces is central to my investigation of identity and representation in Tibet.

While not the first book to critically grapple with questions of coloniality, renowned postcolonial and literary theorist Edward Said transformed academic paradigms and initiated contemporary postcolonial discourse with his 1978 publication, *Orientalism*. While his book applies principally to Western notions of the Middle East, it has since been applied to a number of regions, peoples, and cultures deemed non-Western. Said argues that the West develops definitions, stereotypes, and beliefs about the Other—the non-Westerner—in a systematic manner. This discourse is the result of Western desires, fears, interests, and above all, a desire to maintain power. Orientalism serves as "a set of constraints and limitations on thought" (p. 42) for both East and West. Orientalist discourse restrains and regulates possibilities for meaning-making, cognition,

and culture in Westerner and Middle Easterners. Said, however, perceives possibilities for resistance within and against domination, especially as described in his 1993 self-described "sequel" to Orientalism, *Culture and Imperialism*. Thus, identity and self-determination in the Middle East, Tibet, or elsewhere is not predetermined by the conceptions of outside powers, but formed in interaction with them.

This thesis is concerned with Western discourse on Tibet. Identity, self-perception, and self-representation in Tibet have emerged in dialogue with Western perceptions. In an increasingly globalized world, Tibetans are necessarily embroiled in the Western conceptions of Tibet; Tibetans, in turn, may adopt, subvert, modify, develop, or appropriate aspects of Western beliefs about themselves. Tibetan scholar Donald S. Lopez's (1999) influential book, for instance, argues that Tibetans in exile have appropriated Western notions of Tibet, which I will heretofore refer to as "the Tibetan imaginary."[5] He asserts that Tibetans strategically appeal to the Tibetan imaginary in order to garner credibility and global allies in a fight for independence from China.

A comparatively large body of English-language literature focuses on the characteristics of the Tibetan imaginary, the history of its development and evolution, and its ever-evolving formulation in relation to changes in global politics and Western priorities.[6] Most of this literature derives, implicitly or explicitly, from Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

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[5] This is my own term. Different authors on the subject use various phrases for the same construct. Without consensus, I use "Tibetan imaginary" for reasons of simplicity and clarity.
[6] See Anand, 2007; Bishop, 1989; Dodin & Rather (Eds.), 2001; Lopez, 1999; Neuhaus, 2012; Norbu, 1998.

According to historian, Tom Neuhaus (2012), Tibet was predominantly unknown to Europeans for much of its history despite the elaborate mythologies they created about it. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Tibet generally refused entry to Europeans, and the holy city of Lhasa became known as the "Forbidden City" in the West. The Western imperial imagination was only further sparked as a result. As late as 1975, the number of Europeans and North American who had been to Tibet was estimated at 1250. Half of these individuals had been there due to the the British military invasion of 1903/04. (Neuhaus, 2012) From the mid-nineteenth century to the 1903/04 invasion, Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism were largely derided as superstitious, irrational, primitive, lazy, feminine, and undemocratic.

From 1904 to 1947, Western bombast was compromised amidst the obstacles of modern warfare, urbanization, and environmental destruction. While Tibetans were still referred to as supernaturally evil or ignorant, Tibet was construed more favorably as a haven for what the West felt it had lost. (Neuhaus, 2012) Some Westerners questioned positivism, such that Tibet's perceived spirituality was conceived more approvingly. The highly successful publication of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in the West in 1927 undoubtedly contributed to the spiritual valorization of Tibet.[7] James Hilton's famous 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon*, later adapted into a Frank Capra film, encapsulates contemporaneous Western attitudes. In the novel, Shangri-la, which most scholars

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[7] *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, known by Tibetans as the *Bardo Todol* is a Tibetan Buddhist text generally attributed to Padma Sambhava in the eighth-century but not compiled by Karma Lingpa until the fourteenth century. It details the experience between reincarnations—an interval known at *bardo*. Walter Evans-Wentz and Kazi Samdup's 1927 translation was the first English translation of the text to be published. It has since become the most recognizable text of Tibetan Buddhism and been translated into over 100 languages. (Mullin, 2009)

understand as a fictional location in Tibet, is home to Western utopian desires and spiritual wisdom. Neuhaus notes a final contemporary period beginning with the Chinese invasion of Tibet in which occupied land was conceived of as a bastion for lost values—a place of peace, innocence, and nature.

Scholarship on the Tibetan imaginary is significant, but can be problematic in that its primary focus is the West rather than Tibet. In order to better understand Tibetan negotiations and performances of identity in film, additional postcolonial theories are necessary. English scholar Homi K. Bhabha established himself in the 1990s as a leading postcolonial theorist and literary critic. His focus on identity articulation in contested spaces of colonization and occupation are central to this thesis' approach to identity in Tibet.

A foundational assertion of Bhabha (1994) is that culture and identity are not socially and historically contingent rather than essentially ingrained. Bhabha (1994) writes, "…there is no given community or body of people whose inherent, radical historicity emits the right signs." (p. 39) Tibetan culture and identity is socioculturally contingent. Thus, identity categories, citizenship, and nation are arbitrary and contradictory.

This is demonstrated by the implacability of Tibet and Tibetaness. Without national borders, Tibet is a liminal entity, fragmented by cultural and political forces from without, such as the influence of China, India, and the West, while internally torn by generational fissures of tradition and modernity, pacifism and action, religion and secularism, and disparate political allegiances. Homi K.  Bhabha's analyses prove

particularly applicable to the transnational and diasporic identities of many Tibetans, who exist in, across, and between nations. Bhabha borrows and develops the term "hybridity" to describe the complex negotiations and uneasy amalgamations of cultures, histories, and discourses among colonized, transnational populations. Hybridity is closely associated, in Bhabha's framework, with "in-between" or "Third space." Bhabha asserts

> the need to think beyond narratives of origin and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (p. 2)

Culture, Bhabha argues, is produced through active and ongoing processes of self-making and meaning production rather than from arbitrary origination myths. Identity, especially for those in contested physical and cultural space, like Tibet, is constructed and negotiated at the interstices of various forces and pressures. It is an ongoing process of articulation, performativity, and formation.

Bhabha is particularly interested in how the colonized, oppressed, or disenfranchised might resist dominant power structures. He asserts, for instance, that the colonized might construct revisionist histories for strategic purposes. The 14th Dalai Lama exercises this strategy in his appeals to a supposed past of pacifism and spirituality, and an ethics of compassion to garner international attention from the West. Another strategy, Bhabha asserts, is for the colonized individual to partially adopt the products

and cultural identities of the colonizer, but invert, reappropriate, or "misuse" these cultural signifiers to a subversive extent. For example, in *The Cup* (1999), Coca-Cola cans, emblems of US capitalist consumption, are used to hold prayer candles—a quiet act of subversion magnified through its mechanical reproduction on film and eventual exhibition before audiences.

Bhabha's emphasis on the negotiation of national, political, cultural, and individual identity as a historically and socially dependent process—ongoing and performative—is well-suited to the interpretation of cinematic representations within contested, liminal space. Additionally, both the content of films and the act of filmmaking constitute representations of the self and are part of a process of identity articulation and performance. Said and Bhabha, though very different thinkers, compliment each other in their critical approach to discursive power structures and an acute awareness of the conflicts and contradictions these structures produce for colonized, displaced, and oppressed populations. Together, they form the theoretical framework by which I approach the structure, content, and form of the twelve Tibetan features.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to limit selection bias in the group of films examined, I consulted a list of audiovisual materials on Tibet maintained by Tibetan scholar A. Tom Grunfeld (2012). This document, begun in the early 1990s by Sonam Dargyay, constitutes, to my knowledge, the most comprehensive list of its kind, comprised of citation information for 904 audiovisual titles related to Tibet. Grunfeld instructs individual scholars and readers

to contact him by email with information about any titles the list does not account for. All suggestions that Grunfeld is able to authenticate are added to the document such that it grows over time. Independently, I browsed the Internet for titles alluded to in the literature, which consequently led me to additional titles. This list, assembled independently from the Grunfeld references, contained 112 titles.

For the purposes of this project, only narrative fiction films at least sixty minutes in duration were considered.[8] Other audiovisual genres and formats—short narrative, experimental, documentary, instructional, and news material—represent the majority of film and video produced in Tibet, but are so numerous that to examine them along with narrative features would have been overambitious for a thesis. Furthermore, fiction offers a distinct means to imaginatively articulate Tibetanness. Fiction filmmakers are permitted to creatively construct the characters, representations, and stories to be told. As such, they have the ability to carefully shape and manicure the representations they create. Non-fiction filmmaking involves imaginative articulation as well, but with greater constraints on character and story. The nature of self-representation in fiction and nonfiction is sufficient to warrant independent investigation. Likewise, short narrative fiction film is beyond the purview of this study because its duration creates unique constraints and opportunities for storytelling. Short films require distinct narrative structures from feature

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[8]One film in my sample, *Hornig: Beat the Dog* (2005), does not meet the length requirement but is justified by my research endeavor. This film is 47 minutes in duration, but is the only film accessible to me in a series of Tibetan films about nomadic tradition, romance, and violence in the Eastern plains of Tibet. These nomad films are especially unique in their generally uncritical perspective on tradition and their untrained filmmakers. (Barnett, 2015). They are, however, largely unknown and inaccessible to audiences outside of Tibet. I included *Hornig: Beat the Dog* despite its under-60-minute duration given that it represents a subgenre of Tibetan films that would not have been included otherwise.

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films; certain stories require the temporal affordances of the feature film, while others are better suited to short form. Narrative possibilities, and in turn, the types of representations depicted, are contingent on duration.

Additionally, I established parameters by which to identify a film as "Tibetan." These allowed for consistency and standardization among the films examined. First, the director of the film had to be Tibetan. While some reside in the Tibetan Autonomous Region or in exile, all identify or are identified as Tibetan in interviews, biographical pieces, scholarship, reviews, and other media sources. Second, the film had to be in a Tibetan dialect; this does not, however, guarantee that a film is Tibetan because many Chinese films about Tibet employ Tibetan actors and dialects.[9] Finally, the films themselves had to have been described as Tibetan in at least two peer-reviewed journals or trade publications.

Films that met these criteria were selected from both Grunfeld (2012) and my own list of 112 films. Duplicate titles were removed so that 28 films remained. Twelve of these titles could be acquired via DVD or online streaming services.[10] All 12 films, with the exception of *The Sun Beaten Path* (2011) were available with English subtitles. These dozen films, the basis for my analyses, are listed chronologically in Table 1, along with their year, director(s), and official countries of origin.

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[9]These films are an ideologically interesting category of cinema in their own right. While some might be considered Chinese propaganda, others are subtle in their agenda, as in, for example, the romanticist view of Tibetan life as archaic, and still others are sympathetic to Tibet as long as they remain within the confines of Chinese censors. In short, it is not always easy to distinguish between a Chinese and a "Tibetan" film, which may mislead audiences given the spectrum of political attitudes that they contain.

[10] Streaming services that were consulted included Amazon Video, Google Play Movies & TV, Hulu, iTunes, Netflix, Vudu, and YouTube.

**Table 1: Sample of Tibetan Narrative Feature Films**

| Film Title | Year | Director | Country |
|---|---|---|---|
| The Cup (Phorpa) | 1999 | Khyentse Norbu | Bhutan, Australia |
| Travellers and Magicians | 2003 | Khyentse Norbu | Australia, Bhutan, UK |
| We're No Monks | 2004 | Pema Dhondup | India |
| Dreaming Lhasa | 2005 | Ritu Sarin & Tenzing Sonam | UK, India |
| Hornig: Beat the Dog | 2005 | Tsedup Karko | Unknown |
| The Silent Holy Stones | 2005 | Pema Tseden | China |
| Milarepa | 2006 | Neten Chokling | Bhutan |
| The Search | 2009 | Pema Tseden | China |
| Richard Gere is My Hero | 2010 | Tsultrim Dorjee & Tashi Wangchuk | USA |
| Old Dog | 2011 | Pema Tseden | China |
| The Sun Beaten Path | 2011 | Sonthar Gyal | China |
| Tharlo | 2015 | Pema Tseden | China |

The other 16 of the 28 films were inaccessible to me as a researcher in the US. These 16 films are not distributed on DVD in the US, do not appear to have records in the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) via the WorldCat online database, and could not be found on English or Chinese streaming platforms. Furthermore, a number of Tibetan narrative films were likely unaccounted for on the list of 28 features given that they may have been "amateur" productions or circulated narrowly within and around Tibet. These regional films may remain entirely unknown to scholars, especially those who are not proficient in Tibetan dialects or Chinese. The 12 films listed in Table 1 are not ideally representative of all Tibetan filmmaking. These dozen films were, in the majority of cases, screened in international festival circuits. They were likely made to possess a broad appeal for international audiences, and as such, may contain self-regulated representations of Tibet.

In turn, the films I explore presumably underrepresent or do not represent the ideas of the most disempowered and poor Tibetan populations, and are biased toward those who are educated or have monastic backgrounds. Pema Tseden, for instance, directed four of these films. While his upbringing was not one of great privilege, he made a name for himself as a writer and artist, and through the sponsorship of a US organization, had the opportunity to attend the prestigious Beijing Film Academy. (Smyer Yu, 2014) There he was exposed to and inspired by international art house filmmakers. His film style, discussed in depth in Chapter 3, self-consciously employs international art cinema strategies, which no doubt account for his ability to build an international reputation and make his films accessible globally. Tseden represents an extreme example of educational privilege. I remain aware throughout this study that the film sample encompasses a diversity of filmmakers and poetics, but does not represent all Tibetans or all Tibetan filmmaking. I nonetheless make generalizations of an appropriate scope through careful, methodical, and theoretically contextualized analysis of the 12 Tibetan features.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 1 will focus on narrative strategies and structures across the sample of films. The features are grouped according to narrative structure and modes of narration. Several films situate characters in a search for an entity, while others borrow from, transform, or undermine the Hollywood road movie; both structures convey identity dislocation and emphasize internal character journeys. The films also tend to employ

oratory, cultural performance, and *mise en abyme*[11] as a device for the enunciation of identity and Tibetaness.

These narrative patterns suggest recurrent themes that form the core of Chapter 2. This chapter examines identity and its construction in liminal or hybrid spaces, as Bhabha discusses them. I will specifically focus on three interrelated themes: the intersections of "tradition" and "modernity," "unhomeliness" in exile, and disenfranchised masculinities.

The final chapter presents a case study of Tibetan writer-director Pema Tseden. Tseden's films are slow-paced, introspective explorations of Tibetanness. Tseden employs art film poetics and strict formalism to reaffirm the themes, narratives, and narrational devices I discuss earlier, as well as to extend and complicate them through a unique conceptual viewpoint and disciplined formalism. This chapter analyzes three films in depth in order to articulate how Tseden constructs and deconstructs Tibetan identity.

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[11] "Mise en abyme" is a term derived from French author André Gide. It refers to texts within texts, whether nested artworks, performances, or stories. The nested texts pertain to or illuminate the frame text in some manner. *Mise en abyme* is associated with self-reflexivity and deconstruction via the destabilization of traditional linear narrative. (Danesi, 2008)

# Chapter 1

## Internal Transformation, External Performances: Patterns of Narrative and Narration

> I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning.
>
> —Foucault, *Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michael Foucault*

> From the margins of modernity at the insurmountable extremes of storytelling, we encounter the question of cultural difference as the perplexity of living and writing the nation.
>
> —Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

A small crew of filmmakers travels across Tibet by van in search of actors equipped to play traditional Tibetan lead roles, only to find that no such people exist. A Tibetan refugee and his new friend in Dharamsala travel around India to locate a mysterious unknown man and deliver a *gahut* (charm box) to him, but that man does not accept the protection amulet they travelled so far to deliver. A young man in grief wanders along the roadside on his return from a pilgrimage to Lhasa; dejected, he apparently hopes for an ambiguous sign. These films are, respectively, the narratives of *The Search* (2009), *Dreaming Lhasa* (2005), and *The Sun Beaten Path* (2011).

This chapter broadly establishes narrative trends in the Tibetan films examined and their relation to other national cinemas. Comparison to the cinema of other nations, especially that of Hollywood given its dominance internationally, is necessary in order to illustrate the influences and unique character of Tibetan the Tibetan film narratives.

These relations are commented upon throughout the chapter. Subsequently, the concept that I have called "the search," a recurring narrative structure in these Tibetan films, is elaborated on through an extended case study of *Dreaming Lhasa* (2005). The search involves causal chains based on interior developments rather than external occurrences that may appear aimless in comparison to traditional Hollywood narrative. The character goals ultimately have less to do with the coveted external entity than with an internal, ambiguous search for selfhood. The search often takes the more specific form of the road movie. I present a discussion of similarities and differences in the use of the road structure in three of the Tibetan films I examined. Finally, I discuss the articulation of internal states through songs, stories, and theater presented within these films as important acts of identity construction within a postcolonial framework.[1]

Characters in all Tibetan films in this analysis possess desires, though they may not be able to articulate or identify them for much of the film's duration or at all. The three-act structure employed by many screenwriters, especially in Hollywood cinema, is either neglected or subtly used. Causal chains of events propel the main narratives

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[1] *Hornig: Beat the Dog* (2004) serves as a significant reminder that the scope of my assertions is limited by access. This film is unique among those I examined in that it does not adhere to most of the conventions described in this chapter. The protagonist's internal development in *Hornig: Beat the Dog* is not elucidated and is presumably not a primary concern for the filmmakers. He does not undergo a clear internal transformation, and especially not one related to his identity. Instead, his goals, namely union with his love interest, are externally achieved. Complications arise from without as well, as when his lover's brother attacks him by knife, with very physical stakes—survival or death. *Hornig* is decidedly focused more on external cultural practice than on internal transformation. As discussed in the introduction, the film has been included as a representative example of a type of regional filmmaking with circulation largely internal to Tibet.

forward, but often loosely. Causal impetus may be vague or sometimes unexplained, and many scenes exist outside the primary chain of causal logic. The filmmaker may pause the narrative progression intermittently, for example, to depict or "observe" the daily life and conditions of characters. This loose form of causality sometimes gives the stories an aimless quality.

The narrative structure that I refer to as "the search" describes a majority of the films examined. In a search, defined here in accordance with the films, the characters lack something, whether or not they know it, so they undergo a journey that usually involves geographical movement in order to find something, someone, or some intangible entity. These films ultimately render the journey most significant as an internal or symbolic rather than literal or external process. Prime examples in my sample include *The Search*, as well as *Dreaming Lhasa* and spiritual epics such as *Milarepa* (2006).

The narratives of the set of Tibetan films draw on the influences of various national cinemas even as they alter and resist them to create a distinctly Tibetan hybrid narrative cinema. They most directly draw on Hollywood films in their conventions and subgenres, largely unobtrusive technique, and emphasis on characters and their arcs. However, film analyst and historian David Bordwell (1985a) writes that "Hollywood cinema…emphasizes action, 'the outward expression of inner feeling,' the litmus test of character consistency" (p. 15). In truth, all cinema privileges the external by nature of the medium. Nonetheless, considered collectively, the Tibetan films I examine uniquely emphasize internal versus external states. Bordwell's (1985a) famous codification of the

characteristics of classical Hollywood film,[2] he emphasizes goal-oriented protagonists whose active pursuit of their aspirations plays out in a tightly bound chain of cause and effect. Classical Holly cinema follows a four-act structure with a climax and denouement. Bordwell's assertions illustrate how alternative the set of Tibetan films are in relation to the dominant Hollywood cinema. In the Tibetan films, protagonists may be aimless and unsure of their desires, while act structure and causal logic are deemphasized. These films are not structured to emulate the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster. Instead, they tend to display stylistic restraint and resistance to complex narrational devices.

The Tibetan Autonomous Regions (TAR) borders on India and many thousands of Tibetan exiles reside in India. As a result, some of the films under investigation are also influenced by Bollywood film.[3] Likewise, Tibetans are inundated with Chinese media and films on television and the Internet, which inevitably impacts their poetic sensibilities and expectations for audiovisual media. Tibetans draw and innovate upon the influences of these national cinemas as they develop their own distinctive poetics and concerns.

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[2] The classical Hollywood cinema, for Bordwell (1985a), refers to films produced by Hollywood studios from 1919 to 1960.

[3] Mumbai, India, also known as Bollywood, is a hugely influential cultural and economic force globally. Despite Hollywood financial dominance, India is the world's most prolific film producer, and ranks ahead of the US in ticket sales. (St. Jean Larouhe & Brunet, 2015) Bollywood films are intended as box office hits with mass appeal. Media marketing experts Valérie St.-Jean Larouche and Johanne Brunet (2015) argue that although contemporary Bollywood films vary in their poetics and genres, they generally feature pop music and diverse emotional, tonal, and generic range. These features are evident in the Tibetan films *Richard Gere is My Hero*, and to a lesser extent, *We're No Monks*, likely because they are the only films of the twelve that are officially produced or co-produced by Indian sources

**CASE STUDY OF A SEARCH NARRATIVE: *DREAMING LHASA* (2005)**

*Dreaming Lhasa*'s primary Executive Producer was Jeremy Thomas, the British executive behind *The Last Emperor* (1987) and other films directed by Bernardo Bertolucci. Hollywood film star Richard Gere was also an Executive Producer. These details of production indicate the transnational character of the film, but also imply that it was made for a Western audience, with a certain brand of Western pro-Tibetan politics; that is, self-representations in this film are designed for a Western audience in line with a particular political agenda. While representation in cinema is always dependent on audience and filmmaker intentions, the constitutive role of the audience in the representations of *Dreaming Lhasa* are more clearly apparent than in the other films examined. *Dreaming Lhasa* ultimately depicts conditions of displacement and rootlessness among Tibetan exiles in India, even though protagonist, Karma, is a Tibetan-American New Yorker who is in Dharamsala to film a documentary. She is far more fluent in English than Tibetan dialects, and while her desire for a connection with a land she has never known may add narrative interest, she is clearly meant as a conduit for European audiences. This film, more than the others, appeals to the "Free Tibet" discourse in the West. Karma's documentary, for instance, features the testimony of real-life former Tibetan political prisoners that could easily belong to an agitational political documentary.

As such, the film draws heavily on Hollywood narrative forms at the same time that it slightly deviates from them slightly. As the film begins, Karma has enlisted Jigme, a young Tibetan in exile in Dharamsala who has never lived within the Chinese-occupied

region, as assistant and local researcher. He is apathetic, bitter, and apolitical at the beginning of the film. Dhondup, a recent political prisoner and ex-monk from TAR has just arrived, and meets Karma as an interviewee for her documentary; he provides Karma's only fictionalized interview, and is the only major character played by a professional actor, Jampa Kalsang.[4] Dhondup has traveled to India with a charm box that belonged to his recently deceased mother. On her deathbed she made Dhondup promise to deliver it to a man named Loga in India. He knows nothing about either the charm box or Loga, but is loyal to the memory of his mother. Dhondup has a dream in which he sees his mother transform into Karma, which prompts him to tell her and the audience about Loga, enlist her help,[5] and incite the narrative action.

The primary narrative action revolves around the search for Loga. Karma, Dhondup, and sometimes Jigme, proceed from consultation to consultation with various individuals who possess knowledge about Loga. For example, they first consult Penjor, who appears to be a local historian or academic. He says Loga has been missing for fifteen years, reveals he was a rebellion fighter against the Chinese in Tibet, and refers them to their next consultation with Dekyi, Loga's former wife. Expositional information

[4] Kalsang had been in a series of relatively high-profile productions to deal with Tibet, including the US film *Windhorse* (1998), the Oscar-winning international coproduction *Himalaya* (1999), and the coproduction *Samsara* (2001). He is one of the very few professional actors to be found in any of the twelve films. This might reflect a lack of an accessible network of professional Tibetan film actors, but is also often used purposefully to create a sense of observational or documentary realism, as in the Italian Neorealist tradition. In *Dreaming Lhasa*, Kalsang's professional experience in relation to the other actors is perceptible, such that his character largely carries the traumatic and dramatic weight of the film. One could easily argue that he is the film's true protagonist, but the camera's greater attention to Karma clearly and perhaps problematically designates her as the surrogate protagonist.

[5] A dream vision as a primary cause for much of the consequent narrative action would be tenuous at the least in a Hollywood film, for I would argue that the chain of causality that Bordwell (1985a) describes is governed by a uniquely Western logic of positivism, though there are certainly generically motivated exceptions.

about Loga's history is gradually revealed as the characters travel to various Tibetan settlements in India—from Dharamsala, to Delhi, back to Dharamsala, to Jaipur, to Clement Town, and finally to a small shack in the mountains outside Dharamsala. Here, Karma and Dhondup finally find Loga, now a monk in retreat. Dhondup and the audience learn that Loga is Dhondup's father. Loga explains he was unable to escape Tibet with wife and child. All three characters are ultimately granted some variation of closure in Dhondup's forgiveness of Loga for his absence as father.

By Hollywood standards, *Dreaming Lhasa* would be a "the detective film." As David Bordwell writes:[6]

> The fundamental narrational characteristic of the detective tale is that the syuzhet withholds crucial events occurring in the "crime" portion of the fabula. The syuzhet may conceal the motive, or the planning, or the commission of the crime (an act which includes the identity of the criminal), or aspects of several of these. (p. 64)

Thus, a central element of "the detective film" is that the omniscient narration withholds and gradually reveals story information to the characters and audience. In *Dreaming Lhasa*, the story of Loga is increasingly parsed out to audience and characters alike with each consultation. If successful, at least according to Bordwell, suspense is built for the viewer in this type of construction out of curiosity about the "true" story—the fabula. "The detective film" may often revolve around crime, but I interpret Bordwell's use of

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[6] Bordwell here uses the Russian term "fabula" in place of story—what happens diegetically beyond what the audience sees and hears—and "syuzhet" to mean plot—those elements of the story that are represented visually and aurally.

quotations around that word in the passage above to signal that this subgenre need not concern crime as we generally conceive it. Nonetheless, the story of Loga, while scripted as a political history of Tibet, narrativized in the tale of Loga, is in fact a crime story that saliently involves government espionage, financial intrigue, and murder.

The film arguably has a narrative midpoint as well, again in alignment with conventional Hollywood screenwriting practice, though it occurs relatively late, fifty seven percent through its running time, and does not truly alter character goals so much as place them in greater doubt than at any other point. Karma and Dhondup have learned in Delhi that Loga may likely have murdered a friend in exile in 1988. This of course creates an important question for characters and audience: is the mysterious man a murderer? The new information also calls the virtuousness and purpose of all of Karma's and Dhondup's efforts into question. Back in Dharamsala, Dhondup appears at Karma's apartment to announce that he has given up on the mission and will return to Tibet. Jigme subsequently enters and, in an action that reveals his newfound devotion to the quest, convinces Dhondup to stay; given that Dhondup has never opened the charm box and aware that there will likely be clues inside to propel him forward, Jigme convinces Dhondup to open it.

*Dreaming Lhasa* finally mirrors Hollywood narrative conventions in its incorporation of a romantic line of conflict. This is, for Bordwell (1985a), a definitive component of classical Hollywood narrative, in which the protagonist's main goals weave into and coincide with a romantic line of action. This aspect of the story strikes me as rather awkward and unpersuasive because its execution is not quite conventional by

Hollywood standards or any romantic narrative conventions I have observed in the other Tibetan films. The other films generally only hint at, and reject, romantic possibility, or do not contain narratives of romance or intimacy. Love, lust, and infatuation do not readily coincide with the Tibetan Buddhist precepts of nonattachment to worldly constructs that inform many of the films.[7]

The romantic plotline in *Dreaming Lhasa* has both Jigme and Dhondup interested in the affection of Karma. Karma does not appear to return Jigme's affection, but her ambiguous feelings for Dhondup fuel his jealousy. Karma and Dhondup gradually develop a mutual attraction, perhaps in what comes to be a shared determination and commitment to Tibet as a cause as well as due to the main narrative thread that places them in one another's company in pursuit of common goals. But it is a minimally developed connection not concretely enmeshed in the causal chain so much as in addition to it.

Perhaps most unusual for a line of action that is so clearly secondary is its largely unacknowledged moral complexity. Karma has a partner, Max, as well as a small child in New York, while Dhondup has a wife he plans to return to in Tibet. The audience knows nothing more than this about their respective families; they are referred to, but not represented directly via soundtrack or image. Thus, when Karma kisses Dhondup just before the climactic meeting with Loga, romantic closure and resolution of the "morally

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[7] See Gethin (1998) for an appropriately complex introduction to the universal principals, practices, and origin stories of Buddhism.

acceptable" Hollywood variety either fails to effectively materialize or is intentionally complicated.

Perhaps the sequence can better be understood in terms of Karma's inner character arc. What is Karma's internal journey? What about Dhondup's and Jigme's? All three character's internal transformations are at the heart of *Dreaming Lhasa.* I have largely shown, thus far, how the "the search" is constructed in accordance with Hollywood conventions. However, I argue that the logic of interiority takes precedence over exteriority, and in fact substantiates what is otherwise a rather illogical sequence of concrete causes and effects related to romance and the charm box. This is achieved in part through loosened causality, ambiguity, and sequences that highlight Karma's internal reflectiveness.

Causal explanations are sometimes on are only partially provided. For instance, Penjur is a character who the protagonists consult with for information on Loga twice over the course of the film with no explanation of who he is or substantiation for their visits. The mise-en-scene of book shelves and a desk in Penjur's office suggests he is an academic or historian. (Figure 1.1) Penjur, on the second visit, tells them to see Ghen Rabga, a key source of information, though there is no apparent reason he could not have told them about this on their first visit. Whether intentional or not on the part of the filmmakers, there are frequent causal lapses. Additionally, the protagonists' journey is not geographically linear—they travel across India, but return to Dharamsala three times. All the while, the question remains of exactly why Karma is motivated to do any of this; she appears to have no tangible motivations.

Figure 1.1: Dhondup, in the extreme foreground, examines a photograph of Loga
provided by Penjur, in focus in the background. The audience has been
provided no explanation of who Penjur is or why Karma and Dhondup visit
him aside from what is implied in the mise-en-scene.

Most notably, only about half of the film's running time directly pertains to the

charm box "search." The various expositional visits in pursuit of Loga are interspersed

with staged footage of everyday life in exile. Many of these segments focus on Jigme and

his friends' unfulfilled lives of booze, anger, and displacement in Dharamsala bars

andpool halls, occasionally expressed through pop rock songs performed by Jigme and

his band. An hour into the film, Tenzin Wangpo, a friend of Jigme's, dies in New Delhi

during a political hunger strike aimed at the Chinese; Jigme, who is profoundly affected,

begins to turn his anger into action. Jigme's transformation is important to the narrative,

but the event of the death is tangential—divorced from all narrative threads.  Other

sequences together constitute a kind travelogue of Tibetan exilic neighborhoods and

milieus in India, often seen alongside or from Karma's POV. Still other scenes suggest the subtle love triangle. None of these sequences are relevant are concretely or directly relevant to the charm box.

The result is a search that feels rather directionless—even aimless at times. Since the search for Loga is dotted with explanatory holes, the mystery, or what Bordwell (1985b) describes as the suspense in curiosity, is somewhat diluted; instead, the various visits with Loga's friends and acquaintances constitute interludes in which exposition is doled out in fairly arbitrary fragments. The search for Loga, and the seemingly primary narrative line of action, becomes a collective act of intermittent, ongoing storytelling—a powerful act of self-representation under postcolonial conditions, as I will return to at the end of this chapter. The many sequences with no relation to the charm box further deemphasize the tangible significance and direction of the quest, and suggest that the filmmakers may not be primarily concerned with the mystery that pertains to a charm box at all.

Perhaps the ultimate confirmation of this assertion is that Loga does not, in the end, want the charm box; he returns it to Dhondup. Dhondup's physical journey is one that brings him right back to where he started in Dharamsala—a pattern that suggests the quest was not one of physicality and geographical passage but of spirituality and internal transformation. He also discovers that his mother had not really wanted him to deliver a charm box but to meet his father and find his lineal, and cultural, roots.

All three characters are located liminally in this film in regard to their conceptions of their self-identities and homes. Jigme is in exile in India, torn between bitterness and

allegiance to a place he has never seen (that is, Chinese-occupied Tibet). Karma is a Tibetan American who has grown restless and unhappy as an American citizen and mother. She yearns for something more, also in relation to the Tibet she has never seen. Dhondup has been alienated from his former place in Chinese-occupied Tibet by imprisonment and has given up his robes. In the film, he finds himself in India for the first time, face-to-face with the Tibetan exiles who are the same but different, as Bhabha might say. These characters and those around them often talk, argue, and sing of their identity in exile. The story of Loga is itself about exile. The footage of various cities in India—Jaipur, Delhi, and so on—focus on the environment and conditions of Tibetan exiles in India.

All three characters are in search of roots. This is the primary search that constitutes the film's narrative, echoed in the often aimless pursuit of Loga. In the case of Dhondup, he must leave Chinese-occupied Tibet, meet his father, and return to Tibet in order to claim his roots, though they are decidedly fractured by the history of conflict between Tibetan rebels and China; he will presumably never see his father again. Jigme channels anger into activism, prompted by the death of a friend, though still displaced.

Karma's journey is most ambiguous. Phone conversations suggest she does not get along with Max, her partner in New York, and her film project on Tibet might be interpreted as an escape from her family life in the US. While she seeks to find some sort of connection with Tibet, she initially feels alienated, belonging neither here nor there. As the viewer shares her gaze in a POV shot out the window over Dharamsala, she says, "You know, the more I learn about Tibet, the more I feel like a complete stranger." Her

participation on the journey through exilic India with Dhondup is initially unexplained; perhaps she wants to help a Tibetan man who has been through political hardship, or alternatively she might hope to grow closer to Tibet through Dhondup. The filmmakers attempt to depict Karma as reflective or emotionally affected throughout the film. These moments are marked by close-ups, tearful gestures, a minimalist, moody score, and occasionally unnaturally colored lighting or filters which stand out from the mostly natural light—low key high contrast for interiors and bright exteriors—used otherwise. (Figure 1.2) The precise nature of her thoughts is open to interpretation, but her emotional, pensive reaction to her experiences and her increasing attachment to Dhondup signify a newfound involvement with Tibetan people and exiles.



Figure 1.2: Blue filters emphasize Karma's alienation and reflection after the death of an acquaintance.

In the film's final scene, Karma, who has received a project grant for an unspecified endeavor that requires her to relocate to a new location, also ambiguous, says farewell to Jigme and Dhondup before she boards a bus. The two men enact a traditional but still regularly practiced ritual in which a cotton or silk *khata* scarf is placed just below the neck as a sign of love and respect (Green, 2014). The sacred scarves draped over Karma signify her a newfound but unarticulated Tibetanness. Dhondup then requests that she take the charm box as a memento. The meaning of the object has thus changed the significance of the tangible deliverable on which the plot hinged to an emotional symbol of her journey. The film concludes ambiguously as the viewer does not know the destination of the bus. The lyrics to the Indian song that plays as the bus drives away translate to the Buddhist sentiment, "You don't know what lies ahead / You don't know what's in the past. / Whatever there is, it's here in this moment." Karma appears content to continue the search.

*Dreaming Lhasa* is unique among the twelve films in the extent to which it uses Hollywood narrative convention, but all twelve films employ them to some degree, whether through imitation, mimicry, opposition, revision, or reformulation. The films analyzed feature directionless, aimless searches, wherein the end goal is subverted or nonexistent and outcomes ambiguous. This is explained by filmmakers' representation of characters in hybrid space in pursuit of roots amidst rootlessness. These characters are in desperate pursuit of internal cohesion, yet there are rarely easy or concrete answers in the fragmentary region of Tibet. The search can be narratively externalized, as in *Dreaming Lhasa* or *The Search*, or more abstractly internalized, as in the spiritual quest of

*Milarepa.* As Robert Barnett (2015) explains in the case of the latter film, "In Buddhism, redemption and return to faith do not imply intervention by a monotheistic deity, but are closer to the modernist concept of self-discovery" (p. 142). The desperate attempts at self-discovery are the focus of these films. The quest can also take the form of a road film, as well.

**LIFE IS A SUN BEATEN HIGHWAY: THE TIBETAN ROAD MOVIE**

The search or journey into the self takes the form of a road movie in multiple instances within my sample of films. The song lyrics that accompany the closing moments of *Dreaming Lhasa* have an unmistakable similarity to the words of American creative writer Jack Kerouac (2007) in *On the Road*, one of the most iconic American books about the road and itself an aimless quest for identity betwixt and between the contradictions and oddities of Americana: "Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as if ever so on the road." (p. 183) The road genre of literature flourished in American cinemas for much of the latter half of the twentieth century. Tibetan filmmakers in the 21st century borrowed the road tropes and made them their own.

Film scholar David Laderman (1996) characterizes the road movie as a distinctly American subgenre bolstered by the frontier image. While he implicitly defines it at core as simply a narrative about characters on an extended journey over the road, it tends to have several attendant characteristics. These include "glorified transience, the fugitive/alternative lifestyle, sociopolitical critique, visionary ambition, and sensual restlessness" (p. 46). In a comment particularly appropriate to the Tibetan context, Katie Mills (2006), an English scholar with a focus on alternative subcultures, argues that road

movies are populated by "the very communities whose movements and spontaneity have been restricted by dominant regimes…[and] have deployed the language of mobility…crafting tales of agency regardless of the restrictions on their movement" (p. 13). Film critic and academic Michael Atkinson (1994) alternatively highlights the role of identity and journey as process in the road movie. By his account, "the journey's the thing." It is an "ideogram of human desire and [a] last-ditch search for self." (p. 14). Finally, scholar of American literature and poet Eric Mottram (1981) suggests that the externalities of the narrative structure, destination, and goals may become secondary in the road movie when he asserts that automobiles and motorcycles serve "purposes other than transport" (p. 226). These may include the alleviation of boredom, isolation, loneliness, as well as the pursuit of thrills, courtship, and pyrotechnics.

The road narrative[8] in Tibetan film suggests similar, albeit modified, themes and connotations to its Hollywood iteration. The structure and its pre-established meanings are well suited to the Tibetan films' consistent emphasis on the internal journey of characters. External stakes and plot mechanisms are secondary to a primary goal which may be undefined or unknown to the protagonist. The purported destination or goal is often, in the end, subject to reversal, subversion, or fatally abrupt and nihilistic stasis. As Mottram (1981) notes, the films are often constituted by desperate searches for identity.

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[8] I describe the road movie as narrative structure rather than subgenre or cycle because the authors referenced imply that it is primarily characterized by narrative structure—a mobile journey over terrain. At the same time, they also describe it by a series of qualities that tend to accompany or emerge from the narrative form. Thus, I believe it is equally valid to discuss the road movie as cycle, subgenre, or narrative structure dependent on the context.

In their emphasis on restlessness, angst, outsider identities, and social critique,[9] the structure captures the current state of Tibetan alienation and identity in crisis.

In this light, the frequency with which Tibetan filmmakers use and rework the US road movie structure is unsurprising. I consider three of the eleven features under investigation to be road movies—*The Sun Beaten Path, Travellers and Magicians,* and *The Search*—though it also recurs in a number of Tibetan short films (Barnett, 2015). Barnett (2015) explains the trend as "a signifier for the liminality of Tibetans within modernity" (p. 141). This is in line with my assertions above. The road and automobiles are, in fact, signifiers of modernity and Chinese-influence. The plentiful images of characters in traditional Tibetan costume in automobiles, or of paved roads in utterly remote and desolate landscapes, are themselves anachronistic portraits of the intersection of tradition and modernity. (Figure 1.3)

*The Search* (2009) is perhaps most unorthodox in relation to the aforementioned generalizations because it is Pema Tseden's most distant film; the audience is not encouraged to align with characters as individuals. The film follows a crew of four filmmakers as they travel from place to place in Chinese-occupied Tibet in search of actors to play the male and female lead roles in a film adaptation of the Tibetan legend and opera *Prince Drime Kunden*, used in the film to signify Tibetanness. The crew's producer intermittently tells a personal story of a lost love to the crew as they travel; his story and the camera's otherwise rare medium close-ups on him as he tells it arguably

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[9] In Hollywood road movies, social critique was rather specific to the 1960s and the contemporaneous countercultural movement in the US (e.g. *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967, *Easy Rider* in 1969), but is occasionally revived more recently (e.g. *Thelma & Louise* in 1991).

Figure 1.3: Anachronism along the road in *Travellers and Magicians*

provide some access to character psychology, but his memory mostly serves an allegorical function, much like the rest of plot, and does not generate all that much audience investment because it has no causal relation to the primary narrative. In short, *The Search* is particularly distinct as a road movie, and among the eleven films in general, because it is not about individual characters in search of identity. The film crew may best be described as a collective Tibetan character in search of identity. In accordance with the nihilistic version of the road movie, they never successfully find two ideal actors, or Tibetanness, in the end.

In *The Sun Beaten Path* (2011), Sonthar Gyal, who worked with Pema Tseden as cinematographer on *The Search* and *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005) serves as director; his film has notable stylistic commonalities with Tseden but is nonetheless distinct. Unlike his colleague's road movie, Gyal's film is determinedly focused on a single character and

his journey. He more frequently cuts closer to characters, and uses emotional cues like a musical score to emphasize character psychology. *The Sun Beaten Path* tells the story of a young man named Nyima in Chinese-occupied Tibet who accidentally kills his mother in a tractor accident. In a journey of guilt, religious devotion, and self-forgiveness, prostrates to Lhasa. The plot follows his return home to his family. He is still traumatized, nearly mute and barely functional, only able to keep walking. He refuses to accept rides along the road—the prostrations were not adequate penance for him—and so he walks a road through empty landscapes for much of film's duration. *The Sun Beaten Path* is unusual as a road movie in that travel occurs on foot, and is in turn slowly paced with none of the kinetic energy that sometimes characterizes the road picture. Beginning deep in media res, backstory is gradually developed through subjectively motivated flashbacks. Most importantly, Nyima's dramatic actions cannot be explained concretely. He does not know why he is on this journey by foot, so in a sense he seems to be in search, broadly, of inner peace by a mechanism he cannot specify. The direction of the narrative is thus rather open-ended in comparison to classical Hollywood construction. As Barnett (2015) writes of *The Sun Beaten Path*, "the religious journey is reshaped into a road film." (143)

The narrative is about a vaguely defined but clearly spiritual journey which is expressed beyond all other formal elements by the striking use of landscape. Road films often saliently feature landscapes, and *The Sun Beaten Path* uniquely exploits that potential unlike the other road films I discuss here, and in fact unlike any of the other films in the sample. The cinematography quite frequently places Nyima, miniscule in the

frame, amidst vast expanses of a gray, yellow, and brown no-man's-land. The pavement appears to wind endlessly into nowhere in these shots. The presentation of Tibetan land is in opposition to the majestic conception of landscape in the Tibetan imaginary. While it is often grandiose, it is, as appropriate to Nyima's journey, also bleak—a blank slate for existential contemplation. (Figure 1.4)



Figure 1.4: Nyima and another character are reduced to two black dots on the road amidst an expanse of brown Tibetan landscape in this composition from *The Sun Beaten Path*. The modern road that seems to have no beginning or end crosses through blank desolation.

This interpretation of landscape as void is rooted in socially constructed assumptions of postcoloniality that the film actively exploits. As Sheng-mei Ma (2013) explains of "foreign" desert and permafrost landscapes on film:

Out of this apparent nothingness—a black hole of human experience—a romantic imaginary arises to create the opposite, a spiritual, even religious, longing.

Banished from secularized modernity, god or religiosity is made to dwell with the

premodern in our midst. Hence, Western modernity casts its own shadow on and

"casts away" its old gods to these forgotten corners. (p. 2)

This process is in accordance with Edward Said's notion of the construction of the Other

through projection, sometimes of desires and longings. In *The Sun Beaten Path*, it also

powerfully generates the sense that Nyima's walk is an existential and spiritual journey.

Thus, it is no coincidence that the subtle climax, an ambiguous change in Nyima's

perception, occurs when he arrives in a new snow-covered landscape at the edge of the

Himalayas. He is stricken; a slow and wide POV pan gazes over a herd of animals amidst

the snow, emotionally emphasized by the musical score. (Figure 1.5) He subsequently

takes a bus back to his home and family. According to director Sonthar Gyal, the

character progresses from "self-forgetfulness to the assertion of self" (Gyal, 2011).

The final road film in my sample, *Travellers and Magicians* (2003), is more

comedic and light in tone, and more traditional in narrative arc, which might explain its

relative success abroad.[10] Dondup is a relatively young military officer in Bhutan who

finds himself stationed in the small, traditional village of Teluk Kumbar. Dondup

considers himself to be modern and is generally dismissive of the traditional culture

around him. He idealizes the US and his goal is to travel to Thimphu where he can get a

visa. He misses the bus, however, and is forced to hitchhike with several characters he

considers traditional and at first irritating—a Buddhist monk, a poor apple seller, a paper

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[10] The film's worldwide grosses were $668,639 (http://www.boxofficemojo.com), which may appear unimpressive, but places it as the second most successful of the films in my sample. The first is *The Cup* (1999), with a worldwide gross of $1,079,108. Both films were directed by Khyentse Norbu.

Figure 1.5: The understated climax of *The Sun Beaten Path* consists of Nyima's transcendental encounter with a snow-covered landscape.

maker, and his daughter Sonam. His pompous attitudes are called into questions by his time with these people, a growing attraction to Sonam, and the stories the monk tells along the way which function as parables. Dondup is forced to consider and somehow reconcile his identity amidst tradition, modernity, and spirituality. Buddhism and broader questions of identity in the globalized sphere are encapsulated in the monk's statement, "You know, you should be careful with dreamlands, because when you wake up, it may not be pleasant." The "dreamland" is in this case is the US. The monk understands Dondup's desire for the US as a misguided attachment to desire and passion. The central narrative concern is, yet again, the protagonist's internal self-reflection and identity reformation. The original goal to travel to the US may or may not serve as the endpoint; the plot leaves the outcome ambiguous.

One of the more distinctive qualities of director Khyentse Norbu's film is the centrality of verbal storytelling that takes place on the road; it comes to shape the entire narrative structure. The film consists of three nested storylines, and each occupies a different time, space, and phenomenological realm. The dominant plot is the frame story I have described, but the monk's verbal storytelling gives way to intermittent, extended sequences that depict the tale. His story has its own frame story: a young boy named Tashi dreams of escaping village life and monastic training, so his little brother sneaks a home-brewed liquor into Tashi's lunch. This causes an extended hallucination that constitutes the innermost story, in which a romance devolves into lust, jealousy, deceit, murder, tragedy, and guilt for Tashi. Whereas the landscape serves as the main agent of change on Nyima's road journey, traditional Buddhist stories are the primary agent in Dondup's hitchhiking excursions.

All three films employ road movie conventions, and re-orchestrate them to reflect the conditions and concerns of Tibetans. However, they each do so in distinctive ways: *The Search* is interested in a collective Tibetan crisis of religious, cultural, and national identity, *The Sun Beaten Path* depicts a spiritually and emotionally fragmented individual transformed by the landscape, while *Travellers and Magicians* revolves around the power of storytelling. Indeed, verbal storytelling is a recurring element in several of the films discussed, as well as many of those I have not mentioned; therefore, orated stories, as well as related forms of cultural performance, demand further attention as a narrational technique.

**CULTURAL PERFORMANCE AS NARRATION: BARDS, MUSICIANS, AND THESPIANS**

By cultural performance, I refer to *mise en abyme*—the nesting of texts within texts—that are here constituted by creative forms of cultural expression. In my sample, cultural performance primarily consists of storytellng, music performances, and theater. When represented within a film, these expressions are inextricable from that film's form as a whole. In many cases, they may appear to be presentations of and appeals to a primordial Tibetan culture, or at least a time that preceded the discourse of nations. The stories of the monk in *Travellers and Magicians* and the long sequences devoted to performances of *Prince Drime Kunden* in *The Silent Holy Stones* and *The Search* arguably appeal to tradition and history as justification for a unique and singular nationalistic identity.

Many other instances are self-consciously modern or hybrid. The producer's story of lost love in *The Search* is a contemporary tale about his personal life, just as the collectively assembled story of Loga in *Dreaming Lhasa* pertains to recent history and contemporary life in Tibet. *Dreaming Lhasa* features two performances of songs by Jigme's rock band. *We're No Monks* and *Richard Gere is My Hero* both feature interludes for song performance and agitprop theater skits performed by the main characters. All of these forms, I contend, are forms of storytelling and conscious acts of self-representation.

Storytelling, especially on film, can serve important functions for the navigation of culture and identity among postcolonial people. Film and literary scholar Yifen Beus' (2012) analysis of the role of the storyteller in African and Pacific Island film applies to a

broad range of cultures. At the most basic level, and one that only applies to a portion of my examples, they preserve cultural content and performance on video that is otherwise limited to a particular time and place. They also express different worldviews that might be difficult to convey in traditional narrative form. Beus explains that "ontologies shaped by orality…[in Africa] assume that the world consists of interacting forces of cosmological scale and significance rather than of discrete secularized concrete objects" (p. 115). Tibetan ontologies, often with Tibetan Buddhism at their core, likewise resist Western empirical ontology and binarism.

At the same time, these cultural performances are produced in the present and therefore do not truly constitute preservation of a past moment. Rather, Beus (2012) argues that storytelling practices on film constitute strategic hybridity. She describes this process as follows:

> the postcolonial performer/filmmaker reappropriates the power of the ancestor (the original storyteller) and the subjectivity of the colonizer (who introduced filmmaking to the colonies) while remaining reflexive of his/her own paradoxical positionings as product of a syncretic education from both the Western and non-Western traditions. (p. 116)

Thus, the storyteller (or singer, or theater actor), especially in relation to the video camera, does not reproduce the past but uses it to negotiate cultural influences and identity. A contemporary performance of a traditional song is not a recreation but a reformulation. Judith Butler (1990) writes that "identity is performatively constituted by the 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (p. 33). In other words, external gesture

and expression socio-culturally constitute our own and others' conceptions of our identity. In this light, the performativity of these acts becomes a means for self-determination. Conditions of liminality, as in Tibet, allow the "flexibility and potential to charter new grounds and innovate means of (re)telling stories through a synthesized identity and positioning" (Beus, 117).

Consider Jigme's first song performance in *Dreaming Lhasa*. The band performs against a wall plastered with a pastiche of cultural references that include "Free Tibet" insignia, a portrait of the Dalai Lama, and Rastafarian drapery with images of Bob Marley. (Figure 1.6) Their song is sung in English even though the characters usually speak a Tibetan dialect, and it is in the non-traditional contemporary style of pop rock. The lyrics read:

> I was in a bar with my friend / I don't know which bar and whose / so many whiskeys and people with drink / I jumped to the window and lose myself / I was in Goa beach[11]…Swam and swam tiny / Swam and swam Titanic full as day / I said, "Let me out!" / And they say / "Get the hell out of here."

The lyrics are an expression of angry dejection, with references to excessive whiskey and arguably suicide, and in-betweenness. The subject of the lyrics wants escape, and "they" (the Indians and/or the Chinese) do not want him there either. The cultural performance is an especially self-conscious type of self-representation—an often emotive and poetic declaration of the character's state and self in modernity. Jigme's sense of his own

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[11] Goa is a small state in India along the coastline.

identity may be fractured, but it is nonetheless in formation for himself and the viewer as he sings.



Figure 1.6: Jigme's band plays electric guitars to express their feelings about being in exile against a background of overlapping and disparate cultural insignia in *Dreaming Lhasa*.

Ultimately, though, cultural performances do not occur frequently in these films because of the filmmakers' conscious interest in postcolonial theory; rather, they are forms of narration that serve the narrative. A Hollywood film would typically allow little time for such interludes because they generally do not fit snugly within a causal chain. *Richard Gere is My Hero* opens with an extended sequence that shows a Tibetan man in traditional garb beside a stupa, grandiose Himalayan peaks behind him, as he sings a contemporary ballad for Tibet. (Figure 1.7) One of the main characters, whom the audience does not yet know as such, passes by, but mostly the sequence does not have a

concrete narrative motivation or causal effect. The ballad delays the viewer's introduction to the four main characters and their goals in the subsequent scene.



Figure 1.7: The singer in *Richard Gere is My Hero* appears twice without explanation to sing the same contemporary ballad for Tibet. The image composition and song may appear to be a representation of a pure Tibetan nationalism, but is fairly complex in its strategic hybridity.

Late in the film, this singer, in an identical composition, coincidentally reappears as Nyima, the film's central protagonist, sits nearby. He is in turmoil, frustrated with the possible immorality of his own actions, his alienation from his friends, and more generally with the Tibetan government-in-exile's cooperation with China. The song serves a causal, transformative function for Nyima, accompanied by a sequence of subjective shots of clouds as they enshroud the Himalayan peaks.[12] Nyima proceeds to reform himself through his actions. These sequences present an idealized presentation of

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[12] This is an idealized presentation of landscape, which in turn serves a transcendental, psychoanalytic function for the protagonist. In this sense it adopts aspects of the Tibetan imaginary directly and sincerely.

landscape and song, which in turn serves a transcendental, psychoanalytic function for the protagonist. In this sense, it adopts aspects of the Tibetan imaginary directly. As a cultural reformulation rather than recreation, however, the musical interludes in *Richard Gere is My Hero* constitute a strategic articulation of identity.

Cultural performances need not have any causes or effects to inform the narrative. To draw upon the example of Jigme's songs in *Dreaming Lhasa*, neither one has any causes or effect; they merely express a character's state of mind over the course of the narrative. In contrast to his first song, his second song much later is the film is sung in a Tibetan dialogue and is ultimately a "prayer" that Tibet find freedom. While still performed in a modern style, the song is infused with hope and politicized consciousness. Together, the songs directly reflect Jigme's character arc and articulate the internal narrative development that is at the core of these films.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

Whether they have narrative effects or not, cultural expression through story, song, dance, and art are functionally important as performative enunciation and negotiation of individual, moral, cultural, and political identity. As a narrational device, these sequences are also an important means to convey largely internalized information about characters and their identifications. Just like narrative structures, this type of narration may draw on "modern" culture or "traditional" ritual, but in either case, furthers the story in a manner that is unique to Tibetan film.

The narratives and narration employed by the 12 films are the result of cultural hybridity. The Tibetan filmmakers and performers draw upon various national cinemas,

especially US cinema, but use them uniquely to navigate their own spiritual, individual, cultural, historical, political, and national identity. Whether through their use of search narratives, road journeys, or diegetic cultural performance, the Tibetan films examined focus on the quest for growth, reconciliation, and integration of character identity.[13] In the next chapter, I extend my analysis beyond narrative and narration to expand on themes of identity fragmentation and assemblage in these films.

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[13] *Hornig: Beat the Dog* (2004) is a notable exception to these conclusions and serves as a significant reminder that the scope of my assertions is limited by access. This film is unique among those I examined in that it does not adhere to most of the conventions described in this chapter. The protagonist's internal development in *Hornig: Beat the Dog* is not elucidated and is presumably not a primary concern for the filmmakers. He does not undergo a clear internal transformation, and especially not one related to his identity. Instead, his goals, namely union with his love interest, are externally achieved. Complications arise from without as well, as when his lover's brother attacks him by knife, with very physical stakes— survival or death. *Hornig* is decidedly focused more on external cultural practice than on internal transformation. As discussed in the introduction, the film has been included as a representative example of a type of regional filmmaking with circulation largely internal to Tibet.

# Chapter 2

## Betwixt and Between: Negotiation of Selfhood in Liminal Space

> I have become a pilgrim at bars
> Where I meet
> Sadhus, pandits and poets at war
> At dusk they magically turn
> Into cooks, dishwashers and babysitters.
> This is my story, our stories
> Bitter refugees
> Killing Time.

—Tibetan poet Tenzing Rigdol, *Poem*

> In another's country, that is also your own, your person divides, and in following
> the forked path you encounter yourself in a double movement…once as stranger,
> and then a friend.

—Bhabha *The Location of Culture*

Tibet is a figurative terrain pocked-marked and intersected by a multitude of culturally constructed discourses—tradition and modernity, peace and violence, borders and borderlessness, Buddhism and secularism. Religious precepts of "no-self" clash with identity discourses of nation, culture, and selfhood. Tibet is pulled between Chinese, Indian, and American influence yet committed to the cultivation of Tibetanness, and in ongoing dialectical interaction with the Tibetan imaginary. These dynamics, at least in part, constitute conditions of hybridity and liminality. Tibet a place that is neither here nor there. Critical theorist and activist Frantz Fanon (1952/2008) writes that colonized subjects are "overdetermined from without" (p. 87). That is, they are socio-politically and historically caught within an external web of literary, historical, mythic, and scientific

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contradictions. Caught between discourses, Bhabha (1994) argues that identity is not pre-given but "the production of an image of identity and transformation of the subject in assuming the image" (p. 64). In this way, identity is a process of image-making and conforming. Thus, in the highly visual medium of film, how are self-identity, cultural identity, national identity, and political identity cultivated amidst this metaphorical, and sometimes literal, battleground?

In this chapter, I will explore processes and obstacles of identity-formation as self-represented in the 12 Tibetan films. My focus will most heavily be on the self-identities of individual characters within the diegesis due to a contention that individual self-identity is inseparable from cultural, national, and political identity. These films consciously explore Tibetan identity politics within and around TAR. This chapter is organized into three interrelated themes. The intersection of tradition and modernity is examined primarily through a case study of *The Cup* (1999). Identity in hybridity, in which multiple contradictions, cultures, and pressures converge and intersect, is the subject of a case study on *We're No* Monks (2004). Finally, disenfranchised masculinity in liminality as represented across the sample of films is analyzed.

The films generally present identity in contradictory space as largely irresolvable. Some reconcile oppositions through a Buddhist position of acceptance that may not wholly convince non-Buddhist viewers (e.g. *The Cup, Travellers and Magicians*), others take refuge in traditional realms (e.g. *Hornig: Beat the Dog*, *Milarepa*), one employs a generically motivated but unconvincing happy ending to smooth over its thornier

commentary on identity (the romantic comedy *Richard Gere is My* Hero), while the rest present an inconclusive "slice-of-life," ambiguity, or downright nihilism.

## COKE CAN PRAYER CANDLES: BETWIXT TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Concepts of "tradition" and "modernity" are widely used in academic literature yet rarely and variably defined. Both terms lack specificity and can be used to denote different ideas. Is religion, for instance, traditional because it has existed for a comparatively long length of time, even though it has radically evolved over in that span and is practiced by of the world's population at present? Is there a distinction between "modernity" and "Western culture," itself a precarious concept? Is the performance of so-called tradition in contemporary times actually tradition, or the articulation of a new form? Åshild Kolås (2003), a researcher in identity politics and representation, writes, "the notion of 'modernity' as a semiotic counterpart to 'tradition' has so far received relatively little attention from researchers engaged in Tibetan studies" (p. 21).

Finite definitions of "tradition" and "modernity" are difficult, if not impossible, to verbalize. However, the Tibetan filmmakers discussed in this chapter are informed by their own notions of tradition and modernity, which they articulate through cinematic representation. Thus, the perspectives woven into the films themselves frame my analyses.

Accordingly, tradition and modernity is conceived and characterized differently by different filmmakers even as though it is the most consistent theme across the selection of films. *Hornig: Beat the Dog*, for instance, treats traditional culture with

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earnest affection. The film embodies the self-conception of traditional identity among nomad Tibetans in China. (Figure 2.1)



Figure 2.1: An idyllic image of a traditional Tibetan subculture in *Hornig: Beat the Dog*.

A simple tale of romance and violence, the narrative has the mythic character of a fairy tale, in which Boy sweeps Girl away on the night of her arranged wedding. Traditional kabshat singers provide the score. Such familiar scenarios, however, do not make clear whether the narrative conventions derive from Tibetan or Western traditions. As Bhabha (1994) writes:

> It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic (p. 52).

The use of tradition is not a recreation of the past, but an act in the present that tends to appeal to the idea of an essential Tibetanness. While this ideal does Bhabha's framework, tradition can nonetheless be a strategy for legitimation. On the other hand, one might view this film as a depiction of a subculture in Chinese-occupied Tibet that has resisted change more than others, and is perhaps made for that subculture. In either case, the film has the potential to instill pride.

*Milarepa* similarly appeals to tradition, but more clearly play into stereotypes of the Tibetan imaginary. The opening titles, for instance, read, "11<sup>th</sup> century Tibet was a land of Buddhists and mystics, where lamas and sorcerers roamed and yogis were seen flying through the sky." Directed by Neten Chokling, a reincarnated lama, the film tells a story of great fame in Tibetan spiritual folklore. *Milarepa* is a fairy tale rather than a historical epic. The characters are clearly good, bad, or misguided, sorcery plays a large part,[1] and lessons are learned. Tibet is unabashedly a magical, mystical land in a fantasy universe.

On the other hand, *Travellers and Magicians* centers on a protagonist, Dondup, who conceives of himself as thoroughly modern and blatantly averse to the village he believes to be traditional and backward. His attitude to the villagers is gradually softened by Buddhist stories, but the film is notable for the way it establishes a finite clash between tradition and modernity, Self and Other, and city and country. Dialogue like "I knew I could never trust you city people" makes the binary issues explicit. The result is a

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[1] Bon Po rituals, practiced before the formation of Buddhism and subsequently intertwined with some schools of practice did, in fact, entail acts that would today be considered magic. In *Milarepa*, for instance, the titular character uses the teachings of Bon Po to summon a deadly earthquake.

film filled with comically anachronistic juxtapostions of tradition and modernity in its mise-en-scene (Figure 2.2). As Dondup walks through the countryside in a Tibetan robe, he carries a boom box and a mass-produced green plastic suitcase. His long hair and constant cigarette use contrast him to surrounding characters who frequently critique his modern habits. Interaction between tradition and modernity in Khyentse Norbu's other non-English feature, *The Cup*, is equally prominent but more complex.



Figure 2.2: Dondup dances in his room to rock music in *Travellers and Magicians*. A
　　　　　　　Buddhist *thangka* image hangs on the wall in the upper ride hand corner of
　　　　　　　the frame and his sacred *khata* scarf swings over his head. He wears
　　　　　　　Western sneakers with his traditional robe, which will be underscored in
　　　　　　　later close-up shots of his sneakers. His back wall is covered with posters of
　　　　　　　female models. An Uncle Sam "I Want You" poster and a mass produced
　　　　　　　plastic trunk sit atop his bed. He wears an "I Love New York" t-shirt under
　　　　　　　his robe.

**Of Sacred Cups and World Cups: Tradition and Modernity in *The Cup* (1999)**

Khyentse Norbu, a highly respected reincarnate lama, turned to film as a creative medium to spread the Buddhist dharma. His first feature, *The Cup*, is the earliest film in the sample as well as the most financially successful. The film takes place in 1998 at a Tibetan monastery in India for boys. Notably, the geographic setting is never further specified, suggesting that the film is intended as a story about Tibetans in exile, but also as a universalistic fable. Based on the experiences of Norbu, it tells the comic tale of young monks who are obsessed with the World Cup, often at the expense of their Buddhist practice. They routinely sneak out at night to watch the games. When they get caught on their way back from one match, their young leader, Orgyen, obtains permission from the abbot to gather money to buy a satellite dish and television in order to watch the final game at the monastery. He manages to do so, but only through petty theft and extortion. His most significant wrongdoing in the context of the film occurs when he pawns off the watch of Nyima, the newest and youngest monastery arrival from Chinese-occupied Tibet, to the satellite dish salesman. The watch belonged to Nyima's mother and is his only material connection to Tibet. When the final match airs, Orgyen's guilt prevents any enjoyment; instead he goes to his dorm to attempt to pawn off his own prized possessions in exchange for Nyima's watch. *The Cup* is ultimately a light-hearted moral fable centered on the encounter between "traditional monastic order" and its "encounter with globalization and the information age." (Basu, 2009, p. 312).

Indeed, modernity as an external, unassimilated force is largely equated in this film with late-twentieth century globalization in the form of technology, commodities,

brands, and pop culture. Orgyen is orphaned and presumably has not experienced life outside the monastery, but he knows all about the "rubber sweet" (chewing gum) and the "rubber breasts" of American woman from the glossy magazines that are regularly snuck into the dormitories. Coca-Cola cans are a visual motif, and serve as the young monks' makeshift soccer balls. Likewise, the World Cup as a major plot device serves "as an emblem for the global circulation of media images and capital, from which even the remotest regions may not escape for long" (Chan, 2014, p. 91). The young monks frown upon this type of modernity only to the extent that it directly suggests the Chinese government's particular articulation of modernity. When Nyima arrives from Chinese-occupied Tibet with a Chinese-manufactured baseball cap, a monk named Lodo, Orgyen's primary sidekick, tells him to send it back to China and tosses it over the trees. This is presumably motivated by an allegiance to Tibet as a culture and nation.

If the effects of a global economy signify modernity, tradition is represented via Tibetan Buddhist ritual, which forms the framework for the film from the outset. A child throat chanting to dramyin strings is heard over the credits. The song continues through the first shot of prayer flags, the first image in a montage of spiritual iconography. The sequence ends with a close-up of a hand as it plugs the whole in the bottom of a cup with a candle. This practice signifies the prevention of leakage of the Buddha's wisdom from the mind. (Figure 2.3) The image is a clue to the dual meaning of the film's title as allusion to the World Cup and to Tibetan Buddhism. Throughout the film, attention and screen time is given to ritual that is narratively unjustified by Hollywood standards. The camera inspects the details of the preparation of a staple food called *tsampa*, which has

Figure 2.3: Tibetan Buddhist symbolic iconography and ritual in the opening montage of *The Cup*.

spiritual derivations, as well as the exchange of *khata* scarves. These sequences may serve to "preserve" ritual practice on film, though they also effectively emphasize the apparent difference between tradition and modernity. (Figure 2.4)[2]

With tradition and modernity defined in this way, *The Cup* is a film that constantly juxtaposes and complicates the binary, whether through image, dialogue, or character motivation. I will here focus on visual juxtapositions as a succinct representational tactic by which the film depicts tradition and modernity in coexistence. Much like Dondup in *Travellers and Magicians*, Orgyen's outerwear appears

[2] Felicia Chan (2014) notes, largely in comparison to Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* (1997), that depictions of "arcane temple rituals" are not exotified by the camera in *The Cup* but portrayed more naturalistically. While I believe it is true that ritual is not portrayed as otherworldly or inaccurate, I am not convinced by her comparison to meticulously researched films like *Kundun* that the *The Cup* would not be drastically different, and more akin to the former film, if it had a similarly large budget. The problem remains of how to represent ritual on film to audiences who are entirely foreign to that ritual without the invocation of spectacle.

incongruous with his underwear; he sports a yellow and green jersey for his favorite Brazilian soccer player, Ronaldo, under his saffron monastic robes. Similarly, his dormitory wall is pasted with a collage of soccer players cut from magazines (Figure 2.5). Note the comparatively large depiction of the Buddha embedded within the collage on screen left, less illuminated than most of the other images. As the collage suggests, Orgyen has not abandoned his Buddhist convictions amidst modernity, but they do not appear to be at the forefront of his imagination either.



Figure 2.4: A lavish ritual initiation ceremony embodies tradition—whether ordinary or spectacular.

Perhaps the most striking images of monks amidst modernity occur when they excitedly pick up the giant satellite dish in the countryside, haul it onto a tractor truck (Figure 2.6), and position it on the roof of the monastery. But the boys' enthusiasm is contrasted with the older fortune-teller's bemused skepticism. In a slow pan over the

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Figure 2.5: Orgyen's bedroom collage.



These days...

Figure 2.6: A group of young monks drive a tractor back to the monastery with their
satellite dish in tow.

monastic complex at night, dislocated laughter is heard along with the repetitious swish of a small object through the air. The camera eventually settles on the fortune-teller next to the satellite dish as he swings his Tibetan hand prayer wheel, which serves as a symbolic recitation of mantras. Due to the prominence of the prayer wheel on the soundtrack, the viewer is encouraged to notice it and to contrast its circularity with that of satellite dish. The camera eventually settles on the fortune-teller next to the satellite dish as he swings his Tibetan hand prayer wheel, which serves as a symbolic recitation of mantras. Due to the prominence of the prayer wheel on the soundtrack, the viewer is encouraged to notice it and to contrast its circularity with that of satellite dish.

However, while all these images show a coexistence or juxtaposition of tradition and modernity, they do not necessarily resolve or present a coherent unification of the two. That is, visual anachronisms appear to take precedence over coherent hybrid formations, much like in Khyentse Norbu's next film, *Travellers and Magicians*. For instance, in one scene a child monk refers without irony to the satellite dish as the "precious jewel." In Tibetan Buddhism, the "precious jewel" is a central symbol that entails the three jewels of Buddhism—the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, which correspond to the body, mind and soul. The monk's comparison is comic in that the object of modernity and symbolic object of tradition are so incomparable and, in the context of the narrative, contradictory. The satellite dish is an object of attachment and desire, and therefore a corruption of the "precious jewel."

Still, the film contains moments wherein symbols of modernity are strategically reused, redecorated, or reinvented to suit the purposes of cultural, spiritual, and national

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identity formation. In one instance, Nyima and Palden arrive at the monastery in a car that has been redecorated with Tibetan signifiers. (Figure 2.7) Later in the film, the



Figure 2.7: The Western car has been painted and decorated with Tibetan iconography, ornaments, and a portrait of the 14th Dalai Lama at the center of the windshield.

ubiquitous Coca-Cola cans reappear as candleholders on the religious altar of the fortune teller (Figure 2.8). This is a particularly potent image in its reappropriation of a symbol of modern capitalism, branding, and commodification used for entirely unintended purposes of Tibetan Buddhist spiritual practice. The scene is one of the film's strongest images of hybridity in modernity. A close-up of one of the Coca-Cola candles alight fades into a close-up of a statue of Bhuddha, as if to substantiate its status as spiritual accouterment.

Just as images like these incorporate tradition and modernity, character actions also combine apparent psychological contradictions—the scientifically rational versus the superstitious, embrace of commodities versus a commitment to non-attachment, and so

on. For instance, Orgyen escapes with small groups of monks to watch soccer on television, yet he still bothers the fortune-teller whom he otherwise regards with derision to predict which team will be win. These apparent contradictions appear naturally and are grounded in the depictions of the characters; therefore, they don't necessarily appear as contradictions but as a portrait of hybrid modernity.



Figure 2.8: The fortune teller reappropriates Coca-Cola bottles to hold candles on his religious shrine.

Notably, the fortune-teller and the abbot of the monastery are likely of the Dalai Lama's generation and, at least in the case of the abbot, feel nostalgia for pre-1959 Tibet. The abbot, in fact, is perpetually prepared to make his return, his steel trunks packed. Young Orgyen, on the other hand, is Tibetan but has never lived in Tibet; he has an indifference, if not disdain, for Tibet. He refers to Tibetans stereotypically as dirty and stupid, with a disregard for science. When Palden, Nyima's uncle and also a new arrival

from Tibet, asks why Orgyen does not watch the games during the day, Orgyen responds, "It's something to do with the world not being flat. Anyway, you're Tibetan. You wouldn't understand." Likewise, he chastises the fortune-teller, "This isn't Tibet, it's India. If you don't wash, you get sick…and your predictions won't work."

In short, the film expresses anxiety over the passage of time and generations, and about the cultural eradication of Tibet itself. The abbot, in the end, comes to accept the contemporary conditions of globalization and modernity. He accepts that he will never return to the Tibet of years past and rejects his long-held attachment to former years. Orgyen, in comparison, discovers that his arrogance, predicated on the association of backward tradition with Tibet and progressive modernity with himself, is illusory. In this film, generational differences complicate rather than reify assumptions about traditional elders and modern youth.

*The Cup* offers its own solution to these contradictions—one not necessarily shared by most of the other films and that is integral to its optimistic and crowd-pleasing closure. This position is summed up in the words of the abbot, heard in voiceover as the monks return to the monastery with the satellite dish. He dictates a letter: "Things aren't like they used to be. These days our young monks are exposed to many things that older ones like myself never even dreams of." The image cuts to a sunset of great intensity presumably seen by the abbot through his window, then to a shallow focus close-up of the abbot shown clearly in the foreground as he writes. "Don't worry about your boys. I will make sure that they receive traditional training." The camera underscores his words; the focus racks to the background wall which is covered in Buddhist prayer scrolls and

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ritual objects. "I hope they'll continue to uphold Buddha's lineage according to these modern times." While the accompanying images underscore the simultaneous coexistence and fundamental difference between signifiers of tradition and modernity, the words of the monk suggest a Buddhist acceptance of an increasingly globalized world.

The film suggests that the teachings of the Buddha need not be lost in such a world. Toward the end of the film, a shot of a silver cup on a temple alter is interpreted by Ronald S. Green (2014) as a transposition for the World Cup, "which has now become a part of monastic life. Even the World Cup has taught an important Buddhist message about selflessness…Although locations and conditions change, the essential ideals of Buddhism are adaptable" (p. 91). Undoubtedly, *The Cup*, perhaps due to the filmmakers' expectations for a Western audience, shows Tibetan Buddhism as, at core, a set of positive values that are flexible because they have the appearance of universality.[3] Basu's (2009) comments on the film's resolution, however, take these claims further; she writes, "Tibetan identity can be renegotiated in the new geopolitical arena characterized by new technologies, global interdependence and communication." (p. 314). The film, however, only substantiates Basu's claims if "Tibetan identity" is understood as synonymous with the core values of Tibetan Buddhism. This is certainly not an unheard of supposition; in the Tibetan imaginary it takes the form of a land and culture defined by its unique spirituality, and it is likely believed by many Tibetans themselves, especially those devoted to religious practice like Khyentse Norbu. I contend, however, that the resolution

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[3] More accurately, the values of selflessness and empathy most emphasized by the film correspond to common conceptions of Judeo-Christian values.

more accurately reconciles tradition and modernity than the complexity of Tibetan identity.

The film ends with a montage of Buddhist spiritual practice and iconography that echoes the opening montage. The full-frame picture of the grainy black-and-white soccer match on television, as seen by the monks, crackles out visually and sonically; it slowly crossfades into the image of the tops of two prayer incenses as they burn out (Figures 2.9 and 2.10). The juxtaposition suggests the television image as illusory and temporary in comparison to the path of Buddhism. Traditional Tibetan string music and the abbot's recitation about the cultivation of the self from the famous *The Way of the Boddhisattva* accompanies the images that follow. The film is thus bracketed between montages evocative of Buddhist spirituality. *The Cup* embraces Tibetan Buddhist spiritual values above and separately from conceptions of both tradition and modernity.

Pema Tseden's *The Silent Holy Stones* uses notably similar plot elements and themes. This film will be discussed further in the next chapter, but it bears mention that it is also a film about a young monk-in-training who, on a visit to his family, becomes obsessed with the television set and a particular video series. Rather than join his family to watch the traditional opera of Tibetan Buddhism, *Drime Kunden*, the monk stays inside to watch television. However, the film treats its themes notably differently. Barnett (2015) writes that *The Silent Holy Stones* shows "the consumption of commercial video and the pursuit of the monastic life as in tension but not conflict" (p. 138). *The Silent Holy Stones* is minimally plotted and concerned with details over resolution; it presents
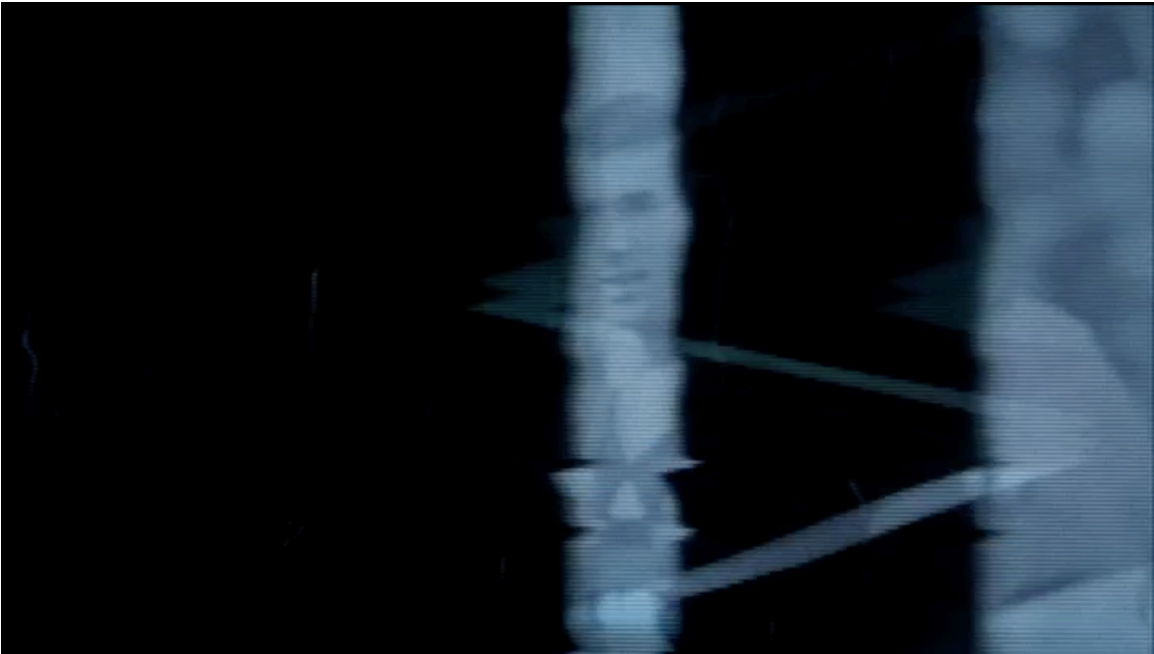
Figure 2.9: The image of the soccer game on the television takes up the entirety of the frame as it slowly crackles out and fades into…
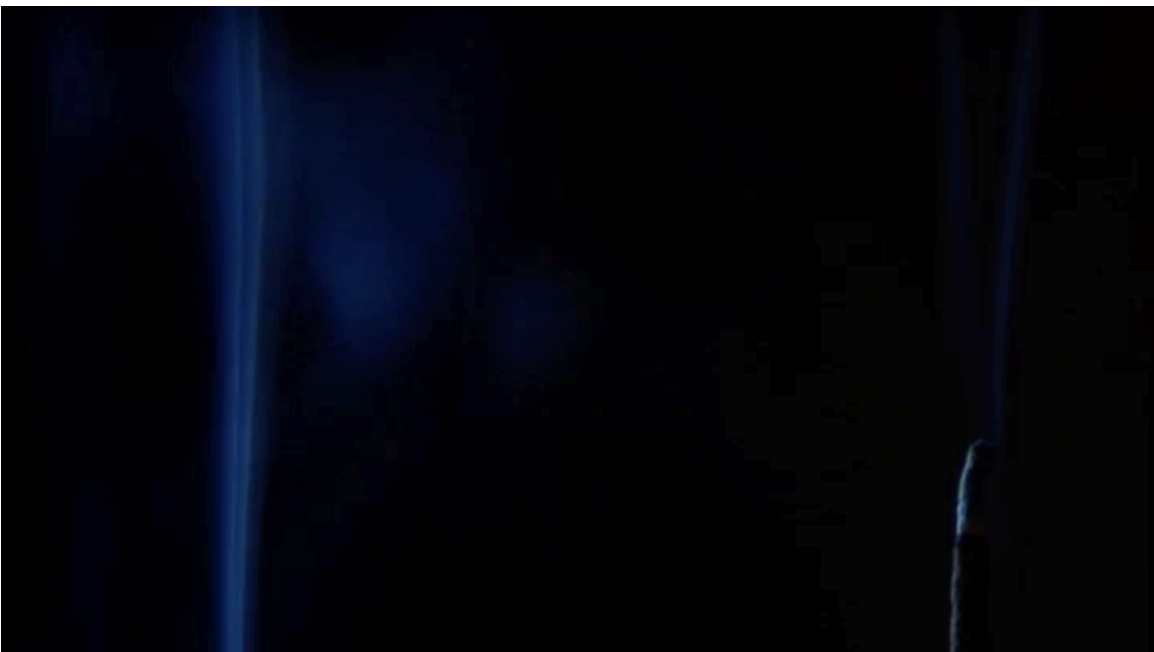


Figure 2.10: …the image the tops of two prayer incenses as they burn out; the smoke billows to the top of the frame.

itself as an observational exercise. Modernity and tradition intermingle, but they are neither reconciled nor inherently in conflict.

The intersection of tradition and modernity is one of the most salient themes in many of these films, if not the basis on which they were conceived. However, the contradiction of tradition and modernity is only one discordance of many involved in the complex articulation of individual and collective identity that these films represent. The next section will consider issues of identity formation amidst a wider network of contradictory psychological, social, cultural, and political forces.

## PILGRIMS KILLING TIME: IDENTITY STRUGGLES IN HYBRIDITY

Tibet is an ever-changing concept beset by a multitude of discursive oppositions—tradition and modernity, East and West, Buddhism and secularism, China and India, particular place and diffuse abstraction. These discourses propagate from within and without Tibet. Tibet is a hybrid space in the sense that Homi K. Bhabha (1994) defines it as "neither the one thing nor the other." (p. 49) It is an ambiguous concept that defies definition and that has different meanings for different people. A sheepherder from the Amdo region, a government official in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, and a monk in exile in India who has never been inside the current Chinese borders may all consider themselves Tibetan, yet have very different notions of what Tibet and Tibetanness are. While a similar argument about cultural and conceptual contradictions could be made of any nation as a construct, the films suggests Tibet's unique history, relations to nations, and traumas have created a crisis of identity for Tibetans within Chinese borders and in exile. This section will focus largely on films

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made by and about Tibetans in exile as opposed to those in Chinese-occupied Tibet given that explicit representations of Tibetan identity struggles would likely be banned within China.[4]

For Bhabha (1994), identity articulation is a constant process that cannot cultivate change when it relies on false essentialist narratives of cultural origination. Instead, he asserts the need for the colonialized subject to:

> focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself (p. 2).

"Hybrid" and "in-between" space are not clearly differentiated by Bhabha. I read them as synonymous, though Bhabha's prose leave substantial room for interpretation. The theoretical space of the "in-between" is characterized by signifiers that float free of meaning and therefore present the opportunity to create new identities and meanings at cultural interstices. In this framework, emerges in process at locations of difference. However, in light of the self-representations within the sample of films, Bhabha's emphasis on successful articulation of identity rather than self-fragmentation and the inability to articulate selfhood is occasionally too optimistic.

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[4] Some Tibetan filmmakers in China have made films about these conditions through the use of subtlety and ambiguity. Pema Tseden (see Ch. 3) is one example. Sonthar Gyal, director of *The Sun Beaten Path*, arguably explores these themes as well.

Cultural studies scholar Hamid Naficy (1994; 2001) extends these ideas about transnational, exilic, and hybrid conditions to assert stylistic and thematic patterns in how they are expressed cinematically. He (1994) considers this "independent transnational cinema," or "accented cinema," as a genre of "texts produced by authorial vision and generic conventions but also as sites for intertextual, cross-cultural, and transnational struggles over meanings and identities" (p. 3). These films "cut across previously defined geographic, national, cultural, cinematic, and meta-cinematic boundaries" (Naficy, 1994, p. 1).

*Dreaming Lhasa* is in many ways an attempt to illustrate different kinds and expressions of identity among exiles in Dharamsala, Jaipur, and Delhi, India that engages well, if unintentionally, with Bhabha's conceptualization of postcolonial identity. The mise-en-scene and locations present constant heterogeneity of cultures (whether Indian, Tibetan, or Western), races, and identities. The search plot stands in for the struggle to find roots and individual and collective selfhood, as navigated by the three protagonists.

Likewise, *The Cup* addresses a cultural and national dislocation. Young Orgyen declares himself to have no roots or home, so he has the nothing to care about besides soccer. The abbot, on the other hand, is initially so rooted to pre-1959 Tibet and a belief in his return that at times he appears nearly possessed in a denial of the realities of recent history. (Figures 2.11 and 2.12)

Identity in dislocation is evident in all the sample films, though certain cases, especially *Hornig: Beat the Dog* and *Milarepa*, do not as readily lend themselves to such

an interpretation. Arguably the darkest and most self-conscious film to explore the subject is director Pema Dhondup's 2004 *We're No Monks: The Struggle for Identity*.[5]



Figure 2.11: Dislocation in the *The Cup*. This discolored image of the Potala Palace is Lhasa appears without context and is a somewhat deceptive insert in *The Cup*…

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[5] The film is titled *We're No Monks* in its opening credits and identified most commonly by this title online and in academic work that references it (see Barnett, 2015). However, the title in its closing credits is *We're No Monks*: *The Struggle for Identity*.

Figure 2.12: …which is immediately followed by a shot of the abbot as he gazes through the window. The prior shot is thus revealed as the abbot's imagined POV. The abbot is trapped in a place elsewhere from where he is, stilted by his liminal condition. Note the image shown in Figure 2.11 is a close-up of the poster in the upper right corner of this composition.

**'Drink Till You're Dead': Identity Crises and Violence in *We're No Monks***

As its shorthand title suggests, *We're No Monks* seeks to confront and oppose nearly all aspects of the Tibetan imaginary. The film gradually engages viewers in a complex web of fissures and contradictions that characterize the lives and identities of four young Tibetan men in exile.

In the opening sequence, a young Tibetan in exile in Dharamsala, Tenzin, the film's foremost protagonist, is shown in an image made to look like the viewfinder of a camcorder. The footage captures Tenzin against a Tibetan flag in the background as he delivers what seems to be a martyrdom video to precede an act of terrorism against the Chinese. (Figure 2.13) His speech is delivered in a combination of Tibetan and English.

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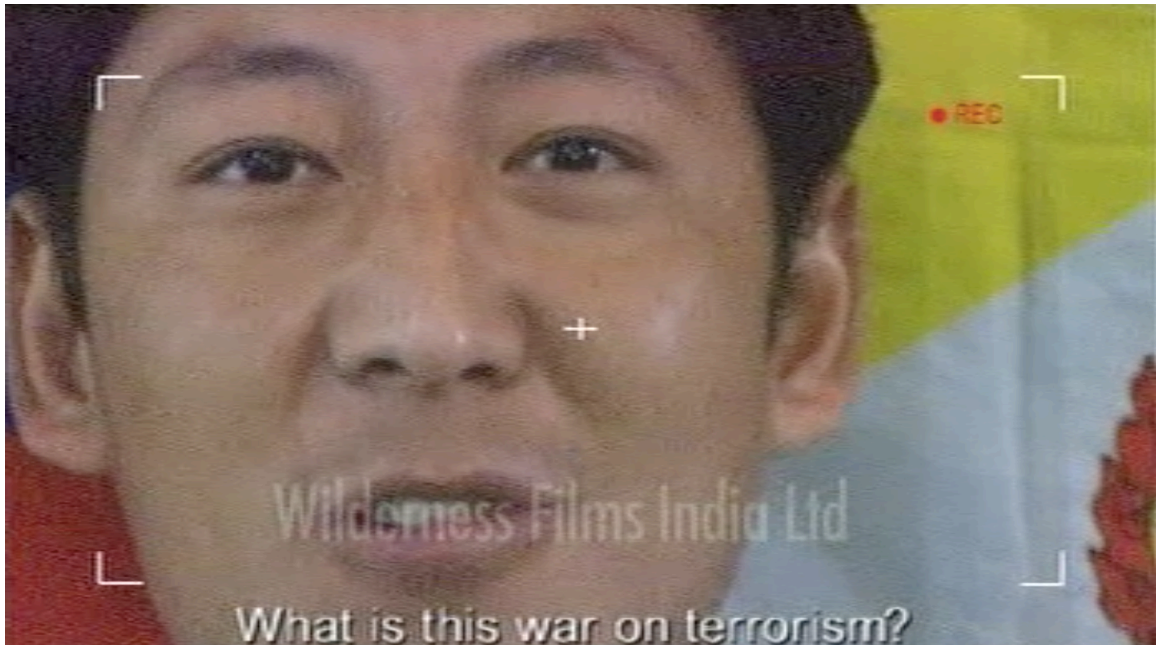
Figure 2.13: Tenzin delivers his martyrdom speech to a camcorder and the viewer. This sentence, as the subtitle indicates, happens to be said in a Tibetan dialect.

The shifts in language occur midsentence and seem to have little correspondence to the meaning of his words, but clearly indicate the different audiences he intends to reach. Notably, he does not address the Chinese—the people of the nation he plans to bomb— but instead appeals to Tibetan nationalism and indicts the West for its inaction despite its power. In abbreviated form, he tells the camera and viewer:

>…Destructions continue even today. What has the world given us? Only empty sympathy. This is a selfish world, my friend, no one cares for anyone…What is this war on terrorism? It's just a pure business on both sides. Poor and ignorant masses always suffer. Rich and powerful have means of escape ready for themselves…Everything in this world is about "I"…Praying for sentient beings is outdated. Nirvana is for self only.

His speech suggests disillusionment with the US, with the structure of world power, and with capitalism in modernity. He then contradicts himself, however, in his ultimate embrace of secular individualism in contrast to Buddhist notions of "no-self."

His words are periodically accompanied by the sound of boat horns in the distance, which are narratively unsubstantiated. Cultural studies scholar Hamid Naficy (1994) notes that representations of place are a central means by which exilic filmmakers turn the ambiguous, contested, and abstract space of their lives into "the concreteness of….place" in cinematic representation. (p. 23) Conflicting and confining liminal space is thus concretized as phobic space, whether agoraphobic or claustrophobic, of paranoia and perceived hostility from foreign and host cultures. Claustrophobic space confines, yet comforts. Agoraphobic space suggests freedom but entails fear. Neither option is satisfactory, and together they constitute a condition of entrapment in exile.

In his 2001 book, Naficy posits a third and alternative type of space that he labels "transitional"—sites such as tunnels, airports, hotels, borders, vehicles, and seaports. The boat horns in *We're No Monks* evoke the movement and perhaps escape from entrapment in Naficy's conception of transitional space. Escape and movement in this case is a transition to death in terrorism. While I certainly do not suggest Naficy advocates terrorist violence, he might consider the act as an alternative to the entrapment of agoraphobic and claustrophobic space.

Thus, the camcorder footage transitions to black for a duration of two minutes and two seconds. During this time, the viewer hears urban noises such as Indian music over the radio dial, car horns, motorcycles, honking, security staff over walkie-talkie, sirens,

an explosion, a baby crying, and so on. The viewer gathers from the sounds that a suicide bomber has attacked the Chinese convoy as it left the Indian President's office. This presentation heightens auditory awareness and arguably the impact of the scene, saves money for the filmmakers, and most important to the narrative, leaves the viewer only to assume that Tenzin, and not someone else, is the bomber. This depiction is simultaneously is in line with Hamid Naficy's (2001) assertion that "if dominant cinema is driven by the hegemony of synchronous sound and a strict alignment of speaker and voice, accented films are counterhegemonic insofar as many of them de-emphasize synchronous sound" and "insist on voiceover and other first person narrations…" (p. 24) *We're No Monks* undoubtedly uses its soundtrack to suggest fragmentation and disorientation in various sequences. In this instance the sounds are technically not necessarily asynchronous but, without visual correspondence, they are disembodied and unsettling nonetheless.

As the sounds fade out, an image of a corner in Dharamsala at night fades in. The light is low key and creates small pools in the dirt road. (Figure 2.14) An ominous drone accompanies the image as, in the manner described by Naficy, a voice emerges, with no clear correspondence to any character, although it may be Tenzin. It is the bomber after death, and he calmly intones, "I have no physical form now. No man- made border matters to me. But, strangely, I have come back to where it all began." This is where the story proper begins, he informs us. The setting of the film is thus in a place that is vaguely chimeric—not quite real or unreal. It is a space of liminality—the "in-between."

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Throughout the film, Dharamsala at night is derelict. There is garbage in the road and stray black dogs roam around as silhouettes amidst low key red light.



Figure 2.14: The stage is set for the story action to take place in the eerie realm of liminal Dharamsala.

While the streets of Dharamsala in the daytime appear less mysterious and use natural light, they present a pastiche of cultural, technological, traditional, spiritual, and secular influences. In Figure 2.15, a modern-day bus is shown at the center of a dirt intersection. The bus is surrounded by groups of monks in saffron robes intermingled with Tibetans in secular attire. The sign for Western Union bank is highly visible, as well as a "Tibetan Shop." The latter presumably caters to Western tourists and commodifies goods that the Westerner would perceive as traditional. Lung ta prayer squares hang across the roofs, their movement in the wind a symbol of ongoing prayer.

Figure 2.15: Heterogeneity and pastiche in a single image of contemporary Dharamsala.

The plot of *We're No Monks* concerns four young friends and Tibetan men in exile who congregate at the Shiva Café, a bar that does not serve alcohol but is nonetheless considered seedy by many elders. The young people do not seem to possess jobs or a sense of purpose, though they are angst-ridden about their lives. The regulars at the cafe are diverse in race and identity—white tourists, Tibetans, and a few Indians. They sit around, smoke, play folk music, and watch a small television. Notably, the walls are painted with images that signify escape—tropical beaches and rocket ships to space (Figure 2.16).

The main protagonist is Tenzin. He is fascinated by the US, especially Los Angeles, and he often wears an English-language t-shirt that lists the reasons why "beer is better than a woman." He chats with Tibetan girls from New York City at an Internet

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Figure 2.16: Tsering and an anonymous women dance in front of rocket ships and tropical paradises at the Shiva Café despite otherwise droll décor and eerie teal light from the window.

café, where he complains about the crowds, traffic, and noise of Dharamsala, and he starts a flirtation with a young American tourist who wears a "Free Tibet" shirt. At the start of the film, Tenzin is a recent graduate with greater repute than his friends, such that his father disapproves of them. When a robbery is committed at an Indian shop, Tenzin becomes the main target of the corrupt Indian officer Shamsher Singh's extortion, verbal, and physical abuse, though the others are also subjected to it.[6] In one such altercation, a group of monks surround Shamsher Singh as he kicks Tenzin on the ground, but due to their vows, they do not intervene except to hide the key that Shamsher Singh has dropped. The scene draws attention to non-violence as a questionable religious and

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[6] Singh is played by well-known Bollywood actor Gulshan Grover, who participated in the film without compensation, according to the closing acknowledgements.

national policy. Tenzin's complications with the Indian police exacerbate his fragile relationship with his parents, who eventually kick him out and leave him homeless. Tenzin proceeds to descends increasingly toward rootlessness as conflicts of racism, generational difference, gender dynamics in the family, tradition and modernity, the East and the West, and an inability to fully relate to Tibetanness plague him.

Three friends accompany Tenzin in his descent. Pasang, a former political prisoner who was tortured in China, exhibits a stoic, tough, and tight-lipped masculinity that occasionally lapses into physical aggression. When his sister Dawa arrives at the refugee center, molested with an electric prod and tortured in China, his vulnerability becomes more evident as he takes on the role of caretaker. Pasang is unlike the other characters in that he is directly fragmented by traumas of Chinese abuse. In one sequence, while drunk, the audience sees his subjective vision of the murder of his parents, which he never actually witnessed. Tsering, another protagonist, had a wife who left him and his young daughter Minkyi and remarried in the US. Minkyi has a serious illness, but Tsering's former father-in-law disallows him from visiting her; Presumably, the father-in-law perceives Tsering as among a troubled generation of male youth. In one scene, Minkyi's teacher allows Tsering to see her, but he turns away at the sight of his daughter, unable to face his own neglect. Tsering is fractured by his family, his lack of agency, and generational conflict. Damdul is the character that intermittently records with the camcorder and thus diegetically motivates the periodic insertions of footage as seen through the viewfinder. He is deaf and mute, and therefore, like the others, exists at the fringes of society. He seems mild-mannered, kindly, and supportive of his friends, but his

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thoughts and feelings are difficult to interpret in the film. *We're No Monks* uses all four of these characters to explore the various competing and contradictory discourses of identity and culture in exilic Tibet and the resultant volitional malaise that gradually push the characters downward in their society to a point where all of them seem to have nothing to lose and could potentially be the suicide bomber of the opening sequence.

Some of these contradictory discourses are articulated through cuts that emphasize thematic contrast. A long shot of a monastery with prayer flags accompanied by traditional Tibetan music cuts to a pan across Tenzin's bedroom wall, which is covered with secular, consumer-ready images of Hollywood celebrities, a poster that features New York City, and even US dollars. This shot tilts down over Tenzin's sleeping head to capture additional signs of American culture and consumerism on Tenzin's night table. The film next cuts to the adjacent living room of the family home where Tenzin's mother prays and prostrates in traditional attire. The clean white walls of the living room, with minimal and traditional adornment, contrast with the cluttered décor of Tenzin's room, just as the mother's prayer contrasts with Tenzin sleeping late in the room next door. In another instance, director Dhondup cuts from the young protagonists as they drink butter tea around the table to Tenzin's family as they do the same in their home. Each shot shows three figures around a table, but their positions are rotated. The cut draws attention to differences of mise-en-scene and points to a generational gap in attitudes and sensibility. (Figures 2.17 and 2.18). Later in the film, extended sequences are contrasted via crosscutting. As the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama passes in a procession of cars through a crowded street of devotees, Tsering, in a separate location, performs a

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Figure 2.17: From left to right, Damdul, Tsering, and Pasang have butter tea, probably at the Shiva Café. This image cuts to…



Figure 2.18: …tea with Tenzin and his parents. The father's disinterest in the family and the mother's expression of solemn servitude speak volumes.

contemporary Hindi song with a band. The religious horns and instrumentation that accompany the Dalai Lama harshly contrast with the Hindi song.

In this film, the attitudes of older generations constitute yet another force of dislocation and oppression as the protagonists struggle to find roots. The robbery is used as an excuse by Indian authorities and Tibetan elders to scapegoat and harass young Tibetans. As Tenzin's father accuses, "I know all your friends well. McLeod's thieves and junkies are all your friends. Those who robbed that shop are also your friends. Even the theft in our office must be their work." More specifically, however, the film depicts and critiques a strongly patriarchal dynamic in Tenzin's family. Tenzin's father is authoritarian and occasionally physically abusive. In contrast, Tenzin's grandmother and mother are quietly protective and more ambivalent as to Tenzin's youthful proclivities. As Tenzin prepares to depart the house for a night out, his grandmother explains, "If you want to go to the USA you should. Son, at your age we already had a family and lived our life. Please think…Most important thing is, don't forget you are Tibetan." Her speech suggests that she considers Tenzin and his friends to be stuck in a vacuum of apathy and wasted time, but that she cares for him and wants him to "find himself." This is balance by her demand that he maintain his Tibetanness. Likewise, Tenzin's mother is generally protective. When he returns home drunkenly, collapsed on the outside stairs, she cradles his head in her bosom. Yet just moments later in the same scene, a final fight breaks out between Tenzin and his father. When his father demands Tenzin leave, it is his mother and grandmother who physically force him out the door. Tenzin tries to return home the next day, but his mother says through tears and a closed door, "We are all dead

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for you." The collapse of family structure, and consequently lineage, is of course deeply intertwined with discourses on the future of Tibet, as is clear in this film as well as others in the sample. The fragmentation of family is a source of great anxiety and anguish.

Another tension of the Tibetan exilic experience that this film brings to the fore is racism. Most notably, the villainous character of Shamsher Singh is extremely motivated by racism toward Tibetans. Tibetans are a recent minority group within India and highly dependent on India's resources; as such, this film suggests, they present relatively new issues in Indian racial relations. At one point, Tenzin has been imprisoned by Shamsher Singh on trumped up, false charges. When the actual criminal, a Tibetan, is brought to the jail, Tenzin exclaims his innocence. Shamsher Singh responds, "He's one of your breed. It is the same thing." He then attempts to force Tashi, the actual thief, to name Tenzin as an accomplice. Shamsher's racist rhetoric is explained further after he lets Tenzin go free; when another officer asks him why he "let that Tibetan go," Shamsher Singh responds that he does not hate Tibetans; he hates "the direction their youth is going in, but as long as I am here, I won't let drugs enter this area." In a familiar use of racist rhetoric, the new population represents a threat to the purity of the nation and its borders. Interestingly, character angst is generated most directly by the Indian villains, and the onscreen villains are Indian. Only one Chinese antagonist is shown onscreen in a subjective flashback to Pasang's torture, but otherwise events in China are only recounted. Nonetheless, character rage is channeled against the Chinese who have forced them into an "in-between" state without nation or home.

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The sense of homelessness that the characters experience is amplified throughout the film, as in the opening sequence, by many of formal characteristics that Hamid Naficy identifies. One of these is a sense of claustrophobia. In *We're No Monks,* characters experience a sense of entrapment in liminality. Consequently, throughout the film, low key or darkly, artificially colored light is often used to enhance a sense of claustrophobia. Pasang's and Damdul's homes are both usually depicted as dark, heavily partitioned, and cluttered. (Figure 2.19) The soundtrack additionally uses repetitive sounds to create what Naficy calls the "liminal panics" of claustrophobia. In Damdul's home, a ticking clock creates an anxious space, while a hotel radiator is used in the same manner when the characters travel to Delhi.



Figure 2.19: Pasang's home in *We're No Monks* suggests claustrophobia through the use of low key blue light, partions, and clutter.

Likewise, self-reflexivity is employed with relative consistency. Naficy (1994) notes that both autobiography and self-reflexivity tend to "drive the narratives and the tropes through which the [independent transnational] films are thought and structured." (p. 11) *We're No Monks'* narrative is certainly not driven by self-reflexivity, but some of its narrational devices are. One of these is the camcorder viewfinder I have described and shown above. Diegetically, it represents Damdul's point of view, and it imitates home-made camcorder footage in the way the focus, camera movement, and zoom are slightly haphazard and chase the action as it occurs. This device draws attention to the technology of the digital camera as a means of self-representation, but also serves, as a film within the film, to make the viewer aware of the film as a whole and its potential for self-articulation.

Director Dhondup also draws attention to the film as a film through his overtly misleading narration. In the opening sequence, as one instance, the filmmakers strongly suggest that Tenzin is the suicide bomber even though he is not. Likewise, in two sequences, Dhondup films plays in close-ups without establishing shots, such that the viewer does not recognize the actions as stage acting until the camera finally pulls back. (Figures 2.20 and 2.21) These maneuvers effectively jolt the view out of the diegesis. In doing so, the film suggests that it is not only about the articulation of identity but is itself an attempt to articulate identity.

In the end, the narrative resolutions for each character together represent a spectrum of outcomes in the Tibetan male exile's struggle for identity. Tenzin robs a Tibetan shopkeeper by knife and convinces himself that he is capable of terrorism.

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Figure 2.20: A close-up of Pasang against a black background. No establishing shot is
provided until…



Figure 2.21: …an extreme long shot at the end of the scene that reveals the preceding
sequence to be part of a play.

In effect, his family and Shamsher Singh have initiated a self-fulfilling prophecy in which, his identity already precarious, Tenzin has become the person he was accused of being. As he sinks morally, he psychologically unravels too; he is out of touch, nervous, and in constant panic. Ultimately, he finds modest redemption and a stable sense of self by assuming a position of responsibility in the workforce. Tsering reunites with his family. Pasang takes on the same sort of strategic identity as the 14th Dalai Lama by advocating for Tibet internationally with a central message of pacifism. Finally, Damdul, literally and symbolically voiceless amidst exilic conditions, is revealed to be the bomber. Only in death does he gain the voice that the viewer hears in the voicover narration and escape from earthly boundaries.

However, the plot of *We're No Monks* does not convincingly substantiate most of characters' arcs. As a result, the film is most successful as a tragic depiction of the costs, struggles, and difficulties involved in the articulation of a coherent identity given the circumstances. *We're No Monks* does not provide answers as to how to create identity in "Third space" or the "in-between," as Bhabha discusses. After all, the film's final words take the form of a question, as Damdul intones in voiceover: "The word 'I' is very important. Isn't it?"

Very similar characters and themes are explored in comedic form in *Richard Gere is My Hero*, a romantic comedy both lighter in tone and visually brighter than *We're No Monks*. With a stronger Bollywood influence and arguably less serious ambitions, it nonetheless comments on the conditions of young Tibetan exiles. Like *We're No Monks*, it focuses on a group of four young, secular Tibetan men in McLeod Danj, a suburb of

Dharamsala. The characters are again frustrated and purposeless, with vague modern aspirations. Their difficulties in articulation and formation of hybrid identities are most evident in their disenfranchisement. They are unemployed and bored; they steal, fight, lie, and borrow money they cannot pay back. Nearly every man in the film owes money to another. Nyima, the primary protagonist, is frustrated with the Tibetan government-in-exile's cooperation with China, and seems to worship Richard Gere over the Dalai Lama; Gere's face is plastered all over the walls in this film. Nyima's political identity seems to be the direct product of Western celebrity culture. The film itself is dedicated to Richard Gere for his "genuine support for Tibetan cause [sic] and unstinting work for humanity." In this case, distinctions between representations by Self (Tibetans) and Other (the West) do not so much collapse as the latter subsumes the former. Once again, the protagonist is enmeshed in a generational conflict with his more religious father who is a government officer, as with Tenzin's father in *We're No Monks*.

The film culminates in a performance of a drama skit by the central characters in which the female lead, Tenzin, is torn in her love for a supporter of autonomous Tibet and an activist for independent Tibet. Tenzin runs left and right across the stage, her body and feelings torn between two poles by the conflict of national identity, just like the broken men who populate the film. The conventional happy ending may appear to offer closure, but provides little resolution to questions of identity in the "in-between." Both *We're No Monks* and *Richard Gere is My Hero* are excellent examples of how navigation of selfhood in conditions of transnational conflict or exile specifically effect, bruise, and

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fragment masculinities. These disenfranchised male characters, prevalent in the majority of the film sample, are this chapter's final consideration.

### THE REAL DHARMA BUMS: CRISES OF MASCULINITY

Gender is here understood in the context of feminist, queer, and postcolonial theory, in which it is generally concerived of as a socially enacted construction. As Elwood Watson and Marc Edward Shaw (2011) explain, gender is "the repeated process of identity formation—a unique progression to each individual, a forever changeable and always-changing meshwork." (p. 2) Within this framework, however, I argue it is important to keep in mind that "issues of loss, waiting, vulnerability, precariousness, love, hurt, pain and (of course) power are unremitting and affect both men and women but with *unequal* [emphasis added] consequences on gendered identity" (Treacher Kabesh, 2013, p. 27). That is, there are complex interactional and systemic distinctions between masculine and feminine identities and presentations even if they are conceived as non-binary and non-essentialist. The effects of personal and collective dislocation on masculinities are important to examine given that films in the sample are arguably almost entirely focused on the plight of men.[7]

Scholarship indicates that masculine ideals are deeply fractured and fragmented in liminality. The man often experiences "*a psychic* disintergration—the disintegration, that

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[7] One could argue that *Dreaming Lhasa* is an exception as the main protagonist is a woman, but as I have described, she is a surrogate protagonist, and her turmoil is entirely internalized, while those of her male co-protagonists, especially Jigme, are more externalized. The sample is of course limited by access. I am, for instance, aware of, but unable to obtain, a film called *River (Gtsngbo)* (2015) by the director of *The Sun Beaten Path*, Sonthar Gyal; this film reportedly focuses on and is limited to the perspective of a young Tibetan girl, though her experiences pertain largely to a realization of the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of her father and grandfather.

is, of a bound and armoured ego, predicated upon the illusion of coherence and control."
(Silverman, 1992, p. 62). Film theorist and art historian Kaja Silverman's approach, as
her language suggests, is psychoanalytically informed, yet her claim holds beyond that
context and suggest the dissolution of the masculine self. As a more specific example,
Watson and Shaw (2011) point to the transformative and potentially traumatic effects of
the integration and imposition of modern capitalism in its regulation of sexuality and
gender possibilities. "Masculinites," they write, "are closely tied to the economic
circumstances in which they are formed and re-formed." (p. 2) Modern capitalism is
deeply connected to both masculine and feminine self-valuation, often in different ways.

Sociologist Amal Kabesh Treacher (2007) likewise focuses on masculinity in
postcoloniality, but she is primarily concerned with affect and emotion—most especially,
shame and its ramifications. For her, loss of agency, responsibility, and even personhood
accompany the loss of masculine control and power. The result is shame, which in turn
sets in motion a number of other negative emotions and behaviors—humiliation, feelings
of inconsequentiality, the mourning of the past, silence, fear, and hostility, often towards
those with less power or status. Shame is a constant reminder of failed obligations to
others and one's society—an inability to measure up—even when action is attempted
under postcolonial circumstances but fails to make a difference.

Treacher's (2007) assertions build on Homi K. Bhabha's writings in her
conception of agency, personhood in colonialism, and mimicry. She writes, "Shamed as
men….and positioned as irrational, powerless, passive and incapable of authority and of
rule, they are neither subject nor object." (p. 290). This sentiment is resonant with

Bhabha, though he would more likely assert that the person becomes *both* subject and object. In either case, personhood becomes ambivalent. Treacher argues that a lack is formed in mimicry—a failure to fully embody and enact the colonial ideal, as described by Bhabha (1994)—that produces trauma.

Film scholars Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (1993) observe that film theory as a whole has "confidently equated the masculinity of the male subject with activity, voyeurism, sadism, fetishism, and story, and the femininity of the female subject with passivity, exhibitionism, masochism, narcissism, and spectacle." (p. 2) While these theoretical descriptives do perpetuate themselves, I argue that they are not just the product of theory but derive from the films themselves throughout the history of the industry to the present, especially in Classical Hollywood cinema. Notably, these distinctions do not hold for the Tibetan sample of films, in which masculinities might more aptly be characterized by passivity, sadism, masochism, and narcissism. These Tibetan male characters are also self-destructive, desperate, physically and verbally aggressive in an over-compensatory manner, quiet, frustrated, disenfranchised, and impotent (in one case literally). They smoke excessively, drink excessively, hang their heads down, and work very little.

Nyima in *The Sun Beaten Path* is nearly mute and barely functional, only able to walk forward for most of the film. Richard Barnett (2015) uses Nyima as an example to argue quite accurately that he:

> stand[s] for all Tibetan men lost in the wasteland of the new Tibet that is neither
> fully city nor completely countryside, deeply fissured by the changes and the

history that have shaped their lives and split them from their families and their homes. This perception of contemporary Tibetan masculinity—muted, almost tragic men who carry silent burdens of cultural density on their shoulders, with the only possible resolution to their condition being the task of reintegrating with the Tibetan community—is visible in almost all the work of the new Tibetan filmmakers." (Barnett, 144)

Even in the case of nomad films like *Hornig: Beat the Dog*, which appear to actively reinforce Tibetan masculinity and femininity, Barnett (2015) notes that "these men can neither escape their past nor express their dilemmas, and their masculinity remains largely tragic, burdened, and inarticulate." (p. 145). *Hornig*, however, does not follow this pattern. The young male protagonist voices his desires, overcomes conflict, and unites with the women he desires. I consider this to be the only film in the sample that does not depict a supposed failure of masculinity, though it plays out as cultural myth rather than a representation of reality.

Otherwise, the patterns are unmistakable. In *Old Dog*, Gonpo is grown and married, but he is cowardly, drunken, and prideful to a destructive degree. Afraid to go to a hospital with his wife so that their fertility can be examined, Gonpo turns around at the hospital gates. Upon his wife's return from a hospital exam, she tells Gonpo that she is not the problem, yet Gonpo, clearly infertile, still refuses to see a doctor. In *Dreaming Lhasa*, Jigme is bored, frustrated, and dependent on substances and women. In one scene, he punches an Indian man who dances, not inappropriately, with Karma at a club, then substantiates his action with a racist comment about Indians. In *Travellers and*

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*Magicians*, Dondup is stilted and immature, but somewhat more stable in his masculine identity than the other characters I discuss here. Nonetheless, director Khyentse Norbu makes sure to include a resident drunk man on the truck in which the characters travel for most the film. He mumbles and smiles and holds his bottle up, but is essentially nonfunctional.

  *We're No Monks* and *Richard Gere is My Hero* present eight protagonists marked by wounded masculinity. In *We're No Monks*, masculinize conceptions of cowardliness and honor motivate a number of the character interactions and fights. Tsering is compromised by his inability to be a father, or even look at his daughter initially, and to partake in a romantic relationship with a love interest. Pasang perhaps believes himself to be ultra-masculine, but his aggression is destructive and clearly depicted as a sign of past trauma. Tenzin, as mentioned, is literally depicted as an incapacitated grown man nuzzled in his mother's bosom—an image that would traditionally be understood as one of emasculation and regression. (Figure 2.22)

Figure 2.22: An image of Tenzin that suggests a regression to a childhood state in *We're No Monks*.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

This chapter has examined themes that emerged in the films' patterns of narrative and narration in greater detail. The films in the sample by-and-large represent problems of identity in a figurative space torn and fragmented by national and political conflict and cultural and individual instability—a space of contradiction and, for Homi Bhabha, floating signifiers. The "depersonalized, dislocated colonial subject can become an incalculable object, quite literally difficult to place" (Bhabha, 1994, 89). The negotiation of individual, collective, spiritual, cultural, and national identity in liminality is an ongoing, complex process.

While these representations constitute a rather dreary portrait, Dibyesh Anand's (2007) observes, "Challenge to the sovereignty of subjectivity goes along with an assertion of

subjectivity. Resurgence of identity accompanies the deconstruction of identity as constructed and processual." (p. 11-12) Every investigation and deconstruction of identity is part of a process of identity formation. These films, in their exploration of issues of subjectivity and identity are in themselves part of the process of identity navigation.

# Chapter 3

## A Cinema of Presence, Absence, and Resistance: Filmmaker Pema Tseden as Auteur

> Each time the encounter with identity occurs at the point at which something exceeds the frame of the image, it eludes the eye, evacuates the self as site of identity and autonomy and—most important—leaves a resistant trace, a stain of the subject, a sign of resistance.
>
> —Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

> My main motivation behind making films? Well, my friends or other acquaintances and I have all seen many films on Tibet and Tibetan culture. However, most of these films do not portray Tibetan culture, the Tibetan way of life, or value-systems properly. So, all of us feel saddened. We felt that it would be very good to see someone who has lived and experienced that culture himself to make a film representing that real experience.
>
> --Pema Tseden

In one sense, the films of Tibetan screenwriter and director Pema Tseden are documents and representations of his conception of Tibetan culture and values. In another sense, they are representations of the dissolution of that culture in contemporary times. Yet in a third sense, they are a reconstitution of Tibetanness in the act of filmmaking and self-representation. At their most effective, and contradictory, moments, they represent all three possibilities simultaneously. If Tseden's films are concerned with what it is to be Tibetan, they nevertheless actively refuse to clearly define or depict Tibetanness for the viewer. Tseden achieves this through a distinctive cinema of presence and absence—one that relies on formal distance and restraint in order to expose what is seen and heard as much as what is not.

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Pema Tseden has become synonymous among Tibetan intellectuals and film enthusiasts with Tibetan film, New Tibetan Cinema, and the onscreen articulation of the conflicts and construction of Tibetan identity. He returns obsessively to the narratives, narrational strategies, and themes discussed throughout this thesis, but he articulates and expands upon them with his unique point of view distinguished by art film influences and formal meticulousness as well as a constructivist approach to Tibetan identity. His oeuvre therefore provides an ideal case study.

Tseden and his work uniquely lend themselves to auteurist analysis given the discourse that surrounds him and that he himself generates, his highly formalized approach, and consistent themes. He is the director of four of the films in my sample, and therefore accounts for one third of the films considered; this is a result of the manner in which he participates in festival distribution, prestige and auteurist discourse, and strategic transnational networking. He is also often regarded in China and abroad as the first Tibetan filmmaker (Kraicer, 2012; Erickson, 2013), though this is erroneous.[1]

Tseden has written, directed, and cast six narrative features since 2005. These include *The Silent Holy Stone* (2005), *The Search* (2009), *Flares Wafting in 1983* (2009), *Old Dog* (2011), *The Sacred Arrow* (2014), and *Tharlo* (2015). *Flares Wafting in 1983* is in Mandarin and was therefore not eligible for inclusion in my sample. Little English-language information is available about the film, and it is usually excluded from filmographies of Tseden's work. *The Sacred Arrow* is unusual for the director as a period

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[1] Tibet, in these cases, refers to Chinese-occupied Tibet as opposed to the larger area of ethnic Tibet that I refer to throughout this thesis. Still, even if one considers only narrative fiction filmmaking within this area, the first Tibetan feature film was *Longing*, directed by Phagmo Tashi in 1992. (Barnett, 2015)

piece and a fable. Reviewed rather poorly by English-language writers, the film is only sometimes included in Tseden filmographies. His films have won a number of awards in their festival circuits, which usually include China, Europe, the United States, and other, largely East Asian, countries; honors include, among several others, the Grand Prize at Tokyo Filmex, the Golden Rooster Award for Best Director, the Asian New Talent Award at the Shanghai International Film Festival, and the Golden Leopard Award at the Locarno Film Festival.

While he is not widely known in the United States beyond Tibetan scholars and Tibet enthusiasts, he is often considered the founder of the New Tibetan Cinema in China (Smyer Yu, 2014). This term refers industrially to the growth of independent Tibetan-language films made primarily by Amdo Tibetan intellectuals and artists in China, as well as to their content and themes; they are perceived to represent Tibetan customs, traditions, and social issues in China in a manner that counters the state's representation of Tibet's past. The phrase, "New Tibetan Cinema," makes conscious use of the tropes of film scholarship while it subversively reclaims the Chinese state-sanctioned notion of a liberated or "New Tibet" (Smyer Yu, 129). The discourse of the New Tibetan Cinema has emerged among Beijing intellectuals, and thus has as much to do with the relationship of urban Han Chinese audiences to Tibet and its cinema as it does to the films. While it may or may not describe a formidable trend in film output, it is a discourse that Pema Tseden is strongly affiliated with.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Tseden's filmmaking process is its transnational character—the strategic ability of his work, production processes, and

public image to move between cultural, ethnic, and national boundaries, as in the case of Beijing's New Tibetan Cinema. Film critic Steven Erickson (2013) writes, "Pema Tseden has negotiated uncertain geographical, political, and artistic boundaries to find a unique niche" (p. 70). Tseden is from Qinghai, a province of Amdo that borders the Tibetan Autonomous Region to the east. It is historically part of Tibet, and remains a part of it ethnically and culturally. Tseden always shoots his films in Amdo, but conducts his pre- and post-production, as well as marketing work, in Beijing. His resources for pre-production and screening activities derive from global connections, and his audiences are found throughout much of East Asia, Europe, North America, and China (Smyer Yu, 2014). His films lend themselves to interpretation, which is strategic as well as artistic given the diversity of political, religious, and cultural perspectives that his audiences encompass. Anthropologist and occasional co-professor with Tseden, Dan Smyer Yu (2014) writes "that the idea of national cinema no longer stands; the boundary with production capital, creative genres, and the consumer markets of other nations and regions has become porous" (p. 128). One of the many contradictions of Tseden's cinema is that even while it is predicated on the "porousness" of boundaries, the films consistently constitute attempts to seek out representations of a unique Tibetaness in contemporary times.

In an interview with the Trace Foundation (2010), Tseden declares:

I want to create a new system of culture. Films are a medium of the new modern culture…So, be it exhibiting Tibetan culture, or contemporary Tibetan lifestyles,

or traditional Tibetan wisdom, the art of filmmaking should become the basic system of presenting the contemporary culture.

His statement may seem clear and direct, but its meanings are equivocal. He wants to both document and create culture. The quote contains echoes of both cultural essentialism and constructivism. What is this "new system of culture?" Finally, if his intentions are not simply to strategically appeal to the West, which I believe they are not (at least wholly), then why is the modern medium of film the necessary means of presentation of Tibetan culture? After all, he implicitly associates culture with tradition, and as a separate entity from "contemporary Tibetan lifestyle." In order to unravel these enigmas, this chapter will provide a brief biography of the life of Pema Tseden, generally describe his poetics and thematic concerns, and conclude with analyses of the four films in my sample in order to better understand how he negotiates Tibetan identity amidst contemporary pressures.

### FROM HERDER TO AUTEUR: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Pema Tseden was born in 1969 to nomadic herders in the Amdo region (Kraicer, 2012). His Chinese name, which is also commonly used in the media, is Wanma Caidan. He grew up in a village which generally only screened Chinese films, but there was one office in his village that showed foreign films; he remembers that he was most struck by the movies of Charlie Chaplin (Tseden, 2010).

After graduation from university, he applied for a Trace Foundation scholarship to attend the Beijing Film Academy—the only film school in China at the time; the Trace

Foundation is a North American NGO that grants scholarships to Tibetan students and works for the "cultural preservation" of Tibet (Smyer Yu, 2014). Tseden was not wealthy and would not otherwise have been able to attend the Academy. His application was undoubtedly strengthened by the fact that he had already established himself in Amdo as a writer on themes and social issues specific to Tibet; he had written about fifty stories by that time (Tseden, 2010), some of which would become the basis for his films. He attended the Beijing Film Academy from 2002 to 2004, where he made short films; these included a graduation project that continues to circulate and be written about called *The Grassland* (2004). The short is a story of forgiveness that locates Tibetan nomads in a spiritually-infused landscape (Smyer Yu, 2014).

Immediately after graduation, Tseden went on to complete his first feature, *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005). Robert Barnett (2015) considers the film a landmark achievement "as the first effective, self-determined representation of Tibetan culture on film." (p 138) Barnett argues that *The Silent Holy Stones* ushered in a new phase of Tibetan fiction filmmaking as Amdo Tibetans were galvanized to make their own digital films. Tseden apparently felt he still had more to learn as a director and returned to the Beijing Film Academy to specifically study directing. While *The Silent Holy Stones* was regarded as an impressive directorial debut, Pema Tseden's subsequent films after his return to Beijing Film Academy suggest that he developed an increasingly coherent, consistent, and restrained cinematic style there.

*THANGKA* PAINTING IN LIGHT AND SHADOW: THE POETICS OF PEMA TSEDEN

Pema Tseden describes his cinematography and storytelling as a *thangka*, a Tibetan scroll painting on cloth. These richly colored devotional wall-hangings are unique to Tibetan Buddhism. Usually highly intricate and detailed, they most typically portray a boddhisatva or deity positioned on a lotus blossom as their focal point, surrounded by numerous other religious figures on smaller lotus petals. (Figure 3.1)
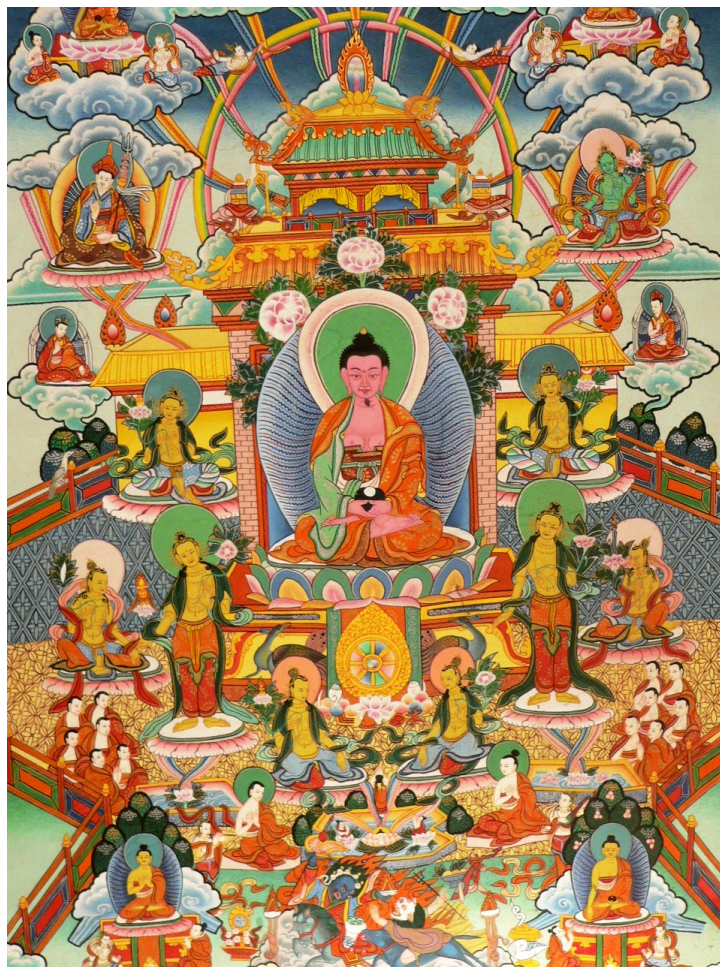


Figure 3.1: A traditional Tibetan thangka painting. (Image retrieved from
https://greatmiddleway.wordpress.com

Mandala patterns are also common in *thangka* painting. "In a thangka, many stories like the life story of the Buddha, can be expressed in one scroll painting, or the human relationship, or the relationship between man and his surroundings, can all be portrayed clearly" (Tseden, 2010). The *thankga* is an apt metaphor and an inspiration for Pema Tseden's formal style as well as its potential implications.

*Thankga*s are meditative artifacts—images contemplated over time by practitioners in the exercise of slow looking and patience. Tseden's films are likewise meditative in their approach. They unfold at a slow pace that demand and cultivate patience. Tseden employs strict attention to visual and narrative formalism. His films are, for the most part, dominated by wide-angle lenses, extreme long shots, and long takes for "maximum inclusion of both cultural and natural ambience" (Smyer Yu, 2014, p. 131) (Figure 3.2). He favors 16, 18, and 25 mm lenses. His takes frequently surpass one minute in duration, and sometimes approach five. Carefully framed, composed, and often static images force the viewer to slowly scan the frame, much like a *thangka*, for the references, meanings, stories, and visual elements it contains and refers to. The compositions become increasingly complex over the course of his career. His later films use mirrors and foreground obstructions, like screen doors and fences, to mediate the audience's position to the characters. The camera most often moves to track moving vehicles; as Steven Erickson (2013) notes, the rarity of close-ups and substantial camera movement lends these devices great narrative and emotional impact. This effect is more prevalent in his films following *The Silent Holy Stones*, which contains more variable shot distances that his later films. The layers of a *thangka* that Pema Tseden refers to are

also contingent on the use of symbols and allusions—stories and references are not painted in full. In the same way, Pema Tseden's work relies heavily on offscreen sound and carefully engineered sound environments that suggest space beyond the frame. Likewise, key narrative moments are elided from the plot. Yet while *thankgas* are self-evident in their rich complexity, Pema Tseden's films may appear austere and minimal, in the fashion of contemporary festival cinema (Erickson, 2013).



Figure 3.2: A panoramic wide-angle shot from *Old Dog* accentuates depth, deep focus, and "natural ambience." The protagonist is framed in extreme long shot with his back to the camera.

Tseden's austerity likely plays a part in the reception of these films as works of "documentary realism" (as in the reactions of Erickson [2013] and Kraicer [2012]). "Documentary realism" is a controversial descriptive in that its stylistic characteristics are socioculturally determined, while the claim to "reality" of film and video content is philosophically tenuous. In this context, Tseden's understated style, whether in the

depiction of Tibetan ritual and celebrations, or everyday contemporary life in Tibet, lends itself to viewer perceptions of authenticity. His penchant for understatement "consciously put[s] his films in deliberate contrast to the exoticizing fiction features about Tibet that have been produced by outsiders, both Chinese and foreign" (Kraicer, 2012, para. 1). The films gather additional credibility as authentic via the discourse circulated about their production; they employ Tibetan dialects, largely Tibetan crews, a non-professional cast (with the exception of the lead actors in his most recent film, *Tharlo*), and are shot in Tseden's homeland of Amdo. Viewer perceptions of realism are central to the cultural and political appeal of these films to his multiple and transnational audiences.

While landscape compositions are often striking in most of the films, Tseden does not provide conventional images of Himalayan peaks and green valleys. His landscape imagery is resistant to notions of grandeur, beauty, majesty, and mystique generated by the Tibetan imaginary. The landscape of Amdo in these films is yellow, gray, and scrubby. The characters are deeply woven into the landscape in a manner that Sheng-mei Ma (2013) considers distinct from those of Western portrayals of landscape; she writes, "Indigenous filmmakers tend not to treat slow pans and landscape shots as 'narrative blanks' silhouetting heroes; rather, native characters are interwoven into the landscape, their stories part of the stories of nature" (p. 3). This treatment of landscape corresponds with the Buddhist principles of no-self and dependent arising, a notion of the interconnectedness of all phenomenon. Indeed, Pema Tseden often frames his characters as small dots upon the landscape. (Figure 3.3) In Tseden's films, landscapes, whether

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natural or man-made, are an expressive extension of the characters, "imbued with religion, spirituality, ethnicity, and culture" (Smyer Yu, 2014, p. 132).
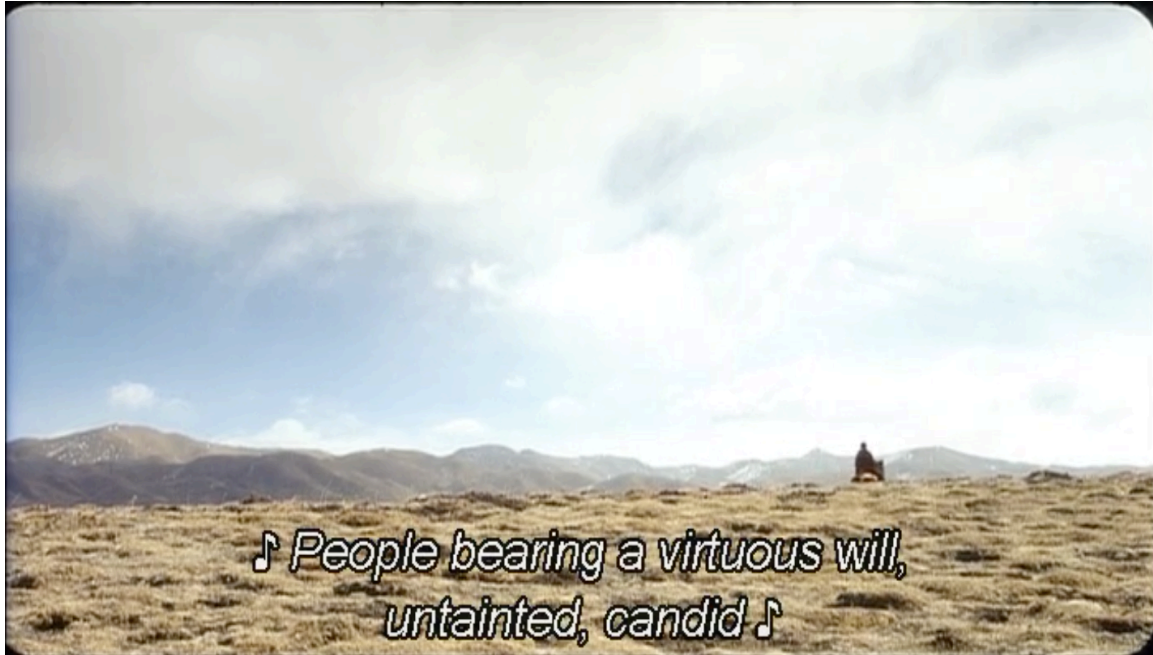


Figure 3.3: Father and son are but a small element of the landscape in *The Silent Holy Stones*.

One final consideration significantly impacts the narrative content of these films. Pema Tseden is an independent filmmaker, in that he does not work for the Chinese state, but he does within the Chinese film industry and is subject to its censorship. He must submit all scripts and films for approval. Thus, his films, with the exception of the character of the Chinese mastiff trader in *Old Dog*, are isolated to Tibetans in Amdo and do not show interaction between Tibetans and non-Tibetan Chinese citizens. Robert Barnett (2015) notes that:

> no representation of modern city life could easily avoid suggesting tension
> between Tibetans and their Chinese fellow citizens—and, technically at least, it is

a political problem in China, if not a crime, to show or suggest lack of harmony

among nationalities (Barnett, 140).[2]

Tseden, however, makes a virtue of censorship. His films critique the imposition of Chinese industrialization and infrastructure in Tibet, but he articulates his opposition through the tradition-modernity dyad as well as through heavily allegorical narratives.

Tseden's thematic and allegorical concerns are decidedly consistent. As with most of the Tibetan films I have discussed, his films deal with "tension, negotiation, breakthrough, breakdown, elation, and transcendence" in a Tibet marked by outside forces of change (Smyer Yu, 2014, p. 129). They are, as such, about the negotiation of identity in transnational and conflicted space. Within this context, Tseden is most consistently interested in how contemporary Tibetans navigate tradition, modernity, and Tibetan Buddhism. Tseden's emphasis on self-representation, enactment of folk traditions, and cultural performativity feature heavily in the chronological analysis of three of his films that follows.

## DEATH OF THE *MANI* CARVER: *THE SILENT HOLY STONES* (2005)

According Pema Tseden, *The Silent Holy Stones* is inspired by experiences from his childhood. He claims that it is "almost all real." (Tseden, 2010) As mentioned in Chapter 2, its plot is comparable to *The Cup*. A nameless young monk-in-training goes to visit his family for Losar, the Tibetan New Year celebration. He becomes more enamored with his family's new television and a particular show about the religious figure of

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[2] This is likewise an issue for other filmmakers in Chinese-occupied Tibet who distribute through official avenues, but not for the majority of filmmakers I consider in this thesis.

Tansen Lama than with the traditional Buddhist activities of Losar. Specifically, the community puts on a performance of the opera *Prince Drime Kunden*, the story of a bodhisattva who gives up everything he has, including his family and his eyes, out of kindness. In the last portion of the film, the boy monk convinces his family to let him temporarily take the television back to the monastic community so he can show the Tansen Lama series to his teacher, Aka. All the young monks in the boy's monastic community are captivated by the television show, but the boy's father soon has to take the DVDs and television back to his village. Disappointed, the monk asks to keep the DVD box, then races off to the Monlam ceremony he is late for. Unlike *The Cup, The Silent Holy Stones* does not have a Hollywood-friendly narrative. It is a minimally plotted film with almost no stakes, various digressions that support the film's themes yet seem to follow the random ebb and flow of life rather than narrative cinema, and a lack of any kind of clear resolution.

While Tseden maintains an emphasis on long takes, tableau staging, and art cinema conventions, the film is stylistically distinctive within his oeuvre. Most notably, he more frequently cuts into medium and long shots of his characters. He still prefers the wide-angle lens when he does so, such that faces sometimes appear slightly distorted. (Figure 3.4) *The Silent Holy Stones* is also distinct from his later work in that it was shot on film. The colors are more saturated and the mise-en-scene is filled with traditional and colorful décor. As a result, the film feels less bleak, slightly more intimate, and lighter than Tseden's subsequent films. While perhaps the result of a directorial style still in

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process, in this case, these features are appropriate to the film's story of a playfully capricious young boy and his siblings.



Figure 3.4: A slightly distorted medium close-up of the young monk's father in *The Silent Holy Stones*. He also looks directly into the camera in opposition to Hollywood norms.

Tseden's use of the opera, *Prince Drime Kunden,* is central to this film's negotiation of Tibeteness and cultural performativity. The opera is a religious parable written in the 13th century and still widely performed in villages and towns, as well as among nomads (Smyer Yu, 2014). It is one of eight national operas of Tibet, and thus a symbol of culture, nation, and religion. The play accounts for such a long portion of the running time that it acts as a story within the frame story.[3] At the same time, Tseden constantly draws the viewer out of the nested story. For instance, the performance is

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[3] Dan Smyer Yu (2014) writes that it accounts for approximately twenty-five minutes of screen time, though I suspect this to be an overestimate that includes plot occurrences synchronous with but not directly related to the performance.

constantly interrupted, as when the young monk boldly stops the show to ask his older brother, the actor in the role of Drime Kunden, for money to see a movie. More significantly, however, the viewer is shown a full eight minutes of a rehearsal prior to the actual show; the scenes enacted, first in everyday contemporary dress and later in colorful traditional costume, are largely the same ones. Thus, the viewer is made extremely conscious of the act of cultural performance (Figure 3.5 and 3.6). The opera is at once a recourse to an essential culture derived from the past and an ongoing means by which to articulate one's self and culture in the present.

As the use of *Prince Drime Kunden* suggests, traditional culture is deeply bound to Tibetan Buddhism in this film. The opening credits prominently acknowledge a Religious Consultant. From the music to the monastic settings to the village décor and ritual, the film is steeped in religion. Aka, the monk under whom the protagonist trains, has been waiting ten years for the Year of the Sheep to occur again so that he may prostrate to Lhasa. The young monk and his grandfather sacrifice a sheep on a mountaintop for Losar, in order to free it from the cycle of endless rebirth. While the grandfather is kind-hearted and permissive of new technology and change, he is himself deeply religious. As he brings the young monk to the family stable to feed the sheep and goats, he imparts, "People and livestock are the same, except for our acquired merit." He refers, in his comment, to karma and the cycle of endless rebirth and suffering known as samsara.

The title of the film is itself a religious reference; a more accurate translation would be *The Silent Mani Stones*, by which the film is rarely but occasionally referenced

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Figure 3.5: An extended rehearsal sequence for *Prince Drime Kunden*. In this scene, three Brahmins ask the prince to relinquish his three children to them.



Figure 3.6: The formal performance of *Prince Drime Kunden*. A blind character asks for Prince Drime Kunden's eyes in this scene.

by English-language sources. *Mani* stones are flat rocks into which syllables of the Heart Sutra are carved. In this film, the young monk's uncle, Zoba, is an elderly *mani* carver who resides in the plains, abandoned by his son—another representation of generational concern. The monk and his father visit Zoba on their way to the family village and intend to do so again on their return, only to learn that Zoba has passed away. As a shepherd remarks, "This fleeting life is like a gust-beaten butter lamp. I'm in good health today. Tomorrow, who knows?" In Buddhism, all entities are ephemeral.

When the boy monk and his father return to Zoba's tent to offer condolences, the boy kneels and begins to recite prayer. As he does so, the film cuts to a gusty landscape that is dreary and desolate. The composition features a structure erected from colorful prayer cloth, which flaps loudly on the soundtrack. According to Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the movement of these fabrics in the wind and elements signify symbolic prayer and Tibetan awareness of the Dharma. The echoes of the monk's prayer accompany the movements of the fabric. The landscape thus becomes an active and emotive presence, a common feature of Tseden's landscapes, through spiritual animation. Even so, the effect is far from that of the ever-spiritualized, transcendent terrain of the Tibetan imaginary (Figure 3.7). Religion, and with it tradition, is associated with the older generation, but permeates Tibetan society and landscape to a greater extent than in any of Pema Tseden's later films.

If Tibetan Buddhism entails an acceptance of ephemerality and change, then the film applies that same acceptance, however elegiac, to modernity. Modernity is represented in the context of this film by technology, media, mass production, capitalist
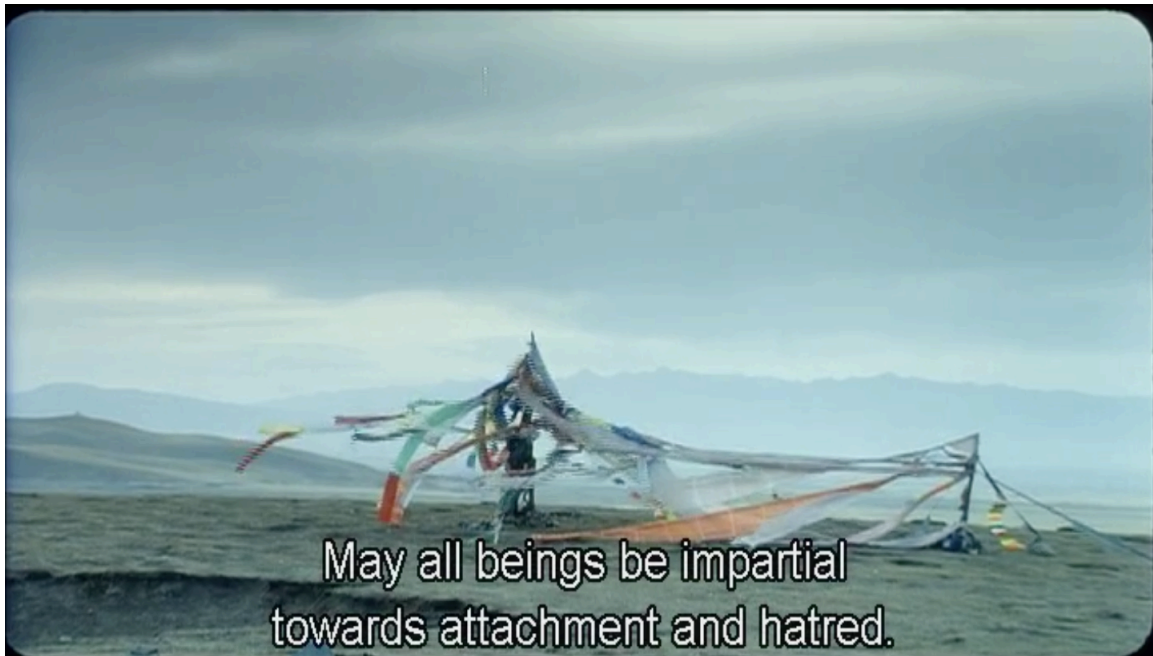
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Figure 3.7: Visual elements and sound combine to animate the landscape with a gloomy spirituality.

consumption, and Chinese efforts at urbanization. The boy monk has seen the story of Prince Drime Kunden many times in his village and is bored by it, yet he jumps at the opportunity to watch it on television. As he and his friend, a young tulku, fast-forward to the "good parts," the VCR image skips forward discontinuously. As a result of the technology, the characters on the television appear to teleport from one portion of the screen to another as if by special effects. The boys laugh ecstatically at the seemingly magical potential of the VCR and television technology.

The modernization in Amdo is explicitly linked to China. The protagonist at one point asks to see his younger brother's school textbook. He examines the lessons in Chinese, which are foreign to him. Then he tells his brother that he should learn to read Tibetan because it allows you to "read many scriptures," to which the brother responds,

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"I don't want to read those. I want to be in the city in the future." In another sequence, Tseden takes comical aim at capitalism and mass production. The protagonist, who has just interrupted the performance of *Prince Drime Kunden* to ask for money, runs off with his younger brother and sister; his sister is an actress in the play, but seems overly confident that she does not need to be onstage again for some time. They spend the money first at a "theater"—a small, crowded room with a tiny television—but decide that the Hong Kong action film is terrible and demand their money back. Instead, they spend it at a vending cart that sells cheap commercial products and candy. These purchases include a snack called "Tansen Lama meat"—a shameless commercialization of a religious figure—and a shiny plastic monkey mask that the young monk associates with the television show he loves.

Visual juxtapositions of the traditional/religious and the modern are plentiful. As the rehearsal ends, the cast members break out of their traditional character roles, hop on a trio of motorcycles, and depart. A recurrent composition of the entrance to the boy monk's home includes a prayer flag in the right foreground and a satellite dish atop the roof to the left of the frame (Figure 3.8). A "disco" dance, as well as a fistfight, breaks out among the young people at the intermission of *Prince Drime Kunden*. A horse treks through Tibetan terrain with a giant television as its cargo. The shots of seemingly remote landscape are carefully composed so that electric lines or towers cross them, however subtly, in nearly every instance. (Figure 3.9)

As in the sequence of prayer over the death of Uncle Zoba, the soundtrack is carefully crafted in a patterned manner so as to quietly suggest an authorial commentary

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Figure 3.8: A recurrent exterior composition of the family home features a prayer flag in the right foreground and a satellite dish in the upper left background.



Figure 3.9: The young monk's prayer on mountaintop carries across prayer flags and an electric tower in the far distance in an incongruous juxtaposition.

that is otherwise restrained and subtle enough to seem nonexistent. In particular, at moments when the monks become swept up in what the film defines as modern culture, Tseden cuts to a shot or series of shots in discontinuous space, though presumably details of the exterior architecture and Buddhist ornamentation of the monastic complex. The sound elements from the previous shot fades out as quiet bells and chimes replace them. The most obvious instance is when several monks are depicted packed into a room to watch television. The show's electronic, futuristic credit music dominates the soundtrack but abruptly fades out in a sudden, narratively unmotivated montage of exterior shots accompanied by chimes and wind (Figure 3.10). The montage ends with a cut back to the monks in front of the television in an identical composition to the earlier one. The dislocated shots, in their calmness, are juxtaposed against television, pop songs, and so on to suggest what might be lost, especially from a Buddhist perspective, in modernity.

In the end, *The Silent Holy Stones* refuses to offer clear resolutions to its thematic quandaries, or even to explicitly identify them as a quandary at all. Robert Barnett (2015) writes that *The Silent Holy Stones* uses "the videocassette and the television drama to present the modernity-tradition and urban-rural dyads as encounters rather than conflicts, ones in which the Tibetan subject consumes modern Chinese mass culture without being destroyed by it." (p. 149). While the comparative lightness in tone to which I referred earlier may lead some viewers to interpret the film as such, a close reading does not legitimate such optimism. While these characters are not destroyed in any literal sense, Tibetan Buddhist principles, tradition, and identity are compromised by modernity. These factors are not so much presented in coexistence as in opposition and sometimes conflict.

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Uncle Zoba is only able to partially carve a *mani* stone for the young monk before his death, which suggests that the monk has been bequeathed a partial, perhaps unintelligible spiritual legacy. As one character remarks after the death of Zoba, "There won't be another *mani* carver now." The end of the line appears to be a very real concern for Tseden in *The Silent Holy Stones*.



Figure 3.10: A quiet cutaway to monastic sculpture of deer and the dharma wheel accompanied by bells and chimes. This shot is part of a montage that occurs while the monks crowd inside to watch television.

**IN PURSUIT OF A FACE: *THE SEARCH* (2009)**

Toward the end of *The Silent Holy Stones*, Aka tells the little monk that he should accompany him on his pilgrimage to Lhasa. Pema Tseden's next film was intended to follow that journey in a sequel of sorts. However, Chinese authorities refused to authorize the script. Robert Barnett (2014) contends that this refusal became the inspiration for *The*

*Search*—a film about the hardships of the production of a Tibetan film and an exercise in representation through omission. Deeply allegorical and self-reflexive in its treatment of Tibetan culture, identity, and politics, *The Search* is, indeed, a film that makes a virtue of censorship. *The Search* is also based on Pema Tseden's experiences as he sought the right opera actors for the *Prince Drime Kunden* sequences in the production of *The Silent Holy Stones* (Smyer Yu, 2014).

The plot follows a film crew constituted by a director, a cinematographer, and a businessman/producer, all unnamed, who travel by car among villages and towns in the countryside of Amdo. They are in search of lead actors for their upcoming film, which is to be an adaptation of *Prince Drime Kunden*. Their goal is to find actors for the roles of the prince and his wife, Mande Zangmo. They find a performer named Drobe for the role of Mande Zangmo relatively quickly. Drobe wears a pink scarf over much of her face and refuses to be seen without it. She used to perform as Mande Zangmo with her ex-boyfriend, Kathub, in the role of Drime Kunden. Kathub has left her for someone else. Since the crew eventually aims to track down Kathub for an audition, she agrees to participate only on the condition that the crew takes her with them to Kathub, who now teaches in a distant town. Despite this structure, the film intentionally feels digressive and aimless. One line of continuity comes from the businessman's story, gradually verbalized over the course of the film, of a lost love who he pledged to marry only to find that she had married someone else.

The crew eventually meets Kathub and decides to cast him. However, Drobe has been somehow moved by the producer's love story, so that when she reunites with

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Kathub, she is impelled to run off. Kathub follows, but she boards a bus and throws the scarf, apparently a gift from him, out the window. She has no use for it anymore, she tells him. Thus, the performers disperse and the crew keeps driving. In the final line of the film, the director admits, "We came all this way here. I gave it a lot of thought. Now I do not feel sure about the role of Drime Kunden. I do not even know what kind of person should play this role."

In some ways, the film treads similar thematic ground to *The Silent Holy Stones* in its use of *Prince Drime Kunden* as an emblem for Tibetanness and as a means to consider tradition and modernity in contemporary Tibet. The tradition-modernity dyad is central, as it is to all the films in the sample. What is especially striking in this film, however, are the representations of the devaluation, lack of knowledge, and loss of memory in regard to the national opera. Kathub Tashi works in a more "developed" town than the small village where he and Drobe are from. In the past, he has always returned to the village to perform the Drime Kunden role for Losar, but this year he has no such plans. This represents Kathub's inability to recognize his own culture's fragility rather than a cultural disregard. The villagers and diegetic filmmakers know that if he does not return, the village will not be able to put on the performance, but Kathub does not accept this. He is akin to Zoba in *The Silent Holy Stones* in that the death of the *mani* carver signifies an end to the *mani* stones. The cultural preservationists are a disappearing breed in Tseden's films. On the whole, the crew finds that the people they encounter are not familiar with Tibetan poetry and cannot remember the opera. In a shot of a rehearsal that lasts just over five minutes, the actors continually forget their lines or break into laughter. At the end of

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the take, the camera slowly pans left to settle on Drobe, a symbol of true Tibetanness as we will see, as she looks on, her expression concealed by her scarf.

In the largest town (comparably more modern in its infrastructures and perhaps more accurately characterized as a small city) the crew encounters a drunken club singer who sings pop tunes—the archetypal disenfranchised male. He explains that if he were offered the role of Drime Kunden he would refuse it. He elaborates, "Drime Kunden offered his own two eyes to others. That is his choice. Has nothing to do with us. However, why did he have to give his wife and children? Where did he get the right to do that? Who gave him that right?" The implication is that Tibetan values have fundamentally shifted in the contemporary world and may not be reconcilable with the more traditional cultural values. His remarks are also interesting because they likely resonant differently with different segments of Tseden's audience. Many Western viewers may in fact identify strongly with the drunkard's assessment, and in turn, self-consciously consider complications of cultural relativism.

*The Search*'s cinematic style is somewhat distinct from and more ambitious than that of *The Silent Holy Stones*. Pema Tseden had at this point completed a second program at the Beijing Film Academy in directing, and his directorial style is notably more consistent and restrained than in his previous film. Tseden had become enamored with the work of Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, his "creative idol" (Symer Yu, 2014), and that influence is especially apparent narratively, conceptually, and stylistically in this film. Wide-angle lenses, long takes, and composition in extreme long shot are more extreme and methodically employed. As the lens captures towns, villages, and

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landscapes from the perspective of the car interior, the film becomes a journey across the terrain of Tibet for both audiences and characters, whose individual psychologies are opaque yet embodied indirectly in the external surroundings. The soundtrack is orchestrated to emphasize contrasts and contradictions in amidst this terrain. Quiet bells again accompany exterior shots of a small Tibetan village, while a dense mix of loud noises and a dislocated "Hello Moto" mobile announcement mark the crew's arrival in a small city.

The result of this style may strike viewers as distanced from the characters. Indeed, the film is more of an intellectual than an emotional exercise. The viewer may have sometimes be unable to distinguish one member of the crew from another in the extreme long shots, which suggest that the individual characters are not the primary locus of attention. The viewer is instead conditioned to look for allegorical and social implications rather than to seek to understand particular characters. The narrational strategies similarly distance the viewer from involvement in dramatic intricacies; Tseden relies heavily on elision and restricted story knowledge. Dialogues that might be central in a Classical Hollywood film often go unheard by the viewer, shown deep in the background or obstructed by walls. For instance, in what might have been the climactic meeting of Drobe and Kathub near the film's end, the two face each other in the distant background. The viewer cannot distinguish their expressions, dialogue, or even most of their gestures. In the left foreground, schoolchildren dance as music blares, and the film crew wait by their car in the right midground. The shot lingers for approximately two and a half minutes, at the end of which Drobe walks forward to converse briefly with the

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director, then walks off screen right. Kathub subsequently does the same. The viewer

hears no dialogue, and never discovers what was said in the encounter (Figure 3.11).



Figure 3.11: Schoolchildren to the left, the film crew around the jeep to the right, and the barely visible and unheard Drobe and Kathub in the far background, slightly off-center to the right. Drobe is in black with her pink scarf while Kathub can be identified by his white sweater.

Tseden's style is complimented by self-reflexivity. Self-referentiality encourages

the viewer to become increasingly aware of their position as a viewer of a film.

Consequently, a film's reflexivity distances audiences and encourages intellectual rather

than purely emotional reaction. There are obvious reflexive elements inherent in a film

about the production of a film, especially a Tibetan one, but Tseden plays on this in ways

both subtle and obvious. Several of the cast members are actually filmmakers or involved

in the filmmaking process in Tibet. Manla Kyab, who portrays the director, is a

screenwriter, like Pema Tseden. Film director Rigdan Gaytso plays the cameraman. As in

*We're No Monks*, his character in the film often records encounters with a digital camera within the frame of cinematographer Sonthar Gyal's own digital camera. The character's footage represents a form of documentation of Tibetaness, and is, revealingly, never seen by the viewer. When the crew meets Kathub Tashi, they interview him about the character of Drime Kunden. The cinematographer, director, and producer are seen from the perspective of Kathub; they are staged in a line and seem to interrogate both the character and the viewer as to the essence of Drime Kunden. (Figure 3.12) Perhaps the most telling example, however, is when a village leader provides a photograph of Drobe to the director but explains that he himself cannot look at it; "That and the person are two different things." His words suggest the inability to capture the essence of a subject by photographic technology and mechanical reproduction. In other words, he suggests that *The Search* itself may be a futile effort to capture Tibetaness in a medium in which the subject can only be partially represented as "a stain of the subject." (Bhabha, 1994)

The film's form and reflexivity, and in particular, the distance it places between characters and even story details, demands viewer interpretation and allegorical reading. *The Search* employs both search and road narrative structures. These structures focus on the process, journey, and transformation, unrelated to externalized goals, obstacles, and stakes. In a search plot, the character journey arc usually involves a physical journey in pursuit of an intangible entity. The road film is a literalized iteration of the search that draws upon the connotations of Western road movies.

Figure 3.12: From left to right, the producer, an anonymous bystander, the director, and the cinematography interrogate both Kathub and the audience.

These characteristics describe *The Search* well, but whereas films like *Dreaming Lhasa*'s broader implications about identity among Tibetans emerge indirectly through the psychologized internal journeys of the protagonists, *The Search* is not terribly concerned with its characters as individuals. The crew's journey is instead an abstracted, collective search—the aimless quest of a generalized Tibetan people to find Tibetaness. Both Dan Smyer Yu (2014) and Robert Barnett (2015) identify Drobe as the embodiment of a Tibetan essence. She may also reinforce the traditional linkage between nation and woman. Yet Drobe is mysterious, almost silent, her ultimate intentions ambiguous, and her face never revealed to the viewer or the film crew. In the end, she takes a bus to an unrevealed destination. Her presence is perpetually evasive. Robert Barnett (2015) writes, "If the veiled girl is Tibetan culture, and the search is for its essence, what survives the

labyrinth of modernity are traces of signs of culture…The essence of Tibetan culture, its content, is never shown." (p. 147) In one sequence, the crew encounters a man named Akhu Khalo, known by villagers as the living Drime Kunden for all of his acts of giving.[4] For Pema Tseden, as we have seen, Drime Kunden, and by extension Akhu Khalo, represent the essence of Tibetaness. Thus, Akhu Khalo only appears in one long take in which he shares his story, his back to the audience. Again, the viewer is not permitted visual access to an ideal embodiment of Tibet (Figure 3.13).
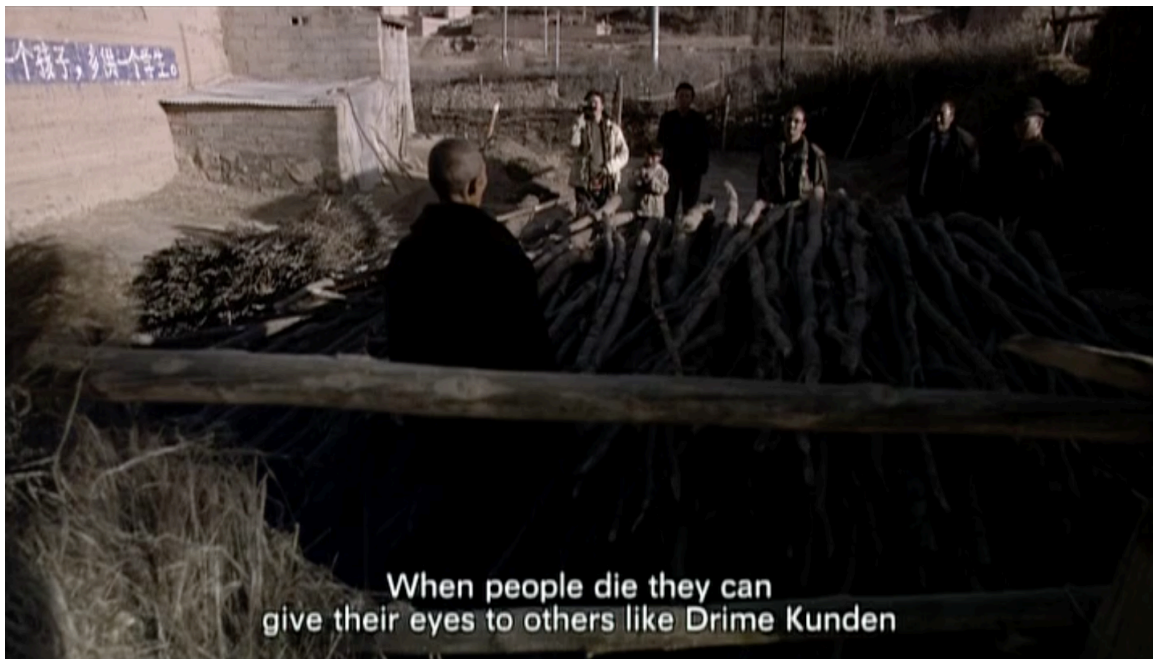


Figure 3.13: Akhu Khalo, billed as the living Drime Kunden, has his back to the camera as he tells his story to the film crew. Once again, the face of Tibet, if it exists at all, eludes the viewer.

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[4] This man was encountered by chance by Pema Tseden's film crew during production. He tells the actual story in the film of how, with his wife's consent, he divorced her so that she could marry a younger blind man upon the death of that man's wife.

The function of the parallel love stories—that of the producer and that of Drobe—is more ambiguous. Drobe's interest in the producer's story is clear. As they ride in the car, the film cuts from the producer to linger for a minute and a half on Drobe in the back seat. The producer continues to tell his story off-screen, as Drobe leans against the window. The moving landscape reflected in the glass simultaneously reflects her other inaccessible interior development. (Figure 3.14) The producer's story may be one of lost love, but it is also about resilience and how one ought not become caught up in the belief of a singular past or future—in the idea one is destined for only one person. The significance of love in the film is further clarified in an interaction between the producer and drunkard. The latter scoffs, "Love! In these times, do you still think that love exists?" The producer responds, "If you do not even believe that! Does it matter if we exist in this world or not?" Love, in this interaction, is implicitly associated with tradition, hope, meaning, and, by extension of these concepts in the context of Pema Tseden's worldview, Tibetan identity. Modernity, in turn, is associated with nihilism.

The producer's story, in combination with the interaction at the club, suggests that attachment to ephemeral events and feelings of the past leads to the floundering of culture. Given that Pema Tseden is so interested in representations of traditional Tibet through cultural performance, especially in this film and its predecessor, this sentiment may seem counterintuitive. Yet Tseden's films sometimes appear contradictory; to conclude that these ritual performances *are* the cultural past or that modernity is rejected in these films would be a mistake. Indeed, the storytelling of the producer is a contemporary iteration of a traditional form of cultural performance in modern times, and

as such articulates Tibetan culture in process. If love is identified with Tibetan identity as asserted above, then the producer's story suggests that there is no singular identity, but many possibilities.



Figure 3.14: A long take of Drobe as she and the viewer hear the producer's story from the front seat. This is an unusual reaction shot that is characteristic of Tseden's films in that the character's face remains nearly static but the landscape in reflection registers her reaction.

In other words, love is used to thematically suggest a constructivist approach to Tibetan identity. As Robert Barnett (2015) asserts, "Just as the businessman's love story had implied, it is the search, the journey, the inconclusive encounters among Tibetans and the questions that they ask each other that remain the core-constituents of culture, not the answers that they wait for." (p. 148). Culture and identity are always in process. In different words, Smyer Yu (2014) writes:

On their road trip the filmmakers in *The Search* find a living exemplar of Prince

Drime Kunden, rich memories of older opera performers, the best actress, and the

most ideal actor though they all scatter to different villages and towns…The opera

*Prince Drime Kunden* resides in every character in the film not in whole but in

part, e.g., a piece of memory, a verse from the opera, or a contending expression

toward the spiritual deeds of Prince Drime Kunden (p. 138).


## THE END OF THE CHAIN: *OLD DOG* (2011)

*Old Dog* stands out as the angriest, moodiest, and dreariest film of the three Pema

Tseden works. He dispenses with much of the self-reflexivity of the *The Search*, and

while the plot is lightly allegorical, it may be taken at face value with much the same

effect. While its style is consistent with his previous films, especially *The Search*, he

more actively involves the viewer with the characters and their relationships.

The film tells the story of a family of sheepherders and their mastiff dog in Amdo.

They live in a small country home several miles outside of a large town. The primary

source of tension is the fact that mastiffs, traditional Tibetan herding dogs, have become a

popular possession among the wealthy urban Chinese classes. They are increasingly

valuable and are frequently bought or stolen from herders. These external factors put

ever-mounting pressures on the family as to what to do with the dog. The family is made

up of Akhu Drakpa, an old man who refuses to part with his mastiff for any price, his

daughter Riksu, and her husband Gonpo, a drunken and sometimes cowardly son-in-law

who represents the disenfranchised and emasculated male archetype. In the opening

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scenes, Gonpo goes to town to sell the dog to a Chinese trader without the knowledge of Akhu Drakpa. Akhu, in turn, buys the dog back the next day. Much of the conflict is between father and son, and resolves itself subtly but conventionally through Gonpo's transformation, redemption, and reconciliation with Akhu. A secondary, also allegorical plotline, involves Gonpo's infertility and shame. The film ends when Akhu is driven to abruptly hang his beloved dog, though the fate of his broken family is left unknown.

Tseden's formal style remains consistent and identifiable, though the expressive and careful compositions in *Old Dog* are especially striking. Compositional richness is achieved through depth, doorways and frames, segmented interior space, and obstructions like glass walls, windows, and fences in the foreground between viewer and characters. These compositional devices isolate the characters within enclosed portions of the composition and, especially in the case of foreground obstructions, suggest the entrapment of the characters and elicit viewer discomfort (Figure 3.15). He also employs shots of particular locations repeatedly to create patterns of repetition with variation: the effect is to suggest change over time or similarities between characters. (Figure 3.16 and Figure 3.17). Sound is notably effective in the evocation of off-screen environments, which is essential to the strong sense of distinct spaces that the film creates—namely that of pastoral fields and the grimy town in contrast. Finally, as in *The Search*, omission and elision of central story elements and action are central to the narration. Gonpo's primary act of redemption is to forcefully rescue the dog—an effort that results in his detainment for fifteen days—yet the viewer only learns of his heroics after they occur via the report of a policeman. Tseden's films thus continue to evade mainstream narrational convention

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in favor of international art cinema tropes. Additionally, they allow the film to maintain an elegiac and perhaps Buddhist tone in that the plot skips overly highly kinetic, emotional, or suspenseful action in order to maintain a calm, consistently level emotional tone in which no sequence (with the exception of the violent final sequence) dramatically stands apart from any other sequence. The elisions also reinforce Tseden's belief in the play of presence and absence within image and narrative.



Figure 3.15: A glass doorway forms a foreground obstruction to a meeting between Akhu and his cousin, Dorje, over tea.

Figure 3.16: Riksu looks out from her front door onto the landscape and Gonpos's motorcycle as she contemplates the predicament of her drunken husband.



Figure 3.17: Akhu looks out from his front door onto the landscape, his beloved mastiff in place of Gonpo's motorcycle, as he contemplates his family lineage.

While traditional Tibetan culture and identity in modernity are once again at the film's core, Tibetan Buddhism no longer plays an explicit role in the narrative. Akhu appears to be a person of faith, with prayer beads or hand wheels often in hand, but these characters, especially Gonpo, are already too dejected and alienated from one another by conditions of hybridity to be primarily concerned with Tibetan Buddhism. Instead, Tibetan culture and daily life are embodied in the symbol of the Tibetan mastiff, while modernity is signified by the capitalist consumption, commercialization, and degradation of the mastiff and of Tibetan culture.

This opposition is visually and sonically presented namely through the juxtaposition of town, country, and the road between them by which characters travel back and forth. The town is clearly associated with Chinese modernization; while the only ethnically Chinese character is a mastiff trader, the Chinese presence is evident indirectly whether through the construction sites that line the street, Chinese-language signage and posters, flags, and the like. The soundscape in the town is densely layered with loud motorcycle and truck sounds, radio commentary and music, and the cacophony of construction. In one scene, Gonpo stares sadly at goats in the street as they play with a trash bag, accompanied by a diegetic pop song. In short, the town is portrayed bleakly. Wide muddy streets teem with animals and garbage, yet mostly devoid of people. The skies are always gray, the buildings blandly uniform, and the colors muted. (Figure 3.18) Through a moody evocation of place, Tseden implies that the town has been destroyed by Chinese modernization initiatives.

Figure 3.18: The town is portrayed in a moody state of destruction and depression.

In contrast, the country is shown as the area around the family's home. Its soundtrack is notably quieter and layered with natural sounds of insects, animals, wind, and so on. The compositions tend to frame the dog and characters as small against the backdrop of peaceful yellow meadows. If the country signifies the old culture and the town represents Chinese modernity, then it is significant to note that, whether by means of motorcycle or horse, the protagonists must frequently cross the road back and forth between them. They must learn to traverse within and across tradition and modernity.

Just as the road complicates the spatial dyad of town and country, the generational differences between Akhu and Gonpo do not entirely correspond to conceptions of the elderly as strictly traditional and their children as strictly modern. Akhu, for instance, smokes cigarettes quite often, an activity that is consistently a sign of modern influence

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in the Tibetan features examined. More significantly, Gonpo and Riksu have had infertility problems for years. They have "tried everything," but have not turned to modern medicine. Akhu is the character who urges them to seek modern medicine at the hospital in town.

Gonpo, in truth, refuses to see a doctor out of embarrassment and pride even when he discovers that Riksu has no reproductive problems. Gonpo is not an unsympathetic character, nor is he an image of Tibetan machismo, but he has grown up in a society of gender inequality and male privilege that is threatened, compromised, and sometimes overcompensated for under the conditions of the Chinese occupation. He is the emasculated male in search of identity through agency. Lineage, as presented in *Old Dog*, lies in the male line, and is thus tied to male pride. At the same time, lineage represents a cultural responsibility—the symbolic obligation to carry on Tibetan culture and identity. Anxiety around infertility corresponds to the end of the Tibetan line. Concerns over lineage, legacy, and cultural continuation apply equally to the mastiff and Gonpo in this film. Thus, as Akhu has tea with his cousin Dorje, he quickly goes outside to feed the mastiff; immediately upon his return, he broaches the subject of Gonpo's fertility for the first time in the film.

Shame, infertility, and the social conditions of liminality in general perpetuate a feeling of alienation and isolation among the characters. Tseden effectively depicts this in almost entirely visual terms. In one recurring composition, the viewer is shown a partially obstructed view of the family as they watch their small television. They sit in silence and, when they do speak, they do not look at each other; they simply stare at the television,

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regardless of what it broadcasts. In one prolonged sequence, they watch a Chinese infomercial for a gold ring that is clearly irrelevant to them, though it functions as a darkly humorous authorial commentary on consumption and capitalism. In a variation on the composition, the foreground is obstructed by a screen door that uncomfortably separates the viewer from the characters and again suggests their entrapment. (Figure 3.19). In other instances, spatial segmentation, frames with the frame, and staging in depth visually suggest emotional and communicative divides between characters. Figure 3.20 depicts the morning after Gonpo arrives home drunk in the middle of the night. Riksu is visible in the far left background in the sunlight outside, framed by the doorway. The room is segmented in the middle, on the right side of which Gonpo sleeps off his hangover in a considerably darker portion of the frame.

The film concludes in a lengthy and highly effective sequence that consists of especially long takes of Akhu and the dog amidst a sunny, pastoral landscape. For instance, in a three minute and seventeen second static shot, Akhu and the dog traverse through their flock from the near foreground until they disappear in depth. The camera lingers, and the noise and movement of one sheep as it attempts to pass through a wire fence becomes the most salient narrative element in the frame. Shots like these lull the viewer into a comfortable state through the slow evocation of the country environment. However, Tseden then cuts to medium shot after a sequence of distantly framed such distantly framed compositions as the sound environment becomes slightly louder. In the context of *Old Dog*, the shot distance is uncharacteristic and intentionally jars the viewer from the complacency of the preceding pastoral sequence. Akhu proceeds to throw the

Figure 3.19: Familial alienation and isolation conveyed in static, lingering compositions. This shot is a variation on an obstructed composition used several times before, with a screen door in the foreground.



Figure 3.20: This composition amply segments the frame via light, depth, doorways, and set design to convey the division between Riksu and Gonpo.

dog's chain leash over the top of the wire fence and to hang the dog. The final shot of the film, which lasts four minutes and eighteen seconds, briefly shows fragments of the dog's face in close-up as it chokes, then pans right across the taut chain to where Akhu pulls. The death of the dog is conveyed unnervingly and slowly through off-screen sound. Upon the dog's death, Akhu drops the chain and walks off into the fields. The camera tracks him from behind, his breath heavy, for two minutes and forty-one seconds. The shot is disturbing and ambiguous both for what it shows and does not show. What is clear is that Akhu refuses to put a price on his dog, on his heritage, or on his identity. Smyer Yu (2014) observes that the effects of this sequence are "rippling among Tibetans in and outside Tibet and generating a new wave of debates and contentions about Buddhist ethics and the national integrity of Tibetans in the midst of modernization." (p. 139).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Pema Tseden has a unique and distinguished place in the short history of Tibetan film. His primary representational concerns are similar to those of the other Tibetan films examined, but executed in a creative, disciplined, effective, and often more complex manner, both technically and conceptually. Tseden's films are always structured around a search for identity in hybridity, articulated in collective as well as individual terms. Narration via theater and cultural performativity are an especially central device by which he quite consciously portrays contemporary, ongoing constructions of Tibetanness. The struggle for identity leads his characters, most notably in *Old Dog*, to despair, self-destructiveness, and male emasculation.

Tseden's distinct, consistent approach lends himself to discussion as an auteur. He has a particular focus on Tibetan Buddhism, which evolves and to some extent dissipates over the course of his career. All of his films evoke a rich sense of location and environment, whether a city, a small decrepit town, a monastic community, or the herding fields, through soundtrack and image. Space and place are nearly always associated with either modernity or tradition, but characters frequently travel the literal and figurative roads between them. Stylistically, Tseden approaches composition meticulously, employs a slow-paced and largely static style through wide-angle lenses, long takes, and extreme long shots. Even so, his stories vary in their ability and intention to involve the audience with individual characters. His narratives appear slim by Hollywood standards and structures, but are allegorically weighty, in part as a strategy to avoid Chinese censorship.

His filmmaking is also unique in its transnationality, even as its main concern is to find, or to record the attempt to find, Tibetanness. Tseden's audiences vary widely by nationality, ethnicity, and distribution in cities and rural areas; different contingents tend to respond differently to his films. In Beijing, he is a "minority" filmmaker and a novelty. Chinese viewers show particular interest in his biography, creative influences, and box office earnings; he serves as an example of a successful Tibetan artist as opposed to a social critic and thinker (Smyer Yu, 2014). On the other hand, Dan Smyer Yu (2014) asserts, based upon his ethnographic research, that urban Tibetan audiences and Westerners react primarily to social tensions and the marginality of Tibetans in China as depicted in the films. Yet Pema Tseden also intends his films for rural Tibetan audiences

about whom his stories are told. The films are screened, sometimes outdoors, with audiences of a few hundred to several thousand in rural Tibet (Smyer Yu, 2014). These differing reception contexts attest to a chameleonic adaptability in Pema Tseden's strategy and films that, given their social critiques and attempts to articulate Tibetan identity, constitute resistant strategic hybridity.

A review of the three films discussed suggests that, while often characterized by despair and depressive moods, the films offer subtle glimpses of hope. In *The Silent Holy Stones*, anxiety about the compromise of tradition and Buddhism in modernity is central, yet Tseden also emphasizes active self-representation and cultural construction through performance. *The Search* depicts a fragmented culture seeking a coherent version of itself in modernity, but again calls attention to the cultural construction of identity through performance, embodiment, and the process of filmmaking itself. However, the medium of film, as *The Search* suggests, cannot fully capture the essence of a culture. *Old Dog* shows dejection and alienation in a contemporary colonial environment, yet even here, there is hope in the redemption of Gonpo and in the utter conviction of Akhu to resist the commodification of his heritage and identity.

As Robert Barnett (2015) writes, in comparison to characters in other Tibetan films, the lead characters in Pema Tseden's films:

> while equally driven by troubling questions, are not tormented by them. They too speak very little and reveal little of their inner lives, but they appear comfortable with the elusiveness of answers. They point through their reticence and restraint

to an unseen world through the use of an elusiveness that is both culturally rich, distinctively Tibetan, and strategically productive in a colonized society" (p. 150). To borrow the language of Homi K. Bhabha (1994) in the epigraph to this chapter, Pema Tseden's films and characters "exceed[s] the frame of the image" and "elude the eye" but "leave[s] a resistant trace, a stain of the subject, a sign of resistance."

## Conclusion

> Are we forever the kind of people who came from a marginal and concealed
> world and who served only as a foil or contrast, waiting to be discovered?

> --Tibetan filmmaker Chenagtshang Dorje Tsering

Dorje Tsering's rhetorical call for Tibetans to make their presence seen, heard, and known through film remains urgent even as it highlights the importance of the work that has already been done. In my examination of twelve Tibetan fiction features, cinematic self-representation and self-definition are clearly well underway. While the films range in style, budget, production values, and distribution, each breaks ground in its representations of Tibetan experience and identity that circulate both internally in Tibet and internationally. As Edward Said (1978) describes of the Middle East, Tibet and its people have historically been perceived, used, and contained as the Other by the most powerful empires and nations. Their image has been strategically molded and remolded by the West and in comparison to the West. With the increasing accessibility of modern technology, Tibetans have actively used the mediums of film and video to craft their own identity and presence.

How then, do these twelve films construe Tibetaness—a nexus of national, political, religious, cultural, communal, and individual identity? If "the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a *self*-fulfilling prophecy" but rather the "procution of an image of identity and transformation of the subject in assuming the image" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 64), then Tibetaness is not an essential

entity that simply needs to be communicated to the world, but an active process of image-making. Film represents this process both in its content and in the image-construction inherent to the medium. Tibetanness, then, is not uniform or coherent across the films. It is in progress, fragmented, partly visible and partly invisible, "neither the one thing nor the other," a hybrid concoction constituted by non-Tibetans and Tibetans alike. It may simultaneously be characterized as traditional, modern, religious, secular, and in the space between these constructs. Tibet is hybrid, liminal and diasporic construct—an ambiguous signifier "crisscrossed" by oppositional discourses. These films show Tibetaness to be in much the same state. In their narratives of loss, desire, process, and search, they emphasize quiet, inward journeys of discovery. As Robert Barnett (2015) writes, the rise of Tibetan filmmaking is focused on "personal and collective restitution and rediscovery" (p. 152).

Film appears to serve a number of functions for Tibetan filmmakers. It is a document—the "preservation"[1]—of a group in contemporary colonial/postcolonial conflict. It is a means to negotiate, for filmmakers and film viewers, self-representations of culture, identity, and selfhood. Self-representation in these films often entail dreary conditions of absence, presence, desire, void, pain, fragmentation, loss, confusion, disenfranchisement, and shame. However, these representations simultaneously involve the construction of cultural identity in a more positive sense through performativity, the very representation of the need for identity, and filmmaking itself as an enunciative act.

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[1] I put this term in quotations because, while it may in this case entail a form of record-keeping for Tibetans involved in production, and be characterized as cultural preservation by them, it is a very different undertaking to record on film or video rather than to preserve on film or video; the former does not entail the latter.

As such, these films are often resistant to the discourses of power. They may employ strategic essentialism, most obviously in depictions that directly recreate the Tibetan imaginary in order to elicit international sympathy. None of the twelve films are entirely predicated on this strategy, but films like *Milarepa* and *Travellers and Magicians*, for instance, employ strategic essentialism at moments. Alternatively, they may resist through active and strategic cultural constructivism. *The Search* most self-consciously takes this approach. All the films rework and borrow from the traditions and cultures available to them through appropriation, reappropriation, and intentional misappropriation. Finally, they resist through their presentation of Tibetaness as elusive. The Other, according to Bhabha (1994), cannot be fully seen or understood by the Self, just as the symbol of Drobe with her scarf in *The Search* resists the gaze of the audience. This "resistant strain," a residue of the unknown, may be inherent to the mediums of film, video, and photography, or perhaps any representational form. Bhabha writes, "…the image—as point of identification—marks the site of an ambivalence. Its representation is always spatially split—it makes *present* something that is *absent*—and temporally deferred: it is the representation of a time that is always elsewhere, a repetition." (p. 73). Film, as document, is always an empty shell.

Film and video as self-representation, however, constitute an invaluable platform for critical deconstruction, formulation, articulation, and continual rearticulation of Tibetanness. Tibetan film may not have the capacity the reveal the essence of Tibetaness, not simply due to limits of representation, but because there is no essential Tibetanness. Instead, these films teach us that the journey is all about the process.

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