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Cinematic Mappings of Chinese Ethnic Minorities:

Discourse Dynamics in National and Translocal Film Production, Consumption, and Circulation,

1949-1999

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Asian Languages and Cultures

by

Cui Zhou

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Cinematic Mappings of Chinese Ethnic Minorities:

Discourse Dynamics in National and Translocal Film Production, Consumption, and Circulation,

1949-1999

by

Cui Zhou

Doctor of Philosophy in Asian Languages and Cultures

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Michael Sanford Berry, Chair

Engaging with theories of Sinophone studies, national cinema, and transnational cinema, this dissertation centers on ethnic minorities in China to address the dynamic interactions among discourses representing the nation-state, the Han, ethnic minorities, and the rest of the world from 1949 to 1999 through the lens of film. Each chapter closely examines one category of discourse in conversation with others regarding the construction of relationships and the negotiations of subjectivities in minority film production, circulation, and consumption. Instead of following the common approach heavily relying on storytelling and narrative studies, I turn to the less-studied non-narrative strategies to scrutinize the functions of opening sequences, props, and set design. I argue that socialist minority films made in the seventeen-year period (1949–1966) cinematically engendered socialist reforms in minority geopolitics, spaces, and bodies; integrated minorities into the Han-centered nation-state; and spread images and social statuses of ethnic minorities that

aligned with the national discourse. This dissertation also extends into extra-diegesis to spotlight how ethnic minorities reacted toward their assigned positions, something absent in prior scholarship. By examining minorities' roles as authors in scriptwriting and actors in film performance during the seventeen-year period, I argue that minorities could maintain limited agency by somewhat negotiating with the national discourse and partly straying from the national interpellation and the constructed personas and identities. Moreover, while prior scholarship generally studies minority films within the context of China, I investigate the transnational and translocal flows of socialist minority films and the adaptations of these films outside the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the 1950s and 1960s. In the transnational and translocal consumption of these films, the socialist discourse embedded within was often deconstructed. In addition, socialist minority films provided a space for non-PRC moviegoers and filmmakers to discuss local geopolitical, social, and identity issues. In the early post-socialist era, a broad spectrum of minority films emerged to challenge the pattern of representation established during the period of high socialism; this new wave was spearheaded by trends of genre hybridization and commercialization of the Chinese film industry. I am therefore studying minority films produced in the 1980s and 1990s to build an argument that the Han filmmakers could use the marginal position of minorities as a weapon to criticize Han-centric notions of national discourse.

This dissertation of Cui Zhou is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles

2022

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NOTE ON ROMANIZATION

This dissertation uses the Pinyin form in most cases, except the specific manners of romanization that have been used historically in regard to certain names in some regions. With regard to people from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and ethnic minorities, efforts are made to include the standard or the most commonly used romanizations of their names in existing publications.

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It has been a long journey. From my hometown of Beijing to Los Angeles, I must take a 12-hour flight. The pandemic makes this distance much longer, and now it has been almost three years since I last saw my parents in person. But the journey has also been a short one. The first day I arrived in the U.S. remains clear in my memory as if it were yesterday. The time seemingly passed in the blink of an eye. For me, Ph.D. life has been an adventure full of laughter and tears. I was not a well-prepared participant when the adventure started. But I got so much help from kind people I met along the way. I therefore want to thank my committee chair Professor Michael for guiding me to successfully survive this challenging adventure. He is always a reliable supporter when I am in trouble. I also want to thank my super helpful committee members, Professor Andrea Goldman, Professor Jasmine Trice, and Professor Junko Yamazaki. Their knowledge and insights into history and cinema helped me to explore my own research.

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20 世纪 30 年代的中国左翼电影运动：影戏、吸引力电影与公共空间 (“Chinese Leftist Film Movement in the 1930s: Shadow Play, Cinema of Attraction, and Public Space”). *Journal of Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications (Social Science Edition)*, No. 6(2019): 123-131.

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“From Silence to Heteroglossia: Rewriting A Sinophone History in *Center Stage*,” Sinophone Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Critical Reflections, at UCLA, April 12-13, 2019.

“The Haunted 1980s: Time-Space Construction and Dialogue with Lu Xun in *Death Visits the Living*,” American Oriental Society, Chicago, March 15-18, 2019.

“Shadow-play Theory and Chinese Film Practice in the 1930s,” International Doctoral Student Forum of Art Studies, at Peking University, China, September 1, 2018.

Introduction

“The People’s Republic of China is a unified multiethnic state founded by the Chinese people of all ethnic groups. Socialist ethnic relations of equality, unity, mutual assistance and harmony are established and will continue to be strengthened. In the struggle to safeguard ethnic unity, we should oppose major ethnic group chauvinism, which mainly refers to Han chauvinism, and local ethnic chauvinism. The state makes every effort to promote the shared prosperity of all the country’s ethnic groups.”

—Constitution of the People’s Republic of China¹

How many ethnic groups exist within the People’s Republic of China (PRC)? A popular song that has been widely circulated in the PRC since early 1990 answers this question well: “Fifty-six stars, fifty-six flowers, fifty-six brothers and sisters together form one family, fifty-six national languages together form one sentence: love my China, love my China. Love my China!” “Love My China” was the theme song created in 1991 for the Fourth Traditional Games of Ethnic Minorities launched in Guangxi, a Zhuang-dominated Autonomous Region. In response to the minority theme, a performer who held ethnic status was selected to sing the song: Wei Wei, a Zhuang singer, won the chance. Later, the baton was passed to Miao singer Song Zuying, who even went abroad and performed the song in Vienna. The simple, repetitive lyrics convey two significant pieces of information about ethnicities in the PRC, diversity and unity. Thus, the lyrics align with the intensely national character of the PRC. As addressed in so many official documents,

¹ “Constitution of the People’s Republic of China,” accessed May 27, 2020 <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/constitution2019/201911/1f65146fb6104dd3a2793875d19b5b29.shtml>.

the PRC is a *tongyi de duo minzu guojia* 统一的多民族国家 (unified multinational country). Among the fifty-six ethnic groups, the Han Chinese have the largest population, and the remaining fifty-five groups, due to having lower populations, are called *shaoshu minzu* 少数民族 (ethnic minorities).²

These ethnic minorities are the focal point of this dissertation. Distinct from ethnological and anthropological approaches, my research concentrates on the cultural world and, through the lens of film, examines the dynamics of discourses representing major forces (i.e., the nation, the Han, ethnic minority filmmakers, and the rest of the world) that actively joined the ethnic minority film field from 1949 to 1999. During the seventeen-year period (1949–1966) in the Mao years, ethnic minority film production flourished. The national and international ethnic minority film re/production, consumption, and circulation created a space for the four major forces to negotiate their relative relationships and subjectivities. In this process, what role did the major forces play? How did these forces influence the construction, consumption, spread, and reproduction of the filmic images of ethnic minorities? How did the forces imagine, form, and negotiate their relationships with each other in film-related activities? Did the discourses representing these forces match, resonate, or compete with one another? How did the interactions of discourses influence ethnic minorities? From the late 1970s to the 1990s, the PRC encountered significant changes. Did this huge shift impact the minority images constructed in the socialist period? If so, then how? These questions are central to what this dissertation aims to explore.

² The term “ethnic” has become somewhat problematic in the West due to the ubiquitous biases and discriminations in various forms. In China, the term is tied to a very different historical and cultural context; I employ the term as a translation of *minzu* 民族, which points to the ways in which this term has been classified, discussed, and framed within a Chinese context. In this dissertation, the terms “minority” and “ethnic minority” are used to translate the Chinese word *shaoshu minzu* 少数民族.

What Is *Minzu*?

Before entering the film world, I first take a step back and discuss a crucial question: the definition of *minzu*. While this dissertation does not engage in the theoretical debate on the definition of *minzu*, a brief overview of how this term developed in China helps provide context for the central focus. In Chinese documents, *minzu* is always compatible with several different English concepts without drawing distinctions. As scholar Thomas S. Mullaney indicates, “the etymological history of the term *minzu*, that notoriously contested word that, since its importation to China from Japan in the late nineteenth century, has been used by widely different communities of practice to translate no fewer than four politically charged concepts: race, nation, nationality (*natsia*), and ethnic group.”³ The ambiguous meaning of *minzu* remains closely tethered to modern Chinese history.

In the late Qing period, the failure of the Qing government in the constant wars and competitions with foreign countries triggered the spread of resentment. The Qing ruler’s Manchu identity, which differed from the majority Han, became the target of examination and attack. In turmoil, the term *race* was imported into China and renewed the worldview of Chinese intellectuals, which was once shaped by a pair of concepts: *hua* 华 (China/Chinese) and *yi* 夷 (barbarian). Intellectual Yan Fu, deeply influenced by social Darwinism, introduced the four primary races on earth as defined by the West—the yellow, the white, the brown, and the black races—and continued the Western racist discourse to explain the hierarchy among the four.⁴ With this new racial perspective in mind, a group of Chinese intellectuals then tried to fit China—the yellow race—

³ Thomas Shawn Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 14.

⁴ See relative information in Yan Fu 严复, *Yan Fu shiwen xuan* 严复诗文选 [Elected poems and writings of Yan Fu] (Beijing: People’s Literature Press, 1959).

into a Western-defined racial structure. Kang Youwei 康有为 was one such intellectual. In his *Datong shu*, he prioritized the white and treated the yellow as the second race in the racial hierarchy. To achieve his ideal world of *datong* 大同 (Great Harmony), Kang suggested *renzhong gailiang* 人种改良 (racial reform) through racial intermarriage.⁵ The racist overtone in Kang's writings is clear. In the same essay, Kang also touched upon the non-Han scattered throughout the territory of Qing China, but he seemingly preferred not to categorize these people into the superior yellow race, which he considered "large in quantity and wise in intelligence."⁶ His intention can be seen in how he referred to the non-Han people: "the *sheng Yao* 生猺 (raw Yao), the *sheng Li* 生黎 (raw Li), and the *sheng fan* 生蕃 (raw savages) in Taiwan."⁷ The adjunct word, *sheng*, which literally means raw and uncivilized, exposed his discriminatory attitude. Liang Qichao 梁启超 further explained the status of ethnic groups in the racial structure. Despite accepting the Western racial structure, Liang, as Frank Dikötter indicates, "rejected the western notion of a 'Mongolian race' and excluded China's minorities from the 'genuine yellows'...the terms 'Han race' and 'yellow race' were synonymous."⁸ In the discussion of race, a boundary was therefore drawn between the superior Han and the inferior non-Han.

The view of Han superiority became influential in the thought of the two important Kuomintang (KMT) leaders, Sun Yat-sen 孙中山 and his successor Chiang Kai-shek 蒋介石. To overthrow the Manchu ruling class, Sun organized the Tongmenghui of China with the political

⁵ Kang Youwei 康有为, *Datong shu* 大同书 [One world], ed. Kuang Bolin 邝柏林 (Liaoning: Liaoning People's Publisher, 1994), 142.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁸ Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 53.

principles of *quchu dalu, hui fu Zhonghua* 驱除鞑虏, 恢复中华 (expel the Tartar barbarians, restore China) in 1905. In Sun's declaration of the Tongmenghui, *dalu* referred to the Manchus, and *Zhonghua*, literally meaning China, was equal to the Han. The Manchus were accused of having destroyed China and repressing the Han people. Sun thus encouraged the Han to take the lead in overturning the Manchu regime and restoring Han China.⁹ Anti-Manchuism and Han-centrism were the core ideas in Sun's declaration. In *The Principles of the People*, Sun further clarified his Han-centric position by indicating that "the Chinese race totals four hundred million people; of mingled races there are only a few million Mongolians, a million or so Manchus, a few million Tibetans, and over a million Mohammedan Turks. These alien races do not number altogether more than ten million, so that, for the most part, the Chinese people are of the Han or Chinese race with common blood, common language, common religion, and common customs, a single, pure race."¹⁰ In this sense, Sun sided with Liang and treated the Han as being synonymous with the Chinese race. Frank Dikötter therefore refers to Sun's ideology as "racial nationalism."¹¹ But in the establishing of the Republic of China (ROC), Sun aimed to gain more support from the non-Han in China and thus temporarily relinquished his Han-centrism and softened his tone with the idea of *wuzu gonghe* 五族共和 (five races under one union). The *wuzu* indicated the Han, Manchus, Mongols, Muslims, and Tibetans in China. To some degree, the concept of *wuzu* was based on transplanting the Western racial structure to the Chinese context and inherited the residue of Qing's

⁹ Sun Yat-sen 孙中山, "Tongmenghui xuanyan" 同盟会宣言 [The Declaration of the Tongmenghui of China], in *Zongli zhongyao xuanyan hekan* 总理重要宣言合刊 [The collection of the Premier's important declarations], ed. Zhongguo guomindang zhongyang zhixing weiyuanhui xuanchuan bu 中国国民党中央执行委员会宣传部 [The Publicity Department of the KMT Central Executive Committee] (The Publicity Department of the KMT Central Executive Committee print, 1929), 5–6.

¹⁰ Sun Yat-sen, *San min chu i: The Three Principles of the People*, trans. Frank W. Price (Shanghai: China Committee, Institute of Pacific Relation, 1927), 12.

¹¹ Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race*, 77.

multiethnic policy. The five-color flag, endowed with new meanings to represent the *wuzu*, ultimately became the national flag of the ROC. As the provisional president of the ROC, Sun publicly announced that “the root of the nation lies with the people. Combining the lands of the Han, Manchus, Mongols, Muslims, and Tibetans into one country while mingling the Han, Manchus, Mongols, Muslims, and Tibetan nations into one people—this process is the unification of the nation.”¹² But Sun had not really given up his Han-centrism. As Mullaney indicates, “the *wuzu gonghe* conception no longer portrayed Tibetans, Mongolians, and others as essentially and irrevocably different, but rather emphasized both the possibility of and necessity for assimilating such groups into the Han majority.”¹³

Such Han-ization or Sinicization was inherited by Sun’s successor Chiang Kai-shek, who made some modifications. A pair of terms shaped Chiang’s ethnic ideology: the traditional concept of *zongzu* 宗族 (clan) in Han culture and the concept of *Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族 (Chinese nation). The ethnic groups in Chiang’s ideology were the clans belonging to the Chinese nation. In *China’s Destiny*, Chiang referenced ethnic groups like the Khitan, Turki, Mongol, and Tibetan groups that had historically mingled into the Han regimes as examples of how, “according to its historic development, our Chinese nation was formed by the blending of numerous clans.”¹⁴ In Chiang’s interpretation, all these clans were the offspring of a shared ancestor. Chiang technically created a new category of the Chinese nation, but his ethnic principle still relied on Han-oriented assimilation and Sinicization. His Chinese nation was thus just another way to refer to the Han

¹² Sun Yat-sen, “Linshi da zongtong xuanyan”临时大总统宣言 [Inaugural address of the provisional president], in *Zongli zhongyao xuanyan*, 9.

¹³ Mullaney, *Coming to Terms*, 25.

¹⁴ Chiang Kai-shek, *China’s Destiny*, trans. Philip Jaffe (New York: Roy Publishers, 1947), 30.

nation. Chiang's ethnic politics exposed the ideas of "singularity and indivisibility."¹⁵ In other words, Chiang aimed to construct a homogenous nation-state composed of a sole-*minzu*—the so-called Chinese nation.

However, this single-*minzu* approach was resisted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which was the rival of the KMT in the Republican era. The CCP took the Soviet approach of treating the non-Han in China as nationalities and supporting national self-determination. Unlike the KMT with its sole-*minzu*, the CCP attempted to explore alternative ways to organize the non-Han groups into the Chinese nation-state. This method, according to Mullaney, unfolded "not by denying the existence of independent Chinese minority nationalities, but by conveying to these groups that it would be possible for them to exist both as Chinese and as Hui, Mongolian, Tibetan, and so on."¹⁶ In other words, the CCP seemed to conceive of constructing a dual-identity system that could tolerate the simultaneous existence of the Chinese identity and ethnic status. In addition, the CCP intended to explain the Han and non-Han relationship from the class point of view and treated the non-Han as the ones repressed by the Han. Regarding ethnic relations in China, scholar Uradyn Bulag also states that "the CCP introduced a new Han ethnic sensibility that was self-reflexive and self-critical rather than being simply paternalistic."¹⁷ But most of the CCP's ethnic ideas and principles had no chance to be practiced in the Republican period. These ideas were more like direct reactions to the CCP's close relationship with the Soviets and its competitive attitude toward the rival KMT.

¹⁵ Mullaney, *Coming to Terms*, 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁷ Uradyn E. Bulag, "Good Han, Bad Han: The Moral Parameters of Ethnopolitics in China," in *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority*, ed. Thomas S. Mullaney, James Leibold, Stéphane Gros, and Eric Vanden Bussche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 96.

In 1949, the CCP assumed power from the KMT to establish the PRC in the mainland and started to deal with the complicated ethnic issues in a unique way. In terms of ethnic principles, the dual-identity plan was put on the agenda. The CCP retained the term *Chinese nation*. But unlike in the KMT, this term was not synonymous with *Han nation*. Instead, the Chinese nation should, per the CCP, function as the collection, and all the ethnic groups, including the Han, should join this collection as subsets.¹⁸ In this way, national diversity and unity could be simultaneously achieved. The CCP could therefore distinguish itself from the KMT's sole-*minzu* approach. Regarding ethnic policies, the CCP promoted *minzu* equality and autonomy as a remarkable ruling advantage and included them in the Constitution of the PRC. Meanwhile, an investigation of the existing *minzu* groups was launched. In the early stage, the government opened this *minzu* issue to the masses and encouraged self-identification. Local people who believed they belonged to a *minzu* could submit petitions to the central government. In 1953, more than 400 petitions were received. Not all these self-identified groups, however, should be identified as the singular *minzu*, according to anthropologist Fei Xiaotong, who later became the leader guiding the ethnic classification project. Many of the groups were from the same group but had different names. Some names were simply different Mandarin translations of the same group.¹⁹ Facing this chaotic phenomenon, the government intervened to guide the ethnic classification project by organizing a professional research team.

¹⁸ Notably, this situation is considered ideal or the blueprint. In practice, however, this plan is not well-followed and hard to achieve.

¹⁹ See Fei Xiaotong 费孝通, *Guanyu woguo de minzu shibie wenti* 关于我国的民族识别问题 [On our nation's ethnic classification issues], in *Zhongguo de minzu shibie jiqi fansi: zhuti shijiao yu kewe pingshu* 中国的民族识别及其反思: 主体视角与客位评述 [Chinese national identification and its reflections: The emic narrative and etic comments], ed. Qi Jinyu 祁进玉 (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2016), 1.

The criteria for identifying a *minzu* became the primary concern of this team. Since the PRC received extensive diplomatic and advisory support from the Soviets at that time, the Soviet approach became the first choice. The CCP appropriated the Soviet term *natsia* (nationality) and relied on Joseph Stalin's criteria to deal with the *minzu* issue in the PRC. According to Stalin, a *natsia* is "a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture."²⁰ Stalin's criteria did not work well in the PRC context; the main problem resulted from Stalin's precondition of the capitalist society. As he mentioned, the *natsia* "is not a racial or tribal" concept.²¹ Rather, a *natsia* should have developed into the capitalist mode. However, in the early PRC, most non-Han groups remained premodern, even primitive societies. To localize the Soviet concept and criteria, the PRC accepted Stalin's "four commons" but replaced his restriction on the capitalist mode with "ethnic potential," following the suggestion of the research team leader, Lin Yaohua.²² Believing the Sinicized Soviet criteria were the only rubric guiding the PRC's ethnic classification project would be naive. Using the ethnic classification in Yunnan, for example, Mullaney points to the invisible influence of the West. He notices that the language-based categorization employed by Chinese experts in Yunnan was influenced by Henry Davies' linguistic mode. In the early 1900s, as Davies studied the ethnic composition in Yunnan, he prioritized language to be the crucial categorization principle. Davies' model was rooted in widespread

²⁰ Joseph Stalin, "Marxism and the National Question," accessed May 3, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1913/03a.htm>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Mullaney, *Coming to Terms*, 11.

Western ethnological philosophy, which heavily relied on the linguist division in ethnotaxonomy.²³ In this sense, the West presented in the PRC's ethnic classification in an invisible way.

Based on this mixed rubric, from 1950 to 1953, the research team identified thirty-eight groups from the 400 petitions submitted. In the following decade, the ethnic classification was ongoing, and about 183 groups submitted petitions to the central government. Experts, after examining the new submissions, approved fifteen new groups and classified seventy-four into the identified categories. In 1965, Lhoba, the smallest ethnic group, gained official approval. This nationwide ethnic classification was then interrupted by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In 1979, after Jinuo was identified as the fifty-fifth ethnic minority group, the fifty-six-*minzu* structure was finally formed in China.²⁴ However, the national classification seemingly does not help clarify the concept of *minzu*. In the PRC's *minzu* list, some identified groups still have a murky relationship with other concepts, such as “race” and “indigeneity.” For instance, the Russian nationality refers to the offspring of Russian immigrants who moved to China during wartime and decided to reside there. Among these Russians, ethnic differentiations exist. In other words, they do not really belong to the same ethnic group, but in the context of the PRC, those differences are erased, at least in official discourse. They are viewed as a homogenous *minzu* of the Chinese nation. The indigenous people in Taiwan are also categorized into the fifty-six-*minzu* blueprint. Because Taiwan was under the KMT's control in the socialist period, the CCP could not access the island to investigate the tribal components. Therefore, the various indigenous people belonging to

²³ Ibid., 44–56. See more detailed explanations in Mullaney's *Coming to Terms*, chap. 3.

²⁴ See the relative information in Huang Guangxue 黄光学, “Zhongguo de minzu shibie” 中国的民族识别 [Ethnic classification in China], in *Zhongguo de minzu shibie*, 52–58.

different tribes in Taiwan were simply mingled into a category—Gaoshan 高山 (high mountain people)—following the old term that the KMT used in the Republican era.

Rather than clarifying the specific definition of *minzu*, the PRC's classification movement confirmed the complexity of the term. *Minzu* became a category overlapping with the classifications of race, nationality, nation, indigeneity, and ethnicity. Not a single English word can directly match the term *minzu*. Scholar Thomas Herbert also realizes the rich and blurred connotations of *minzu*. For the category of *shaoshu minzu*, Herbert indicates that “there is no exact Chinese definition of the term ‘national minority,’ from the Chinese perspective it would imply an ethnic group that is relatively small numerically compared with the largest nationality, and that is distinguished from society at large and from the Han by certain specifically national characteristics.”²⁵ Regarding the phenomenon of the conceptual hybridity in *minzu*, Mullaney does not insist on identifying a clear definition of *minzu* but rather stresses the need to “consider the ambiguity . . . to be a fundamental part of the history of the social sciences, the modern state, and the ongoing collaboration there-between.”²⁶

Film scholar Chris Berry also responds to the conceptual hybridity of *minzu*, but he claims to use the English term race to directly replace *minzu*. According to Berry, “‘Minzu’ means ‘race’ in the sense of a combination of shared genetic and cultural characteristics that binds a group of people for all time . . . race is the closest we can get to *minzu* and is certainly more appropriate than ‘nation’ or ‘China,’ which are too specific and so draw a veil over the full transhistorical idealism of the term ‘race.’”²⁷ However, Berry's interpretation is questioned by Yingjin Zhang. In

²⁵ Thomas Herbert, *China and Its National Minorities: Autonomy or Assimilation* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 12.

²⁶ Mullaney, *Coming to Terms*, 15.

²⁷ Chris Berry, “‘Race’ (民族): Chinese Film and the Politics of Nationalism,” *Cinema Journal* 31, no. 2 (1992), 48.

Zhang's understanding, the hybridity of *minzu* suggests that it difficult to collapse or simplify the concept of race. He further indicates the issues in replacing *minzu* by race:

[Berry's] indiscriminate use of "race" obscures the difference between "race" and "ethnicity" on the one hand and, on the other, conflates the "state discourse" (which legitimates the Han Chinese cultural hegemony over ethnic minorities) and the politics of nationalism in Chinese films (which has strategically drawn on minority cultures in the formation of the "Chinese characteristics" [*minzu tedian*]). Consequently, Berry locates in recent Chinese films a fundamental challenge to the discourse of race and "race-ization," yet altogether neglects the possibility that some of these films might have unknowingly reinforced the Han cultural hegemony in their effort to challenge the state discourse.²⁸

After examining the theories of race, ethnicity, and nationality, Zhang then proposes that using ethnicity is "less problematic"²⁹ than using race when referring to ethnic-related issues in Chinese studies. My dissertation sides with Zhang in terms of terminology, but I also want to address the importance of engaging with the complicated, fluid, and often blurry connotations associated with use of the Chinese term *minzu*.

This overview makes it clear that, from the late Qing to the PRC, discourse, discussions, and debates centering on *minzu* were always closely tied to politics. From anti-Manchus to anti-KMT, the political function of *minzu* had already become an important feature, which determined that discussing ethnic-related issues in China meant that the role of politics should not be ignored. It is also important to notice the power dynamics in the historical discussions centering on *minzu*

²⁸ Yingjin Zhang, *Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and the Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Ann Arbor): 152–53.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

in modern China. In general, it was the Han, as represented by political figures like Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek, as well as other Han anthropologists and experts, who seized the opportunity to play the role of the authority of power and knowledge to define the meaning of *minzu*. Minorities then were always treated as objects under observation, examination, and categorization. Even though they could express their dissent in some cases, they often had to wait for the approval of the Han and the Han-centered regime.

Ethnic Minority Film Production in China: From the 1930s to the 1990s

As the fifty-six-*minzu* model was forming, the CCP's new ethnic policies about producing films about ethnic minorities—*shaoshu minzu dianying* 少数民族电影 [minority films]—started resonating with PRC filmmakers. However, the CCP was not the first to bring minorities to the screen. Some Chinese filmmakers had paid attention to this subject matter prior to 1949. In 1933, Yang Xiaozhong 杨小仲 shot the film *Romance in Yao Mountains* (瑶山艳史). This film, fitting in the clichéd romance pattern, depicts a triangle love story between two Yao girls and a Han male protagonist named Huang Yunhuan, who goes to the Yao Mountains to educate the Yao people living there. As the national crisis became more severe during the second Sino-Japanese war, more Chinese people, even the KMT government, realized the urgent need to call for national unity to fight against Japan and defend the nation in the late 1930s and 1940s. Culture, like films, was expected to contribute to national mobilization. In this context, ethnic minorities, who were the indispensable components of the Chinese nation, attracted filmmakers' attention. In 1943, director Zheng Junli 郑君里 completed his first documentary titled *Long Live the Nation* (民族万岁), which recorded the lives and cultures of ethnic minorities in the northwest and southwest. The central theme and purpose of this documentary, as Zheng himself claimed, was to call for national

unity to fight against Japan.³⁰ The film was the first documentary made in China to choose the various ethnic minorities as its subject matter. Among these pre-1949 ethnic minority-related films, one that greatly influenced the PRC's minority film pattern confirmed in the seventeen-year era was the leftist film *Storm on the Border* (塞上风云 dir. Ying Yunwei 应云卫, 1940). Chinese filmmakers went to Japan-occupied Inner Mongolia to shoot the exterior scenes in the film. Supporting the theme of national fraternity, this film narrates how the Han protagonist Ding Shixiong persuades Mongols to put aside their ethnic conflict with the Han and join them to fight against Japanese enemies to defend the nation. The important plots in this film— such as the conflict between minorities and the Han, the sabotage plotted by spies and traitors, the national fraternity relying on the self-sacrifice and leadership of the Han, and the romantic love—later in the Maoist period became the routines that repetitively appear in minority feature films. After the Sino-Japanese war, Taiwan director He Feiguang 何非光 went to shoot the indigenous people in Taiwan. His film *Hualian Port* (花莲港, 1948) focuses on the conflicts between the Han, indigenous people, and Japanese colonizers.

In 1950, the first PRC-made minority feature film, *The Springtime in Inner Mongolia* (内蒙春光, dir. Gan Xuewei 干学伟), was released. Screenwriter Wang Zhenzhi 王震之 went to Inner Mongolia to interview Mongols, ranging from the lower-class masses to the upper-class princes and high officials, regarding their memories of the establishment of the autonomous region government in Inner Mongolia before 1949. Based on this oral history, Wang finished his film script, which underscores the heroic behavior of Mongols in class struggles. After the premiere,

³⁰ More information about this documentary and its production can be seen in Zheng Junli 郑君里, *Zheng Junli quanji* 郑君里全集 [Collected works of Zheng Junli], ed. Li Zhen 李镇 (Shanghai: Shanghai Cultural Publishing House, 2016), 1–50.

this film received a warm welcome from film experts, ordinary audiences, and government officials. The film was even praised as “the first film to correctly depict ethnic minorities.”³¹ This situation quickly changed after some reviewers highlighted the film’s conflict with the CCP’s ethnic policies. In the early 1950s, the CCP’s policies in minority regions were under the principle of *wen kuan chang* 稳宽长 (prudent, tolerant, and long), which means the government would prudently promote reforms in minority communities, treat the exploited upper classes in minorities with tolerance, and acknowledge the longer time to complete socialist reforms.³² This principle revealed that the CCP in this period prioritized national fraternity over class struggle in ethnic-relevant issues. For the upper classes in minorities, persuading them to support the CCP was the core strategy. In this film, however, the absolute negative portrayals of the Mongolian prince and the religious reincarnated lama cast the minority ruling classes as the antithesis of the people and the CCP, which, of course, conflicted with the Party’s ethnic line. The film was thus pulled from theaters. Wang Zhenzhi published an essay to criticize his political mistakes. According to Wang, “this film inaccurately depicted the ethnic policies of the Party and the government . . . the script centering on the anti-feudalist struggle among Mongolian people disregards the crime of the KMT’s Han-chauvinism . . . [and] ignores the significance of the national fraternity that the Party addressed.”³³ Premier Zhou Enlai then ordered a group of film experts, intellectuals, and officials to re-edit the film together. After a significant number of plot modifications, the film was renamed

³¹ “Neimeng chunguang zaijing shiying”内蒙春光在京试映 [The springtime in Inner Mongolia was shown in Beijing], *People’s Daily*, April 28, 1950. Also see Buhe 布赫, “Yige mengguren kan yibu menggu pian—Neimeng chunguang,”一个蒙古人看一部蒙古片——《内蒙春光》 [A Mongol watched a Mongolian film: *The Springtime in Inner Mongolia*], *People’s Daily*, April 30, 1950.

³² Li Ziyuan 李资源, *Zhongguo gongchandang minzu gongzuo shi* 中国共产党民族工作史 [The history of the CCP’s ethnic policies] (Nanning: Guangxi People’s Press, 2000), 265.

³³ Wang Zhenzhi 王震之, “Neimeng chunguang de ziwo jiantao” 《内蒙春光》的自我检讨 [Self-criticism of *The Spring of Inner Mongolia*], *People’s Daily*, May 28, 1950.

Victory of Inner Mongolia People (内蒙人民的胜利) by Chairman Mao Zedong and returned to theaters nationwide in 1951.³⁴

The censorship of the first socialist minority film undoubtedly gave a lesson to the filmmakers who might work on this topic. Minority films, rather than being a safe field, were extremely politically sensitive. In the following years, PRC filmmakers restricted how deeply their films touched on ethnic policies to avoid political risk. In this context, the theme of love became a safe zone in minority cinema, even though romance was not encouraged in other types of films. This situation lasted until the late 1950s, when the government switched its principle regarding ethnic minority issues. In the new phase that followed, the tolerant attitude toward the upper classes in minorities was replaced by class struggle. In 1958, the central government announced that “regarding the work in ethnic minority regions, [cadres] should consider the local conditions and insist on the class line.”³⁵ Later, “the essence of ethnic issues is class conflict” was promoted to become the dominant ethnic principle and spread nationwide.³⁶ Class struggle—a general topic in socialist films—finally came to be applied to minority films. Minority film production also blossomed during this period. From 1957 onward, approximately five to eight minority films were produced yearly. In the 1960s, when the political atmosphere in the PRC turned harsher, minority film production declined, but two to three new titles were still made each year. This series of socialist minority films broadly depicted ethnic minorities, including Mongol, Tibetan, Miao, Hani,

³⁴ More details about the editing process of this film can be seen in Gan Xuewei 干学伟, “Cong yibu yingpian de fusheng shuoqi” 从一部影片的复生说起 [On the rebirth of a film], in *Zhou Enlai yu dianying* 周恩来与电影 [Zhou Enlai and cinema], eds. Chen Huangmei 陈荒煤 and Chen Bo 陈播 (Beijing: Central Literature Publishing House, 1995), 273–82. Rao Shuguang 饶曙光 et al., ed., *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu dianyingshi* 中国少数民族电影史 [Chinese ethnic minority film history] (Beijing: China Film Press, 2011), 23–35.

³⁵ Ziyuan, *minzu gongzuo shi*, 336.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 336–37.

Kazakhs, Uyghur, Lahu, Korean, Dai, Bai, Yi, Zhuang, Qiang, Jingpo, Li, and Hui. From the bigger groups to minor ethnicities and from the south to the north, socialist audiences got a filmic tour of ethnic minorities in China.

In this period, four big state-owned film studios—the Chuangchun Film Studio 长春电影制片厂 (Changying), the Shanghai Film Studio 上海电影制片厂 (Shangying),³⁷ the Beijing Film Studio 北京电影制片厂 (Beiyong), and the August First Film Studio 八一电影制片厂 (Bayi)—took the major responsibility for regular minority film production. Meanwhile, the government also sponsored the development of film studios in ethnic autonomous regions. For instance, in 1958, the Inner Mongolian Film Studio 内蒙古电影制片厂 and the Xinjiang Film Studio 新疆电影制片厂 were founded. In the 1950s and 1960s, the main job of the two studios was to produce dubbed films, newsreels, and documentaries. With the support of these large studios, they also produced a few feature films about minorities living in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang. Changying helped the Inner Mongolia Film Studio to produce *Morning Song Over the Prairie* (草原晨曲 dir. Zhu Wenshun 朱文顺 and Zhulanqiqike 朱兰琪琪柯, 1959), and Beiyong guided the Xinjiang Film Studio to finish *Ahnaerhan* (阿娜尔罕, dir. Li Enjie, 1962).

Turning to the Cultural Revolution, minorities' ethnic consciousness and identities were always criticized as petty ethnic chauvinism. Minority film production was accordingly stopped. Many minority films made in the 1950s to the 1960s—largely because of their love narratives, minority themes, and relevant reasons—were criticized as *ducao* 毒草 (poisonous weeds) films, even though they were once highly praised. For instance, Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, guided the cultural field during the Cultural Revolution but blamed several minority films in a meeting about

³⁷ In 1957, the Shanghai Film Studio was reorganized into three studios: Haiyan, Tianma, and Jiangnan.

the PRC's film production issues. In her understanding, the minority film *Two Patrolmen* (两个巡逻兵 dir. Fang Huang 方徨, 1958) "uglifies the border soldiers. Neither of the two soldiers can capture any enemies. Ethnic minorities fall madly in love, eating, and drinking. They are also uglified."³⁸ *Five Golden Flowers* (五朵金花 dir. Wang Jiayi 王家乙, 1959) fell into a similar trap in Jiang's review: "The depiction of ethnic minorities does not focus on their progressiveness . . . but underscores love stories, eating, and drinking. The love songs in this film are highly questionable."³⁹ *Visitor on Ice Mountain* (冰山上的来客 dir. Zhao Xinshui 赵心水, 1963) and *Serfs* (农奴 dir. Li Jun 李俊, 1963) also could not escape a similar fate. In fact, during the whole socialist period, the majority of minority film productions occurred during the first seventeen years of the PRC from 1949 to 1966. The Cultural Revolution was a dry period for this film genre. In this sense, minority feature films made in Maoist China only cover those made during the seventeen-year period. Due to this historical fact, my dissertation uses the term *socialist minority films* to refer to feature films made in the seventeen-year period from 1949 to 1966.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, these banned socialist minority films were allowed to return to theaters. Meanwhile, the political climate changed again; in the post-Mao era, especially from the 1980s to the 1990s, ethnic minority cinema production resumed and soon reached its second golden age. According to scholar Hu Puzhong, from 1977 to 1999, about 183 minority films covering thirty-three ethnic groups were completed.⁴⁰ In the Maoist years, many

³⁸ John Sisypus ed., *Mao Zedong de qishou: Jiang Qing yu wenge* 毛泽东的旗手：江青与文革 [Mao Zedong's standard bearer: Chiang Ching and Cultural Revolution] (Xixi fusi chubanshe, 2015), 78–79.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴⁰ Hu Puzhong 胡谱忠, "Xin Zhongguo minzu tici dianying qishi zai" 新中国民族题材电影七十载 [The seventy years of the minority-themed films in new China], *Film Art*, no. 5 (2019): 38.

minority films were made by Han filmmakers or by Han-dominated film crews. But in the 1980s and 1990s, besides the Han, increasingly more minority filmmakers joined the film field and contributed to the production of minority films. The collective fever for minority films gradually declined in the PRC during this second golden age.

Research on Ethnic Minority Films

A large body of scholarship focuses on Chinese ethnic minority films. From the historical perspective, several manuscripts contribute to outlining the development of minority film production in China from the Republican period to the present. Some of these works focus on regional studies to discuss films about ethnic minorities living in a specific place. Among these works, Yunnan, the multiethnic region that has become very famous nationally and globally due to its flourishing ethnic tourism, is a favorite topic.⁴¹ Several books also investigate the general history of minority films in China. Most of these studies fit a similar pattern. For instance, *The History of Chinese Ethnic Minority Film*, following the chronological order, comprehensively outlines the development of minority film productions in China, connects minority films with influential political events, and provides basic content information about the typical minority films produced in different historical phases.⁴² Regarding the socialist period, this book offers a more detailed periodization based on the influential cultural events and changed ethnic policies, which help show how filmmaking resonated with politics.

⁴¹ For instance, Zhang Tingting 张婷婷, *Yunnan shaoshu minzu dianying xushi bianqian yu chuanbo yanjiu* 云南少数民族电影叙事变迁与传播研究 [On the changing narratives and spread of Yunnan ethnic minority films] (Kunming: Yunnan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2017).

⁴² See Rao Shuguang 饶曙光 et al., ed., *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu dianyingshi* (Beijing: China Film Press, 2011). Many studies fit in a similar pattern. For example, Hu Puzhong 胡谱忠, *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu tici dianyingyanjiu* 中国少数民族题材电影研究 [Studies on Chinese ethnic minority-themed films] (Beijing: China International Radio Press, 2013).

Wuershan's examination of the history of ethnic minority films also follows a similar approach, but he enlarges the scope of minority films. According to Wuershan, there are four types of ethnic-themed films: "Han-made minority films, minority films made by directors from the same ethnicity, minority films made by non-Han directors from another ethnicity, and the national and overseas films about the Qing court."⁴³ Based on Wuershan's categorization, the socialist minority film list remains almost the same as those of other scholars. In the reform era after 1976, more differences appear. For instance, Wuershan identifies *The Last Empress* (末代皇后 dir. Chen Jialin 陈家林 and Sun Qingguo 孙清国, 1987), *Burning of the Imperial Palace* (火烧圆明园 dir. Li Han-hsiang 李翰祥, 1983), and *Border Town* (边城 dir. Ling Zifeng 凌子风, 1984) as minority films. This categorization is uncommon. In fact, in the PRC, films about Manchu rulers are often classified as historical costume drama instead of minority films. Thus, despite officially gaining ethnic status in the PRC, the Manchu's position in the film field remains awkward. Films about Manchu royal families, for example, are often excluded from the minority film category. The film *Border Town* is adapted from a short story written by a canonized writer named Shen Congwen 沈从文, who obsessively focused on his multiethnic hometown, Xiangxi. Interestingly, Shen once claimed to be Han in the Republican era but converted to Miao in the PRC. Shen's case is a typical example of how ethnic classification regroupes people's ethnic identity. Some Chinese scholars suggest that Shen's writings should not be discussed as minority work since such an approach will result in overinterpretation. The Manchu writer Lao She 老舍 gets similar treatment in Chinese academia, even though his ethnic identity remains unchanged.⁴⁴ Whether the abovementioned

⁴³ Wuershan 乌尔善, *Shaoshu minzu dianying wenhua* 少数民族电影文化 [Ethnic minority film culture] (Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2015), 30–31.

⁴⁴ See Liu Daxian 刘大先, *Xiandai Zhongguo yu shaoshu minzu wenxue* 现代中国与少数民族文学 [Modern China and minority literature] (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2013), 125. Liu's interpretation is unclear here. He

films belong to the ethnic minority genre is controversial in Chinese academia. Nevertheless, Wuershan's categorization reveals the ambiguous tendency regarding the scope of minority films in the reform era. In the new period, filmmakers were no longer satisfied with simply copying the old film paradigm confirmed in Maoist China. Relying on hybridization and experiments, more new attempts to break the restriction of the socialist pattern emerged. Accordingly, the generic boundary in this process loosened. In the 1990s, responding to the blurred generic boundary, several scholars proposed redefining the term *minority films*.⁴⁵

At this point, I must digress to clarify the minority films that will be discussed in this dissertation. My research mainly focuses on the seventeen-year period and feature films. The boundary of minority feature films in this period is relatively clear and uncontroversial. The socialist minority films under examination in this dissertation are those achieving consensus among film experts, audiences, and the government. To discuss the afterlife of socialist minority films, this dissertation extends into the early post-Mao era, especially the 1980s and 1990s. The discussion remains tied to socialist minority films, however. I aim to explore how these films impacted and were impacted in the post-Mao context to comprehensively render the organic development of this genre from its origins to its blossoming age and to its decline. Based on this

argues that treating Shen's and Lao She's works as minority writings will result in overinterpretation. But this argument is not well-supported by in-depth explanations. Liu's study somewhat represents the general attitude of Chinese scholars toward writers like Shen Congwen and Lao She. As these writers are canonized, their ethnic identities are always disregarded, but the exclusion always lacks persuasive explanations in Chinese academia. In the West, Carles Prado-Fonts has conducted an interesting study on Lao She, which highlights the influence of Lao She's Manchu identity in his writings. See "Beneath Two Red Banners: Lao She as a Manchu Writer in Modern China," in *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, ed. Shu-Mei Shih, Chien-Hsin Tasi, and Brian Bernard (New York: Colombia University Press, 2013), 353–63.

⁴⁵ See Wang Zhimin 王志敏, "Shaoshu minzu dianying de gainian jieding wenti" 少数民族电影的概念界定问题 [The issue of the definition of ethnic minority film], in *Lun Zhongguo shaoshu minzu dianying* [On Chinese ethnic minority film], ed. Chinese Filmmakers Association (Chinese Film Press, 1997), 161–72. He Ming 何明, "Shixi shaoshu minzu tica dianying de wentihua goucheng yaosu" 试析少数民族题材电影的文化构成要素 [On the cultural components of minority-themed films], in *Lun shaoshu minzu dianying*, 266–72. In Chapter 4, I have a detailed interpretation of the academic discussion regarding ethnic minority films in the 1990s.

purpose, for the minority films made in the 1980s and 1990s, I consider keeping the ambiguous filmic category. I further argue that this ambiguity not only stems from how filmmakers react to the socialist minority film pattern but also reflects the 1980s' and 1990s' cultural, social, and political contexts. Thus, instead of engaging with the debate about the definition and rubric of minority films, I treat this ambiguity as the focal point of my research to study the motivation, influence, and underlying meaning behind the blurred generic boundary of minority films in the 1980s and 1990s.

Returning to the research about the history of Chinese minority films, scholars in the West also do relevant studies. Paul Clark's research on this topic focuses on filmic exoticism. He indicates that the flourishing and decline of minority films in different historical phases depend on whether the films could provide the expected exoticism to Chinese audiences.⁴⁶ Regarding the fever for minority films in Maoist China, he states the following: "After 1949, with fewer, mostly Soviet, foreign films on Chinese screens, the search for the exotic led Chinese filmmakers and filmgoers to the most non-Chinese parts and peoples of China, her minority ties in the northwest and southeast."⁴⁷ Clark's argument is built on two assumptions: first, the core function of minority films in the PRC for filmmakers and audiences should be exoticism. Second, minority films could be the substitute for foreign films. These assumptions are not well-explained in Clark's article, however. The main issues relate to how Chinese filmmakers and moviegoers understand the function of minority films and whether the foreign exotics really could be replaced by minority films. After all, foreign films were not so rare, even in the Mao years when the PRC strictly guarded Western culture. The government selected some Western and Japanese films that aligned with the

⁴⁶ Paul Clark, "Ethnic Minorities in Chinese Films: Cinema and the Exotic," *East-West Film Journal*, June 1987: 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

PRC's standard of *progressive films*, dubbed them into Mandarin, and released them to the masses. Foreign film weeks were launched often as well. Chinese audiences could also consume Western exotics from the selected Hong Kong leftist films, which always represented Western lifestyles. Moreover, a group of Western films was still allowed to circulate in the PRC in the name of criticizing the Western spiritual pollution. The PRC filmmakers and audiences thus had the choice to access foreign exotics. In this context, then, the way in which these Chinese filmmakers and audiences understand minority films should be reexamined.

Besides history, scrutinizing the Han and non-Han relationship in the PRC through the lens of minority films is a general research angle. Scholars decipher how Han-centrism is embedded in minority films based on textual studies. The abovementioned film scholars Yingjin Zhang and Chris Berry have conducted inspiring research on this aspect. According to these scholars, Chinese minority films intentionally or unintentionally objectify minorities to cater to Han-centrism and national propaganda. As Zhang indicates, “the outcome of locating a national style in ethnic cultural practices was never a restoration of minority cultures to a majority status, but always a legitimization of minority peoples as part of the solidarity of the Chinese nation.”⁴⁸ He further uses *Five Golden Flowers* as an example to prove that how ethnic harmony is portrayed in minority films confirms “both the necessity and legitimacy of the state discourse in maintaining Han cultural hegemony.”⁴⁹ For Zhang, this Han-centric tendency does not change in the post-Mao era.⁵⁰ But not all scholars agree. Chris Berry proposes that, in the reform era, Chinese filmmakers “use the ambiguity of art and motivated signs to undercut the fundamental assumption of a coherent,

⁴⁸ Zhang, *Screening China*, 163.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁵⁰ See similar argument in Kwai-Cheung Lo, “Two Moments of Ethnic Representation in Tian Zhuangzhuang’s Minority Films,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 3, no. 3 (2009): 231–47.

positive ‘race’ unity and to question many of the cinematic traditions that grew up around that assumption.”⁵¹ He uses *Sacrificed Youth* (青春祭 dir. Zhang Nuanxin 张暖忻, 1985) as an example to show that “this film does not accept that all aspects of Han culture are necessarily superior to Dai culture.”⁵² Nevertheless, Han-centrism is a core concern in Chinese minority film studies.

Yet not all scholars stick to the topic of Han-centrism. For instance, Ling Zhang researched the socialist minority film *Five Golden Flowers*. Instead of obsessing over the mechanism of Han-centrism, she focuses on the aspect of the genre, locates this socialist film in the framework of world road movies, and points to the potential of this film to renew the understating of the road movie genre defined by the West. According to Zhang, *Five Golden Flowers* “challenges the thematic and stylistic definitions and complexities attributed to the ‘road movie.’”⁵³ Unlike the Western road movies highlighting uprooting and deviation, socialist road movies display “a future-oriented socialist utopia” by emphasizing ethnic inclusivity, agricultural collectivity, and community consolidation.⁵⁴ Zhang’s study somewhat jumps outside the general approach, which fixes minority films in the context of Chinese cinema, and explores the connection between the PRC-made films and world cinema.

The previous scholarship significantly contributes to Chinese minority film studies, especially the films produced before 2000. Notably, however, most scholarship centers on the narrative and diegesis and overwhelmingly relies on filmic texts *per se* to study the film

⁵¹ Berry, “Race,” 51.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵³ Ling Zhang, “Navigating Gender, Ethnicity, and Space: Five Golden Flowers as a Socialist Road Movie,” in *The Global Road Movie: Alternative Journeys around the World*, ed. Jose Duarte and Timothy Corrigan, (IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 151.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 151–52.

representation of ethnic minorities in plots. While I acknowledge the significance of texts, I also argue that this approach leaves the function and influence of extra-diegesis and non-narrative strategies in films unattended. Besides the plot, non-narrative strategies, such as props and sets, also can help convey information to spectators. In addition, Xiaoning Lu indicates that the previous research aligning with the filmic representation of minorities “run[s] the risk of asserting ethnicity as a product of textual effect and undermining the CCP’s political endeavor to construct ethnicity.”⁵⁵ She instead turns her focus to performance and spectatorship. Lu examines how the extra-diegetic information about cross-ethnic performance engages with the images shown in diegesis in Maoist China. She states, “The discrepancies inherent in film narratives together with widely circulated extra-cinematic discourse of ethnicity help elicit, not identification, but recognition across the ethnic boundary in historically situated audiences.”⁵⁶ Lu’s approach extends the research focus to examine how the extra-diegesis influences moviegoing and film reception. As her study shows, the extra-diegesis can be an alternative perspective from which to scrutinize minority films. Nevertheless, her research still emphasizes the performance of the Han actors, which leads to another shared issue of the prior scholarship: the approach centering on the Han and Han discourses.

As mentioned, many scholars aim to decipher the mechanism of Han-centrism and the corresponding cultural assimilation. It is necessary to admit the significant contribution of this approach to criticizing Han-centrism. But I also argue that the approach tends to simplify the complicated discourses appearing in minority film production, consumption, and circulation.

⁵⁵ Xiaoning Lu, “The Politics of Recognition and Constructing Socialist Subjectivity: Reexamining the National Minority Film (1949–1966),” *Journal of Contemporary China*, no. 86 (2014): 374.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

These studies overwhelmingly obsess over finding clues of the ubiquitous Han-centrism, which somewhat forms the impression that only one voice—the Han-centered national discourse—exists in minority films. Is this tendency a kind of Han-centrism-oriented point of view (POV) in research? Further, these studies fall into a type of one-way analysis, which just repeats how the national discourse articulates its order and interpellation to the masses through films. However, can other voices, such as minority or Han filmmakers' opinions, exist and speak in the different phases of minority film production, circulation, and consumption? What are the reactions of ethnic minorities to the national discourse? Do they remain suspicious, do they actively accept these narratives without hesitation, or are they forced to accept these national rules and orders? Even if they accept the national discourse without hesitation, how does this acceptance actually play out? Is the national discourse so beyond reproach that it completely mutes other voices? These questions cannot be sufficiently answered by the previous research. I do not imply that the approach that emphasizes criticizing Han-centrism is wrong, nor do I reject the work of Han-centrism in minority films. But I argue that, in deciphering the mechanism of Han-centrism, one also needs to hear voices representing other forces besides the nation-state. Finding a new approach to expand the discussion to cover the various voices and unfold the organic dynamics among these discourses once intervening in minority film production and consumption is valuable.

The one-direction study approach also projects its shadow in fixing minority film studies in the context of the PRC. Most of the previous studies about minority films made from the 1950s to the 1990s stick to the PRC in discussing the national flow of minority films and their influence on PRC audiences. However, these minority films were spread outside the national boundary and consumed transnationally and translocally. Some minority films, even from the preparation stage, had maintained plans to access international audiences. For instance, before the film *Five Golden*

Flowers was shot, the government had decided the film would be released abroad. Adjustments, accordingly, were made to achieve this goal. Xia Yan 夏衍, the film veteran and political leader guiding the PRC film production in the Maoist period, ordered that the film should neither appear to be a political slogan nor mention the Communist Party, Chairman Mao, or the People's Commune.⁵⁷ By softening the political and ideological dimensions of the film, Xia Yan hoped that *Five Golden Flowers* could successfully connect with the international film market. This case explicitly reveals the existence and articulation of various forces in minority film production and exposes how the national discourse might yield to other voices. The film *Ashima* (阿诗玛 dir. Liu Qiong 刘琼, 1964) is another example. Before the film crew was confirmed, as the cameraman Xu Qi recalled, this film's destiny of "going abroad" had been determined.⁵⁸ These cases emphasize the significance of the overseas market. The current studies have not included the overseas market, its reactions, or its influence in the discussion of socialist minority films. Nevertheless, although the field of Chinese minority film studies has gained many significant achievements, many topics still need in-depth examination.

My dissertation aims to fill the abovementioned blank spots to provide a more comprehensive scrutinization of minority film production, circulation, and consumption nationally, transnationally, and translocally, with an emphasis on the socialist period and an overview of the early post-Mao era in the 1980s and 1990s. I argue that ethnic minority films—including filmic texts, productions, consumptions, and circulations—function as the site in which the nation-state, the Han, ethnic minorities, and the rest of the world interact to negotiate their relative relationships

⁵⁷ Yang Kewei 杨克伟 and Jin Yue 金悦, *Yongyuan de Ashima—Yang Likun 永远的阿诗玛——杨丽坤* [Forever Ashima—Yang Likun] (Kunming: Yunnan People's Publishing House, 2015), 36.

⁵⁸ Xu Qi 许琦 and Tian Yi 天逸, "Ashima shiyingtán" 《阿诗玛》摄影谈 [On the photography of Ashima], *Film Art*, no. 1 (2000): 87.

and subjectivities. This dissertation intends to explore the subtle and complicated dynamics among the voices respectively representing the four forces. In communications and negotiations, these voices may come to terms with each other and thus become more homogenous in some cases. At the same time, the voices can compete and divide to be more heterogeneous. Collaboration, compromise, competition, and confrontation are shown in producing, consuming, circulating, and discussing socialist minority films. The dynamic process of how each voice impacts and reacts to the impact of others is the core focus of my dissertation.

The previous studies on Chinese minority films often fit the theoretical framework of the national cinema to discuss how films contribute to the construction of a Han-centered coherent nation-state. In cinema studies, the history of research into the “taken-for-granted” area of national cinema, as scholars Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie summarize, traces back to the 1960s, accompanying the development of theories on nation and nationhood.⁵⁹ The research topics of national cinema range from cinematic archaeology of the origin of the nation to the discussion on how cinema contributes to the emergence and maintenance of nationalism. Relying on the theoretical approach of national cinema to discuss how national consciousness is produced and maintained in filmic representation is easy. Undoubtedly, deciphering how socialist minority films contribute to the construction of the nation-state is the purpose of scholars working on Chinese minority films. But it is inspiring to know that national cinema scholars never restrict their studies to narratives and storytelling. For example, in “Themes of Nation,” Hjort relies on Michael Billig’s banal nationalism, which “is a matter of seemingly trivial evocations or indirect references to the nation in the news, sports and weather reports, among other things.”⁶⁰ Hjort also turns her focus to

⁵⁹ Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie ed., *Cinema and Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2000), intro. 3.

⁶⁰ Mette Hjort, “Themes of Nation,” in *Cinema and Nation*, 100.

the inconspicuous visual details in films. Rather than examining the grand national narrative, she puts the repetitive props and decorations—which symbolize the nation, such as the national flags and photos of the royal family—in the spotlight and interprets how these props work on the audience and conspire with the interpellation of the nation. Hjort’s study suggests the significance of the non-narrative elements and factors in films. This aspect is also ignored in prior Chinese minority film studies.

To make up for this missing aspect, the first chapter of this dissertation relies on the less-studied non-narrative cinematic strategies—including props, art design, and opening sequences—to examine the formation of the socialist minority film pattern in the seventeen-year period and the construction of the expected images of ethnic minorities in the national discourse. This chapter primarily covers how national discourse is embedded in the cinematic spatial reconstruction and the shaping of the ethnic minority body. By studying the visual and auditory information in opening sequences and analyzing the functions of props in set designs, I argue that these minority films represent ethnic minority regions as dangerous places under surveillance, motivate nationalism, and cinematically accomplish the socialist reforms in minority history, spaces, and geopolitics. Prior studies on the socialist minority genre have primarily centered on how minority roles are portrayed as happy, smiling supporters of the Party, leaving the topic of illness unexplored. The second section of this chapter then examines the cinematic portrayals of minority sickness. I argue that socialist minority films construct minority sick bodies as a metaphor for the legacy of multiple exploitations. I then turn to the non-narrative approach and concentrate on the function of a significant prop in these films—the stethoscope. Through the interpretation of three keywords—distance, quietness, and listening—in scenes that include the stethoscope, I argue that this prop contributes to building a hierarchical structure of power and knowledge form: the Han people are

the insightful investigators gifted with the ability to unlock knowledge, while ethnic minority groups are always relegated to being the target of investigation. In filmic imaginations, with the measure and regulation of modern medical instruments, minorities are relegated to positions where they are expected to conform to modern socialist health standards and gain socialist enlightenment by relying on physical healing. But they are just exhibits/onlookers who amplify the magic charm of modernity rather than modern subjects. Meanwhile, illness in films represents ethnicity in relation to gender to reveal a multilayered hierarchical structure in ethnic issues. In such depictions, the socialist minority genre highlights the power of the female community, grants minority women the right to transcend ethnic boundaries, and empowers minority women with respect to gender, the right to speak, and politics. In this way, the gender hierarchy in minority communities is remodeled following the socialist discourse.

Studying socialist minority films should not only discuss the impact of the national discourse but also stress the need to hear other voices, especially the marginal discourse. The theoretical framework of Shu-mei Shih's Sinophone theories is helpful in this aspect. According to Shih, Sinophone theories "study the Sinitic-language communities and cultures outside China as well as ethnic minority communities and cultures within China where Mandarin is adopted or imposed."⁶¹ She further explains that this framework will be a site "of both longing for and rejection of various constructions of Chineseness; of both nationalism of the long-distance kind, anti-Chinese politics, or even nonrelation with China."⁶² However, some scholars have challenged this theory and proposed alternatives, especially regarding the scope of the Sinophone. As Sheldon

⁶¹ Shu-mei Shih, "What Is Sinophone Studies?" *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, ed. Shu-Mei Shih, Chien-Hsin Tasi, Brian Bernard (New York: Colombia University Press, 2013), 11.

⁶² Shu-mei Shih, "Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production," in *Sinophone Studies*, 33.

Lu mentions, Shih's Sinophone "is predicated upon the exclusion of China in the same way Francophone is built on the exclusion of France."⁶³ Based on differences between China and France in terms of colonial history and the fact that "the cinema, culture, history, languages, and dialects of Mainland China are bound with . . . the periphery in the same way as minor Sinophone cultures,"⁶⁴ Lu proposes expanding the scope of the Sinophone to embrace "China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, and the Chinese diaspora."⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Shih's Sinophone theories suggest a focus shift from the Han/China to the peripheries and encourage addressing the crucial voices of the Sinophone communities. These aspects provide the theoretical support to explore ethnic minorities' discourses in ethnic minority film practices. Notably, the minority voice is another disregarded topic in previous studies, one that will be examined in the second chapter of this dissertation.

Distinguishing between the diegesis-centered approach to studying the representation of ethnic minorities in film, chapter two involves extra-diegetic activities and investigates the two important ways that minorities participated in ethnic minority film production: as playwrights and as actors. I specifically highlight the voices of ethnic minorities. By respectively examining scriptwriting and revision, and performance training and practice, this chapter reveals the interactions between the national interpellation and ethnic minorities' reactions. The first section concentrates on minority writers' scriptwriting and editing process. I select Mongolian writer Malqinhu 玛拉沁夫 as an example and scrutinize the subtle changes in his first three scripts—the

⁶³ Sheldon H. Lu, "Genealogies of Four Critical Paradigms in Chinese-Language Film Studies," in *Sinophone Cinemas*, ed. Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 22.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

independent short story, the first script written under the supervision of a Han writer, and the subsequent minority script. Malqinhu's writings show the very process of how Han-centered official discourse trained minorities to follow the expected pattern. Minority scriptwriting in the seventeen-year period constituted not pure personal expression but rather a training camp and self-reform reports. In scriptwriting, minority screenwriters got pedagogical lessons to master the Father's language—the national discourse—on the one hand; on the other hand, the playwrights reported their self-reforms in absorbing the national discourse. But the heterogeneous discourses of minorities in some cases could be tolerated. Malqinhu's scriptwriting further indicates that minorities could insist on expressing their own opinions instead of simply mimicking taught words. Through reconstructing the gender hierarchy between the Han and Mongols, Malqinhu deconstructs Han-centrism and spotlights his Mongol-dominant POV. Ethnic minority performance in the seventeen-year period underwent a similar process. *Speak bitterness* sessions were the routinized activities in socialist minority performance training. I argue that national discourse took advantage of this typical performance training to discipline and rectify the bodies, affect, and behaviors of minority actors. Minority actors, in the name of experiencing their part, acquired class feelings and accomplished socialist reform both physically and psychologically. But they still had the chance to negotiate with the national interpellation. Their subjectivity and self-consciousness can be found in their vocational choices, creative performances, and their marginal positions in film crews (for example, taking minor roles or being extras).

To some degree, minority films function as the national cinema to contribute to cinematically constructing the nation-state and cultivating nationalism. But as Sheldon Lu states, "A pure, clean, distinct national cinema can never exist."⁶⁶ Even for national cinema, it "can only

⁶⁶ Sheldon Lu, ed., *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 25.

be understood in its properly transnational context.”⁶⁷ As the abovementioned examples, such as *Five Golden Flowers* and *Ashima*, reflect, minority films in the socialist period were never restricted to the domestic market but actively joined transnational and translocal circulations. The life of a film after it is spread and consumed outside the national boundary has been studied in transnational cinema theories. In “How Movies Move (between Hong Kong and Bulawayo, between Screen and Stage),” Lesley Stern explains that the consumption of Hong Kong action cinema in Bulawayo nourished the emergence of a new local public sphere.⁶⁸ A group of scholars is interested in studying Hollywood’s role in a transnational background. Miriam Hansen states that classical Hollywood cinema as the first global vernacular “provide[s] to mass audiences both at home and abroad a sensory-reflexive horizon for the experience of modernization and modernity.”⁶⁹ Inside this horizon, audiences and intellectuals in different nations can negotiate their attitudes to modernity and form their vernacular modernism[s]. In this way, as Hansen says, classical Hollywood cinema should be seen as a “scaffold, matrix, or web that allows for a wide range of aesthetic effects and experiences.”⁷⁰ Both Stern’s and Hansen’s studies reveal the localization process occurring in transnational/translocal circulation and consumption. As the cinema made in a context flows to another context, the cinema can interact with the social, cultural, and political situations of the new context and even contribute to the formation of new local culture.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁸ Lesley Stern, “How Movies Move (between Hong Kong and Bulawayo, between Screen and Stage),” *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Kathleen Newman and Natasa Durovicova (New York: Routledge, 2009), 186–216.

⁶⁹ Miriam Hansen, “Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism,” *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2000): 10.

⁷⁰ Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 229.

The theories of transnational cinema inspire the study of minority films' overseas journey. As minority films also actively joined transnational/translocal flow, what did minority films experience? How were they consumed? What kind of relationship did these films shape with the local context? These are the topics addressed in chapter three.

Hence, chapter three extends into the world outside the mainland in the socialist period, places socialist minority films in a global context, and unfolds the interaction between the discourse of the rest of the world and minority films. To provide an in-depth study on the reception of these films outside the mainland, this chapter zooms in to an important base of Hong Kong, which was still a British colony during the Cold War; explores how this Sinophone community reacted to socialist minority films; and discusses Hong Kong filmmakers' efforts to transnationally and translocally circulate socialist minority films and the Hong Kong-made imitative works of these films. The first section of the chapter discusses the fever for *Third Sister Liu* (刘三姐 dir. Su Li 苏里, 1961) in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. I argue that, in the transnational/translocal consumption, the PRC's national discourse and political information—such as Han-centrism, national fraternity, and class struggle, which were painstakingly embedded in socialist minority films—would be undermined, replaced, and even cut off in different forms and to varying extents. New meanings rooted in the local contexts were endowed within the consumed films. Moviegoing thus became the dual process of decoding and recoding meanings of socialist minority films. The popularity of minority films like *Third Sister Liu* triggered imitations from Hong Kong filmmakers. Yet both camps in the Hong Kong film community—the pro-Taiwan and the pro-PRC filmmakers—contributed to producing imitations of socialist minority films in the 1960s. This chapter selects two films respectively representing the two camps—*The Songfest* (山歌姻缘 dir. Yuan Chiu-Feng 袁秋枫, 1965), made by Shaw Brothers, and *Golden Eagle* (金鹰 dir. Chan Ching-

Po 陈静波, 1964), made by the leftist Feng Huang company—as examples to explain the features of Hong Kong-made imitations. I argue that, in the process of mimicking the different aspects of the socialist ethnic minority film pattern, Hong Kong filmmakers departed from the socialist discourse and tied their films to Hong Kong’s particular geopolitical status, social situation, and identity anxiety. Socialist minority films, in this sense, offered Hong Kongers room to reflect on local issues and express their growing local consciousness. The transnational/translocal consumption of socialist minority films exposes that the embedded national discourse can hardly achieve its expected effect to the same extent among spectators. The possibility and opportunity to escape from political and ideological surveillance are always there.

Even though this dissertation mainly focuses on the seventeen-year era, the 1980s and 1990s must also be involved in the discussion because the two decades were the epilogue of socialist minority films, their wide production, and their consumption. In this period, the socialist pattern on the one side was continued; on the other side, however, the pattern was broken by new filmic experiments. This chapter follows a telescope structure, starting with the introduction of the social and political context in the post-Mao era, widening to focus on the changes in the film field, and finally zooming in on the focal point of the chapter—the meaning and impact of minority films and how the genre transformed during the early reform period. In contrast to the Maoist period, the minority genre in the 1980s and 1990s actively engaged with genre hybridizations, wider cross-ethnic writings, pan-entertainment, commercialization, and globalization. As a result, a broad spectrum of minority films emerged. These films challenged the authority of the socialist pattern, problematized the definition of “ethnic minority film,” and complicated the relational system involving minorities. The discourse of the Han filmmakers gradually showed differences from Maoist China during this period. The potential “rebels” among the Han majority emerged. To

illustrate this point, I use Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮's 1980s minority films to discuss how the potential rebels among the Han reflect Han-centrism and the center-periphery structure. Cases such as Tian reveal the interchangeable relationship between the center and the periphery—and ultimately highlight the potential of the periphery. By examining the soundscape of *On the Hunting Ground* (猎场札撒, 1984), I argue that Tian's double-layered soundtrack contributes to providing a new point of audition and a sensory reflexive horizon that exposes the Han to the marginalized socialist minority sensation. Audiences thus need to rely on the sensory-reflexive horizon to construct the concrete meaning of the self. In this way, Tian uses the periphery as a powerful weapon to criticize, instead of maintaining or defending, the discourse of Han-centered national discourse.

This dissertation is a comprehensive examination of socialist minority films from 1949 to 1999. My study is not confined to the repertory of individual film texts. Rather, I embrace the significant activities in the process of film production, performance, consumption, circulation, and reproduction from national and global perspectives and integrate these activities with filmic texts to explore the function and influence of socialist minority films. I argue that socialist minority films and related film activities drew the space and provided the platform for knowledge productions and discourse competitions from 1949 to 1999. Agents including the nation, the Han Chinese, ethnic minorities, and the rest of the world joined this space to construct and adjust relative relations by re/telling, performing, consuming, and discussing the screen images of Chinese ethnic minorities. Consequently, in communications, the four agents are involved in the interactions of collaboration, compromise, competition, and confrontation. Meanwhile, exclusion, rectification, and repression also happened because of the uneven power structure of the four

agents. Socialist minority films thus not only construct and spread the onscreen images of ethnic minorities but also complicate the discourse dynamics amongst these four agents.

Chapter 1

Reforming the Borderland:

The Geopolitics, Space, and Body of Ethnic Minorities in Socialist Minority Films

In 1949, the CCP unified the mainland and promoted socialism as the new regime in China. Finding the way to effectively rule this new nation-state became a tough task for the CCP. Facing this urgent issue, on the eve of the establishment of the PRC, the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee laid out the significance of cinema: “Film art can reach the widest masses and achieve [a] powerful propaganda effect. We must strengthen the film industry and take advantage of it to propagate the achievements of the CCP’s new democratic revolution and nation-building project both nationally and internationally.”¹ This official attitude regarding the importance of films was closely tied to Chairman Mao Zedong’s doctrines in the function of literature and art. In 1942, at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art, Mao indicated that “victory over the enemy depends primarily on armies with guns in their hands, but this kind of army alone is not enough. We still need a cultural army, since this kind of army is indispensable in achieving unity among ourselves and winning victory over the enemy.”² Cinema thus was one among many cultural forms in the arsenal of the CCP’s cultural army in the PRC. PRC filmmakers were eager to answer the Party’s call. But what content the films depicted and how they depicted it became central concerns.

In 1950, the government started to guide the PRC’s filmmaking by scheduling annual film production plans. The Ministry of Culture, for instance, issued the plan for 1951, in which the

¹ Hu Jubin 胡菊彬, *Xin Zhongguo dianying yishixingtai shi* 新中国电影意识形态史 1949-1976 [The history of ideology in new China cinema 1949–1976] (Beijing: China Radio Film & TV Press), 4.

² Bonnie S. McDougall, “*Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art*”: *A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1980), 57.

Party scheduled to complete eighteen new films reflecting eleven themes.³ Among these suggested themes, a new topic stood out—films about ethnic minorities. This topic reflected the Party’s political attitude toward ethnic minorities. As both the Constitution of the PRC and the Common Program announced, ethnic minorities were an indispensable part of the PRC. Ethnic minority film production had thus been on the agenda since the 1950s. Each year, the state-owned film studios had to plan to shoot several titles specializing in ethnic minorities. The government also attached importance to the filmmaking of this topic. As filmmaker Wang Gongpu 王公浦 indicated, in Maoist China (1949–1976), “government leaders like Premier Zhou Enlai and film veterans like Xia Yan and Chen Huangmei 陈荒煤 put a high premium on the production of ethnic minority films. Their help and support brought the golden age of this genre.”⁴

The insiders’ narrative reveals the active participation of politics in socialist ethnic minority film production. To show the ways in which these films intertwined with politics and decipher the information the government intend to convey, this chapter focuses on Maoist China, especially the seventeen-year period (1949–1966), to discuss how the national discourse was embedded in socialist minority films.⁵ Relying on the examination of opening sequences and props, which have not been well-studied, I argue that socialist minority films take on the responsibility of producing a series of expected images of ethnic minority regions and minority people. In the filmic

³ Wu Di 吴迪, “Xin Zhongguo de wenyi shiyan: Cong 1949 dao 1966 nian de ‘renmin dianying’” 新中国的文艺实验: 1949 年到 1966 年的“人民电影” [The art and literature experiment of New China: People’s Cinema from 1949–1966], *Modern China Studies*, accessed May 20, 2020, <http://www.modernchinastudies.org/us/issues/past-issues/84-mcs-2004-issue-2/859-19491966.html>.

⁴ Gong Pu 公浦, “Tan minzu dianying zhizuo” 谈民族电影制作 [On the production of ethnic minority films], in *Lun Zhongguo shaoshu minzu dianying* 论中国少数民族电影 [On Chinese ethnic minority film], ed. [Chinese Filmmakers Association] (Beijing: Chinese Film Press, 1997), 25.

⁵ As I explained in the Introduction, the term *socialist minority films* in this dissertation refers to the ethnic minority films made in the seventeen years from 1949 to 1966.

imagination, socialist reforms are symbolically completed in minority history, geopolitics, space, and body. Ethnic minorities are, in this way, cinematically woven into the socialist discourse system.

Socialist Minority Films as a Genre

The seventeen-year period was the flourishing age of minority films. About fifty titles were made over two decades, especially during the seventeen-year period of 1949–1966. But whether the series of films can be called a specific genre becomes the core question lying at the center of Aubrey Tang’s study. Referring to the definitions of genre films proposed by scholars like Rick Altman, David Bordwell, and Kristin Thompson, Tang concludes that, from both the narrative and form aspects, minority films made in 1940–1966 “are highly malleable” and “lack clear, stable identities and borders that define its genre.”⁶ To some degree, Tang’s analysis makes sense. Hybridization is a remarkable feature of socialist socialist cinema. *The Caravan* (山间铃响马帮来 dir. Wang Weiyi 王为一, 1954) and *The Mysterious Traveler* (神秘的旅伴 dir. Lin Nong 林农 and Zhu Wenshun 朱文顺, 1955) fit the minority narrative in the pattern of the thriller and anti-spy genre. *Third Sister Liu* and *Ashima* adapt to the musical genre. Comedy also becomes an attractive factor in *Five Golden Flowers*. Romance, however, is the genre with which most minority films engage. The wide hybridization ultimately questions the specificity of socialist minority films as a type of genre. Yet notably, hybridity is a common phenomenon throughout the development of genre films. Crossing generic boundaries even becomes the source driving genre films’ consistent innovation. The emergence of new genres sometimes even builds on mixing old

⁶ Aubrey Tang, “‘Filmagining’ Ethnicities: The Making of a Chinese Nation with Film Genres and Styles between 1940 and 1963,” *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 8, no. 3 (2014): 449.

generic paradigms. If the definition of the genre should be restricted to including only certain cinematography and narrative strategies that other genres cannot render, few genre films could meet the standard. In this sense, hybridization in narratives or forms should not be the main reason to doubt whether “socialist minority cinema” could be a genre.

In fact, despite not providing an explicit definition of the minority genre in the socialist periods, filmmakers seemingly held a shared criterion in mind. Not all films with minority elements can meet the requirements of that criterion. In 1960, director Zhao Xinshui completed his first full-length feature film *Swan Goose* (鸿雁). Based on an actual event, this film, set in a multiethnic community in Changbai mountain, focuses on how the postman Li Yunfei devotes himself to serving the people. Many ethnic Korean roles actively participate in the narrative, but the filmmakers never claimed *Swan Goose* was a minority film. In 1960, *Popular Cinema* helped advertise this film. Nor did *Swan Goose* enjoy the general treatment for minority films. Instead, the film was identified as a “*jilu xing yishu pian* 纪录性艺术片 (documentary art film).”⁷ Most posters and photos in the film advertisements focused on the protagonist Li Yunfei. Even though ethnic minority roles appear in the same photos, the minority features are not highlighted as they would be in an ordinary ethnic minority film. Instead, the actors are covered in ordinary Han-style

⁷ “Changying chang jiluxing yishupian Hongyan de jingtou,”长影厂纪录性艺术片《鸿雁》的镜头[Shots of documentary art film *Swan Goose* produced by Changying], *Popular Cinema*, no. 11 (1960): 31. Starting in 1958, Premier Zhou Enlai encouraged filmmakers to produce documentaries with artistic value. Filmmakers then understood Zhou’s words as a political directive and launched the documentary art film movement. This type of film intends to adapt actual heroic events into feature films. In the following years, all three state-owned studios produced films fitting into this “new” category, for instance, *Swan Goose*, *Huang Baomei* (黄宝妹 dir. Xie Jin, 1958) and *Conquering the Tornado* (革命的风暴战胜龙卷风 dir. Tao Jin et al., 1960). This movement was stopped in 1961 when Premier Zhou officially criticized the dogmatism and exaggeration of a series of roughly made documentary art films. See Zhou Enlai 周恩来, “zai wenyi gongzuo zuotanhui he gushipian chuanguo huiyi shang de jianghua” 在文艺工作座谈会和故事片创作会议上的讲话 [Talks at Literature and Art Symposium and Feature Film Production Conference], in *Zhongguo dianying lilun wenxuan 1920-1989* [Anthology of Chinese film theories 1920–1989], ed. Luo Yijun 罗艺军 (Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 1992), 504–18.

clothes.⁸ The sense of Korean ethnicity in this film was therefore not only underscored but also intentionally undermined. This advertising strategy revealed that editors did not aim to categorize the film as an ethnic minority film. Besides editors, spectators seemingly also tacitly accepted this classification. Two film reviews were published in the same issue of *Popular Cinema* discussing how to learn from the protagonist's heroic spirit. The two spectators noticed the existence of minority roles but coincidentally called them "masses"—a general term—instead of following the common address of *ethnic brothers*.⁹ The collective silence of professional filmmakers, editors, and spectators in the minority aspect of this film demonstrates that not all films with ethnic minority roles or content can be viewed as minority films.

Then what does constitute a minority film? What is the identity or border of this type of cinema? In addressing these questions surrounding film genres in Maoist China, the influence and significance of politics and ideology cannot be ignored. The classification of ethnic minority films was deeply rooted in this context. In fact, political motivation distinguishes these films from other genres. In 1953, the Central Film Administration issued a detailed guide to clarify the political purpose of this specific genre. Minority films should "mirror the solidarity and fraternity of different ethnicities in the big family of the PRC, depict political, economic, and cultural changes in minority areas, and underscore minorities' patriotism and their passion for the PRC's nation-building project."¹⁰ This instruction suggests several crucial criteria for socialist minority films.

⁸ "Hongyan" 鸿雁 [Swan Goose], *Popular Cinema*, no. 15 (1960): 14–15.

⁹ Zhu Xuefan 朱学范, "Zuohao dang he renmin de tongxinbing: hongyan shi yibu hao yingpian 做好党和人民的通信兵: 《鸿雁》是一部好影片 [Being a good signal man for the Party and the people: *Swan Goose* is a good film], *Popular Cinema*, no. 15 (1960): 12; and Luo Shuzhen 罗淑珍, "Shidai de yingxiong women de ouxiang: Hongyan guanhou 时代的英雄我们的偶像: 影片《鸿雁》观后 [The hero of the era, an idol for all of us: A review of *Swan Goose*], *Popular Cinema*, no. 15 (1960): 17.

¹⁰ Central Film Administration, "1954-1957nian dianying gushi pian zhuti tici tishi cao'an" 1954-1957年电影故事片主题、题材提示草案 [Draft instruction on subject matters and themes of feature films from 1954 to 1957], in

They must center on the portrayals of minority protagonists and resonate with the Party's ethnic policies. Based on this rubric, despite involving minority roles and stories, *Swan Goose* still cannot qualify for the socialist minority genre since the film neither spotlights ethnic minorities nor resonates with the Party's ethnic policies. Socialist minority films, in this sense, can be seen as a political mission-oriented genre. Further, these films did gradually form a shared paradigm. The following section explores this paradigm and scrutinizes its social and political functions.

A Panoramic View of the Dangerous Places under Surveillance

Regarding the initiation of a film, some people may trace the beginning of the diegesis as the starting point. However, before this time point, the film has already unfolded in the opening sequence. As a significant component, the opening sequence wraps up the whole film but seldom draws scholars' attention. Georg Stanitzek indicates, "This lack of interest [in opening sequences] seems to have sprung from a resistance to the phenomenon of extradiegetic written text."¹¹ Undoubtedly, opening sequences are the place to credit laborers with contributing to film productions. But this economic-legal function is not the whole purpose of opening sequences. In studies on the opening sequence, Gérard Genette's work on the *paratext* in literature is influential. This term refers to the preface, author's name, title, illustration, and so on. According to Genette, the paratext "is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public."¹² He further indicates the paratext is "a threshold . . . a 'vestibule'

Zhongguo dianying yanjiu ziliao 1949-1979 中国电影研究资料 1949-1979 [Chinese film research resources 1949-1979], vol. 1, ed. Wu Di (Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 2006), 358.

¹¹ Georg Stanitzek, "Reading the Title Sequence," trans. Noelle Aplevich, *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 56.

¹² Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an ‘undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text).”¹³ Paratext in Genette’s interpretation can function as an important instruction through which readers can navigate the purposes of authors, editors, and publishers.

Film scholars observantly find the similarity between this literary concept and the opening sequence in cinema. As the exact initiation of a film, the opening sequence functions as the cinematic paratext, which creates “a divided focus of attention, the separation of the inside from the outside, of what is the play of the narrative from what is documenting the production, cinematic narrative from film commentary, intradiegetic from extradiegetic information.”¹⁴ The presence of opening sequences, in other words, functions as the threshold, providing audiences the time to adjust themselves to enter the diegesis. This transitional phase is also full of information which aims to guide spectators to explore the following diegesis in an expected way. Based on his analyses of the opening sequences in 1930s Western films, Will Straw interprets how the compositions of this series of opening sequences interweave with the expressive form of urban life and resonate with what David Henkin called “city reading.”¹⁵ In fact, the opening sequences of socialist minority films serve a similar function and construct a *minority reading* to predispose spectators on how to watch minority films and how to react to minorities and minority-related issues.

¹³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴ Stanitzek, “Reading the Title Sequence,” 45.

¹⁵ Will Straw, “Letters of Introduction: Film Credits and Cityspaces,” *Design and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2015): 155–57.

In socialist minority films, the opening sequences always use natural scenery as the background to highlight the beauty of the landscape in minority regions. In *The Dawn of Meng River* (猛河的黎明 dir. Lu Ren 鲁韧 and Zhu Danxi 朱丹西, 1955), the material support for the credits is a photo of the splendid natural scenery of the Tibetan community located on a mountain. But beauty alone does not provide complete information. Danger lurks in the beauty. The towering blockhouse in the middle of the screen destroys the peaceful scene. The depiction of such lurking dangers in minority regions is a shared topic in the opening sequences of socialist minority films. In *Bonfires in the Border Village* (边寨烽火 dir. Lin Nong, 1957), for instance, the inscription of credits appears during a close-up of some giant plant leaves, which are the typical natural resources of ethnic Jingpo areas and mirror the beautiful landscape there. This natural scene does not, however, present a serene and tranquil ambiance. The sense of danger stands out due to the movement of the plants. As a gust of wind blows, the leaves violently sway through heavy black smoke. The background music also intensifies the growing tensions. Meanwhile, the drumbeat is initially slow, but then suddenly turns to a strong, fast beat. The sound of gongs joins soon after, making the background music sound noisy. As the volume of drums and gongs turns down, a fanfare of trumpets pushes the melody to the rousing climax. Instruments like drums, gongs, and trumpets are widely used in military tunes, and the melody in the opening sequence of *Bonfires in the Border Village* vividly depicts the situation in which soldiers are called upon to fight with enemies. From the audio-visual perspective, the Jingpo community is shown as being in a dangerous situation.

The repetitive portrayals of the dangerous borderlands provide spectators with a first impression of ethnic minority regions. However, filmmakers seemingly have no interest in exaggerating this threat and are rather inclined to highlight that the at-risk places are under control.

The Party's military supervision is underscored through images, credits, and song lyrics. In the opening sequences of socialist minority films, a team of soldiers marching on minority territories is a common background. In *Jin Yuji* (金玉姬 dir. Wang Jiayi, 1959), the Korean heroine guiding a team of guerrillas walks through the woods and trees to approach a Korean village. *Two Patrolmen* places the credits on the scene of a team of armed soldiers patrolling a Dai community. These sequences highlight the very action of "entering." As Stanitzek highlights, "the title sequence has to deal with the systematic hiatus between titling and diegesis in the form of a lead-in into the film."¹⁶ The repeated act of "entering" is how minority films "deal with" that hiatus. The marching queue vividly represents stepping in on the screen, reminding spectators that they are entering the diegetic world. Moreover, this marching queue also foreshows the intervention of the Party's armies in the borderland communities: as the image shows, the military troops are garrisoning there. Lyrics in the auditory aspect address the Party's supervision. In *Two Patrolmen*, echoing the marching patrolmen on the screen, a majestic and rich baritone voice sings, "The border river is flowing near our feet; the white cloud is floating over our heads. We are like a team of flying eagles looking for, listening to, and watching over the enemies. We are the patrollers in the borderline defending the southern border of the nation." These lyrics suggest the geopolitical sensitivity of the minority community and address the fact that the borderland is under the control of and being defended by the Party.

The Party's supervision can also be seen in the written words—the credits. In the constantly scrolling credits, a type of name is always seen—the military armies or affiliated organizations. The opening sequence of *The Caravan* ends with the huge name of the Yunnan Military Region of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in bold font. This name is fixed in the middle of the screen

¹⁶ Stanitzek, "Reading the Title Sequence," 57.

for ten seconds to draw the audience's attention. Several minor fighting scenes appear in the film, which partly explains why the name of the military force appears. In fact, about one-third of socialist minority films include the names of armies and relevant organizations in the credits. For most of these films, however, battle scenes or wars are not important in the narratives. In *Hasen and Jiamila* (哈森与加米拉 dir. Wu Yonggang 吴永刚, 1952), the love story is the focus. The theme of war is only briefly depicted in the last fifteen minutes. Even without fierce battle scenes, the assistance of the Xinjiang Military Region of the PLA still stands out in the credits. Listing all the associated units undoubtedly is a common rule. But in Maoist China, the requirements on what should be listed in credits were not clarified. How war films in the same period treat the content of credits is an interesting phenomenon. Unlike minority films, war films like *From Victory to Victory* (南征北战 dir. Cheng Yin 成荫 and Tang Xiaodan 汤晓丹, 1952), *Shangganling Ridges* (上甘岭 dir. Sha Meng 沙蒙 and Lin Shan 林杉, 1956), *Dong Cunrui* (董存瑞 dir. Guo Wei 郭维, 1955), and *Railway Guerrilla* (铁道游击队 dir. Zhao Ming 赵明, 1956) do not list the associated military units in credits, even though all these films heavily rely on the participation and assistance of soldiers and armies. This contrast reveals the specificity of socialist minority films and implies the important meaning of the existence of the military in ethnic minority regions.

Understanding the function of the addressed military assistance in minority films' credits requires discussing the special film-viewing conventions in Maoist China. According to Xiaoning Lu, socialist films are distinguished from Hollywood films and prevent "a total immersive spectatorial experience."¹⁷ Instead of escaping from reality to get transitory amusement, socialist audiences were encouraged to treat film viewing as something that offered lessons on performing

¹⁷ Xiaoning Lu, "The Politics of Recognition and Constructing Socialist Subjectivity: Reexamining the National Minority Film (1949–1966)," *Journal of Contemporary China*, no. 86 (2014): 383.

tasks in daily life. Thus, in film viewing, the diegesis and the extra-diegesis should be organically integrated so that reality actively interweaves with the diegesis, while the stories on the screen could also extend into reality. The entangled situation between the diegesis and extra-diegesis helps shed light on the addressed military participation in the credits. For socialist audiences, the engagement of military forces helped shape the implication that the depicted ethnic minority regions were under military guard, in both the diegesis and the extra-diegesis. The re-appearance of military assistance in credits resonating with relevant images and sounds in the opening sequences conveys that the dangerous ethnic minority communities have been put under surveillance. Through this repetition, audiences have information comprehensively drilled into their minds, ensuring the audience knows the significant geopolitical status of ethnic minority regions.

As a type of minority reading, opening sequences in socialist minority films also provide concrete instructions on how to understand the geography and history of the depicted ethnic group. In Maoist China, especially in its early years, the majority was not very familiar with ethnic minorities. The opening sequences in minority files sought to make up for the lack of basic ethnic minority knowledge, especially in the 1950s, by always ending with the geopolitical and historical introduction in a male voice-over or intertitles. But importantly, these introductions also had other functions and influences. As Holger Potzsch mentions, “opening sequences also activate a certain memory-making rhetoric that enables potential impacts on historical discourse and memory politics.”¹⁸ In *The Gold and Silver River Band* (金银滩 dir. Ling Zifeng, 1953), the intertitle reads as follows: “On the grassland of Northwestern China, Tibetan compatriots follow the nomadic

¹⁸ Holger Potzsch, “Framing Narratives: Opening Sequences in Contemporary American and British War Films,” *Media, War & Conflict* 5, no. 2 (2012): 155.

lifestyle. For so many years, they were suffering under the repression and deceit of the KMT [the Kuomintang]. Vendettas, therefore, happened among tribes. Tibetan people were engulfed by poverty and pain.” Based on the intertitle, spectators can easily identify the geolocation of the Tibetan community. More importantly, the intertitle also works on memory-making and history rewriting. In the narration of the intertitle, the pre-1949 history of the Tibetan community contains abundant pain and chaos; Tibetan people become the victims of the abuse of the cruel KMT. This standard pattern is used to recount the past in Maoist China. Whether or not the narrative is completely true matters little. The crucial purpose is instead to rephrase and transcribe minority history in a socialist way and fit minorities to the socialist framework, at least in cultural products. The intertitle offers an official example of how to re-narrate minority history through socialist discourse, which transforms the opening sequence into a pedagogical exercise in which the standardized national language is taught and repeated. The intertitle further links the Tibetans with the Han by emphasizing the shared experience under the reactionary regime of the KMT. Even when unfamiliar with minorities, the majority in the PRC knew this discourse pattern very well since they were the victims of the KMT in the socialist national discourse. The shared tragic past and the same enemy aim to call for comradeship among the PRC audiences.

Notably, as socialist audiences collectively attended ethnic minority film screenings, the crucial items, which according to Benedict Anderson could raise national consciousness, were assembled. According to Anderson, the emergence of nationalism relies on several conditions: print-language, calendrical consciousness, deep and horizontal comradeship, and the collective consumption of mediated communication.¹⁹ For the opening sequences in socialist minority films,

¹⁹ See detailed explanations in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

the standard historical narrative in socialist language functions as Benedict's national print-languages, which "were of central ideological and political importance."²⁰ The shared tragic history between the Han and non-Han under the exploitation of the KMT ultimately helps cultivate comradeship and calendrical consciousness. In collective screenings, opening sequences became an important site to train the passion for nationalism in Maoist China.

Cinematic Spatial Reforms in Ethnic Minority Communities

The opening sequences give spectators an overview of minority regions, especially their assigned position on the PRC geopolitical map. Stepping across the threshold, spectators can enter the diegesis to explore the inside of ethnic minority communities. The minority regions in socialist minority films are always separated into three spaces: the CCP's workgroup,²¹ the minority house, and the shelter of enemies. Through the cinematic construction of the three spaces, these films respectively visualize the distinct personas of the CCP, model minorities, and reactionaries—to express the complicated relationships among all three.

Minority films always carve a space for the CCP's workgroup in minority communities, which continue the narrative in opening sequences about the intervention of the Party. How to set up this space was not a pure artistic issue in the seventeen years but intertwined with politics. Director Gan Xuewei recalled a story when Premier Zhou watched the first socialist ethnic minority film, *The Springtime in Inner Mongolia* (1950). Upon noticing the special set of the CCP's office in the film, Zhou asked about the motivation for the design. Gan then replied, "I think

²⁰ Ibid., 67.

²¹ Socialist Minority films set in ancient China (e.g., *Third Sister Liu*) may not include the CCP's space in diegesis, but these types of films were not prominent in the socialist era.

we have liberated China. [Thus] our Party's organizations should be magnificent with style and decent."²² But Zhou corrected Gan and suggested that "[the CCP's office] should be austere [*pusu* 朴素]."²³ Austerity, in fact, is the very style of the CCP's space in minority films. The film *The Caravan* tells a story about the CCP's cadres in a multiethnic community smashing the KMT's sabotage with the help of the Miao and Hani people. Following the visits of minority fellows to the workgroup, the film provides a visual tour of the CCP's office. Rough-hewn and rustic elements occupy the space. All the desks and chairs are made of ordinary wood materials in a simple shape without elaborate paint or decorations. In socialist minority films, such pieces are the typical furniture occupying the CCP's space. This unpretentious, even shabby style in sets resonates with Premier Zhou's order, reflects the CCP's closer relationship with the poor proletariats, and proposes the expected plain lifestyle in Maoist China. Even though the material of wood is rough, in socialist discourse, wood always connotes durability. Meanwhile, some filmmakers also place bonsais composed of green plants on the wooden table as decorations. Green in Maoist China symbolizes longevity and vitality. These props in the CCP's office therefore function as metaphors symbolizing that the leadership and the authority of the Party would remain stable in the long term.

In general, good desks and chairs should provide some degree of comfort and help users relax physically and psychologically. But concerns around these aspects are excluded from the CCP's office. Rather than comfort or beauty, the CCP's wooden furniture evokes austerity. The wooden tables and chairs restrict the physical body of the user to maintain a straight sitting posture.

²² Gan Xuewei 干学伟, "Cong yibu yingpian de fusheng shuoqi" 从一部影片的复生说起 [Talk from the rebirth of a film], in in *Zhou Enlai yu dianying* 周恩来与电影[Zhou Enlai and cinema], eds. Chen Huangmei 陈荒煤 and Chen Bo 陈播 (Beijing: Central Literature Publishing House, 1995), 275.

²³ Ibid.

Unlike the softness of cushions, the wooden surface is hard, which can easily make users feel tired or even uncomfortable. The set of furniture thus deprives users of desires for laxity and coziness and instead indirectly reflects the remarkable endurance of CCP officials. Accordingly, the CCP's office becomes a training field. The furniture assumes the responsibility to trample the will of the user. Meanwhile, the set of the office also underscores the significance of endlessly working. The wooden tables and chairs do nothing but shackle people to work. Even the small props on tables indicate working. In *The Caravan*, when a Miao character named Daiwu visits the CCP's workgroup to report the sabotage, the table of company commander Zhang, on which an enamel mug and a bottle of ink are laid out, is shown on the screen. The bottle of ink, of course, hints at working. The cup, following the rustic style, has no intricate decoration. But filmmakers painstakingly show the words on the cup—"serve the people"—in front of the camera facing the audience. Again, working is underscored. The layout of the CCP's office also resonates with this theme. In the following medium shot, Zhang passes on the political message to Daiwu. Spectators, through this shot, can glimpse the cadre's bedroom, which is not a real bedroom but rather just a narrow corner in the office separated by a curtain (Figure 1.1). The squeezed bedroom symbolizes the shrinking time space for rest and reflects the hard work of the CCP members. As a place opening to the masses, the office has a close connection with collective affairs. But the bedroom has a strong overtone, indicating private life. Mingling the bedroom in the office therefore symbolizes the invasion of the collective into the private space. Even though a curtain is hung to mark the start of the bedroom in this film, the curtain remains open when the masses visit. In this sense, no so-called private space exists in the CCP's office. Every corner is open to the public. The CCP's workgroup is shown as a space representing *gong* 公, a term with rich connotations like *the*

collective, open, and public. This space therefore embodies the imagined persona of the Party: working hard to serve the people.



Figure 1.1 The Bedroom inside the CCP's Office in *The Caravan*

The CCP's space in the ethnic minority community is also displayed as an exhibition hall of socialist modernity. After the government's caravan successfully arrives at the village, minority folks visit the Party's meeting room to invite the secretary and local cadres to join the celebration. In this scene, a pile of wooden boxes is stacked near the door with words on the boxes (i.e., "western medicines inside, handle with care") facing the camera. As folks enter the meeting room, the camera cuts to the scene where the secretary and minority leaders are examining the advanced walking plow—a new agricultural machine. Interestingly, the machine (Figure 1.2) is placed on the table in the middle of the room facing the door, which is like an exhibit in-display waiting for the appreciation of minority folks in diegesis and audiences in reality. As Lanpang and other minority roles move, the camera pans to the right side of the room. More exhibits are shown in front of diegetic and extradiegetic visitors. A new threshing machine is placed on the floor. Several stacks of books are neatly aligned on the table. These exhibits—respectively illustrating medical, agricultural, and educational modernization—transform the CCP's meeting room into an exhibition hall displaying the achievements of socialist modernity.



Figure 1.2 Displaying the New Agricultural Machine in *The Caravan*

Distinct from the CCP's space, minority houses are filled with objects indicating minority features. Art director Han Shangyi 韩尚义 once recalled his work in *The Caravan* and introduced how he painstakingly selected typical materials to decorate the minority house. The set of Daiwu's house aims to match his occupation as a mountain peasant.²⁴ When Lanpang comes to borrow salt, the camera enters Daiwu's house and unfolds an overview of the inside of this typical minority family home. Farm implements—like the plow, the hoe, and stone mill—rest against the wall in corners. A big loom sits on the right side next to the door. Crops like corn and dried vegetables and hunting tools (e.g., firelocks, bows, and arrows) hang on the wall. These props illustrate that the male host Daiwu, as a Miao peasant, excels at both farming and hunting. The house, in this sense, can be seen as the incarnation of Daiwu. Moreover, the strategic set transforms the minority house into another exhibition hall. Unlike the items representing modernity in the CCP's space, this minority showcase is crowded with exhibits marking the primitive and traditional Miao production style. The two contrastive sets place the CCP and minorities in a modern vs. pre-modern framework. As the representative of modernity, the Party embodies the advanced, progressive, and

²⁴ Han Shangyi 韩尚义, *Lun dianying yu xiju de meishu sheji* 论电影和戏剧的美术设计 [On art designs in cinema and drama] (Beijing: China Film Press, 1962), 97.

superior, leaving the opposite to minorities. A hierarchical structure is therefore shaped between the two. In fact, the host of the minority house, Daiwu, is a pro-CCP minority leader, but his loyalty to the Party cannot be estranged from this hierarchy. The pre-modern or primitive position of minorities will not be changed based on their political loyalty.

Some modern elements are also allowed to enter the minority space, but they first need to be packaged in a pre-modern way. In *Menglongsha Village* (勐垵沙 dir. Wang Ping 王苹 and Yuan Xian 袁先, 1960), the Party's representative and soldiers guide Dai villagers to rebuild Leheng's bamboo house. In the new house, a portrait of Chairman Mao hangs on the wall, boosted by two red papercut peacocks. Peacock is a typical mascot in Dai culture. The composition of these props implies the support of the Dai people for Mao. On each side of the Mao portrait sit two candles and two wide-mouthed red vases with red flowers. In front of the portrait, some fruits and food are positioned on the same table. The arrangement of the table turns it into a conventional religious altar. Like in religious activity, the minority fellows led by the Party's representative propose are in front of the table as they toast to Mao and call out, "Long live the CCP! Long live Chairman Mao!" In the previous plots, Dai people always bow down in front of a picture of Buddha to beg for mercy. In this aspect, the portrait of Mao replaces the Buddha, positioning Mao to become the new protector of the Dai people. The political worship of Mao displaces the local religious belief. However, the altar-like table reveals that the modern political loyalty of minorities remains rooted in local religious belief. That minorities understand modern politics in a pre-modern religious way again reflects that the minority followers are still fixed in primitivism rather than achieving political modernization.

Like in the Party's space, consistent work is the dominant activity in minority space. The minority houses always function as offices. Regarding the interior design of Lanpang's house, Han

Shangyi indicates the significant status of the fire pit in the overall layout. According to him, “the fire pit to the left of the door is the place where Latuoai [i.e., Lanpang’s father] chats and smokes. So many conflicts in and outside the village have been mediated here.”²⁵ The fire pit represents Latuoai’s office at home, a place where the public affairs of the village are discussed and solved. Latuoai’s house, like the CCP’s workgroup, is open to the whole community. The *gong* also invades the private space of the minority masses. In the overall layout, the standout position of this “small office” continues the keywords shown in the CCP’s workgroup—ceaseless working. This minority house is simply another work site. Daiwu visits Lanpang’s home to tell her that he will join the army. The camera cuts to the inside scene of Lanpang’s house. Even though it is nighttime, Lanpang is still husking rice. The mortar here, on the one hand, marks Lanpang’s hardworking nature; on the other hand, the mortar turns the house into a 24-hour worksite. The similarities with the CCP’s space frame the minority space as a mini epitome of the CCP’s workgroup, which conveys the information that minorities are mimicking the CCP and following the expected lifestyle proposed by the Party. But their imitation is wrapped up in a pre-modern package. Unlike the Party’s office, where modern activities occur, the minority office is heavily occupied with pre-modern affairs. The abovementioned hierarchical relationship between the Party and minorities is thus reconfirmed.

Different from the stable spaces of the CCP and the minority families, the KMT is always homeless in socialist minority films. In *Caravan*, rather than being within a well-protected fortress, the KMT commander hides in a cluttered cave that can fit no more than two people. An oil lamp placed on the table full of trash glows with dim light, indicating sabotage and crime. In the foreground, under the light of the lamp, several cans are displayed on the table. The words “U.S.A.”

²⁵ Ibid.

on the can are turned around to directly face the camera. Besides the American food, the actions of the KMT commander follow the Western style. Rather than Chinese chopsticks, the commander uses a Western knife to eat American-made canned meat. No other explanations are needed. The KMT's collusion with the United States is clearly expressed through the props. The connection between the KMT and the West is also common in other socialist minority films. In *Two Patrolmen*, the KMT spy Yang Guofang dresses up as a Dai nanny and sneaks into a bistro. After entering the narrow loft inside the bistro, he removes his camouflage and exposes his shirt, which depicts a Western girl in a bikini lying down on a palm tree and basking in the sun. In contrast to the diligence and austerity that the CCP promotes, the posture of the Western woman represents depraved hedonism. Later, Yang mimics the bikini girl's posture and leisurely lies down on the bed with a beam of light shining on his face. This matched posture links the KMT with Western hedonism, corruption, and spiritual pollution.

Starting in the late 1950s, more minority villains appeared on the screen. *Menglongsha Village* is an example to navigate the space of minority villains. This film depicts how the CCP's workgroup smashes sabotages plotted by minority spies in a Dai village. The tribal chief and his relatives in the film are the villains. Through the depiction of the tribal chief's big house, audiences can see what the space of minority reactionaries looks like. The hybridized style is a typical feature; the living room is designed in a Dai-dominated style mixed with ancient Han items. The most arresting place in the room is a big shrine. Several Buddha paintings hang on the wall. Three small stupa statues are enshrined at the altar. This shrine, matching the prayer beads in the hands of the chief, identifies the popular Buddhism in Dai communities. Moreover, bamboo—the typical material in the Dai community—is addressed in this room. The bamboo curtains are used as ornaments for embellishing walls. Rattan chairs, phoenix tail bamboo, and other local plants are

placed in different corners to strengthen the Dai feature. Ancient Han elements appear in the layout as well. Two sets of dark brown, carved, antique wooden tables and chairs are placed among the Dai-style furniture. Various antique porcelain objects are exhibited on the wall cabinets, transforming the room into an antique and curio shelf. Through these details, the third exhibition hall in socialist minority films emerges: the living room of minority leaders turns into a museum displaying antiquity collections. Such collections, in the socialist evaluation system, are considered to represent backwardness and should be destroyed. Yet the props clearly present an excessive tendency in quality. More than ten chairs, several tables with different functions, and the countless porcelains on shelves and tables crowd the living room. This excessiveness mirrors the chief's uncontrolled desire to possess properties. The excessiveness further implies the existence of possible exploitations in his rulings.

The chief's house includes the real bedrooms. The splendid bedrooms unfold a comprehensive inspection of the rich connotations of *si* 私. Functioning as a noun, *si* refers to privacy, which resonates with the connotation of the bedroom as a private space. If the living room represents the public image of the chief, his bedroom reveals his hidden persona in private spaces. The bedroom still features a hybridized style. But the Dai elements significantly decrease. In the private space, those elements simply function as decorative patterns and symbols—for instance, the embroidered peacocks on the folding screen, the long knife on the tapestry, and the abstract peacock patterns drawn on the floor cabinet. The typical Dai building materials are intentionally covered by Western-style wallpapers painted in brown and green. Giving up the Dai-style bamboo bed and matting, a big, carved, lacquer arhat bed in ancient Han style is instead placed in the room. On the opposite side of the bed, a Western sofa sits under the window. The spatial design of the bedroom reveals that the chief has already internally abandoned his Dai identity and conspired

with the West. The two main props—the arhat bed and the sofa—also illuminate how the lounged leaning posture, rather than sitting up straightly, is dominant in the private space. In several scenes, the chief lies curled up on the arhat bed to smoke opium while being attended to by a young Dai girl with heavy make-up (Figure 1.3). The female spy Dao Ailing, the chief’s niece, leans back on the sofa with her legs crossed, lights a cigarette, and sneeringly scorns the CCP’s hard work in the village. These twisted postures convey the physically slouching state and mirror the decadent mind. Collectively, then, the set of the bedroom vividly visualizes the inside world of minority villains: they abandon themselves to a life of degenerate pleasure and hedonism.



Figure 1.3 The Chief is Smoking Opium on the Arhat Bed in *Menglongsha Village*

Another private space also exists in the chief’s house—the bedroom of Dao Ailing. Replacing the Dai or Han feature, elements referring to Western culture occupy this space. Like the chief’s room, Dao’s bedroom is packaged with Western-styled wallpapers. A Western five-candle metal candelabra sits atop the table, and a large chandelier hanging on the ceiling glorifies the whole space. On the dresser sits another candelabrum. Dao’s bedroom therefore feels more like a Western-oriented amusement space. In the sequence when two lackeys report the conflicts between the Dai masses and the CCP, red wine and tall glasses clutter the table. Wreathed in cigarette smoke, the owner of this room, Dao Meiling, appears in heavy make-up with her legs

crossed while playing poker on her own. Her cousin sits next to her, leafing through the huge posters of Hollywood romances in film magazines. While the CCP and lower-class minorities are working hard all day long to serve the people, the members of the minority upper class lock themselves in private spaces and indulge in various luxurious comforts and pleasures. The contrast between the moral/righteous and corrupt/evil is clearly shown through the spatial designs.

Western culture even pollutes Dao's mind and alters her identity. In this film, several scenes show Dao gazing at her own face in the mirror to carefully check her make-up and clothes. On the right side of the dresser sits her portrait picture. Another bigger self-portrait photo hangs over the bed. These photos and her repetitive action of self-gazing indicate her narcissistic personality and reveal another meaning of *si*—individualism and egocentrism, which were opposite to the promoted collective consciousness and always viewed as the result of Western spiritual pollution in the Mao era. Further, as a Dai girl, Dao even converts her religious beliefs. Buddhism is the dominant religion in Dai communities. Accordingly, almost every Dai family in the film worships Buddhist paintings and statues, including the chief. However, instead of Buddhism, Dao hangs a painting of Saint Mary in her private space. The change in religious beliefs literally expresses conversion and implies betrayal. After the appearance of the Saint Mary painting, the visual image of Dao on the screen changes completely. In the previous plots, Dao still maintains some Dai customs to mark her ethnicity—for instance, her Dai-style hairstyle and sarong skirt. But her image is completely Westernized after the portrait of Saint Mary appears. A Western suit substitutes for the sarong. Replacing the Dai updo, she wears her curled modern hair down. Wearing expensive, shiny jewelry, Dao is dressed up as a Hollywood superstar rather than a Dai woman. She thus also visually completes apostasy. The sudden appearance of this Western religious portrait matters. Unlike Dao's personal photos, this prop is not publicly displayed in the room. Spectators do not

even know from where the big portrait emerges. The other secret prop is Dao's gun. It also suddenly appears in her bedroom. Collectively, these props indicate the secrets hidden in this private space. In this way, "secret," another connotation of *si*, is therefore shown. The secret in this film is tied with risk. As mentioned previously, the portrait of Saint Mary is a metaphor mirroring Dao's apostasy. The gun is a clear symbol of violence. With these symbolic meanings, Dao's bedroom is transformed into a space storing unexpected dangers. In fact, in the bedrooms is where Dao plots all the sabotage. The private space, in this sense, becomes a nest of intrigue.

Relying on the spatial arrangement, filmmakers panoramically represent the meanings of *si* and strategically tie the private space with desire, egocentrism, betrayal, and sabotage—which transform the term *si* into a synonym of evilness. The negative portrayal of *si* and the relevant criticism serves as a foil to its antonym—the collective, which refers to morality, righteousness, and the sublime. In this way, filmmakers resonate with the Party's propaganda to promote the idea of collectivism. This film ends with a plot where soldiers of the Party force their way into the chief's bedroom to arrest the traitors. On the one hand, this action quashes the KMT's planned sabotage. On the other, the entrance of outsiders breaks the closed state of the private space. This sequence also implies the Party's attitude toward the "private": rather than showing respect toward *si*, the Party seems inclined to push for a ban on *si* in the PRC.

In socialist minority films, the minority region is not a simple territory in which minorities live but is rather separated into three spaces respectively occupied by the CCP, the minority masses, and the villains. Through the spatial arrangement, these films construct and visualize the expected personas of the three forces. The Party, as its space embodies, is ascetic and hardworking and represents socialist modernity. Ethnic minorities siding with the Party devote themselves to work, but they are fixed in the pre-modern, even primitive state. The villains, who are distinct from the

CCP and the minority masses, are addicted to Western hedonism. Among the three spaces, a symbolic confrontation between *gong* and *si* takes place. Both the Party and the minority masses adopt the *gong*-oriented lifestyle. The remaining *si* in the villains' space finally will be taken over by the representative of the collective—the Party. Ultimately, the competition between *gong* and *si* visually reveals the symbolic socialist reform in minority spaces. Socialist collectivism therefore finally unifies the minority region.

To some degree, the three spaces in socialist minority films function as three exhibition halls, respectively displaying modern, pre-modern, and anti-revolutionary objects and relics. In her study on socialist museums and exhibitions, Denise Ho interprets how curation in the Mao era helped legitimize the state and contribute to the revolution. The definition of the museum in Ho's understanding is broadly to "refer to the memorial hall with its exhibitions."²⁶ Based on this definition, socialist minority films can also function as the onscreen museum, in which objects presenting socialist modernity, ethnic primitivism, and anti-revolution in socialist discourse are displayed in separate exhibition spaces. Ho's interpretation of how Shanghai's Fangua Lane in the Mao years was transformed into a living display offers a new angle to understand the function of socialist minority films as the onscreen museum. In the reform of Fangua Lane, eighteen shantytown houses were intentionally maintained, juxtaposing the new modern dormitory buildings for workers. After the selected model workers and cadres moved into the new dorms, this region became a site for visitors to get class education by witnessing the changes from the old society (the shantytown houses and objects from the past) to the new society (new houses and socialist objects) and listening to the residents' narrative scripts about the bitter past and sweet

²⁶ Denise Y Ho, *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao's China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 8.

present. Fangua Lane, in this way, became the living exhibition of Shanghai's past and present.²⁷ Socialist minority films take the function, similar to Fangua Lane, to deliver socialist education by juxtaposing the past and the present. But in these films, it is the camera, rather than the real residents, that guides audiences to navigate the exhibition. Stories and narratives are provided as living skits during the onscreen exhibition tour for the audience to receive a socialist class education. The difference between this cinematic exhibition and Fangua Lane may be the subject matter of ethnic minorities. In other words, socialist minority films offer an exhibition that specializes in the minority past and present instead of Shanghai—a city with the majority of Han population. Ho in her book further explains the definition of curation, which “refer[s] to all stages of putting on an exhibition, from assembling a collection of objects, to their display and narration, to the rituals of the exhibition hall.”²⁸ In this sense, socialist minority film production and consumption in the seventeen-year period also can be seen as the process of curation: the set design reflects the process of collecting objects; the filming helps organize exhibitions with performative narratives. Rituals, such as the worship of Mao, speaking bitterness sessions, and the oppression of anti-revolutionaries, are performed in the diegetic space to evoke audiences' participation in the socialist revolution.

Shaping the Minority Body

Besides portraying the geopolitical landscape of minority spaces, socialist minority films also contribute to producing the standard image of minorities. This purpose turns the focus to the minority body. The following section concentrates on examining illness narratives in ethnic

²⁷ See Ho, *Curating Revolution*, chap. 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

minority films to discuss the shaping of the minority body on the screen. By depicting diseases causing weakness and the loss of the ability to work and sicknesses that leave physical scars, these films construct the sick minority body as the metaphor for the legacy of multiple exploitations in the past, which provides the government the excuse to intervene in the governance and regulation of ethnic minorities. By studying the functions and metaphorical meanings of the medical prop—the stethoscope and related medical activities—I argue that the sickness narrative in socialist minority films constructs the Han-centered hierarchical power structure between the Han doctors and non-Han patients. The measure and regulation of modern medical instruments and treatments allow minority bodies to be kept in the modern shape, but they cannot gain modernity. Physical healing not only helps minorities eliminate the pain but also triggers their collective enlightenment in socialist discourse.

In the Mao years, the connection between minorities and illness were often seen in newspapers. The following one is an example. “In February 1953, my wife Yihanmu hai was stricken with malaria and fell into a coma because of the severe fever My uncle Zhaguoyin, who is the tribe chief in the village, guiding more than a hundred people, grabbed Yihanmu hai and dragged her to Menghai street. [Zhaguoyin] called her ‘pipa ghost’ (*pipa gui* 琵琶鬼) and abetted others to beat her and burn her house. I was so worried but had no help with it. At that precise moment, Li Candong came. He told Zhaguoyin that Yihanmu hai was sick and must get timely medical treatment. Li and I then took her to the hospital where she received shooting and medicine.”²⁹ This story was recalled by a local Dai man named Ai Wenjiang. The narration following the stereotyped *speak bitterness* pattern centered on accounting for how the tribe chief,

²⁹ Ye Zijian 叶子健, “Jinri Xishuangbanna” 今日西双版纳 [Today’s Xishuangbanna], *People’s Republic*, January 30, 1963.

who represented the upper classes, abused the masses. This story also exposes a controversial question haunting the Dai community—is malaria a disease or the curse of ghosts? Then, what is a disease?

Regarding the definition of disease, the previous scholarship has already done comprehensive research. In work on illness narratives, Arthur Kleinman clarifies three relevant concepts: illness, disease, and sickness. According to him, illness emphasizes the exact suffering experience of patients and their families. Illness “conjure[s] up the innately human experience of symptoms and suffering.”³⁰ Sickness is a type of “disorder in its generic sense across a population in relation to macrosocial (economic, political, institutional) forces.”³¹ Disease then closely ties to the professionalism of healers. More specifically, healers will “interpret the health problem within a particular nomenclature and taxonomy, a disease nosology, that creates a new diagnostic entity, an ‘it’—the disease.”³² According to Robert Hahn, the definition of sickness should emphasize the feelings of patients: “Broadly speaking, the essence of ‘sickness’ is an unwanted condition in one’s person or self—one’s mind, body, soul, or connection to the world.”³³ Even though scholars like Hahn credit the personal experiences of sick people, sickness is never a personal issue. Rather, culture and politics actively engage in the re/construction of the meaning of sickness. As Susan Sontag mentions, illness is always used as metaphor.³⁴ Based on a comprehensive examination of the social and cultural reactions to tuberculosis (TB) and cancer, Sontag demystifies how the

³⁰ Arthur Kleinman, *Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.

³³ Robert Hahn, *Sickness and Healing: An Anthropological Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 5.

³⁴ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997), 3

metaphorical mechanism works in sickness. The narratives about disease and sickness do not release patients from disease but instead intensify their suffering and pain. Meanwhile, Sontag emphasizes the existence of “an increasing tendency to call any situation one disapproves of a disease.”³⁵ Sickness is therefore an ambiguous term. Cultural, social, and even political transcriptions will endow new and unexpected meanings of sickness.

Narrating the sick body, a tradition in Chinese culture, is nothing new. Premodern writings offer many representative roles who are struggling with sickness. The female character Du Liniang in *The Peony Pavilion* falls prey to lovesickness after she dreams of the male protagonist Liu Mengmei.³⁶ In the novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*, several girls—for example, the female protagonist Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai—are tortured by unknown diseases.³⁷ In the modern period, various social and national crises manifest in the depicted sick bodies. The May Fourth elite Lu Xun 鲁迅 is a typical example. Depiction of diseases like the insanity in his first vernacular short story, “A Madman’s Diary,” and tuberculosis in his “Medicine,” became an important mechanism by which he could sharply criticize the national character.³⁸ These sick bodies in Lu Xun’s writings create a metaphor for China dominated by the “backward” Confucian culture, values, and morality. Nevertheless, Lu Xun’s usage of disease elaborates Susan Sontag’s argument that “illness has always been used as [a metaphor] to enliven charges that a society was corrupt or

³⁵ Ibid., 74.

³⁶ See Tang Xianzu 汤显祖, *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 [The peony pavilion] (Beijing: People’s Literature Publishing House, 1963).

³⁷ See Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *Hong loumeng* 红楼梦 [A dream of red mansions] (Beijing: People’s Literature Publishing House, 2008).

³⁸ See Lu Xun 鲁迅, “Kuangren riji” 狂人日记 [A madman’s diary], in *Lu Xun quanji* 鲁迅全集 [Collected works of Lu Xun], vol. 1, ed. People’s Literature Publishing House (Beijing: People’s Literature Publishing House, 2005), 447–56; and Lu Xun, “Yao” 药 [Medicine], in *Lu Xun quanji*, 463–72.

unjust.”³⁹ The depiction of the sick body continues in the socialist period, but the narrative paradigm changed. Focusing on literary works, Liu Chuanxia states, “From the 1950s to 1970s, diseases still widely existed in the society, but the topic of sickness had been out of the focus in literature. In the few literary texts relating to sickness, the healing replacing disease became underscored.”⁴⁰ Yang Yunlai studies the illness depicted in minority-themed writings. Siding with Liu, Yang also claims that “in the 17-year [period] . . . [writings] gradually hide the bodies suffering in illness. Few of them depict the pain driven by disease. Instead, more and more writings turn to scrutinize the process of healing.”⁴¹

Yang and Liu’s shared conclusion builds on literary texts. However, in socialist minority films, the sickness does not disappear but rather gets transferred to ethnic minorities and becomes an important way to shape the minority body. Almost half of the socialist minority films engaged with issues about sickness, healing, and medicines (Table 1). In general, Han characters in these films always play the role of doctors, leaving the role of patients to minorities. Regardless of sex and age, sickness indiscriminately attacks minorities and creates both trouble and pain for them.

Table 1 The Sicknesses in Socialist Minority Films*

Year	Title	Ethnicity	Minority Sickness (roles)	Han Sickness (roles)
1951	<i>Victory of Inner Mongolia People</i> 内蒙人民的胜利	Mongol	Blindness (Mother of Dundebu)	none
1954	<i>The Caravan</i> 山间铃响马帮来	Miao	Malaria (prevention)	Malaria (prevention)

³⁹ Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 72.

⁴⁰ Liu Chuanxia 刘传霞, “Shenti zhili de zhengzhi yinyu—1950-1970 niandai zhongguo wenxue de jibing xushi” 身体治理的政治隐喻——1950-1970 年代中国文学的疾病叙事 [The political metaphor of body governance: The illness narrative in Chinese literature from the 1950s to 1970s], *Gansu shehui kexue* 甘肃社会科学 [Gansu social science], no. 5 (2011): 66.

⁴¹ Yang Yunlai 杨运来, “Lun shiqi nian shiqi shaoshu minzu ticaizuo pin zhong de jibing yiliao shuxie” 论“十七年”时期少数民族题材作品中的“疾病医疗书” [On the illness and healing narratives in minority-themed products made in the seventeen-year period], in *Minzu wenxue yanjiu* 民族文学研究 [Studies of ethnic literature] 37, no. 3 (2019): 83.

1955	<i>The Dawn of Meng River</i> 猛河的黎明	Tibetan	—Injuries (Masses) —Coma (Daerjie) —Difficult labor (Tibetan woman)	Injury (Dr. Su)
1956	<i>Fights in the Desert</i> 沙漠里的战斗	Uyгур	none	Injury (Yang Fa)
1957	<i>The Romantic Song of Lusheng</i> 芦笙恋歌	Lahu	Injury (Zhatuo)	none
	<i>Eagles in the Storm</i> 暴风雨中的雄鹰	Tibetan	none	Injury (Instructor)
	<i>Bonfires in the Border Village</i> 边寨烽火	Jingpo	—Ascariasis (Aishan), —Common Cold (Aishan) —Poisoning (Aishan) —Injury (Duolong) —Dumbness (Manuo's sister)	none
1959	<i>Morning Song Over the Prairie</i> 草原晨曲	Mongol	—Difficult labor (Zhaxiningbu's wife) —Burn (Zhang Xiang)**	none
	<i>Jin Yuji</i> 金玉姬	Korean	Injury (Jin Yuji)	none
	<i>The Muslim Detachment</i> 回民支队	Hui	none	Injury (Commissar Guo)
	<i>Five Red Clouds</i> 五朵红云	Li	Injury (Gonghu)	none
1960	<i>Ode to the Qiang Flute</i> 羌笛颂	Qiang	Coma (Jiami)	Injury (Dong Yongzhen)
	<i>The Colorful Road</i> 五彩路	Tibetan	—Injury (Grandpa Niejin) —Unknown sickness (Qula's mother and Old Zhaxi)	none
	<i>Dai Doctor</i> 摩雅傣	Dai	—Malaria (Dai fellows and Boyihan) —Injury (Aiwen) —Difficult labor (Zhana)	none
	<i>Red Eagles</i> 红鹰	Tibetan	—Difficult labor (Hualuosang's wife) —Injury (Tibetan fellows) —Coma (The tribal chief's son)	none
	<i>Menglongsha Village</i> 勐垵沙	Dai	—Malaria (Paman) —Coma (An elder)	none
	<i>The Red Son on the Mountain Ke</i> 柯山红日	Tibetan	—Blindness (Mailisheng) —Injury (Tibetan fellows)	Injury (General Yang)
	<i>Storms on the Grassland</i> 草原风暴	Tibetan	Injury (Xiushiji)	Injury (Section chief Wang)
1963	<i>Jinsha Riverbank</i> 金沙江畔	Tibetan	Injury (Zhuma)	Injury (Tan Suwen)
	<i>Serfs</i> 农奴	Tibetan	—Injury (Qiangba) —Blindness (Old lama)	none
1965	<i>Jingpo Girls</i> 景颇姑娘	Jingpo	—Coma (Jingpo kid) —Injury (Dainuo)	none

* Two films just showing herbal medicines without direct content about sickness, including *The Mysterious Traveler* and *Five Golden Flowers* are not included in this table.

** The role of Zhang Xiang is the son of Mongolian leader Huhe and Han Chinese Xiuzhi.

The diseases are multifarious, ranging from highly contagious diseases like malaria to obstructed labor, poisoning, coma, various injuries, and disabilities. Some minorities even suffer from

unknown diseases. In *Menglongsha Village*, for instance, a Dai elder suddenly falls after fainting. A soldier in the CCP's work team gives the elder pills and some hot water, which help the elder recover. But throughout the whole process, the name of the concrete disease is not clarified. A similar situation appears in *Colorful Road* (五彩路, dir. Wei Rong 魏荣, 1960). The protagonists, Qula and Zhaxi, always mention diseases that torture their parents, but the names of the diseases remain unknown in this film. The sicknesses depicted in socialist minority films can therefore be classified into two categories: diseases causing weakness and the loss of the ability to work (e.g., coma, obstructed labor, and malaria) and sicknesses that leave physical scars (e.g., injuries and disabilities). Both types of sickness are metaphorized in socialist minority films. The following section thus turns to scrutinize the mechanism of metaphorization and meaning reconstruction related to the two types of sickness.

Sickness as Metaphor in Socialist Minority Films

According to Yang Yunlai, the depiction of the suffering of the patient is no longer the focus of literary writings in the seventeen-year period (1949-1966).⁴² However, this observation may be less true in the film field. The pain and the weakness of minority patients are always illuminated in socialist minority films. In *Colorful Road*, even though filmmakers do not clarify the name of the disease that afflicts Qula's mother, her condition—weakness—is highlighted through her walking style. She always needs others to support her when she walks. As Qula's mother and a grandma look for their lost children, the grandma must give her arm to Qula's mother, even though the grandma is much older. The posture clearly shows the weakness of the poor mother. In addition, a discussion on the visualization of the suffering of patients cannot ignore the abovementioned

⁴² Ibid.

malaria. Malaria is caused by parasites and is often seen in southern China. The condition is also known as *dabaizi* 打摆子 (swinging) or *baizi bing* 摆子病 (swinging disease). These names are based on the crucial symptoms of the horrible disease: walking vacillatingly and staggeringly. In essence, the patients become too weak to control their bodies. The film *Dai Doctor* (摩雅傣, dir. Xu Tao 徐韬, 1960) comprehensively depicts this disease and its influence on the Dai community. Boyihan, the father of the female protagonist Yilaihan, is infected with malaria. A sequence is made to show his pain as the disease afflicts him. In the dense primordial forest, Boyihan wraps himself in a blanket due to a high fever, can barely stagger to his feet, and then suddenly falls after a faint. The camera, which sits in a hollow tree, follows the sound of groans and moves closer to Boyihan, who is lying on the ground covered up by a blanket. The close-up shot emphasizes his deathly pale face. He raves in his delirium and mistakes his daughter for his wife. In this sequence, instead of being hidden, the suffering due to illness is highlighted. In Yin Aihua's analysis, "the diseases shown in minority-themed films produced in the seventeen-year period are nonlethal . . . [and the diseases] also are noncommunicable."⁴³ Undoubtedly, the film *Dai Doctor* provides a counterexample to Yin's argument. Besides Boyihan, the film also depicts the horrible epidemic of malaria in the village—in which many Dai children died from malaria. In this sense, the fatal and highly contagious disease and its symptoms are never out of filmmakers' attention in Maoist China.

In socialist minority films, weakness is a typical symptom caused by diseases like malaria, a coma for unknown reasons, and obstructed labor. These sicknesses always attack and restrict

⁴³ Yin Aihua 尹爱华, "Yishi xingtai, minzu, minjian—shiqinian shaoshu minzu ticai dianying zhong de xiangzheng yu yinyu" 意识形态、民族、民间——十七年少数民族题材电影中的象征与隐喻 [Ideology, ethnicity, civil society: Symbols and metaphors in minority-themed films made during the 17-year period] (Ph.D. diss., Minzu University of China, 2011), 72–73.

minority children, elders, and women. In the films, these weak minority bodies indicate the crisis of reproduction. Obstructed labor symbolizes the trouble in the delivery of new labor resources. The weakness and even death of children reflect the possible declining capacity of human resources. Adults should be able to contribute to social reproduction, but many of them—including Qula’s mother, Boyihan, and Paman—are too weak to leave their beds. This weak tendency and the consequent loss of laboring capability in film portrayal mirror the reality-based anxiety regarding reproduction. In 1951 as the PRC was just founded, *People’s Daily* published an essay to introduce the healthcare situation in minority regions. The author stated, “Our minority brothers experienced numerous disasters under the repressions and exploitations of the domestic and international reactionaries. Their poor living situation results in the spread of disease and the decline of population and even threatens the existence of several ethnic groups.”⁴⁴ This news made the maintenance of reproduction in minority regions stand out as an emergent problem that the young nation-state faced. This anxiety even projected its shadow into socialist minority films.

The news also highlights another important aspect: the accountability of the KMT for the sickness in ethnic minority regions. In fact, this type of narrative was seldom found in socialist newspapers, official documents, or records. In another article introducing the spread of malaria, the author also stated the KMT’s abuse was the reason for the widespread malaria in ethnic minority regions.⁴⁵ These written texts attribute the sickness and diseases of minorities to abuses and exploitations. In fact, socialist minority films also imply a connection between sickness and exploitation. In *Dai Doctor*, during the malaria epidemic, instead of saving the people, minority

⁴⁴ He Cheng 贺诚, “Dangqian shaoshu minzu diqu de weisheng gongzuo renwu”当前少数民族地区的卫生工作任务 [The current tasks on hygienic issues in minority regions], *People’s Daily*, September 14, 1951.

⁴⁵ Wu Zhengjian 吴征鉴, “Pumie nueji”扑灭疟疾 [Exterminating malaria], *People’s Daily*, May 10, 1951.

leaders seize the opportunity for personal gain. The chief's daughter Nansu falls in love with Yilaihan's lover Aiwen. To satisfy Nansu's desire to marry Aiwen and take revenge on Yilaihan and Boyihan, the chief and the village head stigmatize Yilaihan as a pipa ghost causing the pandemic and expel her and Boyihan. Boyihan developed the symptoms of malaria in exile, and he finally passes away. In this sense, local leaders' various abuses—including maliciousness, isolation, stigmatization, and banishment—make the leaders themselves culpable for Boyihan's suffering and death. In this way, minorities' sickness establishes a metaphorical link with abuses. The sick minority bodies become the metaphor for multiple exploitations.

Diseases always attack minority children, women, and elders in socialist minority films. However, it does not mean that minority young men are granted immunity from sickness. Their sickness is instead represented in their scarred bodies. Scarred injuries are the most common sickness shown in ordinary socialist films. In *Red Detachment of Women* (红色娘子军 dir. Xie Jin 谢晋, 1961), the female protagonist Qionghua wants to join the red army. When asked about her motivation, she tears off her clothes to show the scar on her shoulder resulting from the landlord's abuse and emotionally announces, "For this! For revenge!" In *Lei Feng* (雷锋 dir. Dong Zhaoqi 董兆琪, 1964), surrounded by a group of children, Lei Feng touches the scar on his hand and states, "This is the hatred that the old society left on my body." He also once was beaten by the landlord's wife. In these repetitive narratives, scars on Han bodies connect with the past class exploitation. The metaphor of scars in socialist minority films, however, is more complicated. Even though both the Han and non-Han in socialist minority films sustain scarred injuries, the respective metaphorical meanings differ between the Han and minority roles. Most Han Chinese roles get hurt for the sake of minority brothers. In *The Muslim Detachment* (回民支队 dir. Fang Yifu 冯毅夫 and Li Jun, 1959), the Han official, regimental commander Guo, gets shot in his left arm to

shield the Hui leader Ma Benzhan in a fight against Japanese invaders. After being assigned to be the political commissar in the Muslim detachment, Guo devotes all his time to training this Hui army and has no time to heal his injured arm. Consequently, he loses his left arm. This permanent disfigurement becomes the evidence certifying his selfless national fraternity. Similar plots repeat in *Ode to the Qiang Flute* (羌笛颂, dir. Zhang Xinshi 张辛实, 1960), *Storms on the Grassland* (草原风暴, dir. Lin Feng 林丰, 1960), and *Jinsha Riverbank* (金沙江畔, dir. Fu Chaowu 傅超武, 1963). Scars on Han bodies in socialist minority films therefore function as a metaphor for ethnic fraternity.

Yet the metaphor of scars as class exploitation does not lose its efficiency in these films. Rather, the metaphor applies to minority bodies. The upper classes in minorities leave scars on the bodies of ordinary minorities. For instance, in *Menglongsha Village*, the minority mass Shuai'en is tortured by the Dai ruling class. In *Serfs*, the poor serf Qiangba is bullied by the tribe chief's family. The scarred bodies in the films function as evidence of class exploitation in ethnic minority regions. But the reaction of the non-Han to class exploitation is different from the Han roles. Rather than eagerly attacking the upper class or calling for revenge, most minority characters bear the class abuse, swallow the pain, and silence any denouncements. Besides class exploitation, minority masses also experience another type of abuse—Han chauvinism. But minorities' attitudes toward this ethnic exploitation is different compared to attitudes toward class abuse. The ethnic exploitation always provokes the anger of minority characters and transforms these docile victims into outspoken critics and rebels. In *The Romantic Song of Lusheng* (芦笙恋歌 dir. Yu Yanfu 于彦夫, 1957), the Lauhu hunter Zhatuo is shot in the head while fighting with the KMT soldiers. This injury leaves a scar on his forehead and deeply roots ethnic hatred for the Han in his mind. When he sees the CCP's Han geological exploration team, the ethnic hatred triggers him to assault the

team several times, even though the team never hurts him. In *Bonfires in the Border Village*, before the liberation, the young Jingpo man Duolong is bullied by Han Chinese. In a fight with the Han, he is left with a scar on his forehead. This ethnic conflict determines his hostile attitude toward the CCP's Han officials after the liberation. Thus, as his son falls ill after getting the Han doctor's treatment, Duolong attributes the illness of his son to the doctor's medical malpractice and uses it as an excuse to launch a revolt against the Party's rule. In socialist minority films, the ethnic exploitation before 1949 always motivates young minority men to adopt a hostile attitude toward the CCP's Han officials after 1949. These minority men distrust the Han, reject cooperation, and even launch violent conflicts. However, their violent action due to ethnic hatred can always be excused. To remit Duolong's violent behavior, his father Meipu persuades the political instructor not to punish Duolong because, as the scar on his forehead proves, he suffered a lot from the Han in the past. The scar on the minority body becomes an effective punishment-exemption certificate.

The positions of different scars on minority bodies offer an interesting perspective to understand the metaphorical meaning of scars in socialist minority films. In general, most wounds resulting from class abuse are on the torso—legs, shoulders, and arms—covered under clothes. However, most scars caused by ethnic exploitation are placed on the exposed parts of the body. For instance, both the scars on Zhatuo and Duolong are on the forehead. The different positions of scars construct the cultural implications of class abuse and ethnic exploitation: class abuse is a hidden wound that must be discovered. The position further implies that class consciousness is not spontaneous but rather should be cultivated and educated. In contrast, ethnic exploitation is a type of obvious truism. Further, the forehead is located close to the brain—the crucial organ controlling people's thoughts and behaviors. Head injuries therefore represent not only physical pain but also hint at the trauma rooted in the mind and the possible sort of improper behavior. Both Duolong

and Zhatuo are examples. They both not only lose the ability to distinguish good people from bad ones but also behave improperly. These cases expose the possible connection between the body and the mind—underscoring the necessity and urgency of healing both physically and psychologically.

Nevertheless, in socialist minority films, both the sicknesses causing the loss of the ability to work and the scars marking past injuries metaphorize the various abuses occurring in ethnic minority regions. In this sense, the sick minority body is constructed as a metaphor for the legacy of multiple exploitations. This metaphor gives the CCP, which always regards overthrowing suppression and exploitations as its responsibility, a powerful excuse to intervene in minority societies to govern the disordered minority bodies. In fact, this is what socialist minority films repeat. In most sickness-related socialist minority films, the Party sends the medical teams, along with political workgroups, to minority regions to launch socialist reforms, which implies the message that medical regulation, like political missions, is the important motivation for the Party to intervene in minority regions. Getting the weak and scarred minority bodies back into regulation also became the significant mission of the Party's Han doctors in socialist minority films.

Governing the Minority Body: Western Medicine, Modernity, and Spiritual Awakening

1. Western Medicine or Chinese Medicine

To achieve the goal of regulating minority bodies requires first stopping the physical disorder. In China, the debate regarding the priority and legitimacy between traditional Chinese medicine and Western medicine has raged on from the mid-19th century until now. In Maoist China, the state's attitude regarding these two healing methods has been inconsistent. In the early stage of the PRC, considering the weak healthcare system, the government confirmed the principle of “prevention

first, supplemented by healing.” Regarding the divergence between Western and Chinese medicine, the Party announced that it “should criticize factionalism and discrimination and call for unity in the medical field. If one is willing to serve the people with professional skills . . . whatever Chinese medicine or Western medicine, we must give the person a chance to work, study, and improve.”⁴⁶ This official announcement seemed to promote an equal relationship between the two medical schools. But in reality, Western medicine was actually prioritized. In the 1950s, Chinese medical practitioners were encouraged to join the nationwide epidemic prevention campaign. This movement revealed the predicament of Chinese medicine in Maoist China and the conflicts between the Party’s public announcement and the real practices. According to scholar Yang Nianqun, the government gave Chinese medicine a guarded welcome during this period. Chinese medical healers had to learn and adopt Western medical methods and techniques to deal with medical issues in the epidemic prevention movement—this process integrated Chinese medicine into the socialist medical system.⁴⁷ Undoubtedly, the PRC’s national healthcare system was still Western medicine-dominated, and Chinese medicine had to be transformed or “modernized” to join the national system.

In a discussion on medical-themed films and literature, Xiaoping Fang notices how cultural products convey the everlasting tension between the two types of medicine and the influence of relative medical campaigns. As Fang indicates, before 1957, literature could show heterogeneous opinions on the conflict and tension between Chinese and Western medicine. Some literary texts

⁴⁶ Xin Ye 新业, “Wei renmin baojian shiye er nuli”为人民保健事业而努力 [Work for people’s healthcare project], *People’s Daily*, January 10, 1950.

⁴⁷ Yang Nianqun 杨念群, *Zaizao Bingren: Zhongxiyi Chongtuxiade Kongjian Zhengzhi 1932-1985* 再造病人：中西医冲突下的空间政治 1832-1985 [Remaking “patients”: The spatial politics in the conflicts between Chinese and Western medicine 1932–1985] (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2013), 275, 278.

even expressed criticism regarding “the governments’ support for the aggressiveness of Western medicine.”⁴⁸ But after 1957, due to the mass epidemic prevention campaigns, this diversity was “replaced by political enthusiasm and dedication to the reconciliation of Chinese and Western medicine.”⁴⁹ During this period, the shared theme in films and literature was the endorsement and promotion of Chinese medicine. *Spring Comes to the Withered Tree* (枯木逢春 dir. Zheng Junli, 1961) was a typical example. The film portrays people’s suffering in the spread of schistosomiasis and the government’s endeavor to overcome this horrible epidemic.⁵⁰ As many critics and filmmakers mention, a core storyline in this film is the conflict between Chinese and Western medicine.⁵¹ It was a synthesis between these two healing methods that finally resulted in the defeat of schistosomiasis. But the film also implies the different attitudes toward the two types of medicines through the distinct portrayals of the Chinese medical practitioner Mr. Yu and Western medical healer Dr. Li. Yu is kind, careful, and responsible. On the contrary, Li is self-interested, self-centered, and arrogant. In this aspect, the film supports Fang’s interpretation that cultural

⁴⁸ Xiaoping Fang, “Changing Narratives and Persisting Tensions: Conflicts between Chinese and Western Medicine and Professional Profiles in Chinese Films and Literature, 1949–2009,” *Medical History* 63, no. 4 (2019): 458.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Regarding the national campaign targeting schistosomiasis in Maoist China, Zheng’s film represents this movement in a positive tone. However, scholar Miriam Gross’s study of this history unfolds an opposite picture: local masses and cadres were not supportive; it was hard to impact and motivate the locals through education. In Gross’ understanding, this prevention movement failed in almost all aspects instead of success. See more details in Miriam Gross, *Farewell to the God of Plague: Chairman Mao’s Campaign to Deworm China* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

⁵¹ See Zheng Junli 郑君里 “Kumu Fengchun Daoyan Chanshu,” 《枯木逢春》导演阐释 [*Spring Comes to the Withered Tree*: Director interpretation] in *Zheng Junli quanji* 郑君里全集 [Collected works of Zheng Junli], vol. 7, ed. Li Zhen 李镇 (Shanghai: Shanghai Cultural Publishing House, 2017), 289; and “Yingpian Kumu Fengchun Zuotanhui Jiyao” 影片《枯木逢春》纪要 [Important notes of *Spring Comes to the Withered Tree* Conference], in *Zheng Junli quanli*, 327.

products in this period “symbolize the integration of Chinese and Western medicine, but ultimately privilege the role that Chinese medicine played in treatment and prevention.”⁵²

The tone used in films is completely inclined toward Chinese medicine during the Cultural Revolution. Due to national financial constraints, more economical Chinese medical treatments replaced expensive Western medicine and finally seized the dominant status in the PRC during the Cultural Revolution, especially in the wider countryside. Barefoot doctors were trained to be the main medical force in the 1970s. The barefoot doctors’ medical treatments heavily relied on some basic Chinese medical skills and several types of common Western drugs.⁵³ Cultural products in this period resonated with that reality. In the film *Chun Miao* (春苗 dir. Xie Jin 谢晋, Yan Bili 颜碧丽, Liang Tingduo 梁廷铎, 1975), Chinese therapies—including acupuncture and herbal medicine—are the powerful weapons of the barefoot doctor Chun Miao to deal with intractable diseases. While privileging Chinese therapies and herbals, this film symbolically stigmatizes Western medicine through the negative portrayal of Western doctors. Instead of hope and rebirth, the Western-oriented hospital is inundated with corruption and death. The arrogant doctors use their Western medical skills to fawn over high officials but shut their ears to the crying of a peasant child. Their misconduct eventually deprives the kid of his life. However, doctors are numb to the child’s death since they are busy preparing a banquet in honor of the political leader’s arrival. This film ultimately ties Western medicine with irresponsibility, corruption, arrogance, discrimination, and death.

⁵² Ibid., 462.

⁵³ See more historical information about this movement in Xiaoping Fang, *Barefoot Doctors and Western Medicine in China* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2015). For information about medical trainings of barefoot doctors, see The Revolutionary Committee in Hunan Chinese Medicine Institute ed., *Chijiao yisheng shouce* 赤脚医生手册 [The handbook of barefoot doctors] (Hunan: Hunan People’s Publishing House, 1971).

However, socialist minority films have no interest in repeating the tension between these two approaches to medicine and instead side firmly with Western medicine. Almost all minority sicknesses are treated by Western medicine; Chinese medicine is seldom seen. From the late 1950s to the 1960s, as films like *Spring Comes to the Withered Tree* started to privilege Chinese medicine and criticize practitioners of Western medicine, minority films remained indifferent and still chose to display the superiority of Western medicine. In *Dai Doctor*, through the life of the protagonist Yilaihan in the city, the film narrative unfolds the whole process of how to train a professional Western medical doctor in school. In *Jingpo Girls* (景颇姑娘, dir. Wang Jiayi, 1965), as the protagonist Dainuo enters the Western-oriented hospital, audiences can see how Western medical practitioners treat patients and can explore the well-organized hospital, from the doctor's office to the consulting rooms, logistic rooms, and dorms. The kind, responsible, and helpful Western medical doctors in these films clearly contrast with the numb, arrogant, even degenerate Western healers in Han films. In fact, some socialist minority films, such as *The Mysterious Traveler* and *Five Golden Flowers*, indicate the existence of rich herbal medicine resources in minority regions, but these herbals are treated as valuable goods that are ready to ship to the world outside minority communities instead of being used to serve minorities.⁵⁴ This design forms the implication that only Western medicine can cure the sick minority body.

Based on Chris Berry's argument, minority-related films made in the 1950s and 1960s show conservative tendencies and launch xenophobic attacks on anything foreign. Foreign influence always stands for sins and wrongness. In the frame of "foreign things for Chinese use,"

⁵⁴ In *The Mysterious Traveler*, the spies disguise themselves as the caravan transporting local medical herbals outside the Yi village to sell. In *Five Golden Flowers*, Jinhua's father climbs the mountain to pick up herbs. He tells the male protagonist Ah Peng that "medical herbals are everywhere in this mountain of treasures. How can we leave them to stay in the mountain rather than contribute to Socialism?"

limited foreign influences can be tolerated in some cases, but the precondition is Sinicization.⁵⁵ Western medicine in minority films seems to be an exception, however. Instead of representing sins, Western medicine and therapies are promoted as indispensable methods needed to thoroughly remold minority bodies. Socialist minority films then further show how Western medicine regulates minority bodies.

2. The Stethoscope: Mystery and Transparency

In socialist minority films, the magic power of Western medicine is stored in a small prop—the stethoscope. In *The Dawn of Meng River*, Han Doctor Su goes to save the Tibetan hunter Daerjie when he suddenly falls into a coma; the camera fixes in the close shot to amplify the small disc-shaped resonator of the stethoscope placed against the chest of the sick man. Then the camera moves upward, following the rubber tubes to unfold the whole image and show that Doctor Su is carefully listening to the sound being transferred through the instrument. This short scene not only addresses Doctor Su’s devotion to her work but also, more importantly, offers a gaze at the medical instrument *per se*—the stethoscope (Figure 1.4). The stethoscope is a common prop in sickness-related socialist minority films. Almost all doctor roles in such films wear stethoscopes to mark the doctors’ professional status. This instrument is also an all-powerful prop for treating different types of sickness, ranging from fever to injuries. The repetitive appearance of this prop in sickness-related minority films suggests the importance of scrutinizing the function of this diagnostic instruction and its metaphorical functions.

⁵⁵ Chris Berry, “Race (民族): Chinese Film and the Politics of Nationalism,” in *Cinema Journal* 31, no. 2 (1992): 49–50.



Figure 1.4 The Stethoscope in *The Dawn of Meng River*

To heal sick bodies in past centuries, Western medicine heavily relied on a diagnostic tool—the stethoscope, an important acoustic medical device invented by French doctor René Laennec.⁵⁶ In a study on acoustic culture in medicine, Jonathan Sterne indicates the stethoscope and the corresponding mediate auscultation “helped to cement and formalize . . . the doctor–patient relationship.”⁵⁷ Sterne further interprets this relationship in detail. According to him, while adapting to mediate auscultation, the stethoscope not only helped create the distance between class, gender, and knower and known, but also contributed to the promotion of professionalism and social status of doctors. Replacing a patient’s subjective account of illness, the inner sounds of the patient’s body become meaningful and reliable testimony that elaborates on the healthy condition. Patients are therefore transformed from the position of being absolute representatives and owners of their bodies to being the powerless object—the container of unknown sounds. In other words, “the truth of their bodies is audible to the person at the other end of the instrument.”⁵⁸ Doctors then become

⁵⁶ See the invention of the first acoustic stethoscope and its development in Paul Kligfield, “Laennec and the Discovery of Mediate Auscultation,” *American Journal of Medicine* 70, no. 2 (1981): 275–78.

⁵⁷ Jonathan Sterne, “Mediate Auscultation, the Stethoscope, and the ‘Autopsy of the Living’: Medicine’s Acoustic Culture,” *Journal of Medical Humanities* 22, no. 2 (2001): 116.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

the authorities who best know the patients. The doctor is the one mastering the stethoscope and mediate auscultation to listen to, analyze, and identify the conditions of bodies. Patients are no longer active participants and are even excluded from ordinary medical activities. As Li Hengjun argues, “the medical instrument reshapes and cements the power relation between doctors and patients.”⁵⁹ Besides medial functions, the medical instrument, in this sense, is also involved in social and cultural issues.

Based on previous studies, the use of the stethoscope has always involved three keywords: distance, quietness, and the action of listening. Socialist minority films also underscore these terms while the instrument is being used. Scrutinizing the embedded meaning of the three keywords can help explain how the minority body is re/shaped in socialist minority films. As Sterne addresses, the core influence of the stethoscope and mediate auscultation is that they create physical distance between the doctor and patient. But the involvement of ethnicity in socialist minority films complicates those dynamics. This distance in national minority films seemingly focuses more on ethnicities than gender and class. In the abovementioned sequence from *The Dawn of Meng River*, the stethoscope functions as a medium preventing the Han doctor from directly touching the skin of minority patients. Because of this prop, a boundary is drawn between the Han and non-Han. Besides the stethoscope, other medical tools (e.g., such as tweezers and pieces of cotton in disinfection and injectors in shooting, which are commonly seen in the filmic scenes of medical treatment), almost without exception, ensure the indirect touch. But for Han patients, this distance seems to be dispensable. In *Ode to the Qiang Flute*, the Han doctor cures a female Han patient by

⁵⁹ Li Hengjun 李恒俊, “Tingzhenqi yu xifang yiliao jishu zai jindai Zhongguo de chuanbo he jieshou 1840-1910” 听诊器与西医医疗技术在近代中国的传播和接受 1840-1910 [Stethoscope and the circulation and reception of Western medicine in modern China, 1844–1910], in *Ziran bianzheng fa* 自然辩证法 [Journal of Dialectics of Nature] 38, no. 4 (2016): 70.

feeling her pulse. This basic diagnostic method in traditional Chinese medicine, instead of creating distance, requires direct physical contact between the doctor and patient. But when the same doctor cures a minority patient, he switches from feeling the pulses to the indirect touch—injection—to maintain a distance from the minority patient. Whether done intentionally or not, these portrayals distance the Han from minority bodies. Non-Han, in this sense, is othered.

Besides physical distance, for Han doctors and minority patients, the distance from the truth of the human body becomes different because of the stethoscope. In studies on tuberculosis, Susan Sontag indicates that “TB makes the body transparent. The X-rays, which are the standard diagnostic tool permit one, often for the first time, to see one’s insides—to become transparent to oneself.”⁶⁰ In fact, X-rays rather than TB make the body transparent. X-rays are not shown in socialist minority films, but the stethoscope as the “available method for apprehending the interiority of patients’ bodies without physically cutting them up”⁶¹ provides a possible substitute for the X-rays in films. Using the stethoscope, the Han doctor could penetrate the corporeal barrier and enter minority bodies to listen to and check on the invisible interiority. The stethoscope also differs from X-rays in key ways. X-rays indiscriminately expose the inside body in front of both the doctor and patient. Conversely, the stethoscope just makes the truth of the interior audible to the one wearing the earpieces. In minority films, this right is restricted to the Han doctor, who controls the advanced technique and technology. Minority bodies therefore become transparent for the Han but block minorities outside since the sounds are beyond the minorities’ audibility. Despite being the real owners of their own bodies, minority patients cannot obtain control over the knowledge of their bodies without the advanced technique. In this way, the non-Han are

⁶⁰ Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 12.

⁶¹ Sterne, “Mediate Auscultation,” 127.

marginalized in the knowledge structure. In filmic portrayals, the stethoscope promotes the Han to be the knower and makes minorities become the known being investigated and observed. A Han-centered power structure is therefore shaped by using the stethoscope.

During diagnosing and healing, quietness is another keyword that filmmakers intend to underscore. Returning to the abovementioned sequence of medical treatment in *The Dawn of Meng River*, amid sad background music, Doctor Su uses the stethoscope to listen to the sound of Daerjie's chest. Doctor Su then thinks for a while and takes the syringe from the nurse. As Doctor Su starts to give the patient an injection, the camera pans to the worried but voiceless Tibetan relatives standing behind the doctor and patient. The minority patient loses consciousness. In silence, Su then completes all the checking, diagnosing, and healing on her own. All the roles in this scene carefully maintain silence during medical activities. The Han doctor seemingly does not need to know the narrative testimony and accounts of illness from the patient or his relatives, nor does she concretely explain what happened to the patient's body. This mute medical healing is a routine also shown in other socialist minority films. In *Serfs*, the protagonist Qiangba falls into a coma because of the slaveholder's abuse. The camera zooms out from the close-up of Qiangba's face to show the nurses and doctors who are healing him. A nurse sitting next to his head is using a sterile cotton ball with alcohol to disinfect his wounds. A doctor standing next to him uses the stethoscope to check his body. As Qiangba awakes, the camera cuts to other nurses standing there and gazing at him with smiles. At the end of the sequence, a nurse and a soldier hold and stroke Qiangba's dressed foot. Again, except for the background music, this sequence is quiet without any noises. It seems that all roles are afraid of breaking the silence, so everyone's action is very slow and soft. There is no doubt that the filmmakers intend to express the attention, kindness, and helpfulness of the Han medical staff when they save this poor minority man. But the silent gaze

from a group of Han Chinese projecting on a minority body in the cramped space filled with medical instruments and bottles forms a peculiar, even uncanny feeling. In filmic portrayal, the medical staff is more like investigating and even studying the minority body than simply healing the sickness. Minority roles in this process are transformed into medical objects.

Scholar Yang Nianqun acutely observes the pressure behind the gaze of the medical staff in Western medicine. Yang, influenced by Foucault, indicates that the gaze of the doctors in modern clinic medicine represents the silent violence, which makes patients confused about whether the operating table is more like a slaughterhouse or a lab researching medical technology.⁶² In Yang's understanding, the stethoscope is a tool conspiring to construct similar silent violence.⁶³ In socialist minority films, this silent violence in treatment not only mystifies both sickness and medical activities but also deprives minorities of their senses, abilities, and rights. Individual feelings are of little account in medicine. Their mouths are shut so that they cannot express their feelings and doubts. Ears lose their sensitivity to the subtle sounds as well. In filmic portrayals, minority patients generally fall into a coma during the healing. This specific situation deprives minorities of their consciousness, perceptions, and self-control. Accordingly, the sensory organs of patients cannot respond to stimuli. Minorities in these films thus become absolute passive objects with vestigial senses. No one will explain to patients and their relatives what happened and what is happening to minority bodies of patients and relatives. The informed consent doctrine does not work for minority patients in filmic imagination. They therefore become Yang's "passive modern patients . . . who are able to do nothing but waiting and bearing."⁶⁴ The function of their existence

⁶² Yang Nianqun, *Zaizao Bingren*, 177.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 393.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 392.

in medical activities is to provide the investigated bodies. They can do nothing but wait for the cold medical observation, measure, examination, and healing. In contrast to the powerless minority patients, medical tools expand Han doctors' senses. They can listen to the inaudible sounds, see the invisible body, interpret the obscure meaning, and provide proper treatment. The Han, thus, become the all-knowing authority. In this sense, the power hierarchy is created between the superior Han and inferior non-Han groups.

Moreover, the stethoscope underscores the significant action in diagnosing—listening. The minority sick body in socialist minority films, as previously mentioned, metaphorizes the legacy of multiple exploitations. In this context, the purpose of auscultation goes beyond pure medical needs to look for signs of disease. Besides estimating sickness, person wielding the stethoscope also has the responsibility to check for clues and evidence of abuses and exploitations and to hear the invisible and unspeakable bitterness that minorities encounter. In this sense, mediate auscultation functions as a *listening* to bitterness session—a transformed “speaking bitterness” session. As an important component of the mass struggle campaigns in Maoist China, the speaking bitterness session conventionally centered on the action of *speaking*. In speeches, presenters had to use socialist concepts (e.g., class, exploitations, and revolutions) to reinterpret their pasts. By demonstrating their abilities to master socialist discourse—the Father's language—speakers could legitimize their citizenship and subject positions. But in the *listening* to bitterness session, the core action is shifted to *listening*, which relegates the mute minority patient to the position of a marginalized object. The unspeakable bitterness reflects minorities' incomprehension of the various exploitations. These minority patients cannot master the Father's language, either. The connection between the unspeakable bitterness and medical healing in filmic portrayals also implies that minorities' inexperience in socialist discourses is treated as a type of morbid state, one

that must be cured. Minorities essentially become symbolic aphasia patients in the socialist context. The criteria of health and disease are therefore expanded. In turn, whether a person can speak in the proper way becomes an important requirement to check whether the body can meet socialist health standards.

Western therapy, undoubtedly, constructs a hierarchical structure between the Han and non-Han. Nevertheless, such therapy also provides minorities a chance to approach modernity. In her studies on the hygienic modernity in Republican China, Ruth Rogaski notices the hygienically modern appliances for the bathroom and the popularity of *weisheng* chemicals in Republican Tianjin. Rogaski further explains that the use of *weisheng* products (e.g., flush toilets, porcelain sinks, specific clothes, and pills)—“could keep the body in hygienically modern shape.”⁶⁵ In socialist minority films, Western medicine and medical instruments share a similar function with the *weisheng* products in Republican Tianjin in Rogaski’s research. The instruments, such as the stethoscope, help to measure the body based on modern criteria. The therapies—for instance, injection, gastric lavage, and disinfection—help modify the corporal situation to ensure the body can fit into the modern healthy standard. In this sense, the healing obviously intends to cure the sickness and diseases, but, more importantly, helps transform and regulate the physical minority body into the modern shape. What better way to express body transformation than gastric lavage and disinfection? After all, these medical activities visualize cleaning the body from the inside out in a modern way.

At the same time, however, the powerless and insensible situation of minority patients in socialist minority films reveals the fact that these minorities cannot be masters of modernity but

⁶⁵ Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*, (Berkeley: University of California, 2004), 227.

are rather forever relegated to the position of object. The way that minorities are allowed to approach the “modern shape” is built on the deprivation of senses and perception. Minority patients must therefore open their bodies to be the site for exhibitions. On the minority body, modernity demonstrates its magical power to overcome the backward past by successfully curing the sickness left by the old societies and ensures that the abstract modern terms—including hygiene, antiseptics, and immunization—get a comprehensive display. Modern medicine does bring modernity to minority regions and contributes to modernizing the minority body. But in the process, the minority body remains fixed in the object position. Rather than gaining modernity, minority patients are just switched from the legacy of multiple exploitations to the modern exhibits. Among the socialist minority films, an exception that should be considered is *Dai Doctor*. The female protagonist Yilaihan finally becomes the master of Western medicine. But notably, she dearly pays for it: her parents pass away. She is kicked out of the community twice. She also attempts suicide. Yilaihan, in this sense, has been deprived of her entire past identity. After rebirth, she gets the pass to learn Western medicine. Her stories indicate that a minority must experience death and feel compelled to erase ethnicity to gain modernity. Otherwise, each minority patient will remain a passive object bearing the modern works on the body.

In minority films, to emphasize the effect of the exhibition, most medical activities occur in public spaces or are open to the public. But public treatment is not a typical form of Western medicine. According to Yang Nianqun, “the Western medical system is built on the belief of Christian trusteeship and has the private and non-public characteristics.”⁶⁶ This non-public feature conflicted with the medical convention of Chinese medicine. Thus, when Western medicine first became accessible to ordinary Chinese people in the 19th century, most Chinese people could not

⁶⁶ Yang, *Zaizao Bingren*, 72.

accept it. Facing this issue, some Western medical practitioners opened their treatments to the public and even provided open surgeries.⁶⁷ The main purpose of open treatments in this period was to demystify this new medicine. But socialist minority films do not follow this rationale. In *The Dawn of Meng River*, after the medical team settles down, Tibetan patients come to get medical treatments. Besides patients, the team also has minority audiences. The ordinary Tibetan fellows, side by side, stand outside the medical tent and quietly gaze at what is happening inside with curious eyes (Figure 1.5).



Figure 1.5 The Tibetan Onlookers outside the Medical Tent in *The Dawn of Meng River*

The camera switches to mimic these Tibetan onlookers' POV and shows the medical activities—such as diagnosing with the stethoscope, sterilizing medical instruments, and disinfecting and bandaging wounds—one by one in close shots. At the end of this sequence, the camera slowly zooms in on a nurse to scrutinize how she is sterilizing medical instruments. As she opens the sterilizer, steam rises, which veils the medical activity in mist. The mist and the slow pace endow the medical activities, which are beyond the ken of ordinary Tibetan people, with a mysterious and sacred overtone. Minorities are present to witness a series of magic shows made by modernity

⁶⁷ Ibid., 70.

happening on their fellows' bodies: the sick get well. The mute start to speak. In socialist spectacles, minorities ultimately play the roles of props and onlookers.

3. From the Body to the Mind: Spiritual Awakening

Undoubtedly, physical rehabilitation is the result of medical healing, but it is not the only consequence. In his study on the activities of Western medical missionaries in China during the early modern period, Yang Nianqun indicates that the missionaries devoted themselves to physical healing for the ultimate purpose of spreading religious belief.⁶⁸ They believed that “the forging of new lives relies on the physical rehabilitation, which provides a new residence for the spiritual transformation. The regulation of sick bodies becomes the precondition of faith.”⁶⁹ Supported by the trust in the body–spirit continuum, Western missionaries insisted on providing free medical service in China. However, the May Fourth elites disagreed with this idea. Instead of the body, May Fourth elites like Lu Xun prioritized spiritual awakening. Lu Xun once even recorded a primal scene that he encountered while studying medicine in Japan. He talked about how the film showing Chinese onlookers' numbness to the persecution of their compatriot impacted him: “After this film, I felt that medical science was not so important after all. The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made examples of or to witness such futile spectacles; and it does not really matter how many of them die of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit.”⁷⁰ With that aim in mind, Lu Xun gave up his professional medical training to become a writer focused on awakening the spirit of the

⁶⁸ Yang, *Zaizao Bingren*, 13.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁰ Lu Xun, *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 3.

Chinese people. Unlike for the Western missionaries, in Lu Xun's understanding, the body and the soul are separated. The healing of physical pain therefore cannot lead to spiritual awakening.

Lu Xun's criticism is undoubtedly sharp. But as time passed, the attitude toward the body-spirit relationship changed again in China. According to Wang Yu, "[Lu Xunian] spiritual redemption was not as successful as expected Even Lu Xun himself was disappointed at the effect of spiritual healing. Thus, the next generation of May Fourth elites like Ding Ling turned back to explore the abandoned physical healing."⁷¹ Wang examines Zhao Wenjie 赵文节 and Ding Ling 丁玲's medical-themed short stories and argues that the Yan'an literature illuminates the blind spot of Lu Xun and turns to embrace the ideology that "only with the foundation of physical healing can the spiritual treatment be more effective. With the support of the body, the enlightenment can make sense."⁷² However, this argument can hardly comprehend the complexity of the body-spirit relationship shown in Zhang and Ding Ling's stories. For instance, in "Physical Healing and Spiritual Treatment: A Story told by A Doctor," Zhang Wenjie depicts both the physical and psychological pain that the role of Wang Si suffers and endures. Instead of spiritual liberation, physical rehabilitation traps him in darkness and provokes his desire for death. He begs the doctor, "Please! Let me go! I am ashamed to live . . . I . . . die!"⁷³ Wang's death wish makes the doctor notice that "physical healing in this situation cannot help at all."⁷⁴ The doctor starts the

⁷¹ Wang Yu 王宇, "Yan'an wenxue zhong de yiliao weisheng xushi" 延安文学中的“医疗卫生叙事” [Healing and hygienic narratives in Yan'an literature], in *Xueshu yuekan* 学术月刊 [Academic monthly] 49, no. 8 (2017): 140.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 135.

⁷³ Zhao Wenjie 赵文节, "Routi de zhiliao yu jingshen de zhiliao—yige yisheng jiangde gushi" 肉体的治疗与精神的治疗——一个医生讲的故事 [Physical healing and spiritual treatment—A story told by a doctor], in *Zhongguo Jiefangqu Wenxue Shuxi Xiaoshuo Bian* 中国解放区文学书系小说编 [Chinese literature in liberated regions: Novel], vol. 3, ed. Lin Mohan 林默涵 (Chongqing: Chongqing Press, 1992), 1588.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

second-round treatment to save Wang by targeting his suffering spirit. Wang Si's story demonstrates the separation, instead of connection, between body and spirit. Spiritual education is a necessary but independent process separated from corporal curing. In this sense, instead of being an alternative, this story continues or reconfirms Lu Xun's thought that curing the body cannot save the spirit.

I argue that a narrative rupture with the May Fourth tradition occurs in socialist minority films. In the writings of May Fourth elites and Yan'an authors, the route connecting the body and spirit is blockaded. Soul redemption and physical healing must therefore be dealt with separately. However, minority patients in the imagination of socialist minority films do not align with this model. The physical healing always causes socialist spiritual enlightenment. In *Five Red Clouds* (五朵红云, dir. Hua Chun 华纯 and Zha Lie 查列, 1959), the PLA cures the wounds of Yi man Gonghu. After physical healing, Gonghu gives up his indiscriminate ethnic hatred of all the Han, recognizes that the real enemy is the Han in the KMT, and bravely fights with the KMT. Physical healing directly triggers Gonghu's socialist enlightenment. A similar story happens in the film *Bonfires in the Border Village*. Due to the ethnic hatred deeply rooted in the Jingpo community, the CCP's workgroup encounters many plights while mobilizing minority masses to modernize their farming ways. The resistance and the distrust of the Party's Han officials expose how minorities have not reached spiritual awakening. The breaking point occurs in the healing of Aishan's sickness. After witnessing that Aishan is out of danger with the emergency treatment of Li, the local chief is suddenly enlightened. He emotionally apologizes, "Instructor, I have gone completely gaga! I am not going to listen to the rumors." The chief then uses the wine to swear his loyalty and promises to persuade the Jingpo people to put aside their ethnic bias and contribute to the Party's modernization project. Aishan's physical recovery awakens the hesitant local chief and

makes him epiphanic in socialist discourse: he can determine that the so-called ethnic conflict is a deliberated pitfall instigated by the class enemy. In this way, ethnic hatred is shifted to class conflict. Duolong experiences similar enlightenment. After Duolong learns that his son was saved by Li, Duolong cries and repents his crude and rash behavior. He acknowledges that the class enemies have tricked him. To make up for his fault, Duolong volunteers to help the CCP lure the enemy.

A similar plot appears in *Dai Doctor*. In Aini culture, the birth of twins symbolizes bad luck. The twins must be killed to end the bad luck. Because of this tradition, an Aini woman named Zhana loses her first two children and is banished to the mountain. No one in the community interferes with this rule. However, after the masses see that Yilaihan, relying on the new method of midwifery, assists Zhana in giving birth to a second set of twins, the situation changes. As the local leader comes and abets the masses in trying to kill the newborn twins, the minority masses bravely stand up and argue against the leader: one person shouts, “Stop acting high-and-mighty! We will never be frightened by the ghosts and gods in your mouth!” Another continues, “You cannot control us by repeating the same old story!” The mutes, who never know how to resist the class exploitations inside their own ethnic group, suddenly regain their abilities to speak. The Western medical practitioner, in this sense, not only deals with Zhana’s difficult labor but also unseals minorities’ gagged mouths. These plots reveal the magical power of physical healing: it saves minorities from illness and causes their spiritual enlightenment. The medical treatment helps empower the minorities to realize class exploitations and challenge the authority. The ethnic minorities are no longer the dummies bearing class exploitations in silence but have instead risen up and taken the role of outspoken dissenters. Notably, this enlightenment is also generally collective. As a sick member in the minority community is cured, the healing can also enlighten

other minority members. This design somewhat implies that ethnic minorities share the same body and mind.

Also significant is that, in the process of medical healing, gender plays a meaningful role. The intervention of female Han doctors drives the adjustment of gender relationships in ethnic minority communities. Many socialist minority films depict the prevailing male superiority in minority culture. In *Bonfires in the Border Village*, for instance, Manuo is excited to talk about the CCP's agricultural reform project with Duolong. But upon realizing that Duolong does not trust the Han, Manuo stops and promises she will no longer mention the project. In front of the husband, the wife does not have the right to claim her own opinion. The arrival of the female Han doctor Li, however, brings some unexpected changes. Manuo and her son Aishan naturally come to Lin's side and have friendly conversations with her. Through those dynamics, Manuo's movement regroups the roles on the screen. Gender replacing ethnicity draws a new line to exclude the men. Female roles stand together. Their intimacy indicates the forming of a cross-ethnic community bound by sisterhood, which challenges the isolation caused by ethnicity. This new female-centered community threatens Duolong. He blames Manuo and directs his anger toward her, calling her "a stupid cow" in a fit of rage. Through verbal abuse, Duolong forces his wife to leave her Han sister and return to the ethnic group. The development of natural intimacy among women, regardless of ethnicity, is also depicted in *Jingpo Girls*. On her way home, a Jingpo woman named Muna encounters the female Han doctor Li, who seeks to persuade the Jingpo people to modernize their primitive agricultural traditions. Even though this encounter marks the first meeting between the two sisters, Muna naturally raises her concerns about the sick son to Li. Muna's action, like Manuo's, implies the presence of spontaneous intimacy among women and the possibility of

regrouping based on sisterhood. This friendly female talk is stopped by a Jingpo man, who reproaches Muna.

In the cases of both Manuo and Muna, minority men are single-mindedly devoted to defending the ethnic boundary and forcing women to obey this rule by brutally interrupting the communication between women. However, the will of men cannot stop the regrouping. The sickness and corresponding medical treatment ultimately provide the milestone for forming a cross-ethnic female community. When Aishan is sick, even though she knows her husband's distrust of the Han, Manuo still asks for help from Lin. Her trust in this Han sister can overcome any suspicions. While Manuo's male relatives attribute Aishan's second illness to Lin giving the wrong medicine, the men's attitude does not overwhelm Manuo's confidence in her sisterhood with Lin. In fact, Manuo gains confidence when Lin asks, "Do you not believe me?" Manuo even disregards Duolong's order and gives her son to Lin for healing. This action helps Manuo jump outside the stereotyped ethnic gender role. She is no longer the docile wife submitting to the husband's preferences and orders but instead is promoted to be an independent subject with the ability and courage to revolt against the patriarchy. Moreover, her decision to be distinct from men releases her from the fixed ethnic boundary and allows her to join a cross-ethnic female community. In this sense, the sickness of Aishan provides a chance to show the power of sisterhood in overcoming ethnic barriers. The recovery of Aishan with the help of Lin also confirms the reliability of the cross-ethnic sisterhood.

The sickness narrative helps renew minorities' gender personas. Minority women like Manuo are endowed with rationality, bravery, and wisdom. Conversely, minority men become emotional, impetuous, and rash. Accordingly, the ethnic gender relationship is reset in these films. Due to making corrective decisions in crises, minority women are no longer playing the subaltern

role of adhering to men but are instead being promoted to be superior to men. In this sense, healing not only cures minority sickness but also empowers minority women in ethnic gender structure. Besides, empowerment also occurs in the political aspect. In *Jingpo Girls*, Muna disregards the prohibition against communicating with the Han made by the local chief and asks whether her son could be cured by Li. The medical healing not only helps her son recover from sickness but also motivates her political enthusiasm. During a break from farming, Doctor Li talks with Wenshuai—the opinion leader in the Jingpo community—and suggests he should lead the Jingpo people to practice agricultural reform. When facing Li’s suggestion, Jingpo men keep silent and do not dare to challenge the authority of the local chief. Muna stands out for having given support to Li. After everyone leaves disappointed, Muna scorns her husband’s timidity and catches up with Wenshuai to persuade him again, “Can you guide us to do so?” A woman who had not dared to talk more with the Han under the surveillance of Jingpo men now is full of political favor. The change of Muna also reveals the empowerment of minority women in both political and gender aspects.

Through the sickness narratives and the corresponding healings, socialist minority films metaphorize the suffering body as the legacy of the past exploitations. The sickness provides an opportunity for national intervention and governing. Importantly, the target of medical healing is not only the physical body but also the spirit. In the name of spiritual awakening, the class classification, ethnic relationship, and gender order undergo comprehensive adjustments in minority spaces. In this process, the health criteria are modified and expanded. A healthy minority should first eliminate any physical illness and then achieve the socialist epiphany. In this way, both minority bodies and souls are under the imagined regulation. The minorities who fulfill the new healthy criteria are rearranged to participate in the socialist nation-building project, such as by opening paddy fields, building dams, and cultivating the wasteland in films. Many socialist

minority films touching upon the theme of sickness end with a plot where the minority collectively joins the modernization or territory reform project. For instance, in *Menglongsha Village*, the Jingpo masses in the Party's leadership successfully open paddy fields and build dams in the village. The concept of reform, in this sense, becomes the theme running through the whole process: reshaping the body, the spirit, and then the territory.

In sum, this chapter discusses the patterns in socialist minority films and their relationship with the Party's political goals. These films comprehensively not only depict minority spaces and people, but also help spread some basic ethnic minority knowledge among the masses in the socialist period. More importantly, through cinematic imaginations, these films complete the symbolic socialist reform in the aspects of minority history, geopolitics, body, and spirit. Ethnic minorities, thereupon, are involved in the socialist discourse, and the general image of ethnic minorities meeting the expectation of national discourse is successfully shaped in films and spread in the PRC.

Chapter 2

Listening to the Minority Voices:

Ethnic Minority Writing and Performance in the Seventeen-year Period (1949–1966)

By examining the formation of the socialist minority genre, the first chapter interprets how the Han-centered majority discourse intervened in producing the public image of minorities in the seventeen-year period. The wide circulation and popularity of this genre ultimately spread the expected persona of minorities among the masses. However, the national discourse cannot be equal to the voices of minorities. As their images were appropriated in films, minorities also actively participated in the production of self-portraits, responded to their constructed onscreen persona, adjusted their relationship with Han-centrism, and made efforts to express themselves and promote negotiations. Unfortunately, the previous scholarship has not provided in-depth research on the voices of minorities in socialist minority film productions.

This chapter therefore turns to explore the less-studied minority voices during the seventeen-year period. Minority film production was not a field just open to Han Chinese, despite Han filmmakers being the dominant force. Ethnic minorities were also actively involved, especially in script writing and performance. Thus, this chapter aims to decipher the minority voices through the roles that minorities played in the film field—as authors and actors. By zooming in to minority playwrights' writing and revision process and minority actors' training and performing, respectively, this chapter restores the expression and articulation of minorities and further shows the dynamic among minority voices, national discourse, and Han-centrism. I argue that writing and performing provide a way for the Han-centered national discourse to discipline minorities both physically and psychologically. Minorities in this process learned to prioritize the

national discourse and absorbed the core concepts in socialist ideology—including national solidarity, class struggle, and revolutionary spirit—into their own expression. But this environment did not mean space for negotiation disappeared. Instead, I argue that minorities could keep their limited agency and subjectivity in script writing and performance. Minorities could not, of course, rebel or challenge the national discourse, but they could, to some extent, express their diverse and heterogeneous voices.

Minority screenwriters under the Socialist Sun

In Maoist China, most minority film scripts were written by mature Han writers and screenwriters. While an abundant list of examples of such writers and screenwriters—including Zhao Jikang 赵季康, Wang Gongpu, Wang Jiayi, and so on—exists, the contributions of minority writers in this field are also important. From the 1950s, minority literature flourished with the support of the government. More minority writers appeared, and some crossed the border to become playwrights and participated in writing film scripts, although the number of minority screenwriters remained lower than among the Han. For instance, Mongolian writer Yun Zhaoguang 云照光 wrote the script for the film *Storms in Ordos* (鄂尔多斯风暴, dir. Hao Guang 郝光, 1962). The film *Visitor on Ice Mountain* is based on the original script of Wu Baixin 乌·白辛—an Ethnic Hezhe writer. Hui writer Ma Rong 马融 provided the script of *The Muslim Detachment*. Mongolian writer Damulin 达木林 worked with Mongolian director Guangbudaoerji 广布道尔基 to write the literary script *The Son of Herdsman* (牧人之子). Malqinhu and Zhulanqiqike coauthored the script for *The Dawn of Iron City* (钢城曙光).

The creation of such screenplays differs from ordinary literary writings. To some degree, literary writing is a type of personal creation. A writer composes a work of fiction and then sends it to the publisher. If the content is good, it will be published for public consumption. Of course, censorship may also emerge in this process, but literature can still generally be considered the independent work of the author. However, the same cannot be said about screenwriting. Mongolian writer Malqinhu, who was an active screenwriter during both the socialist and post-socialist era, offers insight on this aspect. In a forum, he highlights that the main trouble for playwrights in film crews was having “too many mothers-in-law.”¹ He recalled his personal experience in Maoist China: “As a script was sent out, it must be under the examinations of all the staff in the film studio. Let us use *Changying* as an example. There were 1,800 employees. Even if ten people gave one suggestion, there would be 180 suggestions. How could the playwright work in this situation?”² As Malqinhu’s recollection shows, screenwriters must compromise frequently, yield to other staff in the crews, and experience strict and repeated censorships. Malqinhu, in the same forum, also mentioned that some of his scripts eventually became completely unrecognizable after that process. In other words, the cooperative process of scriptwriting created obstacles to scriptwriters’ creativity. But the process also offered a way to see the communication among different discourses. Thus, scrutinizing minority writers’ script writings and editing can reveal the negotiations and dynamics between minority voices, Han opinions, and the official discourse.

¹ Malqinhu, 玛拉沁夫, “Dianyin chuangzuo rangwo you ai you pa” 电影创作让我又爱又怕 [Filmmaking makes me both excited and afraid], in *Malqinhu wenjin* 玛拉沁夫文集 [Collected work of Malqinhu], vol. 6, *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论 [Literature criticism], ed. Liyuan xiaodi 栗原小荻 and Huang Shenbiao 黄神彪 (Nanning: Guangxi Education Press, 2006), 76.

² Ibid.

The following section therefore examines minority screenwriters' work as a reflection of the function of minority scriptwriting in the context of Maoist China from 1949–1966. Did minorities experience the tension between their self-expression and the national discourse in script writing? How did the two forces influence minorities' creations? Using Mongolian writer Malqinhu as an example, the following section answers these questions by examining the evolution of his three script texts—including his first short story “People on the Horqin Grassland”; his first script under the supervision of a Han writer, *People on the Grassland* (草原上的人们); and his script *The Dawn of Iron City*.³ I argue that, in the writings and editing under the supervision of the Han, Malqinhu was trained to standardize his self-expression to fit the Han-centered majority discourse. In the seventeen-year period, scripts also functioned as “reports” that minority authors submitted to the Party to display how well they had absorbed the Party's principles. However, ethnic minorities did not completely lose their agency as a result. Minorities still had the ability to challenge the Han-centered imagination. By interpreting the love narrative and the minority identity in the script *The Dawn of Iron City*, I argue that the official discourse, in some cases, could shield minority authors to make their heterogeneous expression distinct from Han-centrism.

Training the Minority Pen: Malqinhu and Mongolian Writing

“Hey, I wrote something. Could you help me check if it can be seen as a short story [xiaoshuo 小说]?” In 1951, the young Mongolian writer Malqinhu spoke those words when giving his first manuscript to his friend and asking for his comments. It sounds a bit ridiculous. How can a writer not identify the genre of his own writing? Malqinhu's personal history reveals the reason. He grew

³ This script was later adapted into the film *Morning Song Over the Prairie* by Han director Zhu Wenshun and Mongolian director Zhulanqiqike in 1959.

up in a poor village in Inner Mongolia, so he received a Mongolian education when he was young. Due to joining the Eight Route Army at age 15, he was even a Mandarin illiterate. Starting in 1946, he then spent five years concentrating on Chinese learning. It was during that period that Malqinhu could access literature. In 1951, when Malqinhu was working in Inner Mongolia, a story of how a Horqin herdsman named Tamu fought against an escaped spy was popularized in the grassland. The local officer reminded Malqinhu that the heroine might make good literary subject matter.⁴ After struggling with various difficulties, Malqinhu finally completed his first short story in Mandarin Chinese, “People on the Horqin Grassland (科尔沁草原的人们).” In this simple story, Saran,⁵ a Mongolian young woman, awaits her lover Sanbu and becomes alarmed by the suspicious behavior of a slovenly lama named Bolo. After noticing Bolo’s hidden gun, she realizes the lama is a spy and wants to arrest him. Meanwhile, Bolo sets fire to the grassland to escape, but Saran remains unafraid and eventually captures Bolo. Sanbu and other Mongolian herdsmen also extinguish the big fire. Despite being unsure whether his writing could be categorized as a short story, he endeavored to give it a try and mailed this “little toy” to *People’s Literature*, which was the most authoritative literary journal in Maoist China. Surprisingly, Malqinhu received a message from the journal several days later: his first short story was accepted.

Malqinhu’s first literary attempt subsequently achieved success and was promoted nationally. In 1952, *People’s Daily* praised this minority short story by emphasizing *five news*: “new subject matter, new life, new people, new ethics, and new morality.”⁶ The government also

⁴ See relative information in Malqinhu, “Zai Zhongguo wenxue de guangmao woyuan shang” 在中国文学的广袤沃原上 [On the vast fertile land of Chinese literature], *National Literature*, no. 10 (2013): 123.

⁵ The romanizations of the roles’ names are based on the English translation of this short story published by Chinese Literature Press in 1988. See Malqinhu, *On the Horqin Grassland*, trans. Wen Xue (Beijing: Chinese Literature Press, 1988), 143–64.

⁶ “Wenhua shenghuo jianping” 文化生活简评 [Comments on culture and life], *People’s Daily*, January 18, 1952.

quickly decided to adapt this short story into a film to propagate the achievements of the Party in ethnic minority regions. Hai Mo 海默, a Han playwright serving in the Script Creation Office in the Central Film Bureau, was assigned to guide Malqinhu and another Mongolian fledgling writer named Damulin to compose a team to work on the script by editing Malqinhu's original short story. Understandably, a short story can hardly convey enough information to fill the length of a film, which generally lasts for roughly 90 minutes. Modification was therefore necessary. Another reason for the modification relates to the content of the original short story. As scholar Li Xiaofeng indicates, even though the main narrative in "People on the Horqin Grassland" matches the theme of the era—anti-spies—the story remains significantly distant from the expectation of the national discourse.⁷ Examining these changes and modifications could thus provide the clues to understand the negotiation between minority writers, the Han, and the national discourse.

1. From Horqin to the World

From the story to the script, the first change appears in the title. Horqin—the specific place—is replaced by a bigger and ambiguous term: the grassland. According to Li Xiaofeng, this new title reveals the authors' intention to "expand the narrative from a region to the whole grassland. The grassland . . . then is transformed into the symbol of the nation."⁸ I partly side with Li's argument. The extended boundary is clear in the new title. However, rather than making the grassland the symbol of the nation, I argue that both "the grassland" in the changed title and the corresponding changes in place names collectively reveal the disappearance of the Mongolian POV. The word

⁷ Li Xiaofeng 李晓峰, "minzu guojia huayu dui geren huayu de xiaojie—cong 'Ke'erqin caoyuan de renmen' dao 'Caoyuan shang de renmen'" 民族国家话语对个人话语的消解——从《科尔沁草原的人们》到《草原上的人们》 [Dispelling the personal discourse using national discourse—from "People on the Horqin Grassland" to *People on the Grassland*], *Studies of Ethnic Literature*, no. 4 (2005): 61.

⁸ Ibid.

“Horqin” in the original title marks the specificity of the region. Malqinhu, in his short story, deliberately concretizes this region. In the sequence where the female protagonist (Saran) interrogates Bolo’s identity, the names of different villages in Horqin and neighboring banners—such as Bayan-undur, Altan-obo, Jarud Banner, and Ar Horqin Banner—are listed one by one. These names—for those who are familiar with the grassland, like the Mongols—function as the landmarks outlining the map of the Horqin grassland. Through engaging with the narrative, these place names help place the story into an actual, concrete setting. The place names also, by following Bolo’s footsteps, complete a homeland tour. The setting of this story therefore creates a concrete space Mongols can identify with, imagine, and navigate. In this sense, Malqinhu provides a Mongolian POV in the short story. But for those who are unfamiliar with Mongolian cultural and geographical context—for example, most of the Han—the place names are redundant and even meaningless. In the script targeting the Han-dominated film market, these names are replaced by “the grassland,” “the town,” “the district,” and “the team”—all ambiguous terms without recognizability. The editing exposes the POV change: from Mongolian-centered in the short story to the general Han-dominated in the script.

The new title also emphasizes the need to renavigate the affiliation of the Mongolian community in the national framework. As the Horqin disappears, the nation actively engages with the narrative in the script. Saran, when discussing the future of the grassland with her sister, affiliates the grassland with the nation itself. She says, “Our nation’s grassland is super big.” The setting is no longer the small villages unknown by the public in Inner Mongolia, but rather the grassland owned by the nation. The nation reappears in the following lyrics of herdsman Sanbu’s

songs: “We are running on the grassland to build our nation.”⁹ At the Naadam festival, the heroine Saran is invited to give a public address, in which she states, “We are living in a big family in the Mao era, our Mongolian grassland is a branch on the great tree of the nation, and I am but a leaf on the tree . . . Our Mongolian grassland cannot be separated from the nation.”¹⁰ This sequence, from Malqinhu’s original story, consolidates and highlights the grassland’s affiliation with the nation. The identity of minority roles, thereupon, switches from Mongols in Horqin to the herdsmen on the grassland of the nation. In fact, Saran’s words are not simply lyrical expressions but also the report of minority authors on how they successfully navigated their expected position in the socialist era. Instead of identifying with their minority community, the minority authors should, like Saran, place themselves in a national framework. The modification, in this sense, completes the imagined nationalization of the Mongolian grassland.

Additional modifications to the script further adjusted the Mongolian ethnic affiliation. *People’s Daily* commented that Malqinhu’s short story depicted new people, but the new people emerging from Malqinhu’s pen are all Mongols. To break free of this confinement and engage with more topics, the playwright team added an important new Han role, Lü Shouqing, who is a representative of the KMT. This role and the character’s close contact with Bolo combine to extend the discussion from one ethnic group into a larger picture. Bolo’s status is also modified by the additional role. In the short story, Bolo is the villain plotting all the sabotage that threatens the peace of the grassland. Malqinhu introduces Bolo’s background in detail: “The counter-revolutionary Bolo . . . joined the Kuomintang in 1947 and held the post of deputy commander of

⁹ Malqinhu, “Caoyuan shang de renmen” 草原上的人们[People on the Grassland], in *Malqinhu wenjin* [玛拉沁夫文集[Collected works of Malqinhu], vol. 7, *Film Scripts*, ed. Liyuan Xiaodi 栗原小荻 and Huang Shenbiao 黄神彪 (Nanning: Guangxi Education Press 2006), 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

a unit of the puppet cavalry [He] committed every conceivable crime, plundering the people of over five hundred horses, over seven hundred cattle, and over three thousand sheep. He also raped more than twenty women.”¹¹ This type of portrayal, however, was politically dangerous in the context of the early 1950s. Depicting the evil image of minorities was sensitive in this period because the image challenged the Party’s ethnic policies, which were announced in “The Common Program of The Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference.” In this document, the government addresses that “the People’s Republic of China will become a big fraternal and cooperative family composed of all its nationalities Acts involving discrimination, oppression and splitting of the unity of the various nationalities shall be prohibited.”¹² Accordingly, to meet the demands of the Party, intellectuals were asked to avoid the utterly negative depiction of minority figures, which may hurt minorities’ feelings. The first socialist ethnic minority film, *The Springtime in Inner Mongolia*, once encountered trouble because it depicted minority leaders as villains. The film was, as a result, censored and re-edited into *Victory of Inner Mongolia People*. In addition, the playwright, Wang Zhenzhi, had to publish a self-criticism in *People’s Daily* to reflect on his political mistakes.¹³

Malqinhu faced a similar risk with his depiction of Bolo. Against the existing background, adding a Han agent to represent the enemy of the KMT in the script *People on the Grassland* was a political strategy. The new role of Lü takes over all the crimes of Bolo and becomes the head architect of disaster on the grassland. The negative minority character Bolo accordingly retreats

¹¹ Malqinhu, *On the Horqin Grassland*, 151.

¹² “The Common Program of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference,” *The Important Documents of the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1949), 18.

¹³ Wang Zhenzhi 王震之, “Neimeng chunguang de ziwo jiantao” 《内蒙春光》的自我检讨 [Self-criticism of *The Springtime in Inner Mongolia*], *People’s Daily*, May 28, 1950.

from blame. But it is worth noticing the consequent influence that comes with the exoneration of Bolo. In Malqinhu's short story, without the participation of the Han, Bolo's chosen political affiliations and crimes are based on his independent will. He independently practices the perpetration without being influenced or ordered by others. To some degree, the crimes help Bolo gain subjectivity and agency. However, in the script, Bolo is misguided, deceived, and manipulated by Lü. Bolo thus essentially becomes the helpless puppet and subordinate of the Han, and in the process, Bolo's subjectivity and self-consciousness are deprived. Lü's hierarchical relationship with Bolo ultimately alluded to a Han-centered ethnic relationship. Thus, the appearance of the Han role rearranges Mongols in a new relative network in which Mongols are assigned to be the subordinate and the Han the superior authority.

As the Han spy gets involved in the narrative, the world also projects its shadow on the grassland. Most roles in Malqinhu's short story are stationary and fixed in a region. Even for the mobile role of Bolo, who joins the cross-regional movement, the trajectory of the role just covers some banners and small villages in the grassland. The diegesis is therefore confined to the grassland, which creates the impression that it is isolated from the rest of the world. However, the appearance of Lü in the script makes a breakthrough and brings the world into the narrative. Alarmed by Bolo's frequent contact with Lü, Sanbu goes to the town to report the contact to the director of the Public Security Bureau. Sanbu mentions, "[Bolo] kept in line after the KMT left. But he started visiting the town more frequently as the Korean war began."¹⁴ The director agrees and makes the following prediction: "Most likely they are plotting a large-scale sabotage attack, taking advantage of the urgency of the Korean War."¹⁵ The prediction of the director is correct. In

¹⁴ Malqinhu, "Caoyuan shang de renmen," 33.

¹⁵ Ibid.

a shop, Lü is trying to dispel Bolo's doubts. Lü induces, "What are you worrying about? Once the Americans cross the Yalu River . . . if you work hard, promoting you to be the banner head is not a hard thing . . . let us meet at Naadam. It will be a crucial moment. The American army will come here this winter. We must prepare for it."¹⁶ In these conversations, the grassland is no longer isolated but actively engaged with national and international events. Naadam, an important Mongolian festival, is endowed with a new function—becoming the battlefield for the CCP, the KMT, and the West. The grassland is thus replaced in a global coordinate system. Like the changed title, the Han role and the corresponding engagements of the world in the script remind minority writers to re-navigate their home ethnic community within a larger framework. Instead of confining themselves to their own minority communities, minority writers should open their eyes to the dynamics between the ethnic group, the nation, and the world.

2. Love

Another aspect that gets further modified in the script is the love narrative. Scholar Li Xiaofeng praises the bold description of love in both the original story and the film's script. In his understanding, the depiction of love is seldom seen in 1950s socialist literature.¹⁷ In most socialist literature from this period, love is undoubtedly always seen as a sensitive topic. But Li seems to ignore the specificity of the minority genre. The topic of love, instead of being the forbidden zone, is routine for socialist minority films. In the various revisions of *The Springtime in Inner Mongolia*, a number of significant modifications were made, but the love story between the Mongolian couple was maintained. In the following minority films made in the 1950s, the theme of love even became a safe zone for filmmakers to avoid political risks. In that context, the love that Malqinhu described

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Li Xiaofeng, "Minzu guojia huayu," 65.

in the original story was not surprising. However, it does not mean that Malqinhu's love narrative perfectly fits the requirement of the national expectation. Li Xiaofeng just states the continuity of the theme of love in both the short story and the script without commenting on the subtle changes in the love narratives.

In Malqinhu's original short story, the romantic subplot relates to the main political activity—capturing the spy. Saran, while waiting for her lover Sanbu, meets two men by chance: a grandfather named Amgalang, who tells her about the urgency of the situation in the village, and Bolo, the escaped criminal. The two draw Saran outside the context of the love story and urge her to engage in the campaign to suppress counterrevolutionaries. She accepts this political responsibility and leaves to chase the spy, but her actions do not mean the end of the love story. The theme of love reappears when Saran is chasing Bolo. She is exhausted because of the long chase. Then she figures out where she is—a small hill, on which “Sanbu had first proposed to her. All kinds of flowers grew on the hill, and she remembered how once Sanbu had put two blossoms in her headdress In her mind's eye she saw Sanbu's handsome mouth and gay smile and was lost for a moment in memories of their love.”¹⁸ The romantic memory interrupts the continuity of political activity. Saran is distracted from fully focusing on politics instead of love. A similar situation takes place with Sanbu, who is in a hurry to fight against the fire. In Maoist China, protecting collective property was everyone's political responsibility. However, on his way home, Sanbu is also distracted. The pink tobacco pouch attracts his attention and reminds him of Saran. Malqinhu, in this sequence, writes, “[Sanbu] gave a puzzled smile: ‘Who could have had a rendezvous here and dropped this? Well, no matter what pretty girl made it, it is mine now. Still,

¹⁸ Malqinhu, *On the Horqin Grassland*, 161.

my Saran can embroider a hundred times better than this.’’¹⁹ Even though the two protagonists promptly switch their respective focus back to their own political missions, each character’s love-driven, wandering attention should not be ignored.

It is meaningful to discuss the abovementioned narrative design in-depth to decipher the hidden information behind Malqinhu’s depiction. Love as a symbol of personal emotions points to the private space, but politics always connotes the collective and the public. The relationship between love and politics therefore unfolds the dynamic between private and public spaces. In Malqinhu’s short story, the collective pulls minorities from the private space and assigns them political missions. But minorities do not devote every hour and every moment to collective politics. The surroundings, such as the hill upon which Sanbu proposes to Saran and the tobacco pouch on the ground, always distract the minorities from the collective and guide them to retreat to the private space. By falling into the memory of love, minority roles can forget their assigned political responsibilities and ignore the interpellation of the Party, even though the time was very short. The theme of love in Malqinhu’s short story therefore preserves the private space for minorities and endows them with options: the minority characters have the right to shift their attention back and forth between the private and public spaces. To some degree, the relative freedom to make an independent choice helps minorities maintain their agency.

However, the function of love in the script is different. Instead of being a distraction, love is transformed into another site of political engagement. The sequence of Saran and Sanbu dating is maintained. In the script version, no one interrupts the dating, but that alone does not guarantee their private space. Instead, politics overwhelmingly intrudes upon their private romantic space. After Saran and Sanbu express their love for each other by hugging and singing, the two walk into

¹⁹ Ibid., 155.

the grassland, hand in hand. Surprisingly, what the lovers discuss during this romantic scene is their political responsibility rather than whispers of love. Saran tells Sanbu, “You know, our team’s tasks for the first half of the year have been completed. We also survived the storm. It is almost the most beautiful time of year on the grasslands—autumn”²⁰ After listing all the political achievements, she takes an unexpected turn to tell Sanbu that she accepts his proposal and will marry him in the coming autumn. Political achievements and romance—two unrelated concepts—are closely connected based on Saran’s understanding. While Sanbu is excited to express his happiness about the marriage, Saran interrupts him and continues to propose another requirement for the marriage. She says, “Guess what I am thinking? The working model should not be taken away by other teams. Sanbu! You did a great job in the wolf hunt this year! If you can join our team next fall, our team will be the top one in the whole banner!”²¹ In this way, the political benefits become a precondition for Saran’s marriage. The theme of this sequence is the offer of marriage, but politics dominates the conversation between the two characters. Compared to the pure love in Malqinhu’s original story, which allowed the protagonists to forget politics, in the conversation in the script, political missions replace romance to become the main topic in this private space. The boundary between the private and the collective is therefore blurred. Dating becomes another site to participate in socialist politics, which means private space exists in name only. In essence, love and marriage are not simply personal affairs but instead become collective ones. The theme of minority love, rather than keeping politics separate, should serve socialism and be part of collective politics. This message fulfilled the expectation of the Party. In Maoist China, everyone was asked

²⁰ Malqinhu, “Caoyuan shang de renmen,” 29.

²¹ Ibid.

to completely devote themselves to socialist politics, so in their own writings, minority authors had to learn how to distort their own expressions to follow this expected pattern.

3. Minority Elders

Compared to Malqinhu's short story, the role that changed significantly in the script *People on the Grassland* is the father of the female protagonist—Bayar. The highlight moment of this role is the sequence with the pasture fire. Facing the strange fire, the village leader, Amgalang, mobilizes the masses to fight against the fire. But Bayar stands out and provides different opinions about Amgalang's plan. Bayar demurs, "But it seems to me this fire is so fierce, if we grapple with it directly, we are bound to fail." He then proposes his concrete plan, which can safely put out the fire. To confirm the feasibility of the plan, he concludes, "This is a lesson we learned through many years in dealing with fire."²² Here, Bayar is portrayed as a living fossil, crystallizing the conventions and wisdom of the grassland and the embodiment of the Mongolian philosophy on life. His wisdom makes him the authority of the Mongols. Amgalang then accepts Bayar's plan and guides the masses to put out the fire, following Bayar's instructions.

Malqinhu, in this scene, embedded a metaphor in the cooperation of the two roles. Amgalang is introduced at the beginning of the story as the "village head and an old Party member."²³ Matching with this identity, he is very sensitive to politics. Upon hearing about the fire, he immediately realizes its connection with the spy's sabotage. He guides the masses to fight the fire while framing his words in political rhetoric. He says, "We must first break up the enemy forces and then annihilate the different sectors."²⁴ These details make this role function as the

²² Malqinhu, *On the Horqin Grassland*, 153.

²³ *Ibid.*, 144.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

representative of the CCP. In that context, the conversation between Amgalang and Bayar can be seen as a metaphor symbolizing the power relationship between the Party and Mongols. In Mongolian writers' imagination, rather than being the voiceless subaltern, Mongols are independent subjects, even dissenters, who can question the order of the Party and propose disagreement. Amgalang's acceptance of Bayar's suggestions implies the Party's acknowledgment of the independence of Mongols. The Mongolian ethnicity is, through this implication, placed in a horizontal relationship with the Party.

However, this personal expression of the minority author challenged the absolute authority of the Party in the socialist era and thus had to be modified in the script to fit the standard official criteria. In the script, Bayar still functions as the model of Mongolian convention, which can be seen through his consistent citation of Mongolian proverbs, sayings, and rules. But here the conventions make him a tradition stickler, one who dogmatically abides by the backward rules. Bolo instigates Bayar's relationship with relatives by mentioning the political status of Bayar's daughter Saran. In his words, it is Saran, not the father, who has the right to make the decision since she is the team leader. Bayar is irritated by this notion and chides, "How can she control me?" Bolo then continues to state that, if it is not Saran, then Amgalang, the village head, should oversee everything. Boyar responds with anger, "He is not allowed to assume great airs in front of me! Following our Mongolian rules, he is just a younger brother!"²⁵ In this short conversation, the vivid image of an arbitrary and bullheaded father insisting on his stubborn pride effectively carries Boyar's personality from the pages of the script. Comparatively, minority conventions in the script are stigmatized. Mongolian tradition does not form the precious nuggets of wisdom but rather creates biases pushing people away from the correct track. In the script, it is Bayar who brings

²⁵ Malqinhu, "Caoyuan shang de renmen," 10.

many troubles to the Commune. The minority convention is no longer the savior defending the grassland, but instead the origin of disasters. Bayar's leadership in extinguishing the fire is deprived, too. Like other Mongolian masses in the script, he follows the instructions of Party officers.

The modified persona of the elder father implies the existence of systematic socialist reform in the Mongolian community and conventions. Specifically, Bolo sowing discord reveals the intervention of the socialist system in the existing interpersonal relationships in Mongolian ethnicity. The father/older brother-centered kinship and friendship structure are requested to be replaced by the new socialist political relationship. Every individual is expected to readjust the family relationship by relying on political identity. As the narrative in the script shows, Bayar, the incarnation of authority in Mongolian tradition, should abdicate in favor of the daughter and younger brother, who obtain political status in the socialist system. The power structure connoted in the kinship network, in this way, is deprived. Mongols are rearranged into a political-oriented social system based on the Party's standard. Socialist political structure therefore symbolically reforms Mongolian culture. In this symbolic socialist reform, minorities must retreat from being in the subject position and able to control their own lives in the short story to become subordinates controlled by Party rule in the script.

The Han-dominated cooperative scriptwriting trained minority screenwriters like Malqinhu on how to edit their imaginations to fit and resonate with the official discourse. Minority screenwriters were taught to place their ethnic group in a socialist national network led by the Party and correctly map the power dynamics between minorities, the Han, and the Party itself. After this writing workshop, Malqinhu then finished his second film script, *The Dawn of Iron City*. Unlike the first script that heavily relies on the assistance of the Han intellectual, the second one is a pure

minority work, created by Malqinhu and another Mongolian actress named Zhulanqiqike. This second script focuses on another big event in the grassland—the establishment of Baotou Steel Refinery—and respectively depicts how the older generation defends the sacred mountain Bayan Obo in Republican China and how the younger generation under the leadership of the CCP develops Bayan Obo to support the national industrialization.

Through this script, how minority screenwriters absorbed the training and lessons and then tried to match their expressions with the majority discourse is clear. Instead of confining the context to the isolated Mongolian community, *The Dawn of Iron City* sets Bayan Obo in a complicated context. Because of the valuable iron resources in Bayan Obo, the KMT, the CCP, and Japan converge in this Mongolian grassland area where they compete for control of steel resources. Eventually, as the engagement with Han characters progresses, their roles organically unfold into a fraternal Han–Mongol relationship. The Han older brother Zhang Dongxi sacrifices himself for the Mongols. The Han leader secretary Fang, the representative of the CCP, comes to guide the Mongols to modernize the grassland region. Relying on the role of Fang, Mongolian writers shape the hierarchy between the Party and Mongols. Secretary Fang is the supervisor of the Mongolian leader Huhe, both in the past and in the present. Before 1949, Fang was Huhe’s senior officer. This relationship continues after 1949. After liberation, Fang is assigned to be the Secretary of the Party Committee in the Baotou Steel factory. Huhe later again becomes Fang’s subordinate. This design follows the official discourse to form a vertical relationship between the Han superior and the Mongolian subordinate. In addition, Malqinhu modifies the depiction of love, and love is actively intertwined with politics. To correct the attitude toward Mongolian conventions, Malqinhu and Zhulanqiqike create the role of Laxiningbu, who is a copy of Bayar. After these self-corrections, this script did not encounter many obstacles to being adapted into a film.

Collectively, Malqinhu's explorations in script writing and his changes in the writing process provide the chance to examine the meaning of ethnic minority writing in the seventeen-year period. Instead of independent free expression, writing functioned as pedagogical lessons, through which minority writers learned and practiced how to distort their personal expressions to fit the standards of socialist political discourse. Malqinhu's script creations highlight how the main contrast between the voices of minority intellectuals and the official discourse centers on minorities' subjectivity. The parts highlighting the independence, subjectivity, and authority of Mongols and Mongolian culture were always requested revisions. Notably, the revisions not only showed the process of literary censorship but also were intended to train and educate minority writers to confine their creative imaginations, which were the important components in writers' agency and subjectivity. Minority writing thus exposed the double deprivation of minority agency in Maoist China: the subjectivity of both minority roles in the diegesis and the minority authors was taken away. Minorities in fictional imagination and in reality all should submit to the Party and join the chorus, resonating with the Party's discourse. With regard to the representation of minorities in films, scholar Dru Gladney indicates that the socialist minority genre "has more to do with constructing a majority discourse, than it does with the minorities themselves."²⁶ Yingjin Zhang, siding with Gladney, concludes, "Instead of acting as agents of change in their own right, they [minority roles] are continually directed to pay homage to the nation-state."²⁷ The two scholars anchor their studies on the minority roles in films, but the scholars' conclusions also work to explain other forms of minority writing.

²⁶ Dru Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, no. 1 (1994): 94.

²⁷ Yingjin Zhang, *Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and the Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Ann Arbor), 166.

Exploring the Room for Heterogeneous Minority Discourse

The case of Malqinhu reflects the control of the majority discourse over individual expression of minority authors. In this period, directly resisting the political discipline was undoubtedly impossible. But it does not mean the only choice left for minority authors was to cater to the majority discourse and completely give up their subjectivity. Malqinhu still attempted to explore the possibility of acting as the agent of Mongols' ethnic rights, and the love narrative in *The Dawn of Iron City* allowed him to express his heterogeneous discourse about Han-centrism. On the surface, Malqinhu accepted the socialist convention to grant the Han the status as the leading older brother. As Mongolian workers go to Anshan Steel to learn advanced technologies, "the responsible Han older brothers help them with kindness."²⁸ As Laxiningbu is stuck in the ethnic hatred, Huhe reminds him of the sacrifice of the Han brother Zhang Dongxi: "Without Han comrades like Zhang Dongxi, how can our grasslands enjoy happiness? It is comrade Zhang who led us to fight against the Japanese invaders."²⁹ These details demonstrate that minority screenwriters had absorbed the expected Han-centered ethnic hierarchy in official discourse. However, Mongolian writers did not stop there. They went further in deconstructing and overturning this stereotyped ethnic structure by weaving the gender hierarchy into the love narrative.

According to Gladney, "the representation of the 'minority' in China reflects the objectivizing of a 'majority' nationality discourse that parallels the valorization of gender and

²⁸ Malqinhu, "Caoyuan chenqu" 草原晨曲 [Morning Song over the Prairie], in *Malqinhu wenjin*, vol. 7, 102.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

political hierarchies.”³⁰ He further detailed the parallels: “Minority is to the majority as female is to male, as ‘Third’ World is to ‘First,’ and as subjectivized is to objectivized identity.”³¹ Gladney’s analysis can explain most socialist minority films produced by Han filmmakers. In socialist minority films, minorities are always gendered as docile females, and the Han generally occupy the reserved male position. The film *Friendship in Adversity* (患难之交), written and directed by Han filmmaker Wang Yi 王毅, is a typical example. This film focuses on the close friendship between a Han family and an ethnic Korean family. In the film, the Korean youth Jin Yongjun asks the Han hunter Liu Jinbo to serve as a guide to look for ginseng growing on the mountain, but Liu loses Jin in the old-growth forest. Liu’s regret leads him to take care of the Jin family. During these events, the beautiful sister in the Jin family falls in love with the brave and responsible Han older brother. Further, the Korean family in the story is gendered as female. After Yongjun is lost, only women remain in the Korean family: the old mother, the younger sister, and Yongjun’s fiancé. In contrast with the female minority family, the Han family is male-dominated, with a kind father and a strong son. The gendered Han and non-Han relationship can also be seen in the love story: the Korean young woman falls in love with a Han man. Ethnic minorities thus enter the relationship of affinity with the Han Chinese by playing the role of a female being immersed in love and leaving the active subject position to the Han, who present masculinity and leadership. In this way, the ethnic hierarchy stands out in the gender roles that Han and non-Han characters play, respectively.

However, Malqinhu’s second coauthored script overthrew this gendered, ethnic hierarchy. In the second script, Mongols are gendered as male, while a Han plays the female role. Deciphering this new ethnic hierarchy requires the examination of the Han woman Xiuzhi in *The Dawn of Iron*

³⁰ Gladney, “Representing Nationality in China,” 93.

³¹ Ibid.

City. Compared to the common image of Han women on the screen, Xiuzhi is deviant in many ways. In Han-made socialist minority films, Han women are generally shown as independent, revolutionary, and modern socialist new women. For instance, in *Bonfires in the Border Village*, the Han doctor Li (Figure 2.1) is a modern medical officer in the PLA who goes to the Jingpo village to provide medical help for minority fellows.



Figure 2.1 The Han Doctor Li (right) in *Bonfires in the Border Village*

She is also a political activist who helps the Party's representative capture the KMT spy. However, in *The Dawn of Iron City*, Xiuzhi does not follow this convention. She is instead a maid working in the house of the Mongolian leader Guanbu, and her occupation determines her subaltern position under the ethnic minority ruling: she must follow the orders of her ethnic minority masters. Moreover, the persona of the Han woman in this script is changed. Distinct from the strong socialist female revolutionary, Xiuzhi is the incarnation of tears. She cries for the suffering of her lover and brother; she weeps because of lovesickness. Her eyes also get watery over the reunion of her family. Through these depictions, the tears label this role as a feminine woman who is weak, helpless, and waiting for someone to offer salvation. The most powerful weapon that she relies on to survive is not her courage or socialist belief, but rather her beauty. As the Japanese officer visits Guanbu's house, Xiuzhi's beauty quickly attracts the officer's attention: "He glues his eyes to her. After she

leaves, he asks Guanbu, ‘She is so beautiful. Who is she?’³² The young master in the house, Daoerji, is the second man captured by her beauty. Upon seeing Xiuzhi’s tears, he admires her and states, ‘I am studying in Beijing. However, there is no woman as pretty as you in the big Beijing city.’³³ The Han woman in this script therefore becomes the object projecting the desire of men. This design is seldom seen in Han-made socialist culture.

In addition, the script always connects Xiuzhi with sexual affairs to underscore the function of the Han woman as the object of male desire. She falls in love with Mongolian hunter Huhe. Before officially marrying Huhe, however, she has been pregnant for four months. This plot implies that Xiuzhi has engaged in premarital sexual activity, which is not a moral behavior in Han conventions. Rumors about her affairs with the younger master are everywhere, and the old servant tells Guanbu, ‘The intimate relationship between your son and Xiuzhi is notorious in the town.’³⁴ The servant is also convinced that the younger master made Xiuzhi pregnant and publicly refers to this affair as adultery. While the servant’s words are groundless slander, Xiuzhi does once rely on her beauty to practice the honey trap. She lures the younger master for the sake of Huhe and her brother, who are locked in prison. Xiuzhi, in this sense, plays the role of the femme fatale, using her fatal beauty as a scheme to control men. These plots weave nets that trap Han women in sexual affairs. This design challenges the convention shared by Han-made culture. In his study on the nude images of minority women in post-socialist paintings, Dru Gladney appropriates Camille Paglia’s ‘sexual persona’ term to explain the Han and non-Han relationship hidden behind these paintings. According to Gladney, ‘minority women in China had become . . . the ultimate ‘sexual

³² Malqinhu, ‘Caoyuan chenqu,’ 52.

³³ *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

personae' for the 'Eastern Eye' of the broader Han Chinese society."³⁵ Conversely, Han women are always "represented as covered, conservative, and 'civilized' in most state publications."³⁶ Gladney thus correctly deciphers the common pattern of Han-made minority-related cultural products. However, Malqinhu and Zhulanqiqike's script unfolds an opposing pattern through the depiction of Xiuzhi. Rather than repeating the Han model, minority writers shift the Han woman to have a "sexual persona." Such portrayals of Han women as objects under the voyeuristic gaze are seldom seen in the Han-made socialist minority films. In this aspect, *The Dawn of Iron City* overthrows the conventional gender structure within the Han and non-Han relationship.

Further, by depicting cross-ethnic love between Xiuzhi and Huhe, minority screenwriters constructed Mongols and the Han in an otherwise rarely mentioned conjugal relationship. In Han-made socialist minority films, the Han and non-Han are always bound by friendship, especially brotherhood. Love stories, however, generally only occur within the same ethnic group. Even though Wang Yi's *Friendship in Adversity* touches upon the transethnic romance, Wang does not comprehensively discuss this topic but does emphasize its sensitivity. The couple in the film always addresses how Korean conventions disallow the love between them. In the end, the couple violating this taboo faces punishment (Figure 2.2). While Han filmmakers did not encourage the romance between the Han and non-Han in Maoist China, Mongolian writers entered this forbidden zone. In *The Dawn of Iron City*, Xiuzhi becomes the wife of Huhe and even gives birth to a mixed ethnic descendent—Caixia. In this multiethnic family, the Mongol plays the masculine role of husband and father, and the Han is feminized as the docile wife and good mother. Accordingly, this conjugal relationship edits the ethnic hierarchy: minorities are no longer the subaltern under

³⁵ Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China," 104.

³⁶ Ibid.

the leadership of the Han but their counterpart, even the patriarch. Notably, the PRC also claimed to itself be a multiethnic family under the ruling of the CCP. In this context, organizing a Mongol-centered cross-minority family in this script somewhat implied the ambition of Mongolian writers regarding the imagined way to join the socialist family: they had the chance to be the representative of the Party. In this sense, Mongolian writers, on the one hand, aligned their self-expression to the official discourse, but on the other hand, the writers did not completely give up the chance to explore their subjectivity and agency.



Figure 2.2 The Arrested Couple in *Friendship in Adversity*

Through the transethnic family, Mongolian writers further expressed their attitudes on Han-centrism. The story ends with the reunion of the Mongolian family. As the patriarch in a multiethnic family, the Mongolian protagonist Huhe has a loyal wife (Han), a lovely daughter (mixed), a diligent adoptive son (Mongol), and a breezy niece (Han). The number of descendants in this Mongol-dominated family undoubtedly indicates fertility and prosperity. In contrast, the Han families are always infertile. The Han hero Zhang Dongxi, for instance, is a widower whose wife passes away in childbirth. Later, Zhang is also killed by villains. His daughter is then adopted by a Mongolian family and becomes the Mongol's daughter. Secretary Fang is another widower. Both his wife and children are killed by the KMT during the civil war. Fang then remains single and

stays completely devoted to work. Compared to the procreative Mongolian men, Han men are short of fertility and reproductivity. In these narrative aspects, the Mongolian playwrights' ambition to replace the Han as the new authority and leader stands out. The depiction of the infertile Han is, however, interestingly shielded by the official discourse. In this script, both Zhang's and Fang's lack of fertility can be explained as a type of self-sacrifice for the national fraternity, which still aligns with the expected image of the Han in official discourse. In this sense, the official discourse *per se* provided minority writers with the room to express their heterogeneous discourse regarding the ethnic hierarchy.

To further adjust the Han-Mongol relationship, minority screenwriters also intertwine ethnic identity into discussion through the portrayal of Nabuqi—the Han who is adopted by Mongols. The Han child raised by minorities also appears in the controversial fiction *Daji and Her Fathers* (达吉和她的父亲).³⁷ Written by Han author Gao Ying 高缨, *Daji and Her Fathers* centers on the dilemma of a Han girl named Daji facing the conflict between her Han identity and her kinship with the ethnic Yi people. Even though both Daji and Nabuqi grow up in minority families, the two Han girls' attitudes about their identities are distinctly different. In the Han writer's imagination, Daji's Han identity is inherent, changeless, and remarkable. The narrator figures out how Daji differs from general Yi girls at first glance: "Among all the beautiful Yi girls, she is the only one with such bright skin, an exquisite look, and a slender figure. She does not share the typical rugged and arrogant manners of Yi girls but has a soft appealing look and two cute dimples."³⁸ The Han features of Daji can be directly seen through her appearance and temperament.

³⁷ This fiction was adapted into a film with the same name in 1961. The content of the film version has many differences with the original short story.

³⁸ Sichuan People's Publisher, ed., *Daji he tade fuqin taolun ji* 《达吉和他的父亲讨论集》 [Symposium on *Daji and Her Fathers*] (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1962), 304.

Daji herself also knows how she differs from the Yi and steadfastly maintains her Han identity. As she talks with the Han official, she uses the phrase “*they* Yi people”³⁹ to refer to the Yi, phrasing which draws a line between the Han (herself and the narrator) and the Yi. She, of course, loves her minority father and the Yi region, but this love does not convert her Han identity. She seriously articulates that she is Han Chinese even though she has lived in the Yi community since childhood.⁴⁰ Through the portrayal of Daji, the Han author expresses his view regarding ethnic identity: the Han identity is changeless.

The attitudes of Mongolian playwrights toward the identity of the Han children raised by minorities are different. Nabuqi’s Mongolian status, rather than her Han origin, is always highlighted. Her foster father Laxiningbu, for instance, announces at a collective party that “Nabuqi is not Han Chinese. She grows up drinking Mongolian water and Mongolian milk.”⁴¹ In the common view, she is not labeled as Han. Nabuqi herself also never claims her Han identity publicly but always displays her Mongolian features. As she introduces herself to the Han driver Lin Xiang, Nabuqi uses her Mongolian name. She says, “My name is Nabuqi. Do you understand it? It means ‘leaves’ in Mandarin.”⁴² The Han driver does not share her cultural background, so the simple sentence draws a line separating her from the Han. Even though she knows her Han name, she never calls herself by it. How a person addresses oneself undoubtedly ties with self-identity. Nabuqi therefore seems much closer to the Mongols and Mongolian culture than to her Han origin. When her adoptive mother experiences a difficult labor, Nabuqi first rides the horse to consult her

³⁹ Ibid., 305.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 307.

⁴¹ Malqinhu, “Caoyuan chenqu,” 68.

⁴² Ibid., 76.

Mongolian friends Guanqika and Chagan, despite knowing that the Han can help her. Nabuqi's knee-jerk reaction reveals her intimacy with Mongols. After the three decide to seek help from the Han, Chagan's words again expose the separation between Nabuqi and her Han origin. Considering the language barrier, Chagan suggests that Guanqika be the leader since his Mandarin is the best among the three.⁴³ Nabuqi, a Han girl, cannot master Mandarin, which should be her mother tongue. But her Mongolian language is brilliant. She is even invited to represent workers to perform a Mongolian folksong. Collectively, these details repetitively confirm that the Han origin does not strengthen the affiliation between Nabuqi and the Han community and culture. Rather, the collective life with Mongols in the Mongolian community has made a Han become a Mongol. In this aspect, Mongolian authors' writing again jumps outside the clichéd paradigm made by Han authors. Malqinhu and Zhulanqiqike have no interest in repeating the claims centering on the inclusiveness of Han culture and the eternal Han identity. On the contrary, the authors turn to discuss whether Mongolian culture can endow people with the power to transcend ethnic boundaries and even convert identity.

Malqinhu's scripts in the seventeen-year period unfold the explicit picture of how the official discourses disciplined minority writers to correctly respond to the socialist interpellation. Writing in this period was not simple self-expression but a pedagogical lesson that trained minority authors on how to speak in the Father's language—the discourse of the authority—and how to meet public expectations. However, that does not mean that minority writers eventually become mouthpieces of the Han-centered majority discourse. Minority writers had the chance to embed their individual discourses into their texts, even with the tolerance of the official discourse. In the case of Malqinhu, the topic of romance functioned as a safe zone for him to weave in personal

⁴³ Malqinhu, "Caoyuan chenqu," 74.

opinions regarding the Han-Mongol relationship. Malqinhu did not completely repeat the Han-confirmed rationale but instead expressed his heterogeneous voices and conveyed his Mongol-centered imagination in this safe zone. In his writings, the Mongol ethnicity is an independent subject like its Han counterpart. Mongols even can be more masculinized and fertile, with outstanding reproductivity compared to the Han.⁴⁴ But strategically, he packages this alternative formulation under the cover of the themes promoted by the government. In this sense, the official discourse and the general expectation offer minority writers a potential shield to express themselves and contribute to the maintenance of minority agency. Minority intellectuals in Maoist China were undoubtedly expected to learn and master the Father's language, but their individual voices still had the chance to be expressed and heard.

Socialist Minority Performance

Besides writing, another route for ethnic minorities to engage with ethnic minority film production in the seventeen-year period was performance. Han actors who got professional training and mastered Mandarin in this period were always selected to play starring roles in films. Even for minority films, Han actors always played leading roles. For example, actress Bai Yang 白杨, who achieved her professional reputation during the Republican period, performed as the female protagonist, the ethnic Korean leader Jin Yuji, in the film of the same name. *Han actors first*, to some extent, became a common view and even the rule in film performance. In 1954, Wu Yonggang selected actors for his ethnic minority film *Hasen and Jiamila*. "Before assigning the

⁴⁴ Besides Malqinhu, another Mongolian playwright, Tsogtnarin, in his drama *Golden Eagle* also portrayed a wise and powerful Mongolian father (see more detailed interpretations in Chapter 4.) Interestingly, the masculine, fertile, and powerful minority patriarch in Mongolian writings is not so commonly seen in the screenwriting of minority playwrights from the southern regions.

roles, Falida 法丽达, Abulai 阿布来, and other Kazakhs all believed that the Han actors would play the major roles. They would be the walk-ons.”⁴⁵ The thoughts of the Kazakhs mirrored the common rule in casting during the socialist era. However, Wu’s film surprised everyone. He jumped outside this clichéd principle and let Kazakhs play all the roles in the film.

Hasen and Jiamila is not a singular case. As more directors selected minorities for roles in film performances, a team of minority actors developed in the Mao era, even though their numbers were still fewer than Han actors. Several minority actors even became active professional performers during this period. Mongolian actor Enhesen 恩和森 was one such actor. His debut was in *The Springtime in Inner Mongolia*. He then played several important roles in socialist minority films, such as *People on the Grassland*, *Morning Song Over the Prairie*, and *Visitor on Ice Mountain*. In this process, Enhesen gradually developed a nationwide reputation. Except for his performance in *Visitor on Ice Mountain* as a Tajik father, most of Enhesen’s roles are Mongols matching his ethnic origin. Compared to Enhesen, Hui actor Zhang Juguang 张巨光 and Ma Loufu 马陋夫 seemed to have more chances to cross ethnic boundaries. In his short life, Zhang Juguang “participated in the productions of more than 30 films, successfully performing many impressive artistic characters, and took charge of the major dubbing work in more than 70 dubbed films.”⁴⁶ The scale of Zhang’s performances ranged from positive cadres to negative spies, from secondary roles to protagonists, and from ethnic minorities to Han Chinese.⁴⁷ The abundant choices for Zhang

⁴⁵ Jiang Yi 姜薏, “Yi duo xuanlan de minzu zhi hua: fangwen Hasen he Jiamila de hasake zu yanyuan” 一朵绚烂的民族之花: 访问《哈森与加米拉》的哈萨克族演员 [A brilliant ethnic flower: Interviewing Kazakh actors], *Popular Cinema*, no. 21 (1954): 29.

⁴⁶ Sun Cheng 孙诚 ed., *Benxi mingren* 本溪名人 [Celebrities in Benxi] (Beijing: Chinese drama press, 2004), 181.

⁴⁷ Films that Zhang took part in include *The White-Haired Girl* (白毛女 dir. Wang Bin 王滨 and Shui Hua 水华, 1950), *People on the Grassland*, *Jin Yuji*, *Third Sister Liu*, *Morning Song Over the Prairie*, *The Land* (土地 dir. Shui Hua, 1954), and so on.

to extend his artistic career were closely tied to his talented performance skills, but the significance of language cannot be ignored. As a Hui person, Zhang's mother tongue was Mandarin—the dominant language in socialist cinema. The language that stopped many minority actors from joining film performances helped Hui actors overcome restrictions.

The process through which most minority actors joined socialist performances was usually haphazard. Many such actors were just ordinary people. The abovementioned actress Falida was a translator before her debut, for instance. Actor Abulai's career also had an indirect relationship with performance. He was interested in music and worked in the Xinjiang art troupe, but it was clear he had no experience in cinematic performance.⁴⁸ The famous ethnic Yi actress Yang Likun 杨丽坤 was a dancer in Yunnan before joining the film crew of *Five Golden Flowers*, a film which propelled her into stardom. As these minorities followed their daily routines to attend school, go to work, visit friends, and even walk on the street, they were discovered by filmmakers. The performers' lives thereupon occasionally converged with film. Then how did they understand socialist film performances? In the process of performing, what kind of relationship was built between minority actors and their cinematic representations? How did the performance experience influence minority performers' ordinary lives and identity constructions? In a highly politicized context, what role did politics play in minority performances? How did minority actors respond to the interpellation of ideology?

This section aims to explore these questions by examining minority actors' performances in the seventeen-year period from the perspectives of performance theories, training and rehearsals, and the corresponding sociopolitical functions of performance. Ethnic minority performance in socialist minority films is still a field that has not been well-studied. Scholar Xiaoning Lu interprets

⁴⁸ Jiang, "Minzu zhihua," 29.

the socialist stardoms of red idols and villains based on the case of Zhang Ruifang 张瑞芳 and Chen Qiang 陈强. Even though her studies cover ethnic minority films, Lu still centers on the performance of Han actors in these films and leaves the minority actors unstudied.⁴⁹ Chinese scholar Li Zhenlin also published several articles and books to discuss minority performance. He treats minority performance as an alternative to the Han performance. According to him, minority actors functioning as the Other display exoticism for audiences.⁵⁰ Li's interpretations rely on cinematic texts and mainly focus on summarizing the evolution of ethnic minority performance styles instead of deciphering the "processes," meaning how minority actors rehearsed/performed their roles and how minority actors got performance training. Regarding ethnic minority performance, much in-depth discussion remains unexplored. In this section, by studying how minorities performed roles on the screen in Maoist China mainly from 1949 to 1966, I argue that, through the training and rectifying in *speak bitterness* sessions, minority actors gained the performative body, successfully acquired a sense of class, and accomplished socialist reform both physically and psychologically. Through performing characters, minority actors were fusing with their roles—their assigned social positions in Maoist China. But such fusion did not mean the complete disappearance of self. The shadow of self always appeared during performances and showed the subtle tension between minority voices and the official interpellation.

Stanislavski System in China

⁴⁹ See Xiaoning Lu, *Moulding the Socialist Subject: Cinema and Chinese Modernity (1949–1966)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020), Chaps. 3, 4, and 5.

⁵⁰ Li Zhenlin 厉震林, *Zhongguo dianying biaoyan meixue sichao shishu 1979-2015* 中国电影表演美学思潮史述 1979-2015 [The history of Chinese film performance aesthetic schools 1979-2015] (Beijing: China Film Press, 2017), 263.

The history of modern performance in China traces back to the 1920s. In the book *The Birth of Roles*, director and actor Zheng Junli navigates the development of Chinese performance theories and practices. Learning from Japan, Hollywood, the West, and traditional Chinese operas, Chinese actors explored the most suitable performance style for Chinese cinema from the 1920s.⁵¹ In this process, acting styles were mainly separated into expressionism and experimentalism. Expressionism highlighted skills, while experimentalism emphasized real emotions and experiences. In the 1940s, Chinese actors accessed Russian theater director Stanislavski and started systematically studying his performance theories.⁵² Based on Zheng's statement, the performance history in China could be seen as the hybridization process that mingles various performance theories from the world and the local experience into an organic whole. But the hybridized and discursive performance styles, especially the messy ideologies hidden behind these heterogeneous discourses, could not satisfy the emergent need of the New China culture. Thus, from the 1950s onward, the PRC started to "standardize" the performance system by promoting the Soviet school. Scholar Li Zhenlin states that, starting in 1953, the Film Bureau under the Ministry of Culture guided intellectuals to translate a series of books from Soviet and East European countries that centered on performance theories. The Stanislavski system was gradually promoted during this period to be the prevailing dogma dominating Chinese performance.⁵³ Many articles about Stanislavski and his theories were introduced into the PRC and studied by Chinese experts. In 1956, Soviet experts specializing in the Stanislavski system also traveled to Beijing and Shanghai to train Chinese actors. As a result, Chinese actors started to receive systematic training in this

⁵¹ Zheng Junli 郑君里, *Juese de dansheng* 角色的诞生 [The birth of roles] (Beijing: Joint Publishing, 2018), 12–15.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵³ Li Zhenlin 厉震林, "Zhongguo dianying biao'yan xueshushi shuping" 中国电影表演学术史述评 [Review of the academic history of Chinese performance], *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, no. 10 (2019): 93.

performance style. Experimentalism, accordingly, became the leading aesthetic rule. However, not everyone was a follower of the Soviet model. In her study on Chinese model theater, Xiaomei Chen notes that “modern dramatic artists such as Lao She, Wu Zuguang, and Peking opera expert Zhang Geng . . . objected to such dogmatic use of the Soviet model as the only school of acting.”⁵⁴ The attitude of these artists built on their understanding of the typical feature of Peking opera performance, “whose abstract, symbolic, and expressionist acting styles would not work with the Stanislavsky method.”⁵⁵ However, their rejection would have to wait until the Cultural Revolution to become the dominant principle in the PRC.

Even though Soviet experts went to the PRC to teach the Stanislavski system, Maoist China also modified this system. Scholar Xiaoning Lu explains how the system was localized and modified to fit the political requirements of Maoist China. The differences center on two aspects: individualism and universal human nature. According to Lu, “Chinese practitioners overlooked Stanislavski’s deep affirmation of individuality, which undergirds his theory of psychophysical techniques, in particular emotional memory and physical action.”⁵⁶ Individuality is contrasted with a highly promoted value in Maoist China—collectivism. It is therefore not surprising that the individualism in Stanislavski’s theories was censored. The divergence also emerged in the aspect of *experiencing the part*, which is the major training mode in this performance system. Lu indicates that “based on a conception of universal human nature and a deep affirmation of individuality, the Stanislavski system holds that the actor’s personal experience provides [the actor] with a sufficient

⁵⁴ Xiaomei Chen, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), 91.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵⁶ Lu, *Moulding the Socialist Subject*, 118.

arsenal to perform the character, [the actor's] fellow humankind.”⁵⁷ But this transcendent universal human nature again challenged the ruling ideology—class struggle, which emphasized the clear borders between different classes and thus could hardly be accepted in Maoist China. In 1964, Zheng Junli, who once cited Russian writer Leo Tolstoy to support the idea of universal human nature, had to identify this thought as backward since it lacked class consciousness. He then indicated that an actor could play both positive and negative roles because of his/her proletarian stance, POV, and method, rather than because of universal human nature.⁵⁸ As the major interpreter of the Stanislavski system, to validate Stanislavski in Maoist China, Zheng had to add the advanced socialist class consciousness to Stanislavski's theories. Zheng mentioned the quintessence of this system was the proletarian worldview, which could ensure the performance stayed on the right track.⁵⁹ In this context, *tiyan shenghuo* 体验生活 (experiencing life)—or more accurately, experiencing the life of the proletarian, which aimed to hold the proletarian worldview, replacing Stanislavski's major training of *experiencing the part*—became the indispensable routine for all performers in Maoist China.

Many actors once published essays recording how they experienced life before and during the film shooting. For the Han actors starring in minority films, learning how to play ethnic minority roles became an important task in the process of *experiencing life*. Han actress Qin Yi 秦怡 was assigned to play a Dai woman in *Dai Doctor*. To prepare for this minority role, Qin and the whole film crew went to Xishuangbanna to experience the Dai lifestyle. She then published an essay to report on her *experiencing life*. Interestingly, rather than focusing on how to improve

⁵⁷ Ibid., 119.

⁵⁸ Zheng, *The Birth of Roles*, 19.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 12–13.

performance skills, most of her statements centered on the tragic stories that she learned from an old Dai granny. Qin then concluded that “in the period staying with Dai folks, we got a lot of education and inspiration, which supported us to create characters in this film.”⁶⁰ Based on Qin’s statement, the main activity in *experiencing life* was the *speak bitterness* sessions. By listening to the past tragic stories, actors received class education, which was an effective way to prepare and approach their parts. Qin’s story illustrated Zheng Junli’s theory that the advanced proletarian stance was the precondition for performance. Han actress Bai Yang, who played a Korean leader in *Jin Yuji*, also shared a similar opinion. In her understanding, “the purpose of *experiencing life* was not just to gain the source of creativity, but more importantly to join the struggle, transform the ideology, and consolidate the proletarian world view. Only in this way can actors understand their roles.”⁶¹ The greater attention on the transformation of class ideology shown in these actresses’ self-statements conveys an important message: the principal mission of *experiencing life* was to correct ideology and standpoint.

Serfs Performing Serfs

Does that then mean the proletarian minority actors did not need to pursue the class education-oriented *experiencing life*? They were familiar with their own culture, and more importantly, they belonged to the proletarian class and should have held the proletarian stance. In fact, the casting of some minority films did rely on the proletarian status of actors. *Serfs* is an example. Director Li Jun described his dilemma in the casting of this film: “Selecting actors is an important assignment

⁶⁰ Qin Yi 秦怡, “He Yila de mama zai yiqi” 和依拉的妈妈在一起 [With Yila’s mother], *Popular Cinema*, nos. 3–4 (1961): 18.

⁶¹ Bai Yang 白杨, “Yaozuo wukui yu Mao Zedong shidai de yanyuan” 要做无愧于毛泽东时代的演员 [Being the actors meriting the Maoist China], *People’s Daily*, August 10, 1960.

for directors. Some comrades suggested me being brave to choose Tibetan actors, which would improve the realistic effect of the film. Some others then warned me away from this venture since Tibetan actors are always short of professional training.”⁶² The minority candidates for this film were not actors who lacked professional training. Instead, they graduated from Shanghai Theatre Academy. Despite not having played roles in films, the Tibetan actors had practiced and participated in the performance of several local dramas. Li Jun gave the final verdict: let Tibetan actors star in this film. Li confirmed that he was convinced of the professionalism of the Tibetan actors after watching three of their one-act plays. The confidence to support this decision also derived from the class background of the minority actor crew. According to vice director Zhao Song 赵松, who oversaw casting, “almost all of these Tibetan actors once were serfs, drudges, or from poor families. They have the firsthand experience of the feudal serfdom in old Tibet . . . the social situation, roles, and the era written in this film could resonate with their personal experience, which can raise their class emotion and trigger their creative passion.”⁶³ But the actors’ class status as serfs did not excuse them from the lessons of class education.

In her studies on actor Chen Qiang’s villain stardom, Xiaoning Lu indicates that “class feeling is by no means intrinsic to class but needs to be cultivated for any particular class.”⁶⁴ This conclusion also applies in the case of minority actors. Being endowed with the proletarian status did not guarantee the spontaneous generation of class feeling, especially one correctly matching

⁶² Li Jun 李俊, “Tansuo yu shijian: yingpian Nongnu daoyan gongzuo xiaojie” 探索与实践——影片《农奴》导演工作小结[Experiment and practice: The *Serfs* director’s statement], in *Nongnu: cong juben dao yingpian* 《农奴》: 从剧本到影片[*Serfs: From the screen script to the film*], ed. China Film Press (Beijing: China Film Press, 1965), 133.

⁶³ Zhao Song 赵松, “Guanyu daoyan xuanze yanyuan he chuli yanyuan de gongzuo—jianchi ‘sige diyi’ de chubu tihui,” 关于导演选择演员和处理演员的工作——坚持“四个第一”的初步体会 [On the director’s role in casting—The preliminary review on how to stick to “four-first”], in *Nongnu*, 152.

⁶⁴ Lu, *Moulding the Socialist Subject*, 132.

the socialist ideology. Rather, the class feeling should be cultivated. Thus, the Tibetan actors who once were serfs or from serf families were also required to participate in the class education-oriented *experiencing life*. To boost the class feeling, the actors were assigned to participate in the activity of *fangpin wenku* 访贫问苦 (visiting the poor and asking about the bitterness). Through the name, this activity clearly transformed into a version of a *speak bitterness* session. Tibetan actors went to interview local serfs to hear their tragic stories, visit the exhibitions showing how the serfdom exploited the proletarian class in museums, and observe the restored life scenes of serf owners (Figure 2.3).



Figure 2.3 Tibetan Actors' Experiencing Life in *Popular Cinema* no. 1(1964): 32

Once back from the activity, the actors needed to get together to share their own past bitterness and compare their personal experiences with the stories of the local serfs the actors visited.⁶⁵ Having similar tragic pasts helped shape the feeling of simultaneity and the sense of community among the actors—or more accurately, the feeling of class. Accordingly, Tibetan actors' past experiences were gathered into a pool of bitterness belonging to the exploited classes.

⁶⁵ Song, "Xuanze yanyuan," 156.

Like with the Han performers, *speak bitterness* sessions were also the main activity in Tibetan actors' *experiencing life*. The affect theories are inspiring to understand why this activity mattered. According to Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "affect is in many ways synonymous with force or forces of encounter."⁶⁶ They further indicated that, "in this ever-gathering accretion of force-relations (or, conversely, in the peeling or wearing away of such sedimentations) lie the real powers of affect, affect as potential: a body's capacity to affect and to be affected."⁶⁷ What requires attention here is the wider connotation of "body." It includes not only the physical human body but also the various bodies, such as "nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise."⁶⁸ With the affect theories in mind, the function of *speak bitterness* sessions held by the *Serfs* film crew becomes clearer. The *speak bitterness* sessions provided a field for the various "forces" to encounter and then helped test and train the body's capacity to affect and be affected.

As Tibetan actor Wangdui 旺堆 indicates, the *Serfs* script is about the history of the blood and tears of serfs like Qiangba.⁶⁹ In this sense, the script *per se* is a summary of the bitterness of serfs in the past. The read-through essentially becomes another type of *speak bitterness* session. Vice director Zhao Song memorized the impressive scene that occurred during the read-through: "Except for the voice of the reader, the room was so quiet . . . They [Tibetan actors] sometimes gnashed their teeth in anger. Sometimes they were so sad that tears sprang up in their eyes. How strong and valuable the class emotion was! After hearing the script, comrade Wangdui . . . immediately appealed to play the villain Langjie. [We] asked him why. He answered he wanted to

⁶⁶ Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, ed., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁹ Wangdui, "Nongnu de juexing," 170.

reveal the evilness of those ‘masters.’”⁷⁰ Here, the read-through provided the space for the forces—the script and Tibetan actors—to meet. The reaction of Tibetan actors demonstrated the body’s capability—the script—to affect others and indicated that the Tibetan actors were the bodies that could be affected. But whether their bodies possessed the capability to affect was another important issue. The test focusing on Tibetan actors’ power of affect continued in the casting.

The final round of casting was also based on the performance of speaking bitterness. The assessment focused on assessing whether the actors had the power of affect. Each actor was asked to enact a skit. Wangdui’s *My Experience* was based on his own personal tragedies. This skit was clearly another form of a *speak bitterness* session. Zhao Song recorded the following: “The skit of comrade Wangdui was played in the Tibetan language. To prove his affective power, we invited some Tibetan people to watch this skit together After he started, the tragic stories that took place in his childhood and youth deeply touched him and raised his strong hatred of the landlord class. His words gushed out like the running water. At this moment, the stage was transformed into the *speak bitterness* session. All audiences were unable to refrain from bursting into tears.”⁷¹ Zhao described a site in which affection was raised and transmitted between the actor, his part, and the audience. The tears of the audience proved that the body of actor Wangdui has the capacity to affect. Especially interesting here is the double role of minority actors: Wangdui was both the actor and the audience in his performance. The skit created a space for the transcendent encounter between the past serf Wangdui and the current actor Wangdui. The tragedies in his childhood and youth first impacted the actor Wangdui and caused his affection. Then, through his performance, the affection influenced or triggered resonance among those in the theater. The body of the

⁷⁰ Song, “Xuanze yanyuan,” 152.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

minority actor thus functioned as a medium to transmit affection from the body in the past to the bodies in the theater. The *speak bitterness* session required responsivity to display the process of how Wangdui was affected and then further affected others. In this way, Wangdui's power of affect was approved. He, in *speak bitterness* sessions, achieved the performative body with the capability to both affect and be affected.

Possessing this performative body was crucial for Tibetan actors in the crew of *Serfs*. But this performative body must be surveilled. Instead of noninterference, Tibetan actors' power of affect should be disciplined to fit the socialist ideology. Thanks to his capability to affect and be affected, Wangdui won the opportunity to play the protagonist Qiangba in *Serfs*. However, another new challenge emerged for Wangdui: sadness became the biggest obstacle. Based on Zhao Song's memory, "he [Wangdui] tried hard to explore the inner world of the role Qiangba by recalling both his and his serf fellow's tragic experience. The stories of the character and his past made him suffer. He fell into the depths of the past pain."⁷² Here, Wangdui seemingly had achieved the perfect performative state addressed in the Stanislavski system: the fusion between the actor and the part. But it was also at this point that his performance went "wrong" in the film crew's understanding. Wangdui understood Qiangba as a trampled slave without any hope in such a dark society.⁷³ In the performance, this role was too tragic and too sad. That pure sadness and hopelessness did not match the socialist ideology. In his essay, Zhao explicitly indicated that Wangdui's performing the spiritual trauma of slaves strayed in the wrong direction and distracted from the main mission of the film to call for class struggle and resistant consciousness.⁷⁴ Minority performance should have

⁷² Ibid., 161.

⁷³ Ibid., 162.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 156.

the power of affect, but rather than intensifying sadness, the affect should be directed to function as the smoldering of class hatred, which could trigger resistance.

What Wangdui needed was not simply to absorb the tragic affection in the past but also to discipline his body to transcend the sadness to resistance, which was the fundamental socialist emotion and action. In his personal statement, Wangdui wrote down this reform process. He commented, “From the perspective of my personal understanding, I could not master the rebellious spirit of the poor serfs.”⁷⁵ With the help of filmmakers, he then zoomed into the core action of Qiangba—playing dumb—and redefined the motivation behind this action. That Qiangba bit his tongue was not a mark showing his submission to adversity but rather a way to voicelessly resist. Wangdui’s double correction is interesting. He not only granted his rebellious spirit to his role of Qiangba but also shared that spirit with his past self. He mentioned, “While there is oppression, there is resistance. What is the form of their resistance? For Qiangba, it is playing dumb; for me, it is running away.”⁷⁶ He then further explained the deep rebellious spirit hidden behind the action of his escaping in the past, a spirit he could not find before. By depending on socialist performance, Wangdui even empowered his past experience. He not only corrected his performance but also rectified his past to fit the socialist narrative. Performance thus helped transform a simple poor serf, Wangdui, into a revolutionary fighter with advanced ideology. A self was reconstructed in both the film and reality. Wangdui’s case thus proves scholar Xiaomei Chen’s statement that “by acting out the roles of the revolutionary characters—that is, by creating their revolutionary other while rejecting the nonrevolutionary self—the actors would be reformed.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Wangdui, “Nongnu de juexing,” 180.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁷⁷ Xiaomei Chen, *Acting the Right Part*, 92.

In his subsequent performance, Wangdui paid more attention to transcending instead of performing bitterness and sadness. The rectifications targeting Tibetan actors' power of affect, as demonstrated through Wangdui's performance, were effective and remarkable. In the last scene, Qiangba is forced to carry the master to flee abroad. Wangdui explained Qiangba's internal monologue in detail. Rather than passive endurance, Qiangba had been scheming how to kill the master—the enemy—for generations. Hatred and taking revenge replaced sadness and became the actor's super-objective.⁷⁸ Wangdui stated, "In shooting, I totally forgot the camera. Rage swelled within me Until lunchtime, I realized that I still treated actor Qiongda who played the role of the master as the real master. Because of [the strong emotion], I kicked him too hard [in the performance]."⁷⁹ In performing this scene, Wangdui's sadness about the past pain was successfully transformed into class hatred. The anger further triggered his aggressive behavior to take revenge, even during the performance. Performance in this sense not only helped discipline the affection of actors but also shaped the expected physical action—violent resistance. Meanwhile, the performance offered the chance for minority actors to demonstrate their political and ideological improvements. In this way, cinema performance in Maoist China functioned as a training ground. Minorities in the form of actors joined that training. Through role-playing, such individuals standardized their affection and bodily reactions to fit the socialist expectation. The minorities' performance, on the one hand, was the training item, but on the other hand, the performance was the evidence of self-transformation.

⁷⁸ The super-objective is a core idea in the Stanislavski system. According to Stanislavski, all the plots in a script are tied to the super-objective. All the actors' actions should carry out the super-objective. See Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Routledge, 1989), 293–94.

⁷⁹ Wangdui, "The Awakening of Tibetan Serfs," in *Nongnu*, 179.

As the film was shown, Wangdui's renewed performance successfully affected audiences. A Tibetan spectator, in her review after attending the film, recalled her pain and a similar experience in the feudal serfdom. With abundant pathos in her words, she stated, "The pain even tore me apart. I wanted to commit suicide, but I could not. I had such deep hatred for the serf owner. I must live! I must take revenge! I exerted all my strength to escape."⁸⁰ After she was captured by the owner, she cursed, "You, the serf owner, deserve thousands of knives! You can torture my body but cannot conquest my heart. I will run away until my last breath."⁸¹ Messages in the same pattern were commonly seen in other Tibetan spectators' reviews.⁸² Based on these writings, spectators had accurately received Wangdui's rectified affection in his performance: transcending sadness to class hatred and rebellious spirit and behavior. The audience reactions indirectly reflected that Wangdui's capability to affect was back on the "correct" socialist track.

From People to the People's Actors

In socialist minority performances, minorities completed comprehensive training in both body and affection. They could then successfully switch their roles from ordinary people to the People's actors. The performances provided minority actors the opportunity to attach to socialist modernity and even become the embodiment of socialist modernity.

In Maoist China, the cinema was viewed as a symbol of modernity. For ordinary people, especially the masses living in the remote countryside, cinema was a modern, magic machine far away from their lives. These masses seldomly attended screenings. Even some minority actors,

⁸⁰ Suolang Zhuoma 索朗卓玛, "You nuyi jiuyou fankang" 有奴役就有反抗 [While there is abuse, there is resistance], in *Nongnu*, 371.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² See more reviews in *Nongnu*, 373–96.

before joining filmmaking, knew nothing about cinema art. Before his debut in *The Springtime in Inner Mongolia*, Mongolian actor Enhesen “never had the chance to watch films.”⁸³ A death shown on the screen was once a nightmare for Uyghur actress Ahyixiamu 阿依仙木 since she mistook the film performance for reality.⁸⁴ Being actors in films gave these minorities the chance to access cinema in a professional way. In the preparation of the minority film *Hasen and Jiamila*, the film crew planned various film courses for nonprofessional minority actors to ensure they could gain systematic film knowledge and get training. Courses ranged from film history to professional skills—including the development of Chinese film, general film knowledge, and professional performance skills.⁸⁵ Falida, who played the female lead in this film, stated the following: “Through these courses, I know the historical development of Chinese film and learned the necessary professional knowledge in performance.”⁸⁶ Minority actors in this crew thus got the chance to access foreign films. Since *Hansan and Jiamila* reflected the life of the Kazakh people, Wu’s crew selected several films made by the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic for the reference of minority actors. Falida also indicated how the Kazakh film *The Love Story of a Young Couple* helped her understand her role as Jiamila.⁸⁷

⁸³ Zhong Dianfei 钟惦棐, “Kan Neimeng chunguang” 看《内蒙春光》 [Watch *The Springtime in Inner Mongolia*], *People’s Daily*, April 30, 1950.

⁸⁴ Yuan Chengliang 袁成亮, “Huaer weishenme zheyang hong: dianying Bingshan shang de laike dansheng ji” 花儿为什么这样红——电影《冰山上的来客》诞生记 [Why are the flowers so red: The birth of the film *Visitor on the Ice Mountain*], *Over the Party History*, no. 2 (2006): 49.

⁸⁵ Wu Yonggang 吴永刚, “Zai Xinjiang caoyuan shang paidianying” 在新疆草原上拍电影 [Shooting the film in the grassland in Xinjiang], *Popular Cinema*, no. 14 (1955): 16.

⁸⁶ Falida 法丽达, “Wo zenyang banyan Jiamila” 我怎样扮演加米拉 [How to play the role of Jiamila], *Popular Cinema*, no. 14 (1955): 18.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* The name of the film here is in Chinese “Yidui qingnian de lianai.” Identifying the original name of the film is difficult. The English version, *The Love Story of a Young Couple*, is translated from the Chinese name Falida mentioned in her essay.

Through training, minority actors not only improved their performance abilities but also started to master professional languages. The essays written by minority actors to summarize their performance experience are clearly reminiscent of Stanislavski's theories; those theories could, for instance, be seen in the professional terms they always cited, such as the fusion of actors and characters, *super-objective*, and *internal monologue*. For example, Tibetan actress Shique Zhuoma 拾雀卓玛 wrote an essay to review how she played her role,⁸⁸ and the whole essay was structured following the core theories in the Stanislavski system. She recorded how she experienced her part by observing and mimicking the actions of local grannies and wrote down how she designed inner monologues for her part as the *inner justification* to support her actions in performance. To end the essay, she focused on her analysis centering on the through-going action and super-objective.⁸⁹ This essay is not only a summary of Shique Zhuoma's work as a performer but also the study notes/annotation of Stanislavski's theories. Instead of simply grasping some professional words, Shique Zhuoma acquired the proficiency to master this advanced modern performance system. Through performance training, minority actors were thus no longer the ordinary masses who were shocked by cinema's visual effect but instead developed into insiders who could decipher the cinema, comprehensively study it, explore its mechanisms, and theoretically master relative theories and history. In effect, the knowledge structure of ethnic minorities had been updated and modernized. Performance thus helped minority actors complete the modernization reforms.

Beyond modern techniques and knowledge, the living space of minority actors also expanded. Minorities, by being the People's actors, had a chance to access the central cities—the

⁸⁸ Shique Zhuoma 拾雀卓玛, "Wo jiu zheyang banyan le nainai" 我就这样扮演了奶奶 [How I played the grandmother], in *Nongnu*, 187–96.

⁸⁹ See the concrete meanings of these terms in Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 49, 296; See page 49 for "inner justification" and page 296 for "super-objective."

symbols of the great achievements in socialist modernization. After the production of *Hasen and Jiamila*, all the Kazakh actors went to visit Shanghai—the center of Chinese film production and the biggest modern metropolis in the PRC. These Kazakh actors were invited to sit on the viewing stand in People’s Square during the National Day to enjoy the ceremony.⁹⁰ The Uyghur actress Ahyixiamu, who played the female protagonist in the film *Visitor on Ice Mountain*, was an ordinary student from a small town on the national border of Xinjiang. An accidental opportunity resulted in her joining an ethnic minority film production and gave her the first chance to leave her home and travel to northeast China—the central base of industrialization in Maoist China. During her time in the northeast, she lived in Changying, another important film industry center.⁹¹ In Maoist China, since the household registration system was strict, a simple regional movement required official approval after multiple reviews. But these minority actors, because of film performance, legitimately joined cross-country movements to visit the modernized urban area and enjoy the modern life there. In this sense, performance helped minority actors leave their ordinary living spaces and offered a pass for the actors to access modern urban life.

Some minority stars, due to their talented performances, earned international reputations and even became representatives of the PRC to participate in diplomatic activities. The Yi actress Yang Likun is a typical example. As a dancer, she, like many other minority performers, accidentally starred in *Five Golden Flowers*. Yang became a star overnight because of this film. In 1959, she was invited to join the New Films Exhibition Month in Beijing; there, she met Premier

⁹⁰ Yi, “Minzu zhihua,” 29.

⁹¹ Shen Zhiyuan 申志远 and Wei Chunqiao 魏春桥, “Bingshan shang de laike beihou de gushi” 《冰山上的来客》背后的故事 [The stories behind *Visitor on Ice Mountain*], *Popular Cinema*, no. 19 (2004): 54.

Zhou Enlai, who spoke highly of her performance debut.⁹² The film helped Yang win the award for best actress at the second Asian and African Film Festival held in Cairo, and President Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt directly invited her to visit Cairo to attend the award.⁹³ Afterward, the film was released in more than 56 countries globally. Along with the transnational circulation of this film, the fame of Yang Likun as a talented Yi actress was well-known internationally. Even many Han veterans who had starred in films for several years could hardly compete with Yang's influence.

Because of her international stardom, Yang was no longer a simple actress and became more actively involved in politics, especially diplomatic affairs. In 1960, she was selected as the representative in the delegation to visit Burma with Premier Zhou. She again participated in the delegation to visit Algeria in 1965 (Figure 2.4). Her international reputation grew throughout this period. In 1963, the Prime Minister of Burma, U Nu, visited the PRC by invitation. In Yunnan, he did not follow the scheduled agenda, however, and requested to meet Yang since he liked her film *Five Golden Flowers*. U Nu's spontaneous request caught the officials in Yunnan off guard, but the meeting was finally planned after getting approval from Premier Zhou. During the meeting, U Nu asked Yang more about her present life in the PRC as a star.⁹⁴ This seemingly casual talk made Yunnan officials and Yang breathless with anxiety since they all realized the political sensitivity of the questions. The questions indirectly investigated whether the socialist government could provide for the necessary welfare of its citizens, especially the diverse citizens—ethnic minorities.

⁹² Yang Kewi 杨克伟 and Jin Yue 金悦, *Yongyuan de Ashima—Yang Likun 永远的阿诗玛:杨丽坤*[Immortal Ashima—Yang Likun] (Kunming: Yunnan People's Publishing House, 2015), 44.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

Yang thus phrased her answer in the following way. “I live great in China. We are in a socialist country. When we are old, the government will support us. The stipends are enough for me.”⁹⁵



Figure 2.4 Yang Likun in Algeria in *Popular Cinema* no.7(1964):17

This answer satisfied the political officials. Despite being just a young actress, Yang had become a veteran in diplomatic affairs, mastering the basic diplomatic vocabulary and strategies. Her stardom in film performance endowed her with the status of the nation’s spokesperson. Her life thus became the epitome of the nation’s achievements in modernization. Through the life of Yang, the world observed and examined the development of Maoist China. Yang herself and her performance, stardom, life, and engagement with political affairs somewhat embodied socialist modernity in the aspects of culture, politics, and diplomacy.

The Voices of Minorities

From everyday people to the People’s actors, performance provided minorities with the blueprint on how to transform into the expected socialist minority subjects. Through performance training,

⁹⁵ Ibid., 51.

the affection and physical bodies of minority actors were under surveillance. The benefits of being the People's actors also provided lured minority actors into following the assigned track. But that dynamic does not mean that minority actors had no choice but to accept being the marionettes manipulated by others and mouthpieces repeating the official discourse. In fact, minority actors still had a chance to express themselves. The following section examines the minority voices in three specific cases: personal vocational choice, creative work, and the freedom of extras.

1. Girls Who Do Not Want to Be the People's Actresses

Partly due to the lack of professional minority actors, many of the minorities who once joined film performance were invited to stay in modern cities to be professional actors after showcasing their talents in screen debuts. Some accepted this invitation. For example, Enhesen stayed in Changchun and served Changying. Film performances provided a way for minority people to enter the modern city and change their household status to urban residents. Even though now holding an urban household registration seems to be not much different from a rural one, in Maoist China, the difference was a stark one. In the background of promoting socialist modernization, being modern in the socialist way was almost the Chinese dream for the PRC citizens. Entering the modern city, even living there, was viewed as the way to approach this dream. In the big famine lasting from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, an urban household registration might be a possible pass to end the horrible hunger in the countryside and gain access to the various benefits in cities, such as food and education. This social context existed when actress Ahyixiamu went to Changchun. Unlike the restricted access to food at home, the diet offered by Changying was so good that she quickly gained weight. The change in her bodily form made it difficult for the director to continue the shooting.⁹⁶ This story explicitly shows how much more comfortable life in cities was than in the

⁹⁶ Shen and Wei, "Beihou de guishi," *Popular Cinema*, no. 19 (2004): 54.

rural regions. Unlike other people who were not allowed to migrate from the countryside to the modern city, Ahyixiamu twice received the invitation to stay in Changchun to be a professional actress. However, she refused. Instead of staying in the big city to be a modern urban resident enjoying the convenient and comfortable modern life, she decided to return to her small hometown to stay with her mother.⁹⁷ Something similar also happened regarding Yang Likun's vocational choice. Her performance in *Five Golden Flowers* attracted the interest of the Shanghai Film Studio, which invited her to join the studio. But Yang preferred to stay in Yunnan and work as an ordinary dancer because she loved dancing more than the metropolis of Shanghai and film performance.

Among the ordinary masses in Maoist China, however, film performance and the benefits behind this occupation were very attractive. The public passion for film performance ran high in the early years of Maoist China. In 1954, *Popular Cinema* received abundant letters from readers trying to consult on how to be film performers. Some readers believed they were qualified to be actors, but they did not have the chance to join a performance.⁹⁸ *Popular Cinema* responded by publishing a series of essays written by film experts, professional actors, and people from other fields discussing how to correctly understand the work of film actors in Maoist China. These papers confirmed that socialist film performance was a serious revolutionary responsibility and a way to serve the people.⁹⁹ Han actress Tian Hua also indicated that, regarding vocational choice, one should prioritize collective needs over personal interests.¹⁰⁰ Against this background, the refusal

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Zhang Yunying 张云鹰, "Wo kewang zuo yige dianying yanyuan" 我渴望做一个电影演员 [I hope to be a film actor], and Xu Ming 徐明, "Zenyang cai neng shixian wo de zhiyuan ne" 怎样才能实现我的志愿呢 [How to make my dream true], *Popular Cinema*, no. 9 (1954): 30.

⁹⁹ Cheng Yin 成荫, "Gei xiwang zuo dianying yanyuan de qingnian tongxue" 给希望做电影演员的青年同学们 [To the young students who want to be film actors], *Popular Cinema*, no. 9 (1954): 30.

¹⁰⁰ Tian Hua 田华, "Tianhua tongzhi gei guanzhong de xin" 田华同志给观众的信 [Comrade Tian Hua's letter to audiences], *Popular Cinema*, no. 10 (1954): 29.

of minorities like Ahyixiamu and Yang Likun to be the People's actors is interesting. What such individuals rejected was not only the ancillary benefits behind this job, such as fame and material interests, but also the revolutionary responsibility mandated by the Party and the nation. Facing the call to devote themselves to the revolutionary career by taking part in film performance, minorities like Ahyixiamu and Yang Likun instead chose to follow their hearts. In this sense, Ahyixiamu and Yang Likun seemingly prioritized their personal interests over the interpellation of the nation. Film performances ultimately opened a way for minority actors to approach their expected positions, but some minority actors had the chance to derail from the assigned track.

2. Creating Roles and Self-made Scripts

In general, actors should perform following the instructions of scripts. Actors' creativities are presented in the actors' ability to visualize the dull written words in unique ways. In Maoist China, since performance mainly functioned as a training field, limited freedom remained for actors' creative contributions. Actors who played the socialist models in films were expected to be fully immersed in their assigned social roles and then induce self-transformation in their daily lives. In this context, the script should be a detailed blueprint confining actors and assisting them in transforming their minds and bodies. In reviews written in Maoist China, many actors emphasized how the content of the script had educated them. That does not mean, however, that actors were marionettes without self-consciousness. In fact, minority actors' creativity and subjectivity were somewhat tolerated and could even influence the performance.

In the crew of *Serfs*, the Tibetan actress Qiangba 强巴 explained how she played a minor role—the mother who just appeared in the film for four to five minutes. The climax of this role is the scene of “sending the whip,” which predicts the death of the role. But instead of detailed

instruction, the script just indicated several main actions without any lines. The uncomplicated script gave Qiangba trouble in creating her part but also left enough room for originality and creativity. Qiangba wrote detailed inner monologues for each action. Based on the script, her last action in this sequence was to place a ring around the neck of her son. But Qiangba complicated this action by adding the following monologue: “Boy, you must grow up. You must grow up quickly. Do not forget your poor mom. You need to remember how your parents died and how we suffered for generations. Do not forget the blood, tears, and hatred! You must take revenge after growing up!”¹⁰¹ These words function as Stanislavski’s *inner justification* to provide support for the action. Meanwhile, she modified the symbolic meaning of the prop—the ring. In the script, the ring is a memento showing the love of a poor mom for her son. Qiangba’s creative work, however, turned out to be a testimony of class hatred aimed at reminding the boy of the blood feud between serfs and the masters. The monologue was not just her silent personal notes, either; she instead treated the monologue as her real lines. In rehearsals, Qiangba always spoke out the monologue she had written. In this sense, rather than following the original script, Qiangba’s performance relied on the script she made herself.

The details in that self-made script, in some cases, even replaced the original plots. After rehearsing several times, the crew started shooting. In the scene of “sending the whip,” the mother rushed back to the room and tightly held the child after hearing the cry of her son. No line was designed for the mother in this scene. But in the shooting, Qiangba suddenly called out a line, “My child!” She committed to being triggered by the specific affection she felt, and she could not help but call out those words in this situation. These details that she spontaneously added touched the director. Even though the lines in this film are very refined and well-elaborated, which was the

¹⁰¹ Qiangba 强巴, “Ahma xingxiang de suszao” 阿妈形象的塑造[Creating the role of the mother], in *Nongnu*, 201.

typical style of this film, the words Qiangba improvised were maintained in the final film.¹⁰² Another improvisation kept in the finalized film was Qiangba's creation of a minor role, Basang. At the beginning of the film, the dead body of the father of the protagonist lies motionless, with the father face down in the master's yard. This role has no name in the script, but in Qiangba's script, this role becomes Basang—a concrete living human being. Qiangba explained, “As I [got] deeply immersed in the scene, I concretely felt him and thereupon involuntarily called out his name.”¹⁰³ “Basang” then became the name of the dead body that appears in the film. It was Qiangba who created Basang. Qiangba did not further explain why she selected this name for the husband of her character. It seems that she developed a comparatively complete story between her role and Basang which did not exist in the original film script. In this sense, her performance jumped over the confinement of the Han-made script. Qiangba's agency in her performance therefore stood out.

Through both the script and film, the Han filmmakers unfolded their imaginations regarding the Tibetan serfs, but actress Qiangba did not fully follow the orders of the director and playwright. Rather, she actively devoted herself to the creative work and crossed beyond the restriction of the Han-made instructions shown in the script. As the public always treated minority actors as nonprofessional, Qiangba's creative work was impressive. Her original creation undoubtedly neither completely overthrew the original script nor challenged the authoritative discourse. In a highly politicized context, no one could be expected to do so. But it is still necessary to credit the subjectivity that she showed in her active self-imagination and creative work regarding the stories about the folks from her own ethnic group.

3. The Uncontrolled Extras

¹⁰² Ibid., 202.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 202–3.

In a film, besides leading and minor roles, extras are also indispensable components, even if they are often ignored. Still, some filmmakers see extras as live props. Extras appear in films like the brown base in a painting to fill up the blanks in the backdrop.¹⁰⁴ This opinion undoubtedly undermines the function of walk-ons. According to Wang Jie, however, walk-ons are as important as those leading roles who can influence the artistic quality and realistic effect of a film. In some cases, walk-ons can even contribute to building leading roles and achieving unexpected effects.¹⁰⁵ In Maoist China, the number of professional minority actors was limited, but there was another option for minorities to join film production—by being extras. How did these minorities understand their work as extras in film crews? What did these minorities think about their relationship with the socialist film production?

As previously mentioned, film performance in the socialist era was treated as one way to serve the people and contribute to the socialist revolution. Some minority masses correctly received the message. In 1954, the Xinjiang Cadre School was informed that its ethnic minority students were selected to be extras in *Hasen and Jiamila*. After learning this news, students from various ethnic groups spontaneously started to prepare props. The students even donated their valuable flowers.¹⁰⁶ “Now the film needs flowers. We love flowers, but we love the People’s film career more. We hope the nation can see the flowers that we plant The second morning, we, wearing our brightly colored ethnic clothes and holding the beautiful fresh flowers, started off.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Wang Yang 王洋, “Qunzhong yanyuan jiushi huo daoju: fu daoyan Tie Ying tan qunyan” 群众演员就是活道具: 副导演铁瑛谈群演[Walk-ons are live props: Vice director Qian Ying discusses walk-ons], *Cinema World*, no. 11 (2008): 41.

¹⁰⁵ Wang Jie 王洁, “Qunzhong yanyuan de gongzuo ye shifen zhongyao” 群众演员的工作也十分重要 [The work of extras is also important], *Film Review*, no. 1 (1983): 39.

¹⁰⁶ Because of the geography in Xinjiang, flowers are difficult to grow there.

¹⁰⁷ Zhang Sentang 张森棠, “Yiduo xianhua yipian xin” 一朵鲜花一片心 [A flower a heart], *Popular Cinema*, no. 19 (1954): 22–23.

These ethnic minority students clearly understood their responsibility as extras. They treated their job in the film crew as a way to contribute to the nation-state. To show their loyalty and support, students were willing to donate their valuable property.

Some minority extras seemed to hold a different idea about their work in film production. Director Wu Yonggang remembered how minority extras supported the work of his team in shooting the wedding scene in *Hasen and Jiamila*: “More than 400 minority extras from different places wearing their beautiful holiday outfits rode horses here to take part in the shooting. They not only took food for themselves . . . but also brought a dozen bottles of yogurt for the film crew. They even killed a horse as a gift for celebrating the wedding.”¹⁰⁸ Wu then realized that these hospitable minority extras mistook filmmaking for a real wedding. After hearing an explanation from Wu, the Kazakh herdsmen still insisted that they were joining a collective party instead of completing a political mission. They replied, “No matter real or fake, we believe . . . you are holding a big happy event for our ethnic Kazakhs.”¹⁰⁹ They did not treat their actions as a “performance” but rather as part of their daily lives. Despite being told the scenes on film were fake, the minority extras still kept a distance from what they were told and insisted on what they themselves believed. This story revealed, in those dynamics, the inexperience of Kazakh extras in filmmaking, but it was this inexperience that enabled these minorities to distract from the political interpellation.

In the scenes in which many extras participated, filmmakers generally struggled to control the “performance” in a way that followed filmmaker expectations. In *Ahnaerhan*, the denunciation

¹⁰⁸ Yonggang, “Zai Xinjiang caoyuan,” 16.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

rally scene needed more than 500 extras, so the film team invited members of the People's Commune who were once slaves to support the shooting. In this scene, after the leading role speaks out her bitterness and denounces the landlord's abuse, the masses were supposed to shout out the slogan: "Those who had been wronged stood up and demanded that their wrongs be redressed, and those who had been made to suffer cruelly spoke out against those responsible for their suffering." This scene should be an important pedagogical scene that aimed to teach the audience to transcend their pain to class hatred and induce the expected action of taking revenge. But some minority extras in *Ahnaerhan* did not follow the filmmaker's instruction. Instead, some Uyghur grannies immediately burst into tears as the shooting started. They had immersed themselves in the past pain and the bitterness that the protagonist projected. When the other extras shouted the slogan together, these grannies were too sad to raise their hands and almost collapsed to the ground.¹¹⁰ In this case, the performance turned into a means to release the extras' personal feelings. The minority extras' spontaneous and indulgent emotion challenged the political discipline and the expected codes of conduct in Maoist China. In fact, immersing in personal sorrow was seen as a weakness and a mistake that must be rectified in the socialist context. The extras, however, were lost in the sadness and rejected following the pedagogy to transform the personal sorrow into hatred or the passion for revenge. If socialist performance, as scholar Li Zhenlin mentions, did take the function of rectifying the bodies and minds of actors,¹¹¹ these extras took advantage of their marginal positions and temporarily escaped from the political and ideological correction.

¹¹⁰ Song Jie 宋杰, "Ahnaerhan waijing paishe sanji" 《阿娜尔罕》外景拍摄散记 [Notes on location shooting of *Ahnaerhan*], *Popular Cinema*, no. 3 (1962): 18.

¹¹¹ Li Zhenlin, *Biaoyan meixue*, 35.

Through the film performances of minority actors, minorities appeared on the screen. Their images were circulated inter/nationally, but the authoritative discourses also took advantage of performance to intervene to comprehensively rectify and discipline minorities. The transformation ranged from the physical body to affection and ideology. In performance, minority actors learned pedagogical lessons. The actors then used their performance to report on the consequences of their socialist reform. Meanwhile, by joining socialist performances, minority actors could access socialist modernity and even came to embody socialist modernity. Minority actors' living spaces, knowledge structures, and even relational frames might accordingly drive great changes. Even though performance offered a track for minority actors to fuse with their assigned social roles, minority actors were not required to completely follow the assigned route. In many aspects, such actors could negotiate with the Han-centered official discourses.

In sum, this chapter centers on the two main ways by which minority film workers participated in socialist ethnic minority film production—as screenwriters and actors—to scrutinize the dynamics between minority voices, Han-centrism, and the national interpellation. In both writing and performance, the official discourse intervened and required minorities to mimic, repeat, and resonate with the Han-centered socialist ideology. In this process, ethnic minority filmmakers absorbed the official discourse into their own voices. But that did not mean they were precluded from maintaining some extent of self-expression and creativity. Instead, they actively negotiated with the official discourses to let their own opinions, attitudes, and expressions be heard.

Chapter 3

Made-in Hong Kong:

Transnational and Translocal Circulation, Consumption, and Reproduction of Socialist

Minority Films in the 1950s and 1960s

The first two chapters of this dissertation center on the production of socialist minority films in the PRC and reveal how this genre reflects the dynamic between official PRC discourse and the voices of ethnic minorities. This chapter shifts the focus to the rest of the world and examines the transnational/translocal circulation of socialist minority films in the global market from the 1950s to 1960s. The main target audiences of the socialist minority genre, of course, should be PRC citizens. Despite that notion, the PRC government still encouraged the spread of these films beyond national boundaries. Minority films, for instance, frequently appeared at various international film festivals and exhibitions during the Cold War. In 1952, *Victory of Inner Mongolian People* was selected to represent the PRC to participate in the seventh Karlovy Vary International Film Festival—a festival held by the Czechoslovak Republic with the purpose of promoting international unity and displaying progressive film productions internationally—and won the best script award (Wang Zhenzhi). At the eleventh festival, the performances by actor Daqi 达奇 and actress Wang Xiaotang 王晓棠 in *Bonfires in the Border Village* won the favor of the committee. Both performers were granted the best young actor award.¹ Meanwhile, *Five Golden Flowers* was awarded for best actress (Yang Likun) and best director (Wang Jiayi) at the second Asian and African Film Festival, which aimed to support communication and cooperation

¹ For more information about awards and exhibitions, see Chen Zhenxing 陈振兴, *Guoji dianyingjie gaikuang* 国际电影节概况 [Overview of international film festivals] (Beijing: China Film Press, 1984).

between filmmakers in Asian and African countries. This film was once released in more than fifty-six countries, which set a record in the global distribution history of PRC-made socialist films.² Until the early 1980s, minority films remained the preferred genre for representing the PRC at international events, competitions, and exhibitions.

Within the discussions related to the translational/translocal circulation and consumption of socialist minority films, the influential function of a site—Hong Kong—cannot be ignored. Unlike the pro-Soviet film festivals, Hong Kong helped connect the PRC with the Western world—the rest of the world. Many important socialist minority films were released in Hong Kong and then flowed through to other overseas Chinese communities. This chapter therefore takes an in-depth look at Hong Kong. By examining the consumption of ethnic minority films represented by *Third Sister Liu* in the 1960s Hong Kong and Sinophone communities, I argue that the original functions and political coding embedded in the filmic text could be deconstructed in the transnational/translocal consumption. The active engagement of the local experience, in essence, re-coded specific filmic texts, and the success of *Third Sister Liu* in transnational Sinophone communities catalyzed the fever for knockoffs in the Hong Kong film field. This chapter further uses the Hong Kong-made imitative films—including the Shaw Brothers' mountain-song musical *The Shepherd Girl* and *The Songfest* and Feng Huang company's ethnic minority film *Golden Eagle*—as examples to explore the dynamics between Hong Kong's local experiment—its particular geopolitics, modernity, and migrant encounters—and the PRC's socialist discourse. I argue that imitating the socialist pattern did not help advance an ideological identity tied to Maoist China but rather highlighted the social symptoms of Hong Kong's fast-paced industrializations

² Gao Gejin 高歌今, “Zhuangxin buyi—fang dianying daoyan Wang Jiayi” 壮心不已——访电影导演王家乙 [Cherishing ambition: Interview with film director Wang Jiayi], *People's Cinema*, no. 4 (1978): 61.

and modernization. The adaptations of *Third Sister Liu* and other socialist minority films thus revealed the growing local consciousness in 1960s Hong Kong. During this period, both the pro-KMT and pro-CCP Hong Kongers started to explore new ways to deal with their identity crisis within the Cold War structure.

Hong Kong Film Community in the 1950s and 1960s

In 1945, World War II was finally coming to an end, but it did not bring world peace; instead, the war morphed into a new form—the so-called “Cold War.” The Iron Curtain separated the two blocs respectively guided by the Soviet Union and the United States. However, the Cold War structure was not locked in everywhere globally. Some scattered regions maintained an atmosphere where the two sides could maintain necessary communication. Hong Kong was such a place. At the time, the future of Hong Kong, as a British colony, became a concern after the end of World War II. Would it be returned to Communist China, stay in the hands of the British, or side with the KMT government based in Taiwan? Even though severe ideological conflicts existed between the Western world and the PRC, the two sides reached an unspoken consensus regarding the Hong Kong situation: opting to maintain the status quo. Hong Kong’s special geopolitical status could help maintain some level of balance between the West and Communist China. As scholar Poshek Fu indicates, “dubbed by the press as the ‘Berlin of the East’ or ‘Tangier of Asia,’ Hong Kong had become China’s ‘window’ to the west and the Free World’s ‘watchtower’ to counter Chinese Communism.”³ To understand the function of Hong Kong as both the “window” and “watchtower,” it is important to discuss the Hong Kong film community.

³ Poshek Fu, “Entertainment and Propaganda: Hong Kong Cinema and Asia’s Cold War,” in *The Cold War and Asian Cinema*, ed. Poshek Fu and Man-Fung Yip (New York: Routledge, 2020), 238.

Before the great divide created by the raising of the Iron Curtain, Hong Kong was treated as a shelter for Chinese filmmakers to avoid the wars and chaos occurring in mainland China during the 1930s and 1940s. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, filmmakers stranded in Hong Kong thus had to make a choice about the future. Some of them left Hong Kong—returning to the mainland or fleeing to other places; others prolonged their stay in this colony. Those filmmakers who stayed were soon separated into two camps influenced by the two main political entities that both claimed to be the orthodox representatives of China—the CCP in the mainland and the KMT in Taiwan. The pro-CCP filmmakers (also known as the patriarchal filmmakers or leftists) established the “Chang Feng Xin” 长凤新 system, which included two film companies that mainly focused on Mandarin film productions— Changcheng 长城 (Great Wall) and Feng Huang 凤凰—and the Sun Luen 新联 film company devoted to Cantonese-language film production targeting the Cantonese speakers. The South Film Corporation (SFC) was founded in 1950 to expand the distribution and exhibition chains in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. From 1953 onward, SFC became the sole distributor of PRC-made films in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. The development of these companies was closely tied to the PRC government. According to writer and filmmaker George Shen 沈鉴治, “it was common knowledge that the Chinese communists controlled the ‘patriotic film companies’ in Hong Kong. The controlling body was however not the Xinhua News Agency or an office of the Guangdong Provincial Government, but the foreign office of the State Council, headed by Liao Chengzhi.”⁴ In his study on the interactions between Hong Kong and the mainland in the 1950s and 1960s, scholar Zhao Weifang indicates the different ways the PRC sponsored the three leftist film companies in Hong Kong, such as by

⁴ George Shen, “Film Anecdotes,” in *An Age of Idealism: Great Wall and Feng Huang Days*, ed. Chu Hak (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2001), 288.

providing financial support, film cooperation, art direction, and training (especially for opera films); providing physical places in the mainland for location shooting; and permitting limited distributions of selected Hong Kong-made progressive films in the PRC.⁵

During the same period, as Poshek Fu indicates, “Taiwan did not have official representatives in Hong Kong because the British government had granted *de jure* recognition of the PRC in January 1951.”⁶ Still, the Nationalist government was not willing to give up such an important base. With the help of pro-KMT filmmakers like Zhang Shankun 张善琨, the Hong Kong and Kowloon Filmmakers Free General Association Limited (Free Association) was established in the mid-1950s. This association, on the surface, was like a non-government institution. But it “had close ties with Taiwanese authorities and functioned as a kind of censorship apparatus, a gatekeeper that controlled what Hong Kong films could be shown in Taiwan.”⁷ Only the filmmakers registered in this association could get certificates from the KMT to release films in Taiwan. However, the market in Taiwan attracted the attention of many Hong Kong filmmakers. Shaw Brothers 邵氏兄弟 and the Motion Picture and General Investment Company (MP & GI, or Dianmao 电懋) were the key figures in the Free Association. Since the institution was named Free Association and Taiwan claimed to be Free China, these registered Hong Kong filmmakers were also called *free filmmakers*.

⁵ Zhao Weifang 赵卫防, “Wuliushi niandai neidi yu Xianggang liangdi dianying hudong ji yingxiang xin tan” 五六十年代内地与香港两地电影互动及影响新探 [New achievements in the interactions between mainland China and Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s], *Contemporary Cinema*, no. 12 (2013): 73–78.

⁶ Fu, “Entertainment and Propaganda,” 241.

⁷ Man-Fung Yip, “Closely Watched Films: Surveillance and Postwar Hong Kong Leftist Cinema,” in *Surveillance in Asian Cinema: Under Eastern Eyes*, ed. Karen Fang (New York: Routledge, 2017), 47.

Relying on the Free Association, the Nationalist government intervened in Hong Kong film activities and launched ideological competitions with Communist China. The Fong-fong incident is a typical example. In 1955, rising child star Siao Fong-fong 萧芳芳 joined Great Wall, which caused a storm in Taiwan. The Taiwan-based *United Daily News* even published an article to report this event, writing, “Today, the leftist film rogues robbed the best child star trained by the Free Association We had to admit that we failed in the whole fighting process.”⁸ However, Siao quickly left Great Wall and returned to Shaw Brothers. Then her first journey to Taiwan for film shooting in 1957 was ultimately viewed as “fleeing the freedom.”⁹ The reports about how she was deceived and threatened by the red filmmakers to work for Great Wall and how she finally joined the embrace of the free motherland continued to appear frequently in newspapers until the 1960s.¹⁰ The language used in such papers revealed the competition consciousness and the sharp political and ideological conflicts between Free and Communist China. The Hong Kong film community thus became a battlefield for the two parties.

In the heat of that battle, the British colonial government in Hong Kong seemingly had no interest in taking a clear stance. The Hong Kong government instead chose to maintain balance through depoliticization. To mediate the conflicts, “the Hong Kong government was vigilant against political advocacy of all kinds or anything that openly promoted ideological agendas for fear of compromising its claim of ‘neutrality.’”¹¹ Film Censorship Regulations, promulgated in

⁸ “Zuodao yinggun qiangzou Fangfang jingguo” 左道影棍抢走芳芳经过 [How leftist film rogues robbed Fong-fong], *United Daily News*, August 26, 1955.

⁹ “Zuijia tongxing Xiao Fangfang jin lai tai” 最佳童星：萧芳芳今来台 [Siao Fong-fong, the best child star, visits Taiwan], *United Daily News*, October 30, 1957.

¹⁰ “Nü tongxing Xiao Fangfang laigui zuguo huaibao” 女童星萧芳芳来归祖国怀抱 [Female child star Siao Fong-fong returns to the embrace of the motherland], *United Daily News*, October 31, 1957; “Ku’er liulang de Xiao Fangfang” 苦儿流浪的萧芳芳 [The wondering poor girl—Siao Fong-fong], *United Daily News*, February 26, 1960.

¹¹ Fu, “Entertainment and Propaganda,” 242.

Hong Kong in 1953, were part of that vigilance. Topics relating to ideology and political campaigns in films thus became sensitive content that required severe surveillance.¹² Since most PRC-made socialist films contained ideological and political content, the distribution of such films in Hong Kong became significantly difficult, especially in the early 1950s. According to actress Chu Hung 朱虹, “in 1953, only one feature film made in the mainland was allowed to release [in Hong Kong]. In the following years, the situation did not change a lot. Even though more films could go through the harsh censorship, they were restricted in limited genres such as opera, sport documentaries, and few feature films.”¹³ Such censorship even went beyond targeting the PRC films or films made by pro-Beijing filmmakers. Anti-communist productions from Taiwan and the US were also once censored.¹⁴

Even though politics and ideologies were actively involved, treating them as the sole criteria to separate the two camps in the Hong Kong film community is too simplistic. Scholar Kwai-cheung Lo argued that “filmmakers accepted their dependent position not from sheer ideological commitment but mainly for economic goals and personal reasons.”¹⁵ In the abovementioned case of Siao, she switched to being affiliated with Shaw Brothers at just eleven years old. That such a young child could comprehensively understand the meaning of ideology is

¹² See Kenny Ng 吴国坤, “Lengzhan shiqi Xianggang dianying de zhengzhi shencha” 冷战时期香港电影的政治审查 [The political censorship of Hong Kong cinema in the Cold War era], in *Lengzhan yu Xianggang dianying* 冷战与香港电影 [The Cold War and Hong Kong cinema], ed. Wong Ain-ling 黄爱玲 and Lee Pui-tak 李培德 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2009), 53–69.

¹³ Chu Hung, ed., *Shanyao zai tongyi xingkong: Zhongguo neidi dianying zai Xianggang* 闪耀在同一星空：中国内地电影在香港 [Shining under the same sky: PRC-made films in Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., Ltd, 2005), 13.

¹⁴ Yip, “Closely Watched Films,” 42.

¹⁵ Kwai-cheung Lo, “Hong Kong Cinema as Ethnic Borderland,” in *A Companion to Hong Kong Cinema*, ed. Esther M.K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and Esther C.M. Yau (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2015), 80.

a highly unpersuasive argument; even less persuasive is that she could have made any decisions based solely on her ideological commitment. Siao, in an interview, admitted as much: “I was too young to understand these things In Taipei, I read the news and felt strange. I asked my mom, ‘How did I flee to freedom? What is fleeing to freedom?’”¹⁶ According to Liao Yiyuan 廖一原, a pro-CCP filmmaker, “neither anti-communist nor anti-Chinese ones were our friends We did not treat Shao Brothers as the rightists. None of their films were anti-communist These films never coordinated with the propaganda of counterattacking the mainland.”¹⁷ The narratives of such witnesses reveal the other key aspect of this period. Rather than ideological confrontation, economic competition and cooperation were common phenomena. Due to the lack of local theaters, the circulation and exhibition of films made by Great Wall and Feng Huang in Southeast Asia heavily relied on Shaw Brothers and Cathay, which had developed mature distribution chains in the Nanyang region.¹⁸ Shaw Brothers and Cathay also needed these films to make up for the insufficient capacity of Mandarin film production to feed the Southeast Asian market. Against this background, Hong Kong was rolling full steam ahead with developing its film industry.

The Fever for *Third Sister Liu*

As the sole distributor of PRC-made films in Hong Kong, SFC took on the responsibility to spread socialist films. SFC had to overcome harsh censorship by thoroughly considering and carefully

¹⁶ Peggy Chiao 焦雄屏, *Xianggang dianying chuanqi: Xiao Fangfang he sishinian dianying fengyun* 香港电影传奇: 萧芳芳和四十年电影风云 [Hong Kong film legend: Siao Fong-Fong and her 40-year film career] (Taipei: Wanxiang tushu, 1995), 148.

¹⁷ Zhou Chengren 周承人, “Lengzhan beijing xia de Xianggang zuopai dianying” 冷战背景下的香港左派电影 [Hong Kong leftist films in the Cole War], in *Lengzhan yu Xianggang dianying*, ed. Wong Ain-ling and Lee Pui-tak, 28.

¹⁸ Yip, “Closely Watched Films,” 49.

choosing suitable candidate films. Besides opera films, minority films that clearly avoided socialist political and ideological propaganda were shortlisted. A series of socialist minority films from the 1950s onward were then imported and circulated in Hong Kong. In the theaters owned by the patriarchal camp, audiences could access *Song of Coconut Grove* (椰林曲 dir. Wang Weiyi, 1958),¹⁹ *The Mysterious Companions* (1960), *Five Golden Flowers* (1960, 1979), *Jin Yuji* (1960), *Daji and Her Fathers* (1962), *Qin Niangmei* (秦娘美 dir. Sun Yu 孙瑜, 1962), and *Daughter of the Dai people* (1962).²⁰ In 1962, SFC imported and released *Third Sister Liu*. Exceeding all expectations, it became an overnight sensation in Hong Kong. The film is based on Zhuang folklore and depicts the story of the Zhuang goddess Third Sister Liu. Liu is forced to leave her home after defying the landlord by singing folksongs in public, which the landlord had banned. While on the run, she meets and falls in love with a fisherman named Ah Niu. She stays in the fishing village and organizes the masses to sing mountain songs, which challenges the authority of the local landlord. Liu is arrested as a result, but with the help of the masses, she successfully escapes. The popularity of this film triggered its re-exhibitions, consisting of four main rounds of screening in Hong Kong in 1962, 1964, 1978, and 1984.

The fever for this singing goddess soon extended beyond Hong Kong and swept through Southeast Asia. Collectively, the gorgeous landscape, the melodious mountain songs, and the

¹⁹ The years in this paragraph refer to the exhibition years of these films in Hong Kong.

²⁰ It is the film *Moya Dai* 摩雅傣 [The Dai doctor]. As it was shown in Hong Kong, the Chinese name was changed to *Pipa gui qi yuan* 琵琶鬼奇冤 [The incredible injustice of pipa ghost]. The Chinese titles of other films were also changed even though the English titles remained the same. For instance, *Shenmi de lüban* 神秘的旅伴 [The mysterious companions] became *Dieying zhenji* 谍影侦察 [The shadow of spies and scout cavalries]. These new Chinese titles reveal the preference of the Hong Kong market. Audiences were inclined to attend films with strong commercial elements and entertainment implications. Thriller, spy, and horror genres were popular during this period. See detailed records about the exhibitions of PRC-made films in Hong Kong during the Cold War in Chu Hung 朱虹, ed., *Shanyao zai tongyi xingkong* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., Ltd, 2005).

innocent laboring class restored the vivid image of the homeland for audiences who were suffering from homesickness in the Nanyang region. In Singapore, *Third Sister Liu* even got drawn into the local political campaigns launched respectively by the People's Action Party and the Socialist Front. The two parties coincidentally selected this film as a powerful tool to appeal to the masses to join political events and speeches. Attending screenings for the PRC-made ethnic minority film in Singapore was therefore politicized. Scholar Lanjun Xu comprehensively interprets the connection between the popularity of this film and Singapore's political competitions in the 1950s and 1960s. According to Xu, "*Third Sister Liu* . . . was a 'healthy film' compared with the sexually suggestive Hollywood films of the time [It] was closely related to the Anti-Yellow Culture Movement, which happened in Singapore in the period of 1953–1961."²¹ The political messages embedded in *Third Sister Liu*, such as class struggles and the power of laborers, "effectively expressed the masses' frustrations towards the social injustice under the colonial rule of the British government, and . . . contributed to creating a new vocabulary to interpret localized concerns."²² In this way, the particular historical context participated in the recoding of the film. A PRC-made ethnic minority film was thus successfully localized in a remote Nanyang region.

Despite being a box office hit, *Third Sister Liu* was not publicly released in Taiwan since the KMT banned all films produced in the PRC. However, the film's extraordinary success in Chinese diasporic communities drove the Taiwan government to comment on the film. In a review from a Taiwan-based newspaper, the popularity of the film was driven by the campaign of deceit plotted by the leftists. Audiences failed to see the tears and cries dominating the various roles, the

²¹ Lanjun Xu, "Contested Chineseness and *Third Sister Liu* in Singapore and Hong Kong: Folk Songs, Landscape, and Cold War Politics in Asia," in *The Cold War and Asian Cinema*, ed. Poshek Fu and Man-Fung Yip, 76.

²² *Ibid.*, 81.

depressing atmosphere, and the sadness shown at the end of the film.²³ The review focused on leftist deceit was not the first time Taiwan newspapers had poured cold water on the positive reception of *Third Sister Liu*. Attracted by the interesting content, Japanese artists made the story of Liu into a musical theater and planned to release the Japanese version rather quickly. *United Daily News*, however, reported on the release with a strong negative tone and claimed that Japanese artists had “forgotten their Japanese origin and [instead] performed as the lackey of the CCP”²⁴ since the artists adapted a film filled with “Communist thoughts to invade the world and [propagate] anti-democratic ideas.”²⁵

Political parties in both Taiwan and Singapore had realized the significance of the political messages embedded in *Third Sister Liu*. In reality, the political allusion of this text was the intentional group effort of PRC intellectuals. The Liuzhou caidiao opera troupe was the first official organization that aimed to create a caidiao opera based on the legend of Liu as a gift to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the PRC. The troupe successively submitted seven versions to the government. Later, the fifth version became the blueprint of the film script.²⁶ Scholar Liao Xiaxuan

²³ Yi Jin 易金, “Muqian lengyu jieju lun” 幕前冷语：结局论 [Sarcastic comments before the screening: On the ending], *United Daily News*, June 8, 1962.

²⁴ “Gongfei geju shenru Riben Liu sanjie jiang zai xiayue yanchu” 共匪歌剧渗入日本 刘三姐将在下月演出 [The opera made by Communist bandits infiltrates Japan, *Third Sister Liu* will be shown next month], *United Daily News*, January 24, 1962.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Liao Xiaxuan 廖夏璇, “Minjian xushi zhengzhi yinyu he jiti huayu—dui shiqinian shiqi caidiao ju Liu Sanjie wenben chuanggao guocheng de kaocha” [民间叙事、政治隐喻和集体话语——对“十七年”时期彩调剧《刘三姐》文本创改过程的考察 [Folk narrative, political metaphor and collective discourse: A case study of the text creation and modification of caidiao opera *Third Sister Liu* over seventeen years], *Xiju yishu* [戏剧艺术 Theater art], no. 6 (2021): 22. Both the opera and screen scripts of *Third Sister Liu* were made in the collective creation mode—a typical cooperation method in Maoist period. This mode involves several intellectuals forming a team and working together on a literary product to highlight the significance of the collective and the cooperation. But the authorship of the product in this mode is blurred. Therefore, after the end of the socialist era, many copyright disputes appeared. *Third Sister Liu* was also locked in a legal dispute. See “Shan’ge haobi chunjiang shui shumingquan zhizheng: Qiao Yu beipan qinquan” 《山歌好比春江水》署名权之争：乔羽被判侵权 [“Folk Songs Are Like Spring Rivers” in the

examines the evolution of the seven versions and concludes that the modifications embedded a revolutionary theme in the story and switched Liu's role from that of a song goddess to that of a heroine devoted to class struggle.²⁷ The playwright of this film, Qiao Yu, shared a similar creative doctrine—transforming the role of Liu into a socialist model. In this film, Liu's clear class consciousness and efforts to support class struggles made some PRC audiences worry that the text disobeyed the dominant realistic principles since the revolutionary spirit was a modern socialist product and should not be present in an ancient role. But others held different ideas. For those audiences, the modernization of the ancient role was itself seen as the crowning achievement of this film.²⁸ Nevertheless, these debates and reviews confirm that the political allusion in this film is crucial and should not be ignored.

Yet Hong Kongers seemed to collectively turn a blind eye to the film's socialist ideology and relative political messages, and instead paid more attention to the apolitical aspects, especially the *four goods*—the good narrative, the attractive actresses, the gorgeous sceneries, and the beautiful songs.²⁹ After the premiere, an essay published in *Ta Kung Pao* recorded the general reactions of audiences after attending this film. Hong Kongers were impressed by the gorgeous natural scenes in Guilin and Yangshuo, and the hundreds of mountain songs amused Hong Kong

dispute over the signature rights: Qiao Yu convicted of infringement], *China News*, accessed May 10, 2021, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/2016/03-30/7816641.shtml>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁸ See Ying Tao 颖涛, “Xiandai hua le de Liu sanjie” 现代化了的《刘三姐》 [The modernized *Third Sister Liu*], *Popular Cinema*, no. 1 (1962): 12; Fang Ziran 方自然, “Sixiang xing yu shidai—yingpian Liu sanjie zhi wo jian” 思想性与时代——影片《刘三姐》之我见 [Ideology and the era: Commentary on *Third Sister Liu*], *Popular Cinema*, no. 8 (1962): 22–23; Jia Ji 贾霁, “Guanyu yingpian Liu Sanjie taolun de zagan” 关于影片《刘三姐》讨论的杂感 [Thoughts on the discussion about *Third Sister Liu*], *Popular Cinema*, no. 8 (1962): 20–23; and Ah Yi 阿颐, “Lixiang yu xianshi—yu pengyou tan yingpian Liu sanjie” 理想与现实——与朋友谈影片《刘三姐》 [Ideals and reality: A discussion about *Third Sister Liu* with friends], *Popular Cinema*, no. 10 (1961): 10–11.

²⁹ “Liu Sanjie shiqi qi ying” 刘三姐十七起映 [*Third Sister Liu* to be released on May 17th], *Ta Kung Pao*, May 13, 1962.

spectators. Some of them left the theater humming the melody of the interlude songs.³⁰ These elements were also highly praised by the mainland audiences. But Hong Kongers were also drawn to another aspect, one seldom touched in the film's birthplace—the entertainment deriving from the attractive woman and humorous details. The charming actress Huang Wanqiu, who “was adorable from every angle,”³¹ was a motivating factor in attracting Hong Kongers to attend the cinema. This collective gaze at the female beauty of PRC actresses was not new, however. Yang Likun, who starred in *Five Golden Flowers*, was another actress being described as “adorable in all the angles.”³² As the film was shown in Hong Kong, some audiences even re-attended the film just to carefully scrutinize Yang's smiling face.³³ Hong Kong spectators also noticed the beauty of the actresses playing secondary roles, and the personal backgrounds of actresses playing the other four golden flowers got detailed introductions, too. In close-ups, the actresses' faces were juxtaposed with the starring actress to be displayed in the theater to attract audiences (Figure 3.1). In *Third Sister Liu*, the beauty of Sister Zhou—a minor role—also captivated and was appreciated by Hong Kong audiences. To encourage moviegoing, SFC even prepared the photos of actresses as gifts for audiences.³⁴ The obsession with PRC actresses revealed the female-oriented viewing convention during the period. In addition, the collective gaze shaped the imagined gender structure between Hong Kong (as male) and the PRC (as female). Besides audiences being drawn to the attractive actress, “laughter” was a common audience reaction. The consistent laughter lasting

³⁰ “Yingtian you xianqi le rechao” 影坛又掀起了热潮 [A new wave in the film field], *Ta Kung Pao*, May 19, 1962.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² “*Wuduo Jinhua* gongying” 五朵金花公映 [The premiere of *Five Golden Flowers*], *Ta Kung Pao*, May 5, 1960.

³³ Xiao Feng 小冯, “*Wuduo jinhua jimian lian*” 五朵金花几面脸 [The faces in *Five Golden Flowers*], *Ta Kung Pao*, May 14, 1960.

³⁴ “*Liu Sanjie* song caise zhaopian” 刘三姐送彩色照片 [*Third Sister Liu* sends colorful photos], *Ta Kung Pao*, July 21, 1964.

from the very beginning to the end in the theater was reportedly a common phenomenon when the film was shown. In fact, “100% entertainment” was a typical label bestowed on the film.



Figure 3.1 Obsession with Female Beauty and *Five Golden Flowers* in Hong Kong on *Ta Kung Pao* May 8, 1960

In the consumption of *Third Sister Liu* in Hong Kong, the political core was detached from the filmic text. The entertaining elements, which were repressed in the PRC, were instead spotlighted in Hong Kong. Instead of an act of political education, attending this socialist minority film thus became a form of pure entertainment. Hong Kongers’ disregard for political messages and interest in exploring entertainment revealed the apolitical viewing convention in Hong Kong. That convention, to some degree, relates to the policies of the colonial government, which aimed to maintain a degree of balance among various political forces. Although it is hard to confirm just how many ordinary Hong Kong viewers at the time were aware of the heavy socialist ideological messages in this film, this relatively apolitical reception turned out to be common among moviegoers in Hong Kong.

Imitating *Third Sister Liu*: Shaw Brothers and the Mountain-song Musical

The popularity of *Third Sister Liu* made Hong Kong film producers aware of the untapped market opportunities for films in this genre. Accordingly, reproducing the success of *Third Sister Liu* was

put on the agenda. A series of imitative films aiming to replicate the genes of *Third Sister Liu* quickly hit the screen in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. Shaw Brothers was a veteran film company and, as such, was good at copying economically successful film productions. In 1950s Hong Kong, the PRC's opera films were on the air. Director Li Hanxiang, in serving Shaw Brothers, looked to and understood the potential appeal of opera films in the Sinophone market. Following the paradigm of the PRC-made *yue* opera film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (梁山伯与祝英台 dir. Sang Hu 桑弧, 1954) and the *huangmei* opera film *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* (天仙配 dir. Shi Hui 石挥, 1956), Li therefore produced a series of costume musicals that sparked the fever for the *huangmei* opera genre in Hong Kong.³⁵ Shaw Brothers thereupon seized the leading position in the *huangmei* opera trend. In 1963, Shaw Brothers finished the masterpiece, *The Love Eterne*. The Chinese name of this film—*Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*—clearly uncovered its direct kinship with the PRC-made version, which was released in 1954 and achieved big success at the box office in Hong Kong. Film imitations, to some degree, helped Shaw Brothers find the path to fortune and wealth. In the trend of *Third Sister Liu*, Shaw Brothers, of course, rolled up their sleeves to ride the wave.

Scholar Lydia Liu discusses the reason *Third Sister Liu* could achieve success in different places. In her understanding, the music—which integrates folk melodies, traditional opera, and Western musical drama into an organic whole—plays an important role.³⁶ Shaw Brothers also

³⁵ Law Kar 罗卡, “Zhongguo neidi dianying zai ‘wenge’ qian de chujing jiqi zai Xianggang de fanxiang” 中国内地电影在“文革”前的处境及其在香港的反响 [The reception of mainland films in Hong Kong before the Cultural Revolution], in *Shanyao zai tongyi xingkong*, ed. Chu Hung, 55. More details about how the Li and Shaw Brothers started *huangmei* opera film production can be seen in Li Yi Zhuang 李以庄, “Yibu Zhongguo neidi dianying xianqi, gangtai yingtai de ershinian huangmeidiao rechao” 一部中国内地电影掀起港台影坛的二十年黄梅调热潮 [A mainland film ignites 20-year fever for *huangmei* opera films in Hong Kong and Taiwan], in *Shanyao zai tongyi xingkong*, ed. Chu Hung, 25–27.

³⁶ Lydia Liu, “A Folksong Immortal and Official Popular Culture in 20th Century China,” in *Writing and Materiality in China*, ed. Lydia Liu and Judith Zeitlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 576–77.

noticed the significance of music and aimed to capture the opportunity to rise to another height in succession to the zenith of *huangmei* opera films by producing a new subgenre—mountain-song musicals. Filmmakers in Shaw Brothers pulled all-nighters to produce two imitative fabrications that copied the pattern of *Third Sister Liu: The Shepherd Girl* (山歌恋 dir. Lo Chen 罗臻, 1964) and *The Songfest. The Shepherd Girl* depicts a simple story about how a young couple falls in love because of matching mountain songs. As this film was shown in Hong Kong, *Third Sister Liu* was under its second-round screening. Shaw Brothers then strategically created a confrontational stance between *The Shephard Girl* and *Third Sister Liu*. Newspapers vividly described the two films as being in a “cold war.”³⁷ *The Shepherd Girl* advocated itself as “the first mountain-song musical in Hong Kong most fitting the taste of local audiences” (Figure 3.2 top). In another news source, the editor strongly praised the innovation of Shaw Brothers in this film, claiming that “all [of] the audience would like to accept new things. These years, Shaw Brothers [was] devoted to reforms to fit the need of audiences In the aspect of form, Shaw Brothers never stopped innovations. *The Shepherd Girl*, the first Hong Kong mountain-song musical is the latest attempt.”³⁸ As this adaptation was shouting about its innovation in the songs in the film, *Third Sister Liu* conversely stressed its “orthodoxy” as the “king of the mountain-song musical” (Figure 3.2 bottom).

The “cold war” between the two films also occurred in the mountain-song singing competitions held by SFC and Shaw Brothers, respectively. In 1964, *Overseas Chinese Daily News*

³⁷ Yinse Nüji 银色女记 [silver female journalist], “Liangbu shan’ge daqi lengzhan” 两部山歌打起冷战 [Two mountain-song musicals tangled up in the Cold War], *Overseas Chinese Daily News*, July 15, 1964.

³⁸ “Xin fengge de gechang yingpian: Shaoshi xinzuo *Shange Lian*” 新风格的歌唱片：邵氏新作《山歌恋》 [The new style musical: Shaw Brother’s new film *The Shepherd Girl*], *The Kung Sheung Evening News*, July 8, 1964.

juxtaposed the huge poster of *Third Sister Liu* and the registration form of *The Shepherd Girl Singing Competition* on the same page, which made sense to ensure the battle would stand out. On the SFC side, the winners of the song competition were to receive bonuses and luxury gifts. Winners were also invited to perform the interlude songs from *Third Sister Liu* with stars like Chen Sisi 陈思思 and Kao Yuen 高远 at the Astor Theatre before the screening of the film.³⁹ Meanwhile, Shaw Brothers' song competition was sponsored by the luxury brand Tissot. The top four contestants would thus receive valuable Tissot watches.



Figure 3.2 Advertisement of *The Shepherd Girl* and *Third Sister Liu* on *Oversea Chinese Daily News*, July 15, 1964

³⁹ “*Liu Sanjie shan’ge bisai zuo banjiang*” 《刘三姐》山歌比赛昨颁奖 [*Third Sister Liu Mountain-song Competition award ceremony held yesterday*], *Ta Kung Pao*, July 17, 1964.

Besides, the top four winners also had the chance to serve Shaw Brothers as stand-ins after getting professional training.⁴⁰ These marketing strategies undoubtedly were economically oriented. Notably, though, something else also stood out. Thanks to the intentional competition of Shaw Brothers, the public focus shifted to concentrate on the mountain songs, which is just one aspect of the abovementioned *four goods* of *Third Sister Liu* in Hong Kongers' reviews. In the second-round screening, mountain songs left the other three aspects behind to become the typical feature of *Third Sister Liu*. The mountain-song genre, with which the two imitative films made by Shaw Brothers aligned, received comprehensive promotion from the entire process. In this sense, Shaw Brothers relied on the influential *Third Sister Liu* to leverage anew subgenre: the mountain-song musical.

In the 1960s, Hong Kong audiences were familiar with musicals, but the specific type of mountain song was still new. In promoting the two musicals made by Shaw Brothers, reviews and reports were always eager to define this genre. According to a mainlander in Taiwan, "Mountain Song is a type of folk music in our nation. It is the most popular genre among Hakka people in the south In my hometown Fujian, it is quite common to hear mountain songs. It is said that most mountain songs in *The Shepherd Girl* are the Hakka Mountain songs circulated in Mei County, Guangdong province."⁴¹ In the advertaintments published in Hong Kong's *The Kung Sheung Evening News*, the author also connected mountain songs with Hakka culture. "The music in *The Shepherd Girl* distinguishing from *huangmei* opera and popular songs is adapted from mountain songs popularized among the people living in the mountains and near the sea. The Hong Kong

⁴⁰ "Shange lian gechang bisai" 《山歌恋》歌唱比赛 [The Shepherd Girl Singing Competition], *Overseas Chinese Daily News*, July 9, 1964.

⁴¹ Yu Xinshan 余心善, "Huangmei diao shan'ge gechang dianying" 黄梅调山歌歌唱电影[Huangmei opera mountain-song musical], *United Daily News*, March 5, 1964.

residents immigrating from Huizhou and Hakka regions are very interested in mountain songs with excellent taste.”⁴² These texts aim to confirm that mountain songs belong to the Hakka culture. But this categorization conflicts with *Third Sister Liu*, which claims mountain songs were typical Zhuang culture. In fact, in Maoist China, singing and dancing were always tied to minority culture and became the underscored feature of ethnic minorities. This impression, to some degree, is attributed to the widespread socialist minority films. How should the different narratives regarding the mountain song between the free filmmakers and Maoist China be understood? Is it because songs in the two Shaw Brothers musicals are in Hakka style and completely differ from *Third Sister Liu*? Not really. Several interlude songs in the two musicals share clear similarities with the Zhuang-style folksongs in *Third Sister Liu*. Shaw Brothers filmmakers even directly borrowed the melody of the theme song in *Third Sister Liu* and used it in Shaw Brothers musicals. But why did Shaw Brothers avoid mentioning the Zhuang feature of mountain songs while transplanting them into the Hakka culture? Why did Hakkas matter?

To understand these questions, the origin of Hakkas must be explored. The question is a complicated one that has spurred debates among scholars. Scholar Luo Xianglin took the lead in studying the question in 1933. According to him, “Hakka should be categorized as a branch in the Han ethnicity, which has become a consensus among ordinary scholars.”⁴³ He further indicates that the root of Hakkas was in the Central Plains, but they experienced southward migrations five times in history. Over the course of their relocation process, Hakkas formed communities mainly in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. Luo’s argument has been recently challenged by other

⁴² “Biechuang yige xinpian” 别创一格新片 [A new film with unique style], *The Kung Sheung Evening News*, July 13, 1964.

⁴³ Luo Xianglin 罗香林, *Kejia yanjiu daolun* 客家研究导论 [The introduction of Hakka studies] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2018), 14.

theories.⁴⁴ I do not want to dive too deeply into the debate regarding the complicated origin of Hakka culture, but in the 1950s and 1960s, Luo's conclusions represented a type of common consensus shared by many.

Collectively, Luo's research provides cues to explore the motivation behind the Shaw Brothers' emphasis on the connection between mountain songs and the Hakka culture. The transnational Hakka communities—located mainly in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia—overlapped with the dominant film markets of Shaw Brothers. For non-Hakka Chinese living in these regions, the shared migrant experience and the disconnection with their roots also could set up a resonance between residents and Hakkas. Relying on the familiar culture and similar experiences to stir moviegoing was undoubtedly an effective economic strategy. But the Hakka culture's connection with the Central Plains was another crucial factor in understanding Shaw Brothers' cultural transplantation. The Central Plains, in the Han-centric cultural view, are treated as the origin of Chinese civilization. The culture rooted in this region is therefore granted orthodoxy in history. From this perspective, the historical connection with the Central Plains endows Hakka culture with the right to share this orthodox status. But this status is not conferred to minority culture, which is believed to maintain distance from the central region and therefore is always treated as the marginalized alien culture. By emphasizing mountain songs' affiliation with Hakka culture, Shaw Brothers could empower their mountain songs to possess orthodoxy in Han-centrism. In this way, Shaw Brothers made a competing stance with the socialist ethnic minority film *Third Sister Liu*, which always addressed its orthodox status in the “mountain song cold war.”

⁴⁴ There are various interpretations regarding the origin of Hakka and Hakka culture in academia. But Luo's paradigm dominated the studies of this field until the 1980s. See more information about the development of Hakka studies in Zhou Jianxin 周建新, “Kejia wenhua de yanjiu licheng yu lilun fanshi” 客家文化的研究历程与理论范式 [The development and theoretical paradigms of Hakka cultural studies], *Guangxi minzu daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 广西民族大学学报 (社会科学版) [*Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*], no. 6 (2016): 82.

This competing stance centering on orthodoxy hints at the cultural ambition of Shaw Brothers in this period. The Chinese diasporic filmmakers, including the heads of Shaw Brothers, migrated from the mainland, left the center, and joined the margin in the Han-centric POV. After the mainland was occupied by the CCP, these diasporas were excluded from the orthodox discourse and system, which triggered their collective anxiety. It became urgent to find a solution to deal with this anxiety. Returning to the mainland to reconnect with the Central Plains was impossible, especially for pro-KMT people like those behind Shaw Brothers. The alternative solution proposed by Shaw Brothers was to rebuild a new center in the south by relying on the culture, history, and experience shared by the Chinese migrants living in the Sinophone communities, especially Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. Appropriating Hakka culture in this sense was an effort to shape the new south center. In this way, the scattered Sinophone communities could be integrated into a whole. The new center could also provide a discourse system to compete with the orthodox discourse represented by the PRC and support the Chinese immigrants wandering outside the mainland, giving them a way to explore a new identity.

The attempt to form a new center stood out in the two counterfeit mountain song musicals made by Shaw Brothers. Using *The Songfest* as an example, the following details explain how, in imitating *Third Sister Liu*, Shaw Brothers reconstructed this new center. To some degree, *The Songfest* can be seen as a downright copy of *Third Sister Liu*. From the content to the form, the marks of imitation are clear. Set on a tea mountain neighboring the sea, *The Songfest* depicts a love story between the tea-picking girl Song Yulan and the fisherman Li Chunyang in the Ming dynasty. Hu Sanbao, the brother of the empress, is attracted by the beauty of Song and wants to marry her. To reject Hu, Song proposes following the local convention by holding a mountain song singing match. The winner will be her husband. Li defeats all the candidates in this competition, but Hu

does not want to accept the result. He then kidnaps Li during the marriage ceremony. With the help of the father of the empress, Li is saved, and the couple finally reunites.

The Songfest intended to copy the success of *Third Sister Liu*. The first concern of Shaw Brothers' filmmakers related to the natural scenery. The gorgeous landscape in Guilin contributed to the success of *Third Sister Liu*. Given that, for the Hong Kong-made *Third Sister Liu*, where could the free filmmakers find comparable sceneries? The filmmakers turned their eyes to Taiwan, and Nantou County was selected as the best candidate. There, the scenic spots—including Sun Moon Lake, Caotun Mountain, and Yuchi Township—became the selling points of this film. The wonderful outdoor scenes shot in these attractions were always highlighted in advertisements and reviews. Choosing Nantou's attractions was thus a strategy based on economic goals. Moreover, this region's subtle relationship with politics also seems notable. KMT president Chiang Kai-shek selected the Hanbi building in Sun Moon Lake to be his villa for vacations. Because the ROC was still the official representative of China at the UN, many foreign political leaders visited Taiwan in the 1950s and 1960s. Chiang always invited these state guests to tour Sun Moon Lake and then arranged for them to stay in the Hanbi building.⁴⁵ Through it all, newspapers in Taiwan actively updated the public with all relative information. The consistent visits of domestic and foreign political leaders and the corresponding reports endowed this region with a strong political overtone. In this context, visiting places like Sun Moon Lake was not a simple tour but a political pilgrimage—one that involved being closer to the political leader and showing homage to authority.

Nantou County was also home to many indigenous peoples. For instance, the Thao tribe once resided in the region near Sun Moon Lake, which was called *Ita Thao* 伊达邵. Under

⁴⁵ See Chen Shirong 陈诗蓉, *National Archives Newsletter*, no. 32 (2018), accessed April 26, 2022, <https://www.archives.gov.tw/Publish.aspx?cnid=1468>.

Japanese rule, *Ita Thao* was renamed *Huafan she* 化番社, literally meaning the community to educate savages. After the KMT retreated to Taiwan, a new name was assigned to this region—*Dehua she* 德化社. The term *fan* [savages], given its obvious discriminatory meaning, was eliminated. In ordinary reports and news, rather than *fan*, indigenous people were always called *shanbao* 山胞 (mountain fellows) under the KMT regime. The term change, however, did not eliminate bias. The new name *Dehua*, which literally means using morality to educate and enlighten the uncivil, provided the clue to explore the dominant ideology of the KMT regime—recovering the orthodox Han culture rooted in Confucianism. This name revealed the KMT’s endeavor to use Confucianism to achieve Sinicization and restore the conventional hierarchy between the Han and the indigenous. Promoting Confucianism as the dominant ideology was the KMT’s important political principle to legitimize its rule, which was in danger after the KMT was driven from the mainland.

Newspapers and relative public information resonated with the KMT’s policies to praise the achievement of Sinicization in this region. In the newspapers, the Thao leaders were shaped as the loyal supporters of Chiang and the modern Han-dominant culture. For example, in 1952, *United Daily News* reported the new life of Mao Yujuan, the princess in the local tribe. Mao was getting special training for cadres organized by the government. She had adjusted to the new modern life promoted by the KMT. In the end, Mao publicly announced the following: “I will be a loyal citizen. After graduation, I will devote to the training of mountain women.”⁴⁶ The title highlighting “dress changing” vividly conveyed the message that the indigenous people had switched their manners and customs to fit the Han-style modern life and culture. The core mission

⁴⁶ “Riyue tan dagongzhu tuodiao wushan huan zhengshan” 日月潭公主脱掉舞衫换征衫 [The princess of Sun Moon Lake switching from a dancing dress to military uniform], *United Daily News*, November 16, 1952.

was clear in the new name of the community *dehua*—moralization reform was thus successfully completed. Mao's words further expressed her active engagement with the modern culture and her loyalty to the Han-centered nation. In the depiction of the relative information and news, this region was essentially transformed into an indoctrination field, in which people received orthodox education in Confucianism-centered Han culture and formed political attachments to the KMT.

In that context, the stopover of Shaw Brothers filmmakers in this indoctrination field for several months functioned not just as a simple work trip but also as an important step of the pilgrimage: to get political and ideological training. By immersing themselves in this region, Hong Kong filmmakers were expected to convert to the KMT and the Han-centered Confucian ideology the KMT promoted. After completing the on-site shooting, the film crew moved north to the capital city of the KMT government in Taiwan—Taipei—to complete the studio scenes in Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMPC), a KMT-owned film studio. Visiting the capital ultimately had a strong political overtone. The journey of the film crew, starting from the indoctrination field in Nantou to the political center in Taipei, somewhat revealed the process of naturalization: after getting an education in orthodoxy, these *huawai zhimin* 化外之民 (outlandish people) from Hong Kong gained the approval to arrive at the corridors of power. In this process, one important component of the new center proposed by Shaw Brothers was highlighted—the KMT functioned as the political core of the system.

Regarding the cultural ideology, Shaw Brothers filmmakers and the KMT reached a consensus. They all supported the Han-dominant culture, especially Confucianism. Transplanting mountain songs into the Hakka culture revealed the Han-centric cultural view of Shaw Brothers. *The Songfest* then further revealed these filmmakers' obsession with Confucian values, mainly through the portrayal of the gender relationship. In *The Songfest*, the filmmakers copy the

important sequence of the singing match in *Third Sister Liu*, but the gender discourses embedded in the two films are quite different. In *Third Sister Liu*, Liu's fame in singing attracts the interest of Zhuang men. When Liu is picking tea with girls, some male peasants come to invite her to join a mountain song singing match. This sequence functions as a showground for Liu to display her wisdom, humor, and affinity, while the song match is depicted as an enjoyable communication rather than a competition. As the singing continues, the young men move closer to Liu and finally join the girls to compose a new community (Figure 3.3). Through the movement of men, the gender boundary in the singing activity is first blurred and finally removed. Liu functions as the agent binding individuals into a whole. Her talent in singing impresses and convinces the young men, breaks down the stereotyped male-centered gender hierarchy, and helps promote powerful femininity and the new women discourse in Maoist China.



Figure 3.3 The Disappearance of Gender Boundary in the Singing Match in *Third Sister Liu*

Even though the same sequence is re-played in *The Songfest*, the implicit meaning is completely different. The sequence also starts with girls picking tea on the mountain, but then the narrative gradually strays from that in *Third Sister Liu*. In *The Songfest*, as the boys return from

fishing, the matching song competition begins. The design of the two sides is interesting. The geography naturally separates women on the mountain from the boys on the sea (Figure 3.4). The two sides then maintain this separated state until the end of the sequence, which transforms the matching song activity into a gender fight and reveals the Confucian value that gender boundaries cannot be blurred. The respective occupations of the men and women also move a step further to provide more information regarding expected gender personas. The job of harvesting tea restricts women on the island surrounded by water, which connotes the image expected of women in the Confucian ideal as being domestic, stationary, and besieged. In fact, throughout the film, women are only allowed to move on the land besieged by the sea. On the male side, fishing offers men the freedom to get beyond the blocks, allows them to explore the endless outside, and endows them with mobility. Unlike the restricted situation of women, the male roles, whether positive or negative, have the right to freely shuttle back and forth between the land and sea. The restricted domestic women versus the men with the freedom to move around fits the Confucian gender imagination.



Figure 3.4 The Gender Boundary in *The Songfest*

In addition, *The Songfest* filmmakers seemed generally inclined to emphasize women's inferior position to men. The smart and humorous female figure who can win women and challenge authority in *Third Sister Liu* disappears. In the singing match in *The Songfest*, even the well-spoken female protagonist Song Yulan is, like all women, defeated by men. Facing the challenge of men, women lose their wit and magnanimity. They grow angry as the young fishermen sing, "If you do not know how to match songs, marry into my family to learn in three years." The eloquence of the men starkly contrasts the speechless women. A similar situation repeats in the singing communication between the young couple Li Chunyang and Song Yulan. Li is always eloquent, reasonable, and sophisticated while guiding the conversation, but Song cannot maintain a good demeanor and performs as the importunate, stuttering, and bratty crybaby. Accordingly, a conventional male-dominated gender structure—powerful men and weak women—is consolidated in the singing competitions. In this sense, instead of empowering women, filmmakers hope to restore a conventional order and hierarchy defined by the orthodox Confucian ideology. Thus, Shaw Brothers again proposed rival discourse, this time with the aspect of gender, by using Confucianism to compete with the socialist discourse centering on the powerful new women.

Despite copying many important settings in *Third Sister Liu*, such as the tea mountains and the fishing village, *The Songfest* also presents an original design—the set of the Empress of Heaven temple (Figure 3.5). This temple is crucial in the narrative since the structure witnesses the unfolding of important plots. Li and Song determine their marriage date and swear an oath of love in front of the Empress of Heaven. As Hu Sanbao kidnaps the male protagonist, Song rushes forward to the temple to lament the unjustness of society. It is also in the temple that Song meets with the savior—the father of the empress, who holds a fair trial. In the film, then, as roles encounter troubles and significant events, asking for the help, mercy, and blessing of the Empress

of Heaven is depicted as natural reactions. It is important to explore why the Empress of Heaven temple matters so much in this film.



Figure 3.5 The Empress of Heaven Temple in *The Songfest*

The Empress of Heaven (*Tianhou* 天后 or *Mazu* 妈祖) is the spiritual representation of a woman living in Putian County Fujian province, with the surname of Lin. With the support of the state, she was promoted from a minor deity to the locals to the leading goddess in South China. Mazu, “known . . . as the patron goddess of fisherpeople, sailors, and maritime merchants,”⁴⁷ can be seen as a type of cult dominant in the south and centered on the oceanic culture. As more Chinese people living near coastal regions migrated, this oceanic-oriented and south-centered Mazu culture reached Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. Temples and believers are thus commonly seen in these regions. In this sense, appropriating this deity and giving it a significant position in *The Songfest* reveals the intention of filmmakers to foreground the south oceanic culture that Mazu represents. Since Mazu is a leading goddess in South China, the people living in the hinterland and the north remotely away from the Mazu cultural circle might not be familiar with

⁴⁷ James L. Watson, “Standardizing the Gods: The Promotion of T’ien Hou (‘Empress of Heaven’) along the South China Coast, 960–1960,” in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 293. More information about Mazu and Mazu culture can be seen in Xu Xiaowang 徐晓望, *Mazu Xinyang shi yanjiu* 妈祖信仰史研究 [Studies on the cult of Mazu] (Fuzhou: Haifeng Publishing House, 2007).

this deity. But in *The Songfest*, filmmakers do not leave room to introduce or explain the supernatural power. It is therefore not hard to see the target audiences of this film as those influenced by or familiar with Mazu culture—to be more accurate, the Chinese immigrants residing in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia, which were the major markets of Shaw Brothers. The deity and the godliness could connect together the scattered communities and contribute to shaping a possible shared identity among the Chinese immigrants.

Furthermore, Shaw Brother's imitations of *Third Sister Liu* break the illusion that the category of the Han Chinese is coherent. The hierarchical differences between the north and the south display the controversial discourses among the Han Chinese. Regarding this topic, scholar Kevin Carrico uses the status of the Cantonese people as an example to problematize the singular Han nationality and argue that Guangdong "becomes the ultimate Han periphery in the popular imagination in the contemporary era."⁴⁸ Carrico further explains, "No matter how similar the admittedly untidy social situation in Guangdong may actually be to that of the rest of the nation, this province and its people remain stigmatized and excluded from the imagined vision of a unified vanguard Han, mainly for the purpose of differentiating and reaffirming those imagining them."⁴⁹ As a way to respond to this long-standing marginalization, Guangdong people in the reform era proposed "a mirrored marginalization of the North, rebutting and even inverting denigrating stereotypes as a means of reaffirming a leading Cantonese identity within the Chinese polity."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Kevin Carrico, "Recentering China: The Cantonese in and beyond the Han," in *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority*, ed. Thomas S. Mullaney, James Leibold, Stéphane Gros, and Eric Vanden Bussche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 33.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

Although Carrico's study centers on Guangdong in the reform era, his arguments offer insightful observations of the incoherence of the category of Han as identity through the conflict between the north and the south. This incoherence is also evident in Shaw Brothers' mountain-song musicals in the 1960s. Since the Republican era, Hong Kong, like Guangdong in Carrico's study, had generally been viewed as a cultural desert in the eyes of the people from the north in the film field.⁵¹ In this context, the cinematic battle between Shaw Brothers and *Third Sister Liu*—a film made by a north-based studio (Changying, the so-called cradle of the New China film industry)—revealed the conflicts between the southern margins and the northern center and provided a window to examine the inner tensions and controversies at play within the category of Han Chinese. The mountain-song musicals made by Shaw Brothers further represented Hong Kong free filmmakers' response to the stigmatized image of the marginalized south in general Chinese culture and imagination: counter-marginalization and recentralization through the inversion of stereotypes. For instance, *The Songfest* intentionally depicts a man from northern China. But instead of a decent intellectual, this role is that of an ignorant, arrogant, and deformed clown. In the sequence in which Song Yulan matches songs with men to select her future husband, a hunchback with a clear northern accent stands out to propose his love to Song in an arrogant tone. The beautiful bride-to-be ridicules him as Captain Camel because of his round back in an eccentric tone to sneer at his northern-accented Mandarin. Song's scorn directed at this overconfident suitor from northern China makes audiences burst into laughter. The depiction of this indecent northern character and the public mockery of him in this film reflect the effort Hong Kongers made to produce the mirrored marginalization of the north to reaffirm the central position of the south.

⁵¹ See more explanations in Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinema* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Nevertheless, Shaw Brothers' imitative mountain-song musicals in the 1960s reveal that the category of Han identity is not as coherent as expected but full of competing discourses. Moreover, the Shaw Brothers filmmakers intended to get rid of their stigmatized marginal position and recentralize their stance and specific culture. To achieve this goal, they gradually constructed a new center underscoring the south, immigrant experience, culture, and history through mountain-song musicals. That center promoted Confucianism as the core ideology, treated the KMT as the political leader, and foregrounded the southern oceanic civilization, a position that countered the orthodox stance represented by the PRC.

Appropriating Socialist Minority Films: Hong Kong-made Minority Films

Regarding the influence of *Third Sister Liu* in Hong Kong, previous studies have generally focused on the series of mountain-song musicals made by Shaw Brothers.⁵² This approach leaves the reactions of the patriarchal filmmakers unexplored. In fact, the leftist film studios also actively responded to the popularity of *Third Sister Liu*. In 1964, when Shaw Brothers strongly promoted *The Shepherd Girl*, Feng Huang released *Golden Eagle*, which was the first Hong Kong film shot in the PRC during the Cold War. Despite being seldomly discussed in academia and film history, this film was the first in Hong Kong to earn over one million Hong Kong dollars at the box office. The film was so popular that many Cantonese-language film theaters even scheduled times for the exhibition of the film, which broke the longstanding boundary between Cantonese and Mandarin film theaters in Hong Kong.⁵³ The success of *Golden Eagle* encouraged Feng Huang. One year

⁵² See Zhao Weifang, "Wuliushi niandai neidi yu Xianggang," *Contemporary Cinema*, No. 12(2013): 73–78; and Lanjun Xu, "Contested Chineseness," 73–92.

⁵³ "Xiyuan zuo nanbei he, wu yueyuan ying *Jinying*" 戏院昨南北和 五粤院映《金鹰》 [Yesterday theaters played the reunion of south and north, five Cantonese-language film theaters released *Golden Eagle*], *Overseas Chinese Daily News*, January 22, 1965.

later, the companion film *The Forest Riders* (椰林双姝 dir. George Shen) was finished and, with it, Feng Huang aimed to repeat the success of *Golden Eagle*. Great Wall also contributed to this film series by making *Love Song of Twins* (双女情歌 dir. Huang Yu 黄域, 1968). The trend to produce similar films continued into the 1970s, and *The Hawk of the Yis* (彝族之鹰 dir. Woo Siu-Fung 胡小峰), based on PRC writer Yang Daqun 杨大群's ethnic minority novel, was released in 1973.

In these films that follow *Third Sister Liu*, beautiful folksongs are also included. However, the marketing strategy of the patriarchal film companies markedly differed from that of Shaw Brothers. Great Wall, for instance, published several articles to help spread its new film *Love Song of Twins*. The director of this film, Huang Yu, noticed the successful PRC films like *Third Sister Liu* had a close relationship with beautiful Zhuang songs. While directing his own film, he requested that the composer refer to the ethnic minority music in southwest China.⁵⁴ The music composer Lai Cho-tin 黎草田 also confirmed that most songs he made for *Love Song of Twins* were adapted from the minority folksongs popularized in the southwest.⁵⁵ Based on these statements, the leftists clearly aimed to contrast Shaw Brothers' Sinicization and instead emphasized the typical minority feature of songs. Great Wall was not the only company to take that route. In reports and film reviews, "ethnic minorities" always appeared to mark the typical charm of the imitation films made by the patriarchal film companies. *Golden Eagle* was promoted

⁵⁴ Huang Yu 黄域, "Shuangyu qingge de paishe" 《双女情歌》的拍摄 [The shooting of *Love Song of Twins*], in *Yindu liushi* 银都六十 [Sixty years in Sil-Metropole], ed. Sil-Metropole Organization Ltd., 260.

⁵⁵ Cho-tin 草田, "Qingxin dongting de minge feng chaqu" 清新动听的民歌风插曲 [Fresh and beautiful folksong interludes], in *Yindu liushi*, 261.

as “a film in an ethnic minority style which is seldom seen,” for instance.⁵⁶ Besides being the companion work of *Golden Eagle*, the ethnic Yi people in *The Forest Riders* was another selling point. As an advertisement addresses, “the second characteristic of this film is the love between ethnic Li men and women.”⁵⁷ The abovementioned *Love Song of Twins* in an advertisement was also categorized as a “musical showing the life of ethnic minorities residing in southwest China.”⁵⁸ From this perspective, the patriarchal filmmakers’ understanding of the genre of *Third Sister Liu* was distinct from that of Shaw Brothers. Instead of music, leftist filmmakers treat “minority culture” as an umbrella term. To some degree, then, what leftist filmmakers imitated in this period was the socialist minority genre rather than the specific content of *Third Sister Liu*.

That notion does not mean that the Hong Kong-made minority films were the same as socialist minority films. The following analysis will focus on the blockbuster *Golden Eagle* to examine the characteristics of Hong Kong-made minority films. By comparing *Golden Eagle* and the socialist minority genre, I argue that Hong Kong patriarchal filmmakers intended to participate in the national discourse of the PRC by imitating the paradigm of socialist minority films. But the inclusion of local experience—especially migration, modernization, and the geopolitics of Hong Kong—led this Hong Kong-made ethnic minority film stray from the socialist pattern. The reproduction of minority films in Hong Kong, therefore, completed the farewell ceremony rather than a homecoming: while addressing their nostalgia for China, Hong Kong filmmakers parted from the motherland.

⁵⁶ “*Jinying shiying huo gejie renshi haoping*” 《金鹰》试映 获各界人士好评 [Test screening of *Golden Eagle* received positive audience reactions], *Ta Kung Pao*, December 14, 1964.

⁵⁷ “*Yelin shuangshu kuai shangying: miaoshu lizu de aqinggushi*” 《椰林双妹》快上映: 描述黎族的爱情故事 [*The Forest Riders* is almost complete: Depicting the romance of Li ethnicity], *Ta Kung Pao*, December 2, 1965.

⁵⁸ “*Changcheng kuan yinmu caipian: Shuangnü qingge shiba ri shangying*” 长城宽银幕彩片: 《双女情歌》十八日上映 [Great Wall’s color film *Love Song of Twins* to be released August 18th], *Ta Kung Pao*, August 15, 1969.

Golden Eagle is adapted from a script written by Mongolian writer Tsogtnarin 超克图纳仁, who belongs to the first generation of minority writers educated by the CCP. While working in Silingol, Tsogtnarin heard many stories from the local herdsmen about the dark life and suffering of the Mongolian masses under the rule of the princes. These stories inspired him to write the four-act play script later adapted to create *Golden Eagle*.⁵⁹ In the 1950s, Beijing People's Art Theatre brought the script to the stage. Then, in the 1960s, the script was discovered by Hong Kong director Chan Ching-Po, who was deeply touched by the heroic story of the Mongolian wrestler.⁶⁰ Chan later successfully adapted the script into a historical martial arts epic of the same name. The story in this film is set in the Mongolian grassland when the prince is ruling. Facing the tragic death and the unjust treatment of his brother Shobu, the male protagonist Burkut,⁶¹ who is famed as the golden eagle of the grassland, publicly resists the brutal Prince Bahyen. To avoid punishment, Burkut must hide his identity and wanders into the grassland. In Akon Banner, he falls in love with a beautiful Mongolian girl named Samdan. His identity is exposed, and he is arrested soon after. Then, a poor woman named Dokarma sacrifices her life to help Burkut escape. However, he is still in trouble since his adoptive father is imprisoned and his girl Samdan is forced to marry the son of the prince. With the help of his friends Tchakanho and Tzab, Burkut eventually rescues Samdan.

1. Journey

Despite being interested in the script of *Golden Eagle*, Hong Kong filmmakers still had some concerns while bringing it to life on the screen. The narrative takes place in the remote frontier of

⁵⁹ Tsogtnarin 超克图纳仁, *Jinying* [金鹰 Golden eagle] (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1959), 96.

⁶⁰ Chan Ching-Po 陈静波, "Jinying de paishe" 《金鹰》的拍摄 [The shooting of *Golden Eagle*], in *Yindu liushi*, 203.

⁶¹ The romanizations of the names in this film follow the English translation of the script published by Foreign Languages Press in 1961. See Tsogtnarin, *Golden Eagle* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1961).

the PRC, full of flocks and herds, and focuses on an ethnic minority group with a specific culture. All these factors were unfamiliar to Hong Kong filmmakers.⁶² To ensure authenticity and achieve a better effect, Feng Huang filmmakers decided to head to north China to observe and record the Mongols, their lives, and culture. After getting approval from the PRC government, director Chan guided his crew to start a northern adventure. This trip offered a special experience for Hong Kongers in the background of the Cold War when the PRC was sensitive to visitors from the outside world. While recalling her past career, actress Chu Hung, who plays the female lead in the film, could still remember the details of how they arrived at Inner Mongolia. As she recalled, “being in Mongolia was an adventure because transportation was inconvenient then. We were assisted by a Mongolian director. We flew to Changchun and took a train to Huhhot, then drove for two days before reaching our location.”⁶³ This journey undoubtedly left a deep impression.

In public opinion, Feng Huang’s three-month journey was not viewed as a simple business trip but rather as a patriarchal pilgrimage like that of *The Songfest* crew. Evan Yang 易文, an active Free Association filmmaker, noticed the political message hidden behind the mainland trip of the Feng Huang film crew. In an interview with the KMT-sponsored newspaper *United Daily News*, Yang claimed that “letting affiliated Hong Kong red filmmakers shoot outdoor scenes in the mainland was the strategy plotted by Communist bandits to promote emotional unification. When these red films were released overseas, the mainland sceneries would evoke homesickness and strong nostalgia among overseas Chinese. These Hong Kong filmmakers would turn to be more loyal to the Communist bandits because of the convenient assistance and preferential treatment

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Chu Hak, *An Age of Idealism: Great Wall and Feng Huang Days* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001), 240.

that the Communists provided.”⁶⁴ Considering the trip’s significant political and ideological function, he also suggested the KMT learn from the CCP and provide more chances for the free filmmakers in Hong Kong to visit Taiwan to shoot films.

Yang’s statement pointed to the subtle connection between the specific territorial tour and the loyalty of filmmakers to the regime they supported. The Taiwan trip of *The Songfest* crew provides a clear example: the crew visited local landmarks and immersive experiences to complete the political pilgrimage. The trip by Chan’s film crew, however, was quite different. Rather than the political center, the patriarchal filmmakers were just allowed to travel around the frontiers. Based on Chu Hung’s statement, the film crew moved from Hong Kong to a small unknown village on the edge of the north boundary. The crew on this journey was shifting away from the center of the PRC—the capital Beijing. To some degree, the scheduled trip implied the PRC’s suspicion of the people from the region belonging to the evil capitalist world, even though they claimed to be supporters of the government. That suspicion was not entirely unfounded. In the socialist era, these Hong Kong leftists did cause some trouble and chaos in the PRC. In the 1950s and 1960s, some Hong Kong progressive films were allowed to be shown in Shanghai after undergoing strict reviews. These films took Shanghai by storm and led many in Shanghai to be immersed in strong admiration for the modern Western lifestyle depicted in those films. The fever for the Hong Kong films led to a rising sense of discontentment with the tough socialist life among Shanghai audiences and even threatened social stability. Consequently, the Shanghai government had to enact new regulations and try various ways to discourage the masses from attending Hong Kong films. Later,

⁶⁴ “Yiwen tan yingye xiandaihua” 易文谈影业现代化 [Evan Yang discusses the modernization in the film industry], *United Daily News*, January 15, 1965.

the plan to import Hong Kong leftist films was shelved.⁶⁵ This lesson seemed to make the government more vigilant over the visit by Hong Kong filmmakers. In fact, almost all the major media in the PRC intentionally or unintentionally kept silent about the journey of the Feng Huang film crew.

In fact, instead of a pilgrimage, the Feng Huang filmmakers' trip was more like a re-education program. The Hong Kong filmmakers not only dealt with travel fatigue but also faced a tough living situation that awaited. Unlike the Shaw Brothers' filmmakers being intoxicated by the beautiful scenery in Nantou, Chan and his crew went to a desolate village where the only water resource was a well. Local people's daily life completely relied on that single well. Since water was so valuable, Mongolian locals used the well only for drinking. There were neither baths nor laundry facilities.⁶⁶ In such a harsh situation, what Hong Kong filmmakers experienced was a kind of ascetic life. They were assigned to live in Mongolian-style yurts and follow the same habits as local Mongols. But the collective life did not trigger assimilation or identification and instead highlighted the difference. Chu Hung remembered some of the "bad" deeds the film crew committed when they lived in this village. Even though they knew the water supply was not enough for even just the locals' basic needs, the film crew could not bear life without baths. They "waited until midnight to fetch water, boil it, and hide in the room to bathe in the basin."⁶⁷ But Chu and her colleagues clearly knew they must hide their behavior from local Mongols. "If [the locals] had known, we might have been killed!"⁶⁸ Chu's words revealed inside stories. Even though the Hong

⁶⁵ Zhang Jishun 张济顺, "Gejue zhong de xiangxiang: Xianggang dianying yu Shanghai jiceng shehui dui xifang de fanying" [隔绝中的想象: 香港电影与上海基层社会对西方的反应 [The imagination in isolation: Hong Kong films and how the people of Shanghai respond to the west], *Lengzhan yu Xianggang dianying*, 38–39.

⁶⁶ Chu Hak, *An Age of Idealism*, 240.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 240.

Kong crew was expected to complete the immersive experience by mingling with the local Mongols, which would help the crew improve the authenticity of the performance, they had trouble fitting into the local life. In this process, the boundary between “we [Hong Kongers]” and “they [the Mongols]” became much clearer.

As Chapter 2 indicated, experiencing life, especially the bitterness of the exploited classes, was a common routine for PRC filmmakers. Filmmakers’ reliance on this routine, on the one hand, meant they could accumulate necessary firsthand sources to improve realistic performances and portrayals. On the other hand, in the name of observing life, filmmakers were assigned to set forth on a journey of class re-education. The adversity and the ascetic living situation in local communities was intended to temper the will of filmmakers and let them realize the inhumanity of class exploitation. The feeling of discomfort was meant to be obvious. But that discomfort was the very part that these intellectuals were expected to overcome. By experiencing bitterness, they were meant to learn how to transcend and integrate themselves into the socialist class system. In this way, a unified socialist identity would be constructed and spread. Even though there were no official announcements, the schedule of the Hong Kong filmmakers in Inner Mongolia exposed a similar purpose. The ascetic training and adversities in the remote village aimed at re-educating these “heretics” from Hong Kong to complete their socialist conversion, both physically and spiritually. Chu’s narrative revealed the failure of this plan. Even though Hong Kong leftist filmmakers might return to the PRC with the expectation to mingle with the local community and the nation, the too-harsh living situation did not help the filmmakers convert but rather confirmed their discrepancy with the PRC.

The mainland trip left a deep impression on Hong Kong filmmakers and cast a shadow over the film itself. In *Golden Eagle*, “on the way” functions as the visual subject matter. The first picture that unfolds before the audience is the painting of a queue of marching cavalry in the opening film sequence. It predicts the core action—moving—in the story that follows. After attacking the son of the prince, the male protagonist Burkut escapes. The camera cuts back and forth between Burkut, who is on a horse galloping on the grassland, and a group of cavalymen who are chasing behind him. The theme of moving thus stands out. Besides the sequences that depict moving, the performance also highlights this action. At the Naadam festival, Burkut displays his talent as a wrestler. A singer stands out while singing for Burkut, but he does not stand in a fixed spot. Instead, while singing, he walks around, and the camera records the whole trajectory of the singer’s movement. In fact, almost all the roles are actively moving around on the screen as they speak, chat, dance, sing, and so on, which makes moving become the norm of performance in this film. Even the camera is always moving. This dynamic can be seen when some herdsmen invite Burkut to drink at the festival. He weaves his way through the crowd and hugs the masses standing on the two sides. Here, interestingly, as he moves, the camera follows him to track left—a movement that is itself unusual. In socialist minority films, the static shot is a common choice. The camera, in general, is fixed in a place to record the performance. But in *Golden Eagle*, Hong Kong filmmakers prefer to use the camera to construct a sense of moving in the extra-diegesis. As roles move, the camera keeps up with the action of roles to pan or track left/right, resulting in the effect of dual movement. If the camera mimics the audience POV, the active movement of the camera in this film places the audience in the specific position of the curious, energetic onlooker who observes the surrounding environment. This position reflects the personal experience of patriarchal filmmakers in the PRC. After entering China, especially Inner Mongolia, they were

busy observing the unacquainted place and the unfamiliar Mongolian culture. But this onlooker position also implies that the Hong Kongers, like the camera, always stood outside. They could observe but had trouble really mingling or being involved, which can be seen in Chu Hung's experience.

Moreover, this dual movement gradually shows an excessive tendency. Actors' performances are always accompanied by physical movements on the screen. Whether for important roles or minor ones, the camera consistently follows these actors' movements. Even just a short-distance movement can make the camera react, and this highly reactive situation lasts until the end of the film. This cinematic strategy results in excess motion, which creates a tense dynamic feeling and consequently intensifies the feeling of restlessness, giddiness, and even disorientation and bewilderment since the POV provided by the camera is floating. The eyes are thus too busy to attend to all the details. To some degree, the tense rhythm and excessive movements in this film reflect the fast-paced lifestyle in 1960s Hong Kong. As scholar Man-Fung Yip indicates, "Hong Kong in the 1960s was a city of profound change and transformation. A particular configuration of modern urban-industrial life emerged Hong Kong had by the mid-1960s remade itself into one of the most industrialized territories in Asia, second only to Japan."⁶⁹ The fast industrialization sped up the pace of life and "significantly reshape[d] the ways of time reckoning and redefined the temporal dynamics of both social realities and personal lives."⁷⁰ Yip then connects this specific historical background with the late 1960s and 1970s martial arts films and states that the techniques addressing the effect of speed widely used in these films is "associated with an expanding urban-

⁶⁹ Man-Fung Yip, *Martial Arts Cinema and Hong Kong Modernity: Aesthetics, Representation, Circulation* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017), 58.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

industrial milieu . . . [that] exemplif[ied] a new mode of representing the real.”⁷¹ In fact, there was no need to wait until the late 1960s; in the mid-1960s, *Golden Eagle* had already exposed the symptoms of fast urbanization through the tense rhythm, the restless movement, and the consequent feeling of disorientation present throughout the film.

Among the various movements, Hong Kong filmmakers seemed to be obsessed with marching queues, which provides another clue to explore how this film mirrors the industrialization in Hong Kong. That obsession manifests in the marching queue image being repetitively displayed in the film (Figure 3.6). For instance, in the sequence where Samdan and her mother are guarded as they travel to the prince’s house to complete the marriage ceremony, the camera gazes at the moving queue of cavalry in the long shot. What I want to address here is not the endless moving but rather the mechanical repetition. All the cavalymen in this queue look the same. They are riding horses at the same speed within the same distance, following the assigned route in a straight line; this depiction visually displays the mechanical repetition. The specific movement of the cavalry train aligns with the assembly line in capitalist industrialization, which is homogeneous, restless, and monotonous. These cavalymen are like the standard products transported on the assembly line in industries. The routine scene in modern factories, in this way, is re-played on the Mongolian grassland. Similar visual effects can be seen in the queue of escorts guarding the prison cart. In this sense, the filmmakers’ interest in the marching queue reflects the fast-paced industrial development in 1960s Hong Kong. The film thus becomes the container integrating Hong Kong filmmakers’ reactions to the mainland and their typical Hong Kong experience.

⁷¹ Ibid., 83.



Figure 3.6 The Marching Queue in *Golden Eagle*

2. Minority Culture

The mainland trip of Feng Huang filmmakers, in some sense, revealed the dynamic between socialist discourse and the Hong Kong experience. This dynamic also can be seen in the attempt of Chan and his crew to imitate the socialist minority film pattern. In the PRC, an important mission of this specific genre is to confirm the PRC as a multiethnic country by displaying its diverse ethnic culture. To achieve this goal, PRC filmmakers always leave room in the diegesis to exhibit minority customs and culture. In *Victory of Inner Mongolian People*, for instance, director Gan Xuewei uses a sequence to show how the male protagonist lassos a horse. In *Third Sister Liu*, mountain songs as the label of Zhuang culture are comprehensively displayed. *Five Golden Flowers* sets the major stories as occurring at the Third Month Fair—an important festival in the Bai culture. Basic ethnic minority knowledge thus could be spread as these minority films were consumed. Realizing the multiethnic culture of the PRC was an important step in constructing a unified national identity in Maoist China. With respect to *Golden Eagle*, director Chan Ching-Po seemingly wanted to follow the socialist pattern and drew specific room in the diegesis for the exhibition of Mongolian culture. The first set of this film is the Naadam festival, in which the three manly skills in Mongolian culture—wrestling, horseback riding, and archery—are performed one

by one. In the following sequences, the film also spends significant time exhibiting the virtuosity of Burkut via lassoing. Even the female protagonist Samdan could master this skill.

However, depicting similar scenes cannot guarantee the achievement of the same function and effect. In the socialist pattern, these minority activities are treated as folk culture and customs, which are both deeply rooted in the daily life and labor of ethnic minorities throughout history. For instance, lassoing relates to the nomadic life of Mongols. For the Mongols, horses and sheep are important resources. Mastering lassoing could avoid the loss of horses and sheep. This context is relevant when the skills are performed in socialist minority films. In *Victory of Inner Mongolian People*, lassoing is shown in a working scene—serfs are pasturing sheep under the supervision of a butler. In *Morning Song Over the Prairie*, the male protagonist lassos a wolf to protect the sheep—the property of the People’s Commune. The lassoing aspect in both films is tied with laboring in daily life. In this way, socialist minority films fix these activities in the category of minority culture and customs. Hong Kongers, however, see these activities as martial arts. A news report on the work of the film crew in Inner Mongolia mentioned, “Chu Hung in Feng Huang’s colorful widescreen blockbuster *Golden Eagle* excellently performed a special kung fu on the horseback—lassoing As she could control the running horse, Chu started to learn this skill, which took her a lot of effort. Kao Yuen and Chu Hung studied this kung fu together. There were many kung fu that Gao Yuan must train.”⁷² Due to being shown in Hong Kong, the film was also categorized as part of the martial arts genre.

In fact, treating the Mongolian folk activities as kung fu was not a careless misunderstanding of Hong Kongers but an intentional reform. Investigating how these activities

⁷² “Chu Hung, Kao Yuen wei yan Jinying dang xia kugong” 朱虹高远为演《金鹰》当下苦工[Chu Hung and Kao Yuen working hard on *Golden Eagle*], *Overseas Chinese Daily News*, December 3, 1964.

are depicted in *Golden Eagle* will make Hong Kongers' motivation clearer. In the original script, for instance, Tsogtnarin depicted the death of wrestler Shobu. "After a spirited tussle, Wrestler A (Zhaba in the film) throws Shobu to the ground and deliberately falls with the full weight of his body upon the latter's chest. Shobu faints away on the spot as a result of the violent fall and the weight of the man."⁷³ Even though the behavior of Wrestler A is not moral, he is still performing Mongolian-style wrestling. Wrestling first appears in the *Golden Eagle* during the Naadam festival, which maintains the connection to the minority tradition. But as the plots unfold, the wrestling gradually moves away from the assigned track in the context of the PRC due to the original designs of Hong Kong filmmakers. In the match, the wrestler Zhaba uses a poisoned hidden weapon to defeat Shobu. Filmmakers cut back and forth between the close shot of the wrestling young men and the closeup of the hidden weapon—a popular prop in the martial arts genre (Figure 3.7).



Figure 3.7 The Hidden Weapon in Closeup

The wrestling performance being interrupted by the poisoned hidden weapon ultimately reminds the audience to connect the story with the martial arts genre. The sequence ends with a closeup of the poisoned face of Shobu. His death accordingly prevents him from wrestling but is connected

⁷³ Tsogtnarin, *Golden Eagle*, 10.

with poisoning—another common plot in the martial arts genre. In this sequence, the hidden weapon and poisoning thus create the overtone of martial arts and transforms the Mongolian traditional skill show into a martial arts legend.

In the subsequent plots, more martial arts elements are added to the narrative. Tsogtnarin just grants the male protagonist one skill—wrestling—in the original script. But in the film version, more martial arts skills are involved. When temporarily staying at Samdan’s home, Burkut always practices throwing a knife to prepare for his revenge in his leisure time. The flying knife, like the hidden weapon, is another popular prop in martial arts culture. Burkut uses this kung fu to kill the prince in the end. Specifically, Burkut fights with swords while seeking to save both his adoptive father and Samdan. Burkut’s extraordinary swordsmanship helps him survive. Instead of an ordinary Mongolian wrestler, he switches in this sequence to a swordsman—a common figure in the martial arts genre. The role thus transforms into a martial arts expert who can master various kung fu skills. In fact, to form the connection between the Mongolian athletes and martial arts, this film always shows these skills in violent fighting scenes. At the end of the film, a knock-down, drag-out fight occurs between Burkut and the son of the prince. Wrestling and lassoing in this fight become powerful ways for each to potentially protect himself and kill his rival. The close connection with death underscores the bloody violence behind these activities. Therefore, they are detached from laboring or cultural exhibition and transformed into martial arts.

Such modifications in *Golden Eagle* draw in the traditional Mongolian activities from the minority folk culture and affiliate them with a new category—martial arts. Understanding the hidden motivation, however, requires placing this film in the context of Hong Kong. Martial arts films became a popular genre and flourished in 1920s Shanghai, but the films were soon banned by the KMT government. In the 1940s, this genre got new life in Hong Kong. A series of martial

arts films were made and circulated in Hong Kong, contributing to the popularity of the genre. The fever for martial arts films lasted for a long time. “With growing demand from both local and regional markets, the early 1960s saw a surge in the production of Hong Kong martial arts films.”⁷⁴ Against this background, the modifications that Chan and his crew made in *Golden Eagle* to transform traditional Mongolian athletics into martial arts is more like a market-oriented strategy. Rather than following the PRC pattern to fix these activities in the nomadic laboring scenes and identify the activities as part of an ethnic minority culture that was far removed from the knowledge background of Hong Kongers, Chan prioritized Hong Kong’s local taste and experience. He did not completely throw away the pattern of socialist minority films but rather wrapped the unfamiliar elements in a familiar and attractive package. The special hybridization between the socialist minority genre and the Hong Kong martial arts genre therefore reveals the localization process. Assimilation did occur, but it is not the Hong Kongers who were assimilated into the PRC discourse system. The socialist genre was instead localized to mingle into the Hong Kong context. In this sense, despite an attempt to maintain close ties with PRC culture and discourse by imitating the socialist ethnic minority film genre, the Hong Kong filmmakers’ local experience, which always had the upper hand, distracted them from the track assigned by the PRC.

3. Physical Abuse

The emphasis on martial arts reminds audiences to turn their attention to the body, especially the male body. In socialist minority films, minority bodies are also under the spotlight. As Chapter 1 discusses, by depicting the suffering minority bodies, PRC filmmakers construct a link between the physical pain of ethnic minorities and class exploitation. In other words, the minority bodies function as display booths exhibiting the evidence and horrible consequences of class abuses

⁷⁴ Yip, *Martial Arts Cinema*, 6.

throughout history. Chan and his colleagues again wanted to continue this class discourse. In a report, the editor recorded the reflection of Kao Yuen, who starred in *Golden Eagle*, regarding his performance in a prison cart. “Sitting in the wooden-made prison cart on the grassland is suffering. The sun overhead was scorching. The wooden wheels rolled on rough wasteland. Even though there were just a few shots, and it was not a long time, Kao could no longer bear it anymore. Kao said, ‘Only this has already been enough to expose the inhumanity of princes and high officials in that period.’”⁷⁵ Kao’s statement being made in the common language, which was widely used in the PRC’s *speak bitterness* sessions, revealed that patriarchal filmmakers endeavored to engage with the socialist discourse centering on class struggle. The filmmakers noticed the link between the physical pain and the class exploitation promoted by the PRC official discourse and hoped to transmit this idea to Hong Kong audiences. But the concrete filmic depictions again lose touch with the socialist track due to the participation and integration of Hong Kong’s local experience.

Still, physical abuse is a common subject matter in PRC-made minority films. PRC filmmakers, however, paid more attention to the consequences rather than the process. In the original script, Tsogtnarin depicts the beating scene. After being arrested, Burkut accuses Senke of being accountable for the death of Burkut’s poor father, which ruffles Senke. Senke then orders soldiers to “take him away and give him a good beating.”⁷⁶ Burkut subsequently gets dragged away, and the whipping occurs backstage. The very process of whipping is visually absent. Audiences can rely on how the lashes sound to imagine how the heroic Mongolian is being cruelly tortured.

⁷⁵ Wen Jing 文静, “Jinying yi renwu: Gaoyuan kairan quiche ziwei” 《金鹰》一人物：高原慨然囚车滋味 [A role in *Golden Eagle*: Kao Yuen lamented on how it felt to sit in a prison cart], *Overseas Chinese Daily News*, December 20, 1964.

⁷⁶ Tsogtnarin, *Golden Eagle*, 53. In the first version published in 1957, this scene centers on how Senke orders soldiers to drag Burkut away to whip him. See Tsogtnarin, “Jinying” [金鹰 Golden Eagle], *Play Monthly*, no. 4 (1957): 31. However, in the 1960s English version, some new details about how the masses beg Senke to stop beating Burkut are added in this scene.

This design has a relationship with the typical feature of stage performance, in which letting violent scenes happen backstage can protect actors. But in films, PRC filmmakers also maintained a distance from graphic violence. *Serfs* also depicts scenes relating to whipping, for example. At the beginning of the film, a half-naked serf is lying on the ground. As the butler goes to kick the serf, the camera shoots the butler's feet in a close shot. The lash marks on the body of the serf lying next to the housekeeper's feet therefore stand out. In the following scene, the serf's owner arrives, and the camera cuts from the face of the serf's owner to a closeup of the scars on the serf's body. The cinematography draws the audience's attention to the existing scars on the minority body but keeps the torture itself hidden. In fact, the following plot leaves room to switch to show ongoing torture: the owner picks up the whip, aiming to again beat the poor serf. But filmmakers refuse to complete the switch to actually show the whipping. The butler stops the serf owner and tells him the serf has passed away. The butler's words make it possible to avoid showing the ongoing torture. In this sense, despite wanting to highlight the ruthless abuse of the ruling class, filmmakers are more inclined to focus on the scars rather than the vivid and ongoing graphic violence. This strategy depicts class exploitation as a perfective consequence that happened in the past without any immediacy, which resonates with the official discourse that the dark society of the past no longer exists.

However, facing this similar topic, Hong Kong filmmakers prioritize the ongoing abuse and exaggerate the graphic violence on the screen. In the film version, after Burkut is arrested, Senke whips him. But instead of following the instruction in the original script to hide the visual violence, Chan moves the whipping to the very foreground. In this sequence, Burkut is hung upside down and beaten by Senke, who stands in the right corner of the screen. With his arm lying in the center of the screen, Burkut's half-naked body in a close shot occupies three-quarters of the screen

space. The composition of the shot attracts audiences to gaze at his ripped muscles, which appear more masculine and stronger because of his upside-down position. This composition also amplifies the body's reactions as the man is lashed. In the close shot, the tense muscles, twitching body, sweat mixed with blood, and struggling face accompanied by the painful moans are all meticulously captured by the camera (Figure 3.8).



Figure 3.8 The Tortured Male Body

Because of the camera POV, audiences are forced to observe and experience the pain resulting from violent abuse. The ongoing graphic violence in this sequence thus provides the spectator a chance to enter the realm of “embodied experience,” which in Yip’s analysis means “a function not only of a high-impact combat style grounded in forceful body contact—a style often characterized as *yingqiao yingma* (tough and hard-edged) and *quan quan daorou* (literally meaning ‘every punch gets to the flesh’)—but also of a more complex cinematic style capable of bringing out the power, the speed, and other sensory effects of the on-screen action.”⁷⁷ In fact, the effect of *quanquan daorou* was even promoted as a label for the film in advertisements.⁷⁸ In this portrayal

⁷⁷ Yip, *Martial Arts Cinema*, 68.

⁷⁸ “*Jinying dadao changmian pozhen*” 金鹰达到场面逼真[*Golden Eagle* achieves a high level of realism], *Overseas Chinese Daily News*, December 8, 1964.

emphasizing ongoing graphic violence, the suffering body gradually shifts away from the metaphorical function as the evidence of class exploitation is transformed into a type of exotic and erotic spectacle.

That type of spectacularization is the core principle directing the filmmakers to depict the plots relating to class exploitation. Because Sambu fails in the competition, he is whipped by Senke as punishment in a yurt. Instead of simply showing the silent scars like in socialist minority films, the camera zooms in to the ongoing scarring. The process of how the whip beats against the back of Sambu is completely recorded in a close shot. Filmmakers even go a step further to intensify the graphic violence. In the second half of the sequence, the torture is escalated into a symbolic castration. The son of the prince comes in and directly cuts off both of Sambu's arms without mercy. Along with screams of agony, Sambu's warm blood bathes Zhaba's face. For wrestlers, arms are the source of masculine power. Cutting the strong arms of Sambu thus symbolizes castration. The sensational effect of this sequence also captivated Hong Kong audiences. In a review, this "super exciting"⁷⁹ sequence was depicted in detail. The review also selected other violent shots in this film for exaggerated depictions. For instance, "bloody scenes with heads of the dead rolling on the ground are so realistic, which never let audiences feel fake at all."⁸⁰ The written words intensified the exciting but horrific graphic violence in the film and therefore contributed to the sensationalism of *Golden Eagle*.

Why does sensationalism matter here? Man-Fung Yip's interpretation of the excessive violence in Chang Cheh 张彻's new school martial arts films also helps explain the sensational tendency in *Golden Eagle*. As more mainland migrants packed into Hong Kong, the city became

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

overcrowded, and social pressure thereupon soared. In the resulting harsh work and living conditions, the laboring class could not help but experience “sensory deprivation.”⁸¹ Meanwhile, the mass culture aiming to provide various dazzling sensory stimulations was widespread and uncurbed in the Hong Kong market targeting the younger generation. In Yip’s understanding, Hong Kongers were thus collectively facing a situation of sensory burnout, which resulted in “a propensity for ever more powerful stimuli required to break through the blunted sensory apparatus.”⁸² According to Yip, this specific context explained why Hong Kong filmmakers were obsessed with excessive violence and sensational scenes in the late 1960s. Even though *Golden Eagle* is not like the late 1960s films (for example, *One-Armed Swordsman* 独臂刀) that provide overly bloody and violent sensory stimuli, Chan and his crew clearly aim to create a high level of sensory arousal by depicting the horrible castration, physical tortures, a head slashed by a knife, bloody bodies, and scenes of corpses littering the ground. In this sense, Yip’s analysis may need minor modifications. Rather than in the late 1960s, the cinematic resonance mirroring the sensory burnout started in 1964. I do not intend to argue that Chang Cheh and new school martial arts filmmakers directly copied the pattern of *Golden Eagle*. But importantly, before Chang Cheh, leftist filmmakers had realized the symptoms of modernity in Hong Kong and began to explore ways to overcome Hong Kongers’ sensory burnout by providing intense visual sensory stimuli in films. *Golden Eagle*, in this way, reveals the resonance between the leftists and the free filmmakers, who were always viewed as opponents. This film also reminds academia to reflect the dominant free filmmakers-centered approach in the field of Hong Kong film studies.

⁸¹ Yip, *Martial Arts Cinema*, 60.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 63.

Turning back to the sensational sequence showing the maltreatment of Sambu, another aspect that should be addressed is the image of the peeping woman. Instead of directly showing the whipping, filmmakers have Dokarma peep at the abuse through a crack in the Mongolian yurt. The camera mimics the POV of Dokarma and provides the audience with a peculiar viewing position—that of a voyeur. In the PRC films, peeping is seldom seen in the depiction of positive roles in that this action connotes spying, which was a sensitive topic in Maoist China. In this Hong Kong film, however, the female peeping is closely tied to the abused naked male body (Figure 3.9).



Figure 3.9 The Peeping woman and the Abused Man under the Female Gaze

These dynamics thus transform the scene into a BDSM show. And while now distanced from espionage, peeping still highlights the eroticism and exoticism behind the viewing. The film also implies the subtle relationship between the female gaze and the vitality of masculinity. After being peeped at from the female POV, Sambu experiences amputation and then dies. This consequence

sends the message that the female gaze can be powerful enough to castrate masculinity. The following sequence about the escape of Burkut further explains how to boost the vitality of masculinity by managing the female POV. Burkut is handcuffed in a prison cart, which visually symbolizes his restricted masculinity. Filmmakers then have Dokarma sacrifice her life to save the bound hero. The death of Dokarma is thus linked to the revival of male power. In this film, Dokarma is the female figure who is explicitly granted the right of viewing, and after her death, the restricted male protagonist is released and regains his heroic power to fight with enemies and save the ones he loves. This plot thus conveys that it is the disappearance of the threat from the female-centric POV that releases the restricted masculinity.

The relationship between the female threat and masculine anxiety is again rooted in the social situation in 1960s Hong Kong. According to Yip, “[in] the 1950s and much of the 1960s . . . Hong Kong cinema was primarily female-centric. . . . Female stars—Pak Yin and later Chan Po-chu and Siao Fong-fong in Cantonese films; Li Lihua, Lin Dai, You Min, Ge Lan, Ling Po, and Xia Meng in the Mandarin-speaking ones—dominated the screens of local theaters, outshining their male counterparts.”⁸³ In Yip’s interpretation, this female bias resulted in the anxiety about masculinity and triggered the favoring of a visceral and graphically violent approach in the late 1960s and 1970s Hong Kong new school martial arts genre. However, I argue that earlier than the late 1960s, *Golden Eagle* already expresses criticism of female favoritism and proposes a solution to the anxiety of masculinity. Dokarma’s gaze alludes to the female-centric convention in the Hong Kong film field. The castration of Sambu then metaphorizes the tragic consequence of masculinity in this female-centric context. In this sense, the death of Dokarma symbolizes the anxiety triggered by the female threat and the call for the rejuvenation of masculinity. The castration of Sambu then

⁸³ Yip, *Martial Arts Cinema*, 86.

predicts the tragic consequence of masculinity in this context. Even though *Golden Eagle* is not categorized as part of the new school martial arts genre, this earlier film has already foreshadowed the main features of the new style initiated by the filmmakers at Shaw Brothers in the following decade.

The portrayal of abuse makes Hong Kong filmmakers compete with the PRC discourse. Even though such filmmakers were expected to follow the class struggle-centered PRC discourse, their Hong Kong experience won again and pushed them to pull further away from Maoist China.

4. Father–Son Relationship

In Tsogtnarin’s script, the lower-class male elders always function as the beacon for the young Mongolian masses. The father Shil is a typical example. He is a brave and powerful sage who can predict risks and point youths in the right direction. As the two sons are celebrating their win in the horse-riding competition, Shil senses the possible threat because the win makes the prince lose face. Thus, before the wrestling match, Shil reminds Shobu, “You must be very, very careful . . . especially watch that dark one; he is like a rabid dog . . . Take care of yourselves, boys.”⁸⁴ Compared to the reckless and rash young boys, Shil is more prudent and cautious. The younger generation is essentially at risk, and Shil always plays the role of the rescuer providing help and assistance. For example, when soldiers come to his yurt to search Burkut, Shil shields his son from the manhunt by pretending to talk to the ghost of the dead Shobu, which scares the soldiers away. It is also Shil who guides the youths to devise a feasible solution for saving Samdan. Even though the story centers on the golden eagle—Burkut—the significant function of Shil cannot be ignored in the script.

⁸⁴ Tsogtnarin, *Golden Eagle*, 9.

The image of the wise minority elder also appears in socialist minority films.⁸⁵ In *Morning Song Over the Prairie*, Huhe is such a father; he is visionary and can always provide necessary and helpful suggestions to guide the growth of the younger generation. Such portrayals of powerful and wise fathers are driven by the request of socialist discourse. In Maoist China, the Party–masses relationship is always metaphorized by the father–son structure. The Party (government), as the absolute leader, occupied the position of the symbolic father. The masses, therefore, were placed in the position of sons/daughters. In this sense, the image of the powerful father in cultural products functions as a literary eulogy to metaphorically praise the Party. The allegory of a father guiding the growth of children confirms the relationship between the Party and the masses. By producing and repeating this allegory, PRC intellectuals paid homage to the Party and the nation.

Golden Eagle also expresses the same interest in the father–son relationship, but the wise father does not satisfy the Hong Kong filmmakers' expectations. The role Shil plays is changed beyond recognition in the film version. As the prince shows his anger at the failure of his riders in the horserace, Shil is intimidated by the authority of the prince and becomes terrified. Shil even tries to dissuade his sons from participating in the following wrestling match. Compared to the father who calmly helps his sons adjust their wrestling suits and offers encouragement in the script, the filmic image of Shil is very weak, even cowardly. After Burkut escapes from the Naadam festival, Shil is arrested by the prince. Shil then has one of his arms cut as punishment. As Burkut returns Bahyen's banner, what he sees is a powerless father restricted in prison being brutally

⁸⁵ I want to clarify that the wise minority elders always appear in socialist minority films set in the ancient context or the context in which the CCP does not appear. If the CCP actively engages with the narrative, the minority elders may be portrayed negatively in some cases, to prioritize the Party's leadership. It is also important to notice the differences between the Han filmmakers and minority filmmakers. Their imagining of the relationships between the Party and the minority elders might be different. See Chapter 2 for more detailed explanations.

tortured with only one breath left. Rather than playing the role of the patron and guardian, the father has become a hopeless liability waiting for the asylum provided by the younger generation.

The weak father/strong son dichotomy explicitly diverges from the PRC discourse but mirrors the Hong Kong experience. Like Burkut, the mainland immigrants in Hong Kong were forced to separate from their homes. The shared experience makes Burkut function as the embodiment of Hong Kongers projecting their drifting life in Hong Kong and further triggers the modifications on the respective personas of the son and the father. Rather than following the PRC discourse to depict a son being protected and saved by the father, Hong Kong filmmakers prioritized granting independence to the son. What the filmmakers eulogize is transferred to the heroic behavior of the son who rolls with the punches to save the ones he loves. In this way, the son sheds the subaltern status with the need to get an education and guidance from the father and instead becomes an independent individual. To some degree, the formation of the weak father in the film indirectly implies the possible disappointment toward the motherland hidden in the minds of the pro-PRC Hong Kongers. As they were eager to reunite with the nation and endeavored for a homecoming, the official announcement of the PRC for the future of Hong Kong suddenly shattered those dreams. In 1960, facing the issue of Hong Kong and Macao, the PRC government articulated the main principle as *changqi dasuan chongfen liyong* 长期打算, 充分利用 (making the long-term plan and taking advantage of [Hong Kong and Macao]). The PRC “in the predictable future would not launch policies which could change the current situation of Hong Kong. Meanwhile, relying on the specific geopolitical status, Hong Kong should make a contribution to the PRC’s socialist reforms and diplomatic strategy.”⁸⁶ This principle challenged the expectations

⁸⁶ Cheung Ka Wai 张家伟, *Xianggang liusi baodong neiqing* 香港六四暴动内情 [Inside Story of 1976 Riot in Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: The Pacific Century Press Limited, 2000), 118.

of Hong Kongers. In the foreseeable future, homecoming would be difficult to achieve, and Hong Kongers would need to rely on themselves. This hopelessness partly explains the motivation of Hong Kong filmmakers to construct a weak father who cannot support the son and instead awaits the son's salvation. The reconstruction of the father-son relationship in the film thus alludes to the reality experienced by Hong Kongers who were waiting to reunite with their families.

Due to the inclusion of the Hong Kong experience, the ending sequence in this film also shifts away from the design of the PRC writer. At the end of Tsogtnarin's script, Shil forces Burkut to leave with Samdan, and Shil himself stays to win more time for the couple to escape. Galsan is infuriated and "strikes Shil a smart blow on the temple,"⁸⁷ which results in the death of the great father. In this script, the father sacrifices himself for the new life of the younger generation. But notably, the mother of Samdan is still alive. The couple's loyal friend Tchakanho, who acknowledges that he cannot leave because he must take care of his old mother, also stays in the banner. These figures function as ties binding the couple to the home after the father passes away. In other words, even though the golden eagle flies away, the attachment remains and predicts the possibility of a homecoming in the near future. The couple's relocation, in this sense, is only temporary. This subject matter is commonly seen in socialist culture to depict stories that happened in the dark pre-1949 context. For instance, *Third Sister Liu* also ends with a young couple leaving, but their relatives and families stay in the Zhuang community. None of them are sad about the farewell but are rather full of confidence, passion, and happiness. Why? The socialist minority films set in the post-1949 background provide the answer. These films generally start with (or include) the homecoming of displaced people from afar. The ending of the minority films is set in the pre-1949 context and the beginning of the stories occur in the post-1949 context, therefore

⁸⁷ Tsogtnarin, *Golden Eagle*, 99.

creating a complete continuous narrative: the displaced people in the dark society finally return home and reunify with their families just as a brighter future—the new China—arrives.

But in the hands of Hong Kong filmmakers, the possible attachments to link the protagonists with the home are completely cut off. Both Shil and Samdan's mother are killed. The couple's friends Tchakanho and Tzab, instead of staying in the Akon banner, join Burkut and Samdan on their journey. For the protagonists, the home has already lost its meaning and becomes an empty signifier. Neither relatives nor friends await the return of the displaced protagonists. Their attachment with the homeland thereupon is cut off. Accordingly, the motivation and possibility to return are undermined or even eliminated. The four young people's attitudes toward their upcoming displacement are worth noting. When the four reunify on the grassland, the camera cuts to their pleasant smiles. The reunion empowers all four of them. They neither worry about the future nor feel sad about the displacement. Finally, the camera gazes at the backs of young people riding their horses away. A new community is formed among the four. The community, which provides a sense of security for the youths to leave home with confidence, is bound by strong friendships rather than blood lineage. The film also foreshadows the friendship between the young men. Tchakanho and Tzab express their respect for the hero Golden Eagle even before they know Burkut's real identity. In addition, Tchakanho is charmed by Burkut's martial arts skills. As the story progresses, the three young men work together to save Samdan and Shil. The brotherhood the young men develop in this process turns out to be solid.

This male bonding again foregrounds the local experience of Hong Kong. Based on interpreting the significance and function of male friendship in Chang Cheh's martial arts films, Yip indicates that the development of this theme is rooted in the experiences of migrant workers struggling in foreign lands. Yip further stresses that male-bonding in China "took on even greater

importance in times when a stable base of social security was lacking Without the protection of [a] traditional lineage, village, or clan, male bonding played a major role in providing the rootless and marginalized individuals with the economic, social, and emotional support necessary for their survival in an alien and often hostile environment.”⁸⁸ The refugees from China in Hong Kong were experiencing this very situation. “In an immigrant society such as Hong Kong or in the diasporic Chinese communities throughout Southeast Asia and around the world, notions of fraternal solidarity and justice have taken on such importance in the popular imagination as well as in everyday life practices.”⁸⁹ Yip’s theory explains the motivation of Chan and his crew to form a new male-centered community bound by the brotherhood in *Golden Eagle*. The newly formed community offers a way to overcome the anxiety resulting from the disconnection from the home community. Specifically, the nonconsanguineous brotherhood makes up an uncomplete kinship structure and supports individuals confronting the uncertainty and unknown future. This very strategy is practiced by the diasporic Chinese, including the Hong Kong filmmakers.

The 1960s journeys of pro-PRC Hong Kong filmmakers in the PRC and their films unfold a peculiar phenomenon. These filmmakers were always trying to join the PRC discourse system by imitating the PRC film paradigm. However, the harder they tried, the further they shifted away from their expectation. Their endeavor to fit the PRC model created even more distance between the filmmakers and the PRC. In many cases, the Hong Kong experience was incompatible with the socialist discourse in the PRC. Facing the conflicts, Hong Kong leftist filmmakers always either intentionally or unintentionally prioritized their own local experiences. As they still called for homecoming and struggled with nostalgia, such filmmakers might not have realized that their

⁸⁸ Yip, *Martial Arts Cinema*, 96.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

independent journey had set sail in the distant land—the British colony. Against this background, could they return home? Did they even want to return home? The mainland trip of the *Golden Eagle* film crew and the information embedded in the film itself seem to imply a possible answer.

Socialist minority films mainly targeted the PRC masses to promote socialist knowledge regarding the national character, ethnic policies, and minority culture. But as these films were spread outside the national boundary and participated in transnational and translocal circulation, the functions granted by the socialist context might not be completely maintained and might instead face meaning reorganization. The consumption of the socialist minority genre represented by *Third Sister Liu* in Hong Kong and other Sinophone communities in Southeast Asia explicitly revealed the process of cultural localization. Yet mimicking the film paradigm did not guarantee the acceptance of the PRC's national identity rooted in the filmic texts. Instead, the Hong Kong-made “knockoffs” respectively made by the dominant film companies in the two rival camps in Hong Kong—including *The Shepherd Girl*, *The Songfest*, and *Golden Eagle*—drew the local consciousness into the spotlight. The nostalgic emotion was still there, but the overseas Chinese in the 1960s had started reconstructing their relationship networks and identity to deal with their specific diasporic status. In this sense, socialist minority films offered a space for Hong Kongers to explore, communicate, and develop local consciousness.

Chapter 4

Looking Back or Moving Forward?

Decentralization and Reconstruction in the 1980s and 1990s

From 1966 to 1967, the PRC fell into chaos resulting from the Cultural Revolution. The nationwide cultural production was stalled. Model operas became the dominant cultural productions consumed by the PRC audiences. Minority films were postponed in that the minority consciousness and identities highlighted in these films were blamed for advocating for ethnic chauvinism, which challenged national unity. To some degree, the ethnic principle in this decade likely constructed a more homogenous *minzu* nation-state. When the Cultural Revolution turmoil ended with the downfall of the Gang of Four, the urgent issue for the CCP government became how to deal with the problems that carried over from the Mao era. The new president, Hua Guofeng, had no interest in completely overthrowing the cult of Mao that had taken root. In 1977, Hua proclaimed what is known as the “Two Whatevers,” stating, “We will resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave.” This announcement, however, was only applied for one year and was discarded with Deng Xiaoping’s rise to power. The new government led by Deng in this period started to “bring order out of chaos,” and as people’s attention shifted from class struggles to economic reforms, China entered its post-socialist era.

Alongside the regime change, the economy, culture, values, and almost every facet of society underwent enormous changes. Against this background, the genre of minority film—an artifact from the era of high socialist culture—also encountered impacts. This chapter will follow a telescopic structure, starting with the introduction of the social and political context in the post-

Mao era, widening to focus on the changes in the film field, and finally zooming in on the focal point of the chapter—the meaning and impact of socialist minority films and how the genre transformed during the early reform period. The chapter, through this structure, aims to contextualize the minority genre within a comprehensive social backdrop and show its organic dynamic within the post-socialist history. The point at issue is interpreting the various approaches and attitudes of filmmakers—especially those who were Han Chinese, the dominant force in the socialist era—who participated in minority affairs and identity reconstruction in the post-Mao age. I argue that, in the 1980s and 1990s, the ethnic minority film paradigm confirmed in the socialist period was impacted by commercialization, hybridization, and pan-entertainment. The voices of the Han started being distinguished from those of Maoist China. Some Han filmmakers turned to reimagine the center—periphery relationship and ethnic hierarchy in minority films and attempted to reflect and modify their positions shaped by the Han-centered national discourse.

Living in the Early Post-Socialist Period

As previously noted, “reversals” was the main item on the agenda in the early post-socialist period. From the perspective of ethnic politics, “bringing order out of chaos” was mainly shown in the campaign of the second ethnic classification movement launched in 1979, accompanied by the third national census. This second campaign was not seeking to identify new ethnic groups in China proper but rather looking to “restore ethnic identities.” It was during this era that victims of the Cultural Revolution’s “sole-nation project”—minorities who were forced to give up their original ethnicities—could apply to change their assigned ethnicities. Based on the record, “from

1982, more than 5 million people applied to change their ethnic identities. During this period, 2.6 million people successfully restored their ethnicities.”¹

Meanwhile, the government enacted the *People’s Republic of China Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law* in 1984. Seeking to remedy the harsh suffering minorities faced during the Communist period, the government announced that the law included many economic, cultural, and political benefits specifically for minorities. For instance, specific funding would be sent to minority regions to support the development of their local economies. Minority students could also enjoy a bonus-point system when they participated in national exams, including the high school and college entrance exams. Concerning the cultural and language differences, the admission lines for the college entrance exam in some minority autonomous regions were much shorter than in the general Han communities. Some of these benefits still exist today.

Even though the government originally intended to restore order, the above political campaign also created some problematic issues that persist even now. First, the minority welfare system led many Han Chinese to change their official ethnic category to a minority classification in order to take advantage of these new policies introduced during the early post-socialist period.² Furthermore, the artificiality and the corresponding problems of the taxonomic framework of the ethnic classification project stood out. In fact, in the report on the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative (CPPC) conference in 1978, Fei Xiaotong noted, “The list of Chinese ethnicities will not stay the same. Ethnic identification should continue to be worked

¹ Li Shaoming 李绍明, “Woguo minzu shibie de huigu yu qianzhan” 我国民族识别的回顾与前瞻 [Retrospect and Prospect of the Ethnic Identification Project in China], *Sixiang zhanxian* 思想战线 [Thinking], no. 1 (1998): 45.

² Shi Lianzhu 施联珠, “Zhongguo minzu shibie yanjiu gongzuo de tese” 中国民族识别研究工作的特色 [The characteristic of Chinese ethnic classification], in *Zhongguo de minzu shibie ji qi fansi* 中国的民族识别及其反思 [Chinese national identification and its reflection: the emic narrative and etic comments], ed. Qi Jinyu 祁进玉 (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2016), 70.

on.”³ The government, however, seemingly had no interest in modifying its established fifty-six ethnic minority classification structure. Not a single new ethnic category was identified during this period, despite the constant stream of applicants from groups such as the Dakar and Chuanqing, who petitioned for reinvestigation and reclassification. Nevertheless, ethnic mobility clearly increased substantially in China in the 1980s. This massive cross-ethnicity movement clashed with the ethnic structure that existed in the socialist period.

Other boundaries were also pressed as increasingly more varied cultures emerged in different areas and times, overflowing onto the Chinese market. The flood of foreign and new cultural products not only enriched the Chinese people’s lives of leisure but also provided them with alternative options, discourses, and imaginations—all of which challenged the stability of the Maoist social order. Consequently, the existing borders and boundaries barely maintained the norms and standards. Instead, they became the targets to be discussed, criticized, and even attacked in the early post-socialist era.

In the film field, the big debates centered on discussions about the existing borders and standards and redefined what a “good film” should be. In 1979, Bai Jingsheng 白景晟 published a paper and claimed that film should “throw away the walking stick of drama.”⁴ This statement openly challenged the narrative-centered socialist paradigm. Shortly afterward in the same year, filmmakers Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo 李陀 also stated that “because of the repression and havoc of cultural anarchy wrought by the Gang of Four, and because the task of eliminating their

³ Fei Xiaotong 费孝通, “Guanyu woguo minzu de shibie wenti” 关于我国民族的识别问题 [On the issues of Chinese ethnic identification], in *Fei Xiaotong minzu yanjiu wenji* 费孝通民族研究文集 [Collection of Fei Xiaotong’s ethnic studies] (Beijing: Publishing House of Minority Nationalities, 1988), 163.

⁴ Bai Jingsheng 白景晟, “Diudiao xiju de guaizhang” 丢掉戏剧的拐杖 [Throwing away the walking stick of drama], in *Bainian zhongguo dianying lilun wenxuan di'er juan* 百年中国电影理论文选 [One Hundred Years of Chinese Film Theories], vol. 2, ed. Ding Yaping 丁亚平 (Beijing: Culture and Art Press, 2002), 3–9.

pernicious influence is far from accomplished, the serious neglect of research into film aesthetics and the exploration of production techniques still exists among filmmakers.”⁵ Further, Zhang and Li felt that the ideal film circles should “create an atmosphere in which people can speak freely and openly about the artistic quality of films and their representative techniques, aesthetics, and language.”⁶

Zhang and Li’s paper strongly impacted the Chinese film studies field, and many of the most influential scholars and filmmakers in China joined the discussion on the relationship between film and literature. Even though the bold statements from Zhang, Li, and Bai were striking, they were not necessarily embraced, and another group of scholars led by Zhang Junxiang and Shao Mujun rejected the trend of “non-dramatic films.” They advocated the literary value of film. Some scholars even insisted that “film is a type of visible literature.”⁷ While this debate lacked consensus, the dissension inspired more people to reflect on the past definitions and standards of what constitutes a good film, providing room for heterogeneous opinions.

In the following decades, the discussion on cinematic artistry triggered and nourished the production of film experiments and innovations in the Chinese film community. Zhang and Li’s paper provided theoretical support and cultivated a space for the subsequent arthouse film practice and artistic experiments. For instance, Zhang Nuanxin finished *Drive to Win* (Sha’ou 沙鸥 1981) and *Sacrificed Youth* (Qingchun ji 青春祭 1985), while Wu Yigong 吴贻弓 directed *Sister* (Jiejie

⁵ Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo, “On the Modernization of Cinematic Language,” in *Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era*, ed. George S. Semsel, Xia Hong, and Hou Jianping, trans. Hou Jianping (New York: Praeger, 1990), 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11–12.

⁷ The summary of this 1980s debate can be seen in Zhang Wanchen, “The Main Debates in the New Era,” *Literature and Art Forum*, no. 6 (1986): 76–79; and Xia Hong, “Film Theory in the People’s Republic of China: The New Era,” in *Chinese Film: The State of the Art in the People’s Republic*, ed. George S. Semsel (New York: Praeger, 1987), 35–62. Individual papers about this debate can be seen in *Selections from the Discussion of Film’s Literary Characteristic*, ed. Chinese Film Art Editor (Beijing: China Film Press, 1987).

姐姐 1984). Their work brought new terms—including *long takes*, *long shots*, *location shots*, and *natural lighting*—and performances by non-professional actors, which refreshed the cliché-ridden aesthetic models that had long dominated Chinese film. On-the-spot aesthetics then replaced socialist realism to become the most fashionable cinematic approach. Although the artistic manifesto of Zhang and her followers was aggressive and radical, their practices were comparatively mild. Most of their films diluted the narrative rather than completely discarding it.

This conservative feature completely disappears in films produced by Fifth-Generation filmmakers, who exposed Chinese cinema to the international spotlight in a much more radical way than did their artistic mentors like Zhang Nuanxin. Tian Zhuangzhuang, a director of the Fifth Generation, claimed that, during the 1980s, he “had a lot of rather extreme ideas and thought that film should have as little dialogue as possible.”⁸ Instead of storytelling, the Fifth Generation preferred communicating through forms of expression. A series of films following this radical approach—such as *Yellow Earth* (黄土地 dir. Chen Kaige 陈凯歌, 1984), *On the Hunting Ground*, *The Big Parade* (大阅兵 dir. Chen Kaige, 1986), *Horse Thief* (盗马贼 dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1986), and *Red Sorghum* (红高粱 dir. Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, 1988)—heavily broke through the past narrative-oriented film paradigm and viewing convention.

Another new phenomenon in films that challenged the existing socialist artistic principles and resulted in a nationwide discussion was the flourishing of commercial films (also known as entertainment films, or *yule pian* 娱乐片). Scholar Jia Leilei clearly points out the three crucial elements of entertainment films: commercial value, melodrama, and entertainment.⁹ Based on

⁸ Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 61.

⁹ Jia Leilei 贾磊磊, “Guiyi yu jinji: yulepian de shuangchong jueze” 皈依与禁忌：娱乐片的双重抉择 [Converts and taboos: the double choice of entertainment films], in *Contemporary Cinema*, no. 2 (1989): 22–23.

these elements, unlike in Fourth and Fifth Generation films, entertainment films do not intentionally challenge the existing viewing conventions. Instead, the films explore new ways—exoticism and eroticism—to refresh and intensify audiences’ viewing pleasure.

Entertainment films rapidly developed into a carnival for various genres banned in the Mao era, including horror, pornography, and science fiction. Films such as *Ghost* (幽灵 dir. Chen Fangqian 陈方千, 1980), *Murder in the Forest* (林中谜案 dir. Xu Weijie 徐伟杰, 1984), *Outwitting the Beautiful Villain* (智斗美女蛇 dir. Liu Zhongming 刘中明, 1984), *Intrigue in Honeymoon* (蜜月的阴谋 dir. Li Yucai 李育才, 1985), *The Evil Dead in the Barranca* (深谷尸变 dir. Hao Weiguang 郝伟光, 1985), and *Warriors Errant Black Butterfly* (游侠黑蝴蝶 dir. Lu Jianhua 陆建华 and Yu Zhongxiao 于中效, 1988) flooded the Chinese film market. By viewing such titles, the audience is able to get a glimpse of the unprecedented pleasures revealed through visions of sex, violence, crime, and fantasy guaranteed by the new breed of films. Although few of these films were a tour de force, the glimpses of the exotic and erotic that they provided attracted abundant spectators. Some of these entertainment films even became bona fide blockbusters.

While commercial films did not receive high artistic praise, like the Fifth Generation, the new wave of commercial films did start a trend in China. As scholar Shao Mujun states, “almost all of the twenty-two film studios in China grabbed the entertainment film straw and tacitly shared a crazy mission to ‘kill until no one was left and to strip to the buff.’ A group of elites even gave up their artistic ideals and scrambled to produce films on fashionable topics like drug trafficking, venereal disease, murder, rock and so on.”¹⁰ The giant economic advantage enjoyed by the

¹⁰ Shao Mujun 邵牧君, “Zhongguo dangdai yulepian wenti boyi” 中国当代娱乐片问题驳议 [The refutation of issues of contemporary Chinese entertainment films], *Contemporary Cinema*, no. 2 (1989): 11.

commercial genre did attract some arthouse filmmakers to join the collective party of “amusing ourselves to death.” Guo Baochang 郭宝昌 directed a horror film, *Mist Over Fairy Peak* (神女峰的迷雾), in 1980. Tian Zhuangzhuang, after his double failures at the box office, turned to embrace the commercial genre and directed *Rock ‘n’ Roll Kids* (摇滚青年) in 1988. In the same year, director Li Shaohong 李少红 released the horror film *Silver Snake Murder* (银蛇谋杀案).

Nevertheless, from reality to the cultural imagination, the paradigms, norms, and structures confirmed in the Mao era were interrogated and shelved. Boundaries became looser, resulting in the increased potential of mobility from a variety of perspectives. Indeed, Chinese society was no longer a socialist state with one side clearly drawn to Mao’s doctrines. Instead, society was transformed into a permeable space that tolerated people shifting back and forth between porous boundaries. In this space, hybridization had more opportunities to emerge and proliferate. Meanwhile, the space also created the ideal breeding ground for the communication of heterogenous discourses. Just as the academic debates about experimental films and entertainment films showed, consensus was not the ultimate goal. Rather, the various competing voices directly impacted the dictatorial orders in the Mao era and helped to create a sphere of heteroglossia.

Collectively, the 1980s undoubtedly created a rupture from the socialist past, a carnival of the colorful and changeable present, and a moment that Cornelius Castoriadis called *kairos*, stating that “time is that in which there is *kairos* (propitious instant and critical interval, the opportunity to make a decision) and *kairos* is that in which there is not much time.”¹¹ In that decade, the Chinese people got a chance to enjoy the heteroglossia, but they also found themselves at a historical crossroads: China needed to make a decision about its future.

¹¹ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 212.

The Minority Genre in Flux: Dialogue among Academic Discussions and Film Practices

Minority films in this context, on the one hand, mirrored the characteristics of the era but, on the other hand, also contributed to the construction of the specific time-space. A series of minority films continued the conventional pattern of the socialist minority genre and assisted in propagating national consolidation and the Party's ethnic policies. Meanwhile, attracted by large economic returns, some filmmakers considered hybridizing the minority genre with commercial and entertainment elements. The comparatively loose censorship of this genre and the increased overseas investments ultimately stimulated increasingly bolder adventures in minority film production.

In 1989, Tianshan Film Studio and Cai Brothers Pictures (Macao) collaborated to produce *The Night Robbery* (夜盗珍妃墓 dir. Cai Yuanyuan 蔡元元, 1989). In the film, filmmakers combined the Manchurian court's secret centered on the Consort Zhen with the most eye-catching and fashionable components, including ghosts, naked women, sexuality, cannibalism, decapitation, and death by a thousand cuts (Figure 4.1). Scholar Zhang Shilu characterized the film as an example of "yellow pollution" on the screen and used it as an example to criticize the pornographic tendency of film production in early post-Maoist China.¹²

This film is not an exception. As minority film production involved commercial competition, some minority films started to overstep the boundaries defined by national minority patterns and, to some degree, displayed a tendency of potentially being out of control of the nation-

¹² Zhang Shilu 张世炉, "Yinmu ye ying zhuyi saohuang—cong yingpian Yedao zhenfeimu kan yinmu de huangse wuran 银幕也应注意“扫黄”——从影片《夜盗珍妃墓》看银幕的“黄色”污染 [Screen should pay attention to eliminate pornography: the yellow pollution on the screen through the film *The Night Robbery*], in *Movie Review*, no. 1 (1990): 9.

state. This phenomenon raised concerns about the development of the minority genre. What defines a minority film? What content can minority films portray? Must the minority genre center on the display of minority cultures? Can minority films “entertain”?



Figure 4.1 Violent Torture in *The Night Robbery*

1. Definitions and Patterns in Minority Films

Facing these issues and concerns, in the 1990s, the fifth Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Festival committee sponsored by the government decided to select “ethnic minority film” as the theme of that year’s symposium. At this large-scale conference, almost all significant Chinese scholars, filmmakers, and officials in the film world gathered to discuss various aspects of ethnic minority film productions from the 1950s to 1990s in China. The artistic achievement of the Maoist-era minority genre films won the experts’ approval. Meanwhile, scholars also confirmed the important cultural and political function of the minority genre to propagate socialist policies and cultures in the Mao era. The definition of the minority genre also came under scrutiny.

A group of scholars, for instance, indicated that the so-called minority genre in the Maoist China consisted of Han-produced films and could not be representative of minorities’ opinions. The scholars, therefore, preferred to categorize socialist minority films by a new term, *Zhongguo*

shaoshu minzu ticai dianying 中国少数民族题材电影 (Chinese ethnic minority-themed films).

The aim was to weaken the authority of the Han filmmakers and the authenticity of the contents portrayed by the series of films. Another group of scholars was inclined to continue to use the term but proposed redefining the minority genre. Scholar Wang Zhimin set forth a rubric based on three principles—culture, author, and subject matter—to assess whether a film qualified as a minority film. According to Wang, “the cultural principle is the most essential one, which means the minority genre should depict minority cultures. The subject matter contributes to guarantee the cultural characteristics of minority films, but only when the minority subject matter is not enough as the authors—the directors and screenwriters—must hold onto a minority cultural identity.”¹³ In Wang’s definition, minority cultures are undoubtedly the core component of the minority genre. Wang’s rubric gained a consensus among Chinese scholars. For example, He Ming stated, “A good minority-themed film should properly depict minorities’ material culture and cultural scenes, accurately represent behavior culture, and deeply present conceptual culture.”¹⁴ He Ming also indicated that “[if] the behaviors of characters in a film cannot show the cultural features of minorities, then the film loses its specificity as a minority genre.”¹⁵

The definition that treats minority cultures as the center tolerates the widely applied trans-ethnic writings in minority film production. Based on Wang’s theory, if a director or screenwriter can show his or her identification with minority cultures in a film, regardless of whether his or her

¹³ Wang Zhimin 王志敏, “Shaoshu minzu dianying de gainian jieding wenti” 少数民族电影的概念界定问题 [The issue of the definition of ethnic minority film], in *Lun Zhongguo shaoshu minzu dianying* 论中国少数民族电影 [On Chinese ethnic minority film], ed. Zhongguo dianyingjia xiehui 中国电影家协会 [Chinese Filmmakers Association] (Beijing: China Film Press, 1997), 166.

¹⁴ He Ming 何明, “Shixi shaoshu minzu ticai dianying de wentihua goucheng yaosu” 试析少数民族题材电影的文化构成要素 [On the cultural components of minority-themed films], in *Lun Zhongguo shaoshu minzu dianying*, 272.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 270–71.

ethnicity is Han, then the film could qualify for the minority genre. In this sense, the Han still had a chance to continue their careers in this field. Moreover, the culturally centered definition is an effective academic response to the new situation in minority film production in the 1980s and 1990s. By emphasizing the importance of minority cultures, the definition helps avoid abusing minority elements for commercial motivations and therefore, to some degree, theoretically ensures the quality of minority films.

However, every coin has two sides, and the above definition actually relies on the summarized characteristics of the socialist minority film masterpieces. When scholars cited examples to explain how the minority genre should look, they always returned to classics from the socialist canon, such as *The Romantic Song of Lusheng*, *Five Golden Flowers*, and *Serfs*. Often when films outside this model were mentioned, scholars based in China tended to treat them as “ideologically wrong” and artificially excluded them from discussions about minority cinema. Consequently, in this nationwide discussion, the differences and changes in the post-socialist era, which challenged the socialist minority pattern, were seldom put on the table. In fact, if one pulls the cases omitted under Wang’s definition back into the investigation, another image unfolds: the national paradigm of the minority genre in the 1980s and 1990s encountered challenges both internally and externally.

Scholar Paul Clark explores the characteristics of national minority films. According to Clark, compared to films set elsewhere, socialist minority films set in Northern China, such as in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, more often engage in topics regarding class conflicts and foreign espionage. However, the southwest minority areas are always the hotbed of love stories.¹⁶ This

¹⁶ Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics Since 1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 95–101.

trend threw down the gauntlet in the early post-Mao era. In the 1980s, blood replacing love spread to increasingly more cinematic portrayals in southwest minority areas. Unlike being depicted as the origin of folk songs in the socialist period, the dense and labyrinthine virgin forest in southwest China became the natural habitat of crime. In the horror and crime film *The Evil Dead in the Barranca*, a young Han careerist, Dr. Fang, murders his master, Pupo, an ethnic Yi doctor, twice for chasing fame and fortune. The rugged mountainous geography of the Yi community facilitates Fang in organizing these murders. Further, the police intervention in this mysterious murder case of Pupo does not stop the tragic story from unfolding. Rather, during the police investigation, minorities keep becoming victims one by one in the mountains—their home. Blood, death, nightmares, madness, and uncanny emotions in this film substitute for the sweet love normally present in this Yi settlement. The emergence of this type of film undoubtedly formed an image of the southwest minority areas that sharply contrasted with the prevalent image portrayed during the seventeen-year period.

The cinematic portrayal of northern minority groups also started to separate from the socialist framework. The daily life of ordinary minorities replaced national topics as the prominent subject matter. For instance, in *The Marriage of Rena* (热娜的婚事 dir. Guang Chunlan 广春兰, 1982), a Uyghur girl fights for her marriage. *My Lover, My Hate* (无情的情人 dir. Chen Guojun 陈国军, 1986) narrates a tragic love story centering on a beautiful Tibetan girl who lives as a horse thief with her uncle. Socialist heroes and heroines supporting class struggles and fighting with spies were clearly no longer the superstars. Instead, minority “ancestors,” figures who never existed in Maoist products, took to the stage. In 1986, Zhan Xiangchi 詹相持 directed *Genghis Khan* (成吉思汗) to portray how the founder of the Mongol Empire—Temujin, a spiritual leader of the Mongolian people—stopped the chaotic wars among different tribes in the grassland. In

1988, another significant minority group in northern China—the Tibetans—also began to explore their own history. Phurbu Tsring 普布次仁 produced *The King Songtsan Ganbu* (松赞干布 1988), which traced back to the regime of Songtsen Gampo and discussed this Tibetan king's contributions to the Tibetan community and history.

It is also during this period that the paintings and images of minority historical leaders and heroes—for instance, Genghis Khan—replaced Chairman Mao's portrait and became important props appearing in increasingly more films about minority cultures. In Maoist China, by promoting Mao as the great man bringing new life to minorities through the banal details in films, the dominant socialist discourse tactically substituted minorities' own histories for the history of the People's Republic. The replacement of the props with leaders' images in these films revealed the intent to reexplore minorities' histories and construct an alternative narrative regarding ethnic origins and histories.

Another clue that indirectly referred to minority ancestors is the theme of grave robbing—a commercial genre banned in the socialist period. In *Confession of a Tomb Robber* (古墓惊魂 dir. Dong Tao 东涛 and Sun Zhiqiang 孙志强, 1986), filmmakers set the tragic stories of three minority victims of the Cultural Revolution—Uyunbat, Sarna, and Deligeer—against the backdrop of grave robberies and archaeological excavations of ancient Xiongnu tombs in Inner Mongolia Province. In the above-mentioned entertainment film, *The Night Robbery*, the treasures and antiques in Consort Zhen's tomb attract grave robbers' attention and build a link with the Manchu ancestors. Filmmakers also stressed that this film was based on the historical record to emphasize its authenticity.¹⁷ Both the direct portrayals of historical minority leaders and the indirect allusions to

¹⁷ Many scholars later criticized the incorrect information and details in this film and doubted its authenticity.

ancient minority cultures imbue the minority protagonists with historical depth. In the early post-Mao era, themes including ethnic roots, ancestors, and a complex cultural past can be discussed in films. Even though these discussions did not completely detract from the systematical Han-centrism, one needs to give credit to the appearance of “newness” distinct from the national minority genre and examine the meaning and influence that the “newness” might bring.

The grave robbing-themed films also mirror the specific feature of the early post-socialist era—the permeable space and kairotic time. In *Confessions of a Tomb Robber*, the diegesis provides an anachronistic perception by juxtaposing symbols of various historical time-space junctures. In other words, different historical eras permeate and project throughout this cinematic text. The abovementioned treasures and antiques in Xiongnu tombs were undoubtedly linked to an ancient time-space. Archeologists’ cowboy clothes and leisure activities—such as picnicking, drinking sodas, playing guitars, ballroom dancing, and disco dancing—comprise the protagonists’ modern Western lifestyle (Figure 4.2). Meanwhile, the filmmakers wove the experiences of educated minority youth into this story, something that is seldom seen in Chinese films, and the film therefore unfolds a specific socialist memory.

In terms of genre, hybridization and border-crossing are the typical features of this film. The subject matter of archaeology aligns the film with the influential *xungen* 寻根 (searching for roots) movement. The confessions in the three protagonists’ painful Mao-era personal stories resonate with another mainstream cultural trend—*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学 (scar literature). Yet using this to conclude that the film is therefore serious art and thus distinct from entertainment is a faulty assumption.



Figure 4.2 Archeologists' Picnicking and Western Lifestyle in *Confessions of a Tomb Robber*

The film combines many commercial elements—murder, a love triangle, premarital sex, martial arts, horror, and pop culture—all of which engulf the audience. Sadness, pain, happiness, and thrills alternately impact the audiences' senses. These heterogeneous, even conflicting, elements collide with each other and create an atmosphere of revelry in the cinematic text. In this sense, neither north nor southwest minority areas in this series of films are the space to celebrate the greatness of the Party and Chairman Mao. Instead, these areas are transformed into tumultuous sites that help release suppressed desires and banned sentiments.

The relationship and hierarchy between the Han and non-Han also faced modifications in the early post-socialist era. The image of the Han as the “big brothers” in socialist minority films not only highlights their fraternal relationship with minorities but also confirms a hierarchical structure in which the Han are superior to non-Han since the former is the embodiment of civilization. However, in the early post-Mao era, the brilliant “big brothers” on the screen were transformed into corrupt persecutors. In *The Evil Dead in the Barranca*, Dr. Fang, a Han Chinese, kills the Yi medicine master Pupo, which results in Pupo's daughter, who is Fang's lover, going mad (Figure 4.3). In *The Night Robbery*, the Han tomb robbers disturb the Manchu ancestors' rest

after death and steal and destroy national treasures. In *Confessions of a Tomb Robber*, the Cultural Revolution, guided by Han leaders, drives three innocent Mongolian young people into a cycle of suffering. Through such narratives, the unbreakable brotherhood confirmed in the Maoist culture undoubtedly presents a rift in this series of films. Furthermore, minorities are no longer the symbol of primitiveness and backwardness. Instead, they play the roles of elites in various aspects: medical authorities (Pupo and the forest guard), great leaders (Genghis Khan and Songtsen Gampo), and creators of great artists (the owner of the Xiongnu tomb).



Figure 4.3 The Han (left) Poisons the Yi (right) in *The Evil Dead in the Barranca*

Furthermore, as foreign filmmakers joined to produce films about Chinese ethnic minorities, more rival, even subversive voices emerged from beyond the national boundaries of China. As China opened its door in the late 1970s, this forbidden country tickled the curiosities of foreigners. More and more foreigners started focusing their cameras on this mysterious nation. Some of them picked Chinese ethnic minorities as their subject matter. A group of foreign documentaries and feature films about ethnic minorities, their lives, cultures, and histories was made. In fact, in the Mao years, Dutch director Joris Ivens and Italian director Michelangelo

Antonioni—the Chinese people’s old friends— were invited to shoot documentaries about Red China. Of course, their journeys were assigned and surveilled by the government. Ivens and his wife got the chance to visit Xinjiang, where they shot documentaries about Kazakhs and Uyghurs during the Cultural Revolution. The content in the camera of Ivens and his wife mainly resonates with the national discourse of displaying the happy lives of Kazakhs and Uyghurs at the height of the Cultural Revolution. Turning to the post-Mao era, some foreign filmmakers continued this stance in their films about Chinese ethnic minorities to achieve a degree of harmony with the national discourse of the PRC. But in the period, another group of foreign filmmakers switched their focus to portray a side of minority history and culture rarely mentioned in the PRC and past socialist minority films, which created a rival stance with the CCP.

For instance, in 1997, French director Jean-Jacques Annaud adapted the memoir of Heinrich Harrer, *Seven Years in Tibet*, which recorded his personal experience when he stayed in Tibet from 1948 to 1952, into a feature film of the same title. Instead of peace, this film depicts the violence and death that accompanied the PLA’s entry into Tibet in 1950. The Party’s role as the savior of the Tibetan masses and the narrative centering on how the CCP and its Han officials rescue minorities from abuse and exploitation, which are constantly repeated in socialist minority films like *Serfs*, are subverted in Annaud’s film. He does not highlight the conflicts between the ruling classes and lower classes in Tibet but places the Party and its arrogant Han officials as the antithesis of the Tibetans. Meanwhile, *Seven Years in Tibet* shows the existence, experience, and influence of Westerners in ethnic minority communities, which are always absent in socialist minority films. This design reveals that the ethnic issue is not just about the Han and non-Han. Annaud’s film in this sense reveals a perspective excluded from the PRC’s official narrative and consequently questions the authenticity and authority of the national discourse of the PRC. The

controversial portrayals of these dark sides aroused opposition from the PRC government, which claimed that this film stigmatized China and the Chinese people. Accordingly, both the film and Annaud were criticized and banned in the PRC.¹⁸ Ngapoi Ngawang Jigme, the Tibetan political leader and the former vice chairman of the National People's Congress, as the witness to "the liberation of Tibet," accepted an interview with an American reporter in 1998 to clarify the historical mistakes shown in Annaud's film.¹⁹

In fact, besides *Seven Years in Tibet*, a series of similar films made by foreigners, such as *Kundun* (dir. Martin Charles Scorsese, 1997), appeared during this period and enriched the global representation of Chinese ethnic minorities in films. These foreign films explored the less studied aspects of minority issues, significantly impacted the narratives, images, and relations confirmed in the socialist minority genre, and added a rival voice competing with the PRC's authoritative national discourse. However, because of the ideological sensitivities, these foreign films were intentionally disregarded and excluded in the PRC.

All these changes and their potential meaning cannot be found in scholarly discussion in 1990s China, which reveals how the academic discourse lagged behind the reality of film production. In this sense, the theory could not comprehend what had happened or provide

¹⁸ In 2008, the ban on Jean-Jacques Annaud seemed to be lifted. He was allowed to enter China to direct another film about Chinese ethnic minorities—*Wolf Totem*. This film is based on the semi-autobiographical novel of the same title written by a Han writer Jiang Rong, in which Jiang records his life in Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution as a *zhiqing* 知青 [educated youth] to explore the cultural character of Mongols. In 2015, Annaud's film was released in China. During the promotion period of this film, the major official media in China kept silent about his last controversial film *Seven Years in Tibet*, even though some film fans gossiped about this 1997 film in personal social media. The government even planned to select Annaud's *Wolf Totem* to represent the PRC to compete the Best Foreign Language Film at Academy Awards. See more information in "Why China Changed its Foreign-Language Oscar Submission at the Last Minute," accessed July 11, 2021, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/why-wolf-totem-is-not-831313/>. In China, this film also aroused oppression from Mongolian intellectuals. For instance, Mongolian author Guo Xuebo claimed that *Wolf Totem* distorted Mongolian culture. See <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2015-02-24/doc-icczmvmun6255257.shtml>.

¹⁹ "Ngapoi Ngawang Jigme on *Seven Years in Tibet*," *China's Tibet*, no. 3(1998): 5-10. A character by the name of Ngawang in *Seven Years in Tibet* is based on Ngapoi Ngawang Jigme.

reasonable interpretations. Instead of scrutinizing the existing changes, academia, to some degree, intended to haul minority film production from its natural trajectory of development back to an outdated position. Even though film practice had gone a step further, theories were seemingly still adhering to the stereotyped socialist logic.

The cultural center *per se* might then be problematic. The emphasis on minorities' distinctive ethnic features draws on the ethnic groups that are not yet minoritized out of the discussion. For instance, Manchuria stories are seldom categorized as a minority genre since Manchu and Hui have been highly Sinicized. Wang cites the film *The Last Empress* (末代皇后 dir. Chen Jialin and Sun Qinggou, 1987) as an example when posing a rhetorical question to his readers regarding “whether we can see the ethnic characteristics of the last Manchuria emperor in China through this film.”²⁰

What, then, should an excellent culturally centered minority film portray? Scholar He Ming provides some guidelines. According to He, minority films should show “minority clothing, buildings, living materials, production tools, natural scenes, even animals and plants imbued with minority cultural meanings.”²¹ These guidelines consider the broad definition of culture and ensures that films provide a full representation of all the aspects of minority lives. But in some sense, highlighting ethnic distinctiveness and cultural elements may put the minority genre in danger of becoming cultural exhibitionism. In this sense, does this type of definition theoretically trap the minority genre in a form of internal colonialism?

2. Minorities' Relational System in Filmic Imaginations

²⁰ Wang, “Shaoshu minzu dianying de gainian,” 166.

²¹ He Ming, “Wentihua goucheng,” 267.

Notably, Chinese scholars also observed the problems regarding the unequal power structure between the Han and non-Han in minority films, which is a core issue in the theory of internal colonialism. As Shao Zhou straightforwardly states, “the essential issue [of the minority films produced in the 17-year period (1949–1966)] is the ethnic identity of the screenwriter . . . and, except for a few scripts written by ethnic minority writers, Han writers made most minority films produced in the 1950s to 1960s [As a result, this series of films] use[s] the point of view of Han people to observe other ethnic groups’ lives. They [the films] relied on the value of Han culture to interpret other groups’ behaviors.”²² That the Han control the right to shoot, narrate, and interpret creates an unequal ethnic relationship and conspires to unilaterally Sinicize and Orientalize minorities. With assistance from the mass production of the socialist minority genre, a Han-centric worldview was gradually building and spreading in Maoist China. But the Han were seldom aware of this reality. In an analysis of *The Romance of Drum Tower* (鼓楼情话 dir. Li Xiaolong 李小珑, 1987), Ren Yin mentions, “It is hard for the Han to be aware that they are just one ethnicity [out of fifty-six]. They easily imagine themselves as representatives of the Chinese nation. The portrayals of minorities in films made the Han take it for granted that they represented civility, but the minorities were the barbarians, naïve, and incredulous.”²³ In the name of civilization, these minority films stabilized the Han’s central position and pushed the minorities to

²² Shao Zhou 少舟, “Shanshuo duominzu shenghuo binfen guangcai de xinzhongguo yinmu: jianji shaoshu minzu dianying chuanguo de minzuxing wenti” 闪烁多民族生活缤纷光彩的新中国银幕——兼及少数民族电影创作的民族性问题 [The sparkling multiethnic life and the colorful screen in new China: on the issues of ethnicity in the production of ethnic minority film], in *Lun shaoshu minzu dianying*, 122.

²³ Ren Yin 任殷, “Cong Gulou Qinghua kan shaoshuminzu dianying de wenhua yiyun” 从《鼓楼情话》看少数民族电影的文化意蕴 [Interpreting the cultural function of ethnic minority films from *The Romance of Drum Tower* (1987)], in *Lun Shaoshu minzu dianying*, 208.

the margin. By controlling and consuming the depiction of minorities, the Han exploited the non-Han when portraying the exotic/erotic.

Although the Chinese scholars noted above do not directly employ Western concepts and theories, their shared stance regarding Han–minorities’ relationship with Western scholars who support theories of Sinicization and internal colonialism remains fairly apparent. Western scholars’ criticisms have been more straightforward. By analyzing several minority-themed cultural products, Dru Gladney argues that “the state[,] through commodifying and representing its minorities as colorful and exotic, engages in a project familiar to the representation of colonized peoples by colonial regimes.”²⁴ This phenomenon and tendency, in Gladney’s opinion, lasted from the socialist era to the post-socialist period. Yingjin Zhang sides with Gladney and directly indicates that “minority films participate in internal colonialism/internal orientalism.”²⁵

Undoubtedly, this Han–minorities relationship is crucial to revealing and deconstructing the hidden internal colonialism. However, largely focusing on the Han and non-Han relationship leaves the minority–minority relationship and minorities’ transnational relationships unattended. In this aspect, the theory of internal colonialism, to some degree, abstracts minorities from their particular contexts and simplifies their complicated relational networks into a binary structure, in which the Han is always easily misunderstood as the unique crucial factor completely dominating minorities’ development. In this sense, the theoretical approach puts minorities in danger of being de-historicized and de-contextualized. In fact, the minority genre attempts to jump outside the

²⁴ Dru Gladney, “Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (1994): 98.

²⁵ Yingjin Zhang, *Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and the Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Ann Arbor, 2002), 166.

binary structure and explores, imagines, and constructs minorities' specific relational coordinate systems.

Exploring the relationship between the Han and non-Han was not the only function of the minority genre in the post-Mao era. Some filmmakers explored positioning the minority genre in a new and complicated coordinate system. In the 1980s and 1990s, more and more ethnic minority filmmakers joined the film field compared to Maoist China. Many of these minority filmmakers took part in cross-ethnic writings and filmmaking. Zhang Chengzhi 张承志, an ethnic Hui writer, not only intended to discuss the spiritual power of Islam but also heavily obsessed over Mongolian culture. His novella *Black Horse* (黑骏马) depicted how Mongolian people understand the meanings of the family bond, friendship, and love. Later in the 1990s, this novella was adapted into the film *A Mongolian Tale* (黑骏马 1995) by a Han veteran director, Xie Fei 谢飞. Guang Chunlan is another filmmaker representative of those who participated in the trans-ethnic writing. Guang, a Sibe director, fixed her camera on the joy and sorrow of ordinary Uyghurs instead of her native ethnic group. Even though from the ethnic perspective she is a native Uyghur person, her films—for instance, *Happy Song* (幸福之歌 1981), *A Girl Who Do Not Want to Be An Actor* (不当演员的姑娘 1983), and *The Death of a Beauty* (美人之死 1986)—earned approval from Uyghur audiences in Xinjiang.²⁶ These cross-ethnic writers helped minority filmmakers and artists break through the cliched Han/non-Han binary network and explore the experiences of other minority groups.

²⁶ Guang Chunlan 广春兰, “Chuangzuo jiqing yu fengfu duocai de minzushenghuo——mantan paishe shisi bu minzu dianying” 创作激情与丰富多才的民族生活—漫谈拍摄 14 部民族电影 [The Passion of Creation and the Colorful Ethnic Life: On the Productions of 14 Minority Films], in *Lun Shaoshu minzu dianying*, 13–14.

Another significant contribution of Guang and filmmakers like her is that they, to some degree, provided a transnational breadth to the minority genre. Guang Chunlan recalls that, “as *A Girl Who Do Not Want to Be an Actor* was shown at the Cairo TV station, the film won over all the Egyptians Audiences called the embassy to express their love for this film. An Egyptian woman [even] went to the embassy and insisted that she was the very mother in this film.”²⁷ Guang’s words undoubtedly confirm the success of *A Girl Who Do Not Want to Be an Actor*. But except this success, something else has been ignored. I argue that Guang’s portrayals and public announcements actually expanded the boundary of Uyghur culture and tried to position both the culture and Uyghur lives in a wider Arab world instead of the limited framework of being one among all 56 Chinese ethnic groups. Besides an emotional perspective, Guang emphasized the connection between her Uyghur films and other Muslim countries in material aspects. In her Alexandria city tour, for instance, she exclaimed in wonder that a well-preserved ancient castle in Alexandria was so similar to the one she created for *The Death of a Beauty*. As Guang says, after watching that film, some local people called the embassy to check whether it was shot in Alexandria.²⁸ If the excited Egyptian mother’s case proved the emotional connection among people in the Muslim world, the ancient castle, to some degree, built a historical and material link between Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the Muslim world. In addition, in 1995, Guang’s *Visitors from the Gobi* (戈壁来客) got approval from the ambassadors of Turkey. They believed that this wonderful Muslim film would win success in the Arab world and encouraged Guang to show her

²⁷ Ibid., 18.

²⁸ Ibid., 18–19.

films abroad.²⁹ Even though Guang did not directly mention her intentions, it was easy to see that she aimed to reconstruct Uyghur transnational networks beyond national boundaries.

Guang's case is not unique. *The Confession of a Tomb Robber* also conveys the tendency to release Chinese minorities from the Han/non-Han bilateral relationship. In the film, as the Mongolian woman Sarna enters the ancient Xiongnu tomb and sees the beautiful antiques, she sighs, "How talented our ancestors are!" Sarna's words not only provide a chance for Mongolian people like her to take pride in their ancestors' significant historical and cultural contributions but also offer a juncture to connect current Mongolian people with the Xiongnu Empire—the ancient enemy of the Han. By treating Xiongnu as the ancestors of Mongols, filmmakers challenge the artificial geopolitical landscape drawn by the government after 1949. Mongolian culture thus extends beyond the boundary of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region and enters a broader world involving areas like Mongolia, Siberia, and central Asia, where it shares a long history separate from the Han.

Through the previous discussions, I do not intend to imply that these portrayals made by minority filmmakers in the 1980s and 1990s were more realistic or much closer to the truth than were socialist minority films. I hope to emphasize the significance of "initiative" behind these attempts and call for attention to minorities' conscious engagement with the rest of the world outside the boundaries of China. Based on the previous examples, in the early post-socialist era there was a group of filmmakers and artists who were no longer satisfied that the minority genre limited the discussion of minorities within a bilateral system with the Han. Instead of speaking to the Han, such filmmakers challenged the current geological landscape and aimed to build the connection among different ethnic groups, dig deeper into the development and history of minority

²⁹ Ibid., 12.

culture, and imagine the potential transnational links between minorities and foreign countries. All these efforts point to filmmakers seeking to look for the alternative narrative of Self outside the mainstream discourses mainly confirmed in Maoist China, even though they are seemingly powerless and still limited in a Han-centered social structure. In the theoretical framework of internal colonialism, this type of cross-border phenomenon hardly finds the space to exist. To some degree, the ignorance of the relationships beyond the binary Han/non-Han system may theoretically deprive minorities' agency and, just like Han-centrism, fix minorities in an object position.

3. Han Chinese Identity

Even regarding the Han/non-Han relationship, the dominant theory of internal colonialism is not foolproof. Gladney uses the film *Sacrificed Youth* to decipher the mechanism of how the Han constructed a national identity referring to minorities. In an essay, Gladney cites Paul Clark to express that, regarding the “search for a national identity in China, [it] apparently became more readily understood in opposition and contrast to minority cultures thought to be more vibrant and easily objectified than that of the amorphous, invented Han Chinese Self.”³⁰ In the end, Gladney concludes that “Han-ness is related to ‘Whiteness,’ so the majority in China is invented as unmarked category, courtesy of a subjugated, stigmatized and identified minority.”³¹ Gladney's interpretation points out the objective position and the unbalanced Han–minorities relationship portrayed in films.

But still, some crucial issues regarding ethnic identity go unmentioned. Gladney compares the dress code dictating that minorities wear specific ethnic “costumes” and Han Chinese wear

³⁰ Gladney, “Representing,” 112.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 117–18.

“clothes” in many cultural products. This phenomenon helps him prove the unmarked status of the Han and further reveals the embedded logic of Han supremacy. I do not seek to challenge his argument, but I do propose reflecting on an unattended but relevant question: do all the Han satisfy this unmarked status? Is it possible that the emptiness of the ethnic Han category triggers their identity anxiety?

In the analyses by Gladney and Clark, the central mission of the minority genre manifests as the construction of a Self—one that is sure of its identity. However, must this constructed Self belong to Han ethnicity? In the process of Self construction, can Han have a chance to identify with minorities? Academia seems inclined to focus on discussing how the non-Han are forced or tempted to pay homage to the Han culture, but academics seldom comment on the potential countertrend: in which situations can the Han, or the people who are identified as Han Chinese, turn to minority identities? Can they have the chance to challenge their assigned position in the Han-centered national discourse?

I admire the effectiveness of criticisms and analyses based on the dominant theory of internal colonialism in revealing the general tendency of Sinicization. But it is also noteworthy that the current scholarship in this theoretical framework, to some degree, largely concentrates on how the majority Han as conspirators are involved in Sinicization and Han-centrism but leaves the “rebels” and aberrant cases among the Han unattended. There is no doubt that Han-centrism is a systematic issue. However, to comprehensively illuminate the mechanism of Han-centrism, it is also important to expand the focus to the discussion of the following questions: although the Han have vested interests, besides being conspirators, can they side with minorities to challenge the national discourse or the structural Han-centrism?

In history, aberrant cases are widespread. Accordingly, a route for the Han to convert always exists. After studying the history of the ethnic Hui people in China, historian Wang Ke supports historian Bai Shouyi by stating, “The history of Chinese Islamism is not a process of Sinicization of Islamism, but a history of Chinese people’s Hui-ization.”³² In other words, the Hui people in China were originally Han Chinese who gave up their Han ethnic status and converted to embrace a minority identity.

Another contentious case is the Chuanqing ethnicity. In 1955, sociologist Fei Xiaotong published a report on the Chuanqing people’s ethnic origins. Based on a strict scientific investigation, Fei indicated that the Chuanqing people were the offspring of Han immigrants and therefore should be identified as Han rather than as a separate ethnicity. Until 1978, Fei still insisted on that conclusion. He further explained that the Chuanqing people’s rejection of Han ethnicity could be attributed to their conflicts with the later Han immigrants.³³ However, Fei’s authoritative decision failed to satisfy the Chuanqing people, and they constantly called for additional investigations. In the 1980s, local officials in Guizhou Province led a self-investigation of the Chuanqing’s ethnic background and submitted a document, titled “Report on the Reinvestigation of Ethnicity of the Chuanqing People in Guizhou Province,” to the central government; in the document, the Chuanqing people requested that they be classified as a separate ethnic minority group based on their differences from the Han.³⁴ Although officially the ethnic status of the

³² Wang Ke 王柯, *Xiaoshi de “guomin:” jindai zhongguo de minzu huayu yu shaoshu minzu de guojia rentong* 消失的“国民”: 近代近代中国的“民族”话语与少数民族的国家认同 [The disappeared national citizen: the contemporary Chinese ethnic discourses and the national identity of ethnic minorities] (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2017), 46.

³³ Fei Xiaotong, *Fei Xiaotong minzu yanjiu* (Beijing: Publishing House of Minority Nationalities, 1988), 159.

³⁴ Hu Hongbao 胡鸿保 and Zhang Limei 张丽梅, “Minzu shibie yuanze de bianhua yu minzu renkou” 民族识别原则的变化与民族人口 [The change of principles of ethnic classification and ethnic population], in *Zhongguo de minzu shibie*, 196–97.

Chuanqing continues even today to be unresolved, the tendency of anti-Sinicization is shown through their constant petitions. Rather than sharing the Han's cultural and social priorities, the Chuanqing, as the offspring of the Han, prefer to maintain their independence and identity as a separate ethnicity.

Both the ethnic Hui and Chuanqing cases reveal that the Han identity is not unchangeable. Historically, the Han Chinese can, in some situations, convert their Han identity and turn it toward a minority status. But what about film practices? Do filmic portrayals share a common phenomenon? To explore the answers to those questions, the next section looks back to the 1980s films with a focus on Tian Zhuangzhuang's minority films.

Tian Zhuangzhuang and His Obsession with Minorities

“Freak!” “Tech fanatic!” “Meaningless!” In 1980s China, audiences and reviews criticized the young director Tian Zhuangzhuang for his two new ethnic minority films: *On the Hunting Ground* and *Horse Thief*. Amid the endless suspicions, condemnations, and attacks, Tian counterattacked: “My films are for the audiences of the next century!” Predictably, rather than easing disputes, his grandiloquence infuriated audiences and drew even fiercer attacks. To understand the controversy surrounding these films and Tian's purpose, it is important to review the personal history of the director and zoom in to his 1980s minority films.

As a key figure of the Fifth Generation, Tian Zhuangzhuang has been deeply engrossed in producing films with themes involving ethnic minorities, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. His first film, *Red Elephant* (红象 1982), set in an ethnic Dai community, depicts the close friendship between minority children and animals. His two subsequent minority films—*On the Hunting Ground* and *Horse Thief*, which respectively portray the lives of commoners in Inner Mongolia

and Tibet—take a more radical approach. Although these films were tour de forces and represented Tian’s avant-garde artistic beliefs, both failed at the box office. Tian then had to consider a transformation while facing increasing economic pressure. Yet even during his commercial transition period, minority themes remained his focal point, and Tian adapted Manchu writer Lao She’s *Drum Singers* (鼓书艺人) into a film in 1987. Emerging four years later, his commercial film *Li Lianying: The Imperial Eunuch* (大太监李莲英 1991) depicts the secret story of the Qing court.

Even though Tian reduced his feature film production and has remained in the background since the 1990s, he did not divert his attention from minority topics. With Tian’s assistance, younger minority directors like Pema Tseden started their film careers. Tian also tried documentaries. In 2004, he finished his first full-length minority documentary, *Tea-Horse Road Series: Delamu* (茶马古道：德拉姆, 2004).

Tian’s minority films have since drawn scholarly attention. Many film scholars, for instance, have acknowledged that Tian’s 1980s minority films display some features that run contrary to the socialist minority genre—the dominant pattern of minority films in the socialist era. However, whether these changes transgress the tradition of the national ethnic minority films in the PRC has sparked controversy among scholars. One group of scholars has claimed that Tian’s films challenge prior national film practices and “represent an important shift at the inception of the Fifth Generation films, a shift away from a national narrative toward a cultural critique.”³⁵ Another group has applied applies the theory of internal orientalism to show that Tian’s minority

³⁵ Dru C. Gladney, “Tian Zhuangzhuang, the Fifth Generation, and Minorities Film in China,” *Public Culture*, 8 (1995): 161. Essays showing similar attitude can be seen in Chris Berry, “Race: Chinese Film and the Politics of Nationalism,” *Cinema Journal*, no. 2 (1992): 52–58; and Li Yingming, “The Cultural Point-of-View and Theme in the Minority-Themed Films in the 17 Years,” in *Lun shaoshu minzu dianying*, 172–85.

films remain fixated on a Han-dominant position and exotic points of view—as does the national minority genre—and ultimately treat minorities as objects rather than real subjects.³⁶

Strikingly, most of these studies rely on examinations of narration and visual details, leaving the sound aspects unattended. By scrutinizing the function of Tian's complicated sound design, this section aims to explore how Tian's 1980s minority films impacted the socialist minority genre and renewed the understating of ethnic issues. In this way, I intend to fill the gaps that exist in the academic discussions surrounding Tian's minority films.

Using Tian's controversial film *On the Hunting Ground* as an example, the following analysis centers on the perspective of the film's soundscape to understand the function of Tian's auditory experiments in the 1980s. I argue that Tian's double-layered soundtrack, which lays a monotone male Mandarin translation over all the Mongolian dialogues, does much more than simply revealing the existence of the Han-centric hierarchy in Maoist cultural products. Rather, this auditory design also contributes to providing a new point of audition and a sensory reflexive horizon that exposes the audience to the marginalized socialist minority sensation. By portraying minorities' daily lives and constructing the film on minorities' knowledge structure and historical sentiments, Tian cultivates an "outsider" subjective position, which helps to shift the audience to the periphery. Audiences must thus rely on the sensory-reflexive horizon to construct the concrete meaning of the Self. Instead of maintaining or defending the Han-centered hierarchy, Tian uses the periphery as a powerful weapon to criticize Han-centrism and intervene in the identity crisis in 1980s China triggered by the breakup of the past socialist practice. Tian's exploration in the

³⁶ For instance, Yingjin Zhang, *Screening China: Critical Interventions, Cinematic Reconfigurations, and the Transnational Imaginary in Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Ann Arbor, 2002): 151-206; Paul Clark, "Ethnic Minorities in Chinese Films: Cinema and the Exotic," *East-West Film Journal* 7 (1988): 15-31; and Kwai-Cheung Lo, "Two Moments of Ethnic Representation in Tian Zhuangzhuang's Minority Films," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 3, no. 3 (2009): 231-47.

sensory-reflexive horizon remains distinct from the narrative-centered and image-dominated viewing convention, contributing to a new sensory-oriented viewing experience.

On the Hunting Ground is set on the Mongolian steppes and depicts a conflict among several young hunters. In the film, herdsman Bayasiguleng punishes Wangsenzhabu according to zhasa, the hunting law enacted by Genghis Khan, for engaging in illegal hunting activities. Bayasiguleng's behavior provokes Wangsenzhabu's brother, Taogetao. To avenge his brother, Taogetao throws a wolf into Bayasiguleng's sheep herd and instigates antagonism between Bayasiguleng and his best friend Jirigeleng. Taogetao's plan is successful; at the next hunting event, that antagonism leads Bayasiguleng to steal Jirigeleng's prey, thereby breaking the hunting law. These conflicts among the men, however, do not influence the friendships of the men's female relatives. In a sudden fire, Jirigeleng's wife saves Taogetao's mother, which deeply touches Taogetao. Finally, following zhasa, Taogetao, Jirigeleng, and Bayasiguleng all kneel in front of a sheep head hanging on a pillar to reflect on their faults.

Given the above narrative, how does this film differ from the past socialist paradigm? Scholars have already provided many answers. On-location shooting, non-professional Mongolian actors, native Mongolian language, natural lighting, long shots, long takes, and a diluted narrative are all elements that helped this film escape from the cinematic clichés that had heavily dominated socialist cinema in China. However, all these strategies were also shared by other art films produced in China during the same period. One main element makes *On the Hunting Ground* stand out: its attention to sound design.

Mapping Sound: Polyphonic Soundscape and Socialist Minority Auditory Experience

Beginning in the 1980s, as more imported films flooded the domestic market, Mandarin was no longer the sole language of films circulated in China. In the field of minority film production, more filmmakers started to use native ethnic languages to facilitate a degree of authenticity. But the usage of minority languages became a barrier for most audiences in China since the majority of filmgoers were Mandarin speakers. The two conventional methods to deal with this language issue are dubbing and subtitling. For instance, Xie Fei's *A Mongolian Tale* (黑骏马) has two versions: one features the original Mongolian dialogue with Mandarin subtitles, and the other is dubbed into Mandarin. Tian, however, preferred neither dubbing nor subtitling. His *On the Hunting Ground* instead added a Mandarin voiceover while retaining the original Mongolian voices. As a result, audiences can simultaneously hear the two languages while the film plays. This sound design generates a bilingual polyphonic effect that had never appeared before in mainstream Chinese films. Yet this soundscape is not a pioneering work in the Chinese film industry. To understand the function of this bilingual polyphonic soundscape, it is worth revisiting the socialist era and remapping the auditory experience of ethnic spectators.

Considering the power of films as an effective propaganda tool, the PRC government devoted considerable effort to exposing more people to cinema. From the 1950s onward, since a large proportion of residents lived in rural China, the government started to build a nationwide cinematic network by supporting the development of film projection units. These units delivered films not only to the countryside of Han communities but also throughout minority regions. At that time, most films circulating across the mainland were in Mandarin. China is a multiethnic country, though, so various languages did coexist. In Maoist China, besides several ethnic groups (e.g., the Manchu, Hui, and She) mainly using Mandarin as a common language, most minorities did not

master this language. Language, therefore, became a stumbling block that severely impeded the promotion of the national consolidation project.

Dealing with this language issue was imperative, and dubbing emerged as a possible solution. In 1952, the China Film Administration proposed increasing the production of minority language-dubbed Mandarin films for minority audiences.³⁷ Responding to this official proposal, Northeast Film Studio (Dongying),³⁸ one of the important bases for dubbing studios in China, produced several Mongolian-dubbed Mandarin feature films in 1953.³⁹ Later, Beijing Film Studio and Shanghai Film Studio also joined this effort. However, rather than dubbing Chinese films for minorities, the three state-owned studios devoted most of their energy to dubbing foreign films. In the 1960s, sponsored by local governments, minority autonomous regions—such as Xinjiang, Mongolia, and Guangxi—gradually built up their own dubbing studios to meet local needs.

While dubbing studios were developing, the number of minority language-dubbed films produced remained limited. The main plight stemmed from the wide variety of languages and widespread poverty throughout the country. As China was a new country that had just found peace after many wars, the shortage of materials and funding made it difficult for the government to afford the large-scale productions required for domestic feature films. Mandarin films in the 1950s were thus released in a limited quantity; minority language-dubbed films numbered even fewer. A key issue is that more than 80 ethnic languages coexist in China. Some languages are used by a small population, perhaps consisting of a particular ethnic group. For instance, among the ethnic Yi, the multiple languages used result in some difficulty in communications among those in the

³⁷ “Laixin zhaiyao”来信摘要 [Selection of recent letters], *People's Daily*, December 6, 1952.

³⁸ In 1955, Dongying changed its name to the Changchun Film Studio (Changying).

³⁹ “Wenhua jianxun”文化简讯 [Cultural news], *People's Daily*, September 29, 1953.

same ethnic group. Dubbing any film into all languages spoken in China—both today and in the 1950s—is therefore impossible. Even if film studios could dub a film into many languages, the minority communities, which were mostly located in the countryside and mountainous areas, still would have had trouble meeting the basic film projection conditions. Consequently, dubbed Mandarin films were limited in terms of the number of languages the films were dubbed into and the number of prints produced.

Under those circumstances, finding economical ways to give more minorities greater access to films became an urgent issue that Chinese officials needed to resolve. Meanwhile, local talents endeavored to provide simultaneous oral interpretation and invented magnetic recording technology to deal with language issues in minority communities. Film projectionists, who were active in local communities, especially the rural regions, spearheaded the effort to resolve the language issue. To complete assignments, as Mandarin films were shown in minority and multiethnic regions, film projectionists played the role of interpreters who translated the script lines into local languages for minority audiences.

In a nationwide projection experience-sharing session, a film projection unit serving the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Jilin Province introduced, in detail, how to successfully practice and improve the skills for providing simultaneous oral interpretation. The projectionists in this unit were equipped with additional earphones and microphones. As the character on the screen spoke, projectionists with the earphones would unmute the microphone and simultaneously dub the lines into Korean. A well-trained projectionist in this unit could accurately dub a whole film independently with the ability to mimic the voices of people of different age groups and genders. This skill helped widen the circulation of Mandarin films in the Yanbian minority communities. By the end of the 1960s, “all the films shown in ethnic Korean communities had

already turned to Korean dubbing.”⁴⁰ Notably, the government affirmed this achievement; in the official view, the simultaneous oral interpretation was “a great contribution to the career of film projection . . . and this experience is valuable as it systematically spread across minority film projection units.”⁴¹

Soon after the national call for simultaneous oral interpretation, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and several other provinces successfully invented magnetic recording technology.⁴² The key to this technology is the sound recording function of magnetic particles. After local staff received the copy of the film, they applied magnetic particles on the margin of the film and then let the local interpreters dub the lines while synchronizing with the characters in a film. The magnetic particles helped to record the interpreters’ voices on the original footage. During the subsequent showings in minority and multiethnic communities, with the help of a sound-reproducing machine, audiences could hear the minority language being dubbed.⁴³ Even though the resulting dubbing quality was rough, this comparatively easy technology saved valuable film resources and helped local interpreters deal with their heavy workloads. The alternative method of magnetic recording technology eventually came to be highly recommended by the

⁴⁰ Zhang Kaixin 张开欣, “Changbaishan shang de dianying fangyingdui”长白山上的电影放映队 [The film projection unit on Changbai mountain], *People’s Daily*, June 8, 1964.

⁴¹ “Dianying fangying gongzuo shang de yige zhongda chuanguo” 电影放映工作上的一个重大创作 [A great contribution to the work of film projection], *People’s Daily*, December 16, 1964.

⁴² “Rang gengduo nongmin kandao, kandong, kanhao geming dianying” 让更多农民看到、看懂、看好革命电影 [Let more peasants watch and understand revolutionary films well], *Guangming Daily*, June 22, 1965.

⁴³ A detailed introduction to the magnetic recording technology can be found in Aduqinfu 阿都沁夫, “Luetan woguo minzuyu yizhipian de gongyi gaige” 略谈我国民族语译制片的工艺改革 [Brief discussion of the technological reform of minority languages-dubbed films in China], *Dianying* 电影[Film], no. 6 (1983): 39–41; and Hu Puzhong 胡谱忠, “Yunnan shaoshu minzu dianying yizhi zhongxin Wu Kuangwen fangtan” 云南少数民族语电影译制中心伍匡文访谈 [Interview with Wu Kuangwen], accessed August 3, 2011, <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/2011/2011-11-06/104659.html>.

government. In an essay published in the *Guangming Daily*, magnetic recording technology was described as an “advanced experience that has the advantages of simultaneous interpretation and, more importantly, improves the quality and eases the workload intensity. It pushes minority language dubbing to new heights.”⁴⁴ Until the 1980s, based on the official documents published by the Ministry of Culture, magnetic recording technology was still deemed “suitable to the condition of the PRC and beneficial for minority people to understand films.”⁴⁵

How did the two language dubbing methods impact minorities’ moviegoing experiences? In an interview, Wu Kuangwen, a staff member at the Yunnan Ethnic Minority Language Dubbing Center, recalled the screening work in minority and multiethnic regions and indicated an important point: while attending screens, minority spectators could hear two types of voices together—the vivid Mandarin, with clear and specific characteristics to showcase the various personalities, emotions, and genders, and a voiceover in a minority language, which was generally concise and comparatively monotonous.⁴⁶ This specific *bilingual polyphonic effect* derived from the remaining aural qualities heard from the original soundtrack and the simultaneous oral interpretation produced by early magnetic recording technology.

⁴⁴ “Dianying faxing fangying gongzuozhe huoxue huoyong maozhuxi zhuzuo: jianchi dang de wenyi fangxiang, reqing song geming dianying xiaxiang, yixin wei wuyi nongmin fuwu”电影发行放映工作者活学活用毛主席著作：坚持当的文艺方向，热情颂革命电影下乡，一心为五亿农民服务 [Film distributors and projectionists learn and use Chairman Mao’s theories: insisting on the Party’s art principles, delivering revolutionary films to the countryside, and serve for 500 million peasants], *Guangming Daily*, January 6, 1966.

⁴⁵ Wenhua bu 文化部 [Ministry of Culture of the PRC], “Guanyu minzuyu yizhipian de gongyi gaige he jinyibu gaohao tuci peiyin gongzuo de tongzhi”关于民族语译制片的工艺改革和进一步搞好涂磁配音工作的通知 [Notice about the technological revolution of minority language dubbing films and further development of magnetic recording technology], in *Dianying tongxun* 电影通讯, no. 2(1984): 42.

⁴⁶ Hu Puzhong, “Yunnan shaoshu minzu dianying yizhi zhongxin Wu Kuangwen fangtan,” accessed August 3, 2011, <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/2011/2011-11-06/104659.html>.

From an auditory perspective, *On the Hunting Ground* constructs a similar bilingual polyphonic effect. Spectators can simultaneously hear two languages with different characteristics. The Mongolian conversations are vigorous and can express varied tonalities, while the Mandarin translation is monotonous and does not represent the overall richness shown in the original footage. A male voice with a peculiar intonation takes on the responsibility of dubbing all the lines spoken by people belonging to different ages and genders. Instead of accurately translating the Mongolian dialogue, however, the Mandarin voices function as a short introduction that summarizes the primary content conveyed through the original discourse.

Relatedly, in *New Chinese Cinema*, Kwok-kan Tam and Wimal Dissanayake briefly introduce Tian's sound design and indicate that this "intercession has the effect of distancing the audience from the experience of the film."⁴⁷ But besides distance, this soundscape opens a route for audiences to approach and connect with a forgotten world of minority and multiethnic communities. Here, I do not imply that Tian's sound design completely copies the socialist minority soundscape. He does, after all, make modifications. The difference occurs in the switched roles of Mandarin and minority language. Mandarin in *On the Hunting Ground* changes from being the original voice in the socialist period to being the dubbed language. These modifications push the film closer to minorities' socialist auditory experience in that the non-minority audiences in the post-Mao era became like those minorities in the Mao era who were forced to watch a film originally in a non-native language with only a concise interpretation in the native language.

In the essay "Fidelity Versus Intelligibility," James Lastra refers to the function of a POV shot that defines a concept sharing a similar function in the aspect of sound—the point-of-audition (POA) sound. According to Lastra, the "POA sound (like the POV shot) attempts to represent the

⁴⁷ Kwok-kan Tam and Wimal Dissanayake, *New Chinese Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 39.

experience of hearing within the diegesis, normally the hearing of a character.”⁴⁸ If one does not confine the POA in the diegesis, it is logical to argue that *On the Hunting Ground* also offers a POA that represents the experience of hearing by the minorities. Relying on this POA, minorities’ sensations and sentiments, which are difficult to be shared, can be directly transmitted and impact the audience’s hearing sense. In this way, the film pushes the Han to immerse themselves in the socialist minority sensations and concomitant sentiments. From this perspective, as Dutch documentary director Joris Ivens states, the “film is very different from previous Chinese films. It neither relies on logic nor plot nor drama nor dialogues. Instead, it expresses the intuitive feeling.”⁴⁹

Sensory Triggers and Sensory-Reflexive Horizon

Ivens’ interpretation undoubtedly gets right to the heart of the matter. Instead of following Mao’s cultural doctrines to treat film as a pedagogical tool to educate the masses, Tian believes that “film should represent sentiment.”⁵⁰ In an interview, Tian expressed that “the medium of film has the power to express endless moods and atmospheres without the interruption of language. It is the difference between hearing a story told and the experience of viewing.”⁵¹ At a symposium, Tian also addressed the key to watching his minority films. According to him, “audiences and directors

⁴⁸ James Lastra, “Fidelity Versus Intelligibility,” *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (London: Routledge, 2012), 250.

⁴⁹ Hu Bin 胡滨, “Yiwensi fufu tan jibu zhongguo dianying” 伊文思夫妇谈几部中国电影 [Mr. and Mrs. Ivens evaluate several Chinese films], *Movie Review*, no. 2 (1985): 2.

⁵⁰ Zha Jianying 查建英, *Baishi niandai fangtanlu* 八十年代访谈录 [A collection of interviews in the 1980s] (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing 三联书店, 2006), 407.

⁵¹ Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 60.

are equal . . . and experience the events and characters' destinies in films together."⁵² Tian's statements indicate that feelings and sentiments matter in his films. But it is still important to further clarify how feelings and sentiments exactly work in his films?

To emphasize the role of feelings, Tian strategically condenses the elaborate narrative connections to draw audiences' attention away from plots and storytelling. Meanwhile, he tries to design abundant sensory triggers to boost audiences' senses and let them sensorially participate in his films. In *On the Hunting Ground*, the "peculiar" bilingual polyphonic soundscape is a typical example. This non-conventional sound effect, which is employed without explanation, can immediately catch audiences' attention, impact their auditory senses, and trigger a variety of audience responses. Various sensory triggers appear in scenes marking violence. The film repetitively displays shots depicting the final agony experienced by prey just after being shot. Utilizing slow motion and close-ups, the camera zooms in on the process of the prey in the throes of death. With the writhing, the twitches, and the dying kicks, each slight action is amplified, thus composing a siren song that is visually amplified for the viewer (Figure 4.4). As such actions are displayed, filmmakers eliminate all other sounds to create a quasi-vacuumed auditory experience, one that intensifies the sense of pressure and creates an uncanny feeling. The dead silence alongside the magnified dying struggles of the animal seems to lead audiences to a sensation akin to asphyxiation. Audiences can thus experience the moribund condition thanks to the dynamics created by the sensory triggers. Similar triggers also appear in the scenes depicting the slaughter of sheep and the attacks of wolves. These peculiar triggers ultimately lure audiences into being distracted from the narrative and instead draw attention to the sensory realm.

⁵² Ibid.



Figure 4.4 The Prey's Dying Kick in *On the Hunting Ground*

In the essay “Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism,” Miriam Hansen states that classical Hollywood cinema, as the first global vernacular, “provide[s] to mass audiences both at home and abroad a sensory-reflexive horizon for the experience of modernization and modernity.”⁵³ Audiences and intellectuals in different nations can, inside this horizon, negotiate their attitudes about modernity. Referring to this theory, I argue that, by tactically designing sensory triggers and emphasizing the significance of feelings, *On the Hunting Ground* offers a similar sensory-reflective horizon. In this horizon, spectators are exposed to the socialist minority auditory sensation and are invited to share, communicate, and reflect on what minorities experienced, including Han-centrism and the unequal ethnic hierarchy.

In many interviews, Tian Zhuangzhuang has indicated that, while directing *On the Hunting Ground* and *Horse Thief*, he wanted to use the two films to criticize the past seventeen years of history.⁵⁴ Some scholars also explored the hidden allegorical subtext alluding to the Mao era in both films. Kwai-Cheung Lo analyzes the juxtaposition of the peaceful grassland and the violent

⁵³ Miriam Hansen, “Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism,” *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2000): 10.

⁵⁴ Zha Jianying, *Bashi niandai fangtan lu*, 407.

hunting scenes, highlighting that this design “not only symbolizes the sudden eruption of atrocities and violence during the Cultural Revolution but also designates the irresolvable antagonism and remnants of violence in urban life.”⁵⁵ Lo further claims that “although Tian uses the Mongolian and Tibetan worlds as symbols of socio-political chaos during and after the Cultural Revolution, he neglects the real disasters inflicted by the political movement on the ethnic minorities themselves.”⁵⁶ The lack of minorities’ experience makes Lo conclude that “Tian’s intentional use of minorities to serve his own agenda is obviously a means of appropriating the other in Han-dominant China’s self-questioning as a cure for its own illness.”⁵⁷

From a narrative perspective, this film does not directly portray minorities’ lives in the Mao era, but that does not mean that the film never engages with any minority experience inflicted by the political campaigns of the Mao era. Minorities’ socialist experience is represented in the auditory aspect. Relying on this point of audition, spectators enter the sensory-reflexive horizon, in which they are asked to use their senses to feel the Han-dominant ethnic hierarchy.

According to Yingjin Zhang, Tian’s minority films “examine ethnic cultural life ‘on an equal basis (*pingshi*)’”. His attempt at ‘equality’ is evidenced by the conspicuous absence of a leading Han character as an omniscient narrator.”⁵⁸ The physical body of the Han character does, as Zhang mentions, disappear in the diegesis. But the voice of the Han—the Mandarin voiceover—is omniscient and striking. Although two types of languages appear simultaneously in *On the Hunting Ground*, the volumes and tones of the languages differ completely. The original Mongolian

⁵⁵ Kwai-Cheung Lo, “Two Moments of Ethnic Representation in Tian Zhuangzhuang’s Minority Films,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 3, no. 3 (2009): 239.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁵⁸ Yingjin Zhang, *Screening China*, 167.

dialogues are at the normal volume. But as soon as the Mandarin voiceover starts to translate, the Mongolian voices are immediately turned down. From the perspective of volume, this design constructs an auditory effect that Mongolians should yield to Mandarin. The overwhelming Mandarin, in this sense, carries the cinematic text a step forward to an allegorical level and symbolizes the hegemonic position of Mandarin.

Regarding tone and intonation, Mongolian lines are presented in a natural style to mimic the state of daily life. The Mandarin voiceover is high-pitched, shows vigorous emotions, and represents masculinity—which is very unlike Mongolian in a synchronized recording. Despite the energetic presentation, however, the voiceover is also cold, chilly, and distant, which distinguishes this sound from the normal state but matches the specific voices widely used in socialist news reports and newsreels. In the socialist era, this type of sound was the embodiment of official discourse and represented authority and irresistibility. It is thus hard for the same sounds to be used to express common emotions like anxiety, pleasure, and sorrow. The inherent vigorousness of this tone, in fact, is closely tied to the dominant legitimized emotion in the Mao era: the passion for the revolution. In this sense, by representing the masculinized revolutionary voice, *On the Hunting Ground* throws spectators back to the socialist auditory space and invites them to reflect on the past socialist sentiments.

From the auditory perspective, besides Mandarin, another type of sound deliberately accentuated in the film is the sound effect implying that killing and violence are occurring. The noises in the hunting scenes—ceaseless gunshots, shouting, and chaotic hooves—stimulate audiences' auditory sense and closely tie this sequence to the danger of death. The signs of killing also lurk in the comparatively peaceful grassland. In the sequence with a group of women and kids gathering to shear sheep, among the soft lively chatter of the women, the sounds of shearing are

so striking that they cannot be ignored. Like the noises in the hunting scenes, the sounds of shearing also imply violence and danger hiding behind the peaceful surface.

In the auditory aspect, this series offers tactically amplified sounds that interlock with each other. The overwhelming Mandarin, therefore, finds its connection with the metaphorical meaning of killing and violence. Thus, the filmmaker not only highlights the hegemony of Mandarin but also implies that this language attained its dominant position in minority areas through violence. In this way, this film provides spectators a chance to feel and reflect on the mechanism of hidden Han centrism and its influence—all while relying on the hearing sense.

Empowering the Margin: Outsider Subject Position

The sensory-reflexive horizon not only helps audiences reflect on the ignored minority experience in Maoist China but also contributes to the construction of a new subject position. In Tian's talk with scholar Chris Berry in a 1990s symposium, Berry reveals the significant position of "outsider" in *On the Hunting Ground*. According to Berry, "the protagonist of the film is the outsider standing on the margins of his community. The audience is outside the film. The Han Chinese are outsiders for the Mongolian and Tibetan cultures."⁵⁹ Tian acknowledged that Berry's analysis hit the nail on the head. Tian had started exploring this outsider position even from his first film, *September* (九月 1984).⁶⁰ I argue that this "outsider" subject position is the entry point for scrutinizing and discussing the construction of Self in *On the Hunting Ground*.

From the narrative perspective, within the diegesis, this film portrays several protagonists who stand on the margins of Mongolian communities. The protagonists break the hunting laws

⁵⁹ Xiao Ye 萧叶, "Daoma zei lunbian" 《盗马贼》论辩 [Debates on *Horse Thief*], in *Film Art*, no. 7 (1986): 12.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

and therefore get punished physically and psychologically. Meanwhile, the film centers on a marginalized minority culture—*zhasa*—and depicts how this Mongolian value influences people’s behaviors. The general audiences, especially the Han Chinese, undoubtedly are far away from both the normal daily life in the grassland and the Mongolian value system. These spectators, in this sense, become the outsiders of the film. Outside the diegesis, most spectators—the Han Chinese—are undoubtedly outsiders when it comes to both the socialist minority auditory experience and the sentiment of being wrapped in the hearing sensation.

Regarding structures of knowledge, spectators are also pushed to the margins. As a film engages in minority topics, cultural differentiation is an unavoidable issue. Socialist minority films are never short on Han-oriented cultural interpretations aimed at filling up the shortage of Han knowledge and showing a scientific attitude toward ethnic issues. By occupying more cultural capital, Han Chinese can maintain their superior position in the ethnic relationship and confirm their status as the embodiment of civilization. In this way, the embedded Han-oriented cultural interpretations contribute to stabilizing the Han-dominant power structure. Further, since Han-oriented cultural interpretations fill knowledge blind spots, Han Chinese can avoid falling into obscurity and instead dedicate themselves to the viewing pleasures deriving from exoticism. In this sense, as scholar Yingjin Zhang mentions, “minorities rarely occupy the subject position in minority films . . . fixed in the state cultural machinery, minority films have, in effect, participated in some kind of ‘internal colonialism’ and ‘internal orientalism.’”⁶¹

However, this dynamic is seemingly not what Tian and his crew sought to repeat even though Tian’s two 1980s minority films refer to many minority festivals, rituals, and customs. Rather than inheriting socialist norms, Tian rejects providing any explanations. He thinks cultural

⁶¹ Yingjin Zhang, *Screening China*, 166.

interpretation is unnecessary because “all the local people [minorities] have no trouble accessing the portrayed cultural events.”⁶² Tian’s words reveal that he prioritizes the minorities, rather than Han Chinese, and constructs his films based on minorities’ knowledge structure. The lack of Han-oriented explanations thoroughly stings the ordinary Chinese audiences and forces them to recognize their own knowledge shortcomings. In 1980s China, the design transferring the audience from the center of knowledge to the periphery challenged the dominant viewing convention and resulted in complaints. Many critics claim that Tian’s films abuse minority cultures since he meaninglessly accumulates too many religious scenes and folk customs for the sake of technical razzle-dazzle and exotic splendor.⁶³ To some degree, the critiques reflect some Han Chinese’s anxiety resulting from the potential loss of their dominant position in the aspect of knowledge capital. It is unfair, however, to simply treat Tian’s refusal to provide common cultural interpretations as evidence that reveals his intention to pursue exoticism. I argue that Tian explores the use of the sensory-reflexive horizon to replace cultural interpretations as an alternative way to gain knowledge. This horizon is also the core used to decipher the subject construction in Tian’s minority films.

As political authority Deng Xiaoping announced the slogan that practice is the sole criterion for testing truth, China turned to welcome the return of “science.” In this background, anthropology and ethnology—which are generally seen as disciplines relying on fieldwork (practice) to scientifically investigate, analyze, and interpret the truth of minority cultures—became reliable methods of knowledge acquisition and secured more scholars’ support. To produce

⁶² Xiao Ye, “Daoma zei lunbian,” 5.

⁶³ Chen Yutong 陈玉通 “Ping yingpian Daomazei jiqi pinglun” 评影片《盗马贼》及其评论 [On *Horse Thief* and its reviews], *Film Art*, no. 11 (1986): 15.

a true realist genre in the early reform era, a group of filmmakers also encouraged appropriating an anthropological approach into minority film production. As a result, “visual anthropology” was imported into China as a powerful theory. Chinese cinematographer Yang Guanghai, a pioneer who helped produce a series of scientific documentaries about Chinese ethnic minorities in the socialist period, announced the significance of making ethnographic films in China.⁶⁴ From the late 1970s to the 1980s, several local and central film studios founded their respective visual anthropology centers and produced many ethnographical films, such as *Baiku Yao* (白裤瑶 1985) and *The Carnival of Life* (生的狂欢 1986).

Even though the anthropological approach was praised by Chinese scholars and widely intervened in Chinese ethnic minority studies, adopting it cannot guarantee accurate reading of minority cultures. Scholar Johannes Fabian suggests the weak points of the anthropological approach. He defines the concept of “anthropological allochronism” and indicates the hidden colonial consciousness behind the normal approach widely used in the field of anthropology, which inclines to fix its objects of study, generally the indigenous or the ethnic minorities, in the past time-space.⁶⁵ If this so-called scientific approach remains problematic, how could one manage the unavoidable cultural differentiation and barriers in minority films? Tian’s minority films propose the alternative solution: rather than the rational anthropological approach, the sensory-reflexive horizon in Tian’s minority films blazes a sensorial trail for audiences to gain knowledge.

⁶⁴ Yang Guanghai 杨光海, “Zhongguo shaoshu minzu shehui lishi kexue jilu yingpian de huigu yu zhanwang” 中国少数民族社会历史科学纪录影片的回顾与展望 [The retrospect and expectation of scientific documentary of Chinese ethnic minority societies and histories], *Minzuxue yanjiu* 民族学研究 [Ethnology studies], no. 1(1982): 288–293.

⁶⁵ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 32–33.

The strategy that invokes sensations, instead of pedagogy, to gain knowledge of and approach an unfamiliar culture clearly manifests in Tian's another minority film—*Horse Thief*. This film represents many religious rituals—such as sunbathing the Buddha, inserting arrows, and performing the Ghost Dance (Figure 4.5).



Figure 4.5 Religious Rituals in *Horse Thief*

However, without the assistance of conventional pedagogical interpretations, audiences can hardly receive information about alien rituals and conventions through narration. The lack of explanation invalidates rational analysis and alerts the senses and sentiments that dominate film viewing. Audiences' attention is thus transferred to the actions of seeing, listening, and feeling. The noticeable sound of prayer wheels, the saints' religious chanting, the chewing sound of vultures, the repeated actions of full-body prostrations, and the giant statue of Buddha all function as sensory triggers piloting spectators into the sensory-reflexive horizon, in which spectators can rely on sensory experience to communicate and negotiate with the unfamiliar Tibetan culture. The existing knowledge structure of the spectators therefore may be updated. In this process, the Han filmmakers relinquish the omniscient authority to the interpretation gained by the national minority genre. These filmmakers, like audiences, are thrown into a sensory domain in which only sensations work.

The process of knowledge acquisition also involves the process of constructing the Self. As scholar Liu Shusheng and Qian Jing highlight, the appearance of Tian's 1980s minority films "to some degree punch the inertia of the traditional viewing custom."⁶⁶ Tian offers "a new aesthetic norm for us . . . if this new form is confirmed in China, it must make a new claim for the audience. Not only can audiences create films, but also films train audiences."⁶⁷ Training audiences can also be understood as the process of self-construction. In fact, many Chinese films take responsibility for providing a constructed Self that spectators can identify with once guided to do so. Generally, the constructed Self in films is concrete and explicit, but Tian does not follow this convention. The Self in his film is pending construction. Notably, his minority films provide a subject position—the outsider position—which leads spectators to jump outside the clichéd social structure, and a construction method—the sensory route to gain knowledge—which unfetters spectators from the restriction of the conventional mode of relying on rationality.

Leo Ou-Fan Lee's discussion on the function of the periphery helps illuminate why people are willing to keep a minority status, which is generally seen as marginal, powerless, and subaltern. Instead of simply treating "margin" as a powerless, even colonized position, Lee explores the power of the margin and points out that "being a self-exiled Chinese on the peripheries"⁶⁸ can be a potential way to detour the pressure resulting from the Han-centric hierarchy. According to Lee, "it is only on this marginal ground that I feel psychologically secure and even culturally privileged. By virtue of my self-chosen marginality, I can never fully identify myself with any center."⁶⁹ The

⁶⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 20–21.

⁶⁸ Leo Ou-Fan Lee, "On the Margins of the Chinese Discourse," *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, ed. Shu-Mei Shih, Chien-Hsin Tasi, Brian Bernard (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 161.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 162.

cinematic attempts of Tian in the 1980s resonate with Lee's theory. In the situation where people were unsatisfied with the assigned subject position, they tactically withdrew from it, despite its superiority, and instead turned to look for a new identity and subjectivity in the powerful periphery.

In this aspect, Tian's film practices differ from those of his contemporaries like Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. The films by Chen and Zhang also show their concerns about the destructive consequences of the socialist era and the collective anxiety about reconstructing an identity in the post-Mao era after the collapse of the cult of Mao. In her studies on contemporary Chinese cinema, Rey Chow indicates that 1980s films by Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou display what she calls "primitive passions," a strategy to deal with "cultural crisis."⁷⁰ According to Chow, "the primitive" refers to "the animal, the savage, the countryside, the indigenous, the people, and so forth, which stand in for that 'original' something that has been lost."⁷¹ The spectrum images of nature, children, and women in 1980s films by Chen and Zhang demonstrate Chow's theory that the primitive is "always an invention after the fact—a fabrication of a *pre* that occurs in the time of the *post*."⁷² In the process of looking for the primitiveness, Chen and Zhang locate the source of power in the origin of Chinese culture—the central plain. Thus, their cameras gaze at the yellow earth (*Yellow Earth*), the folk culture (*Red Sorghum*), and Chinese characters (*King of the Children*). Chen and Zhang do not challenge the Han-centric cultural and social structure but just reset it from the primitive state to fabricate a story of a *pre*. However, Tian's solution to the same issues takes an additional step. He prefers to structurally rebuild a Self rather than modifying or resetting one. His minority films provide a sensory method on how to construct this subjectivity. The reconstructed

⁷⁰ Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 22.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

subject and identity should not, however, be generalized and simplified as the ethnic Han, even though the possibility remains for the subject and identity to belong to the Han. This dynamic, to some degree, can be seen as Tian's alternative answer to the ethnic issues, identity anxiety, and art cinema paradigm in early post-Maoist China.

Coda

After the 1990s:

Chance or Challenge

“Whenever I introduced myself as a Tibetan in middle school and high school, the first word everyone would blurt out was: ‘Serfs’ For many people, their understanding of Tibet is still stuck on that level.”

—Pema Tsenden¹

From the late 1970s to the 1990s, ethnic minority films in China enjoyed a second golden age. New attempts, experiments, and innovations called the past socialist minority film paradigm into question. But ironically, this flourishing period also foreshadowed the decline of this genre. As the PRC opened its doors to the rest of the world, increasingly more diverse, dazzling, and exotic cinematic spectacles flooded the domestic market. Facing the increasingly fierce competition after the 1990s, could minority films survive? It is helpful to examine the fate of minority films in the post-2000 period.

More changes occurred in the ethnic minority film field after the 1990s. As Chapter 4 discussed, in the 1990s, more people started questioning the innovations, experiments, and hybridizations distinct from the socialist minority film pattern. The legitimacy of Han filmmakers to direct minority films also turned into a debate. With a barrage of questions, the majority Han

¹ Amy Qin, “From a Tibetan Filmmaker, an Unvarnished View of His Land,” *The New York Times*, accessed June 8, 2022, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20190625/pema-tsenden-tibet-china/>.

filmmakers who once dominated the production of this genre withdrew from the field and gave the leading position to minority filmmakers after the 1990s. Of course, such developments do not mean that the Han have never since touched on this field and genre. In fact, some contemporary Han filmmakers have contributed many influential minority films. For instance, in 2004, Lu Chuan 陆川 finished *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol* (可可西里), which won many awards at several influential global and national film festivals, such as the Golden Horse Awards, Hong Kong Film Awards, Tokyo International Film Festival, Berlin International Film Festival, and Golden Rooster Awards. In the same year, Tian Zhuangzhuang released a documentary about the multiethnic communities along the ancient Tea Horse Road, *Delamu* (德拉姆). A year later, Wang Quan'an 王全安's *Tuya's Marriage* (图雅的婚事), about the harsh life of a Mongolian wife based on an actual event, won the heart of the committees at the Berlin International Film Festival and was awarded the Golden Bear. Therefore, the Han filmmakers did not completely quit this field. But compared to the socialist era, these filmmakers have not been the absolute leading force.

Like the tendency shown in the 1980s and 1990s, from 2000 onward, increasingly more ethnic minority filmmakers have emerged to tell their own stories. Some have even become the new icons in this field. For instance, the Tibetan director and writer Pema Tseden 万玛才旦 joined the film field in 2002 with *The Silent Holy Stones* (静静的嘛呢石), which depicts the daily life of several monks in Tibet. Pema Tseden focuses on his home ethnicity and prefers to discuss the complicated relationship between the Tibetan religion, tradition, and modernity. This topic repetitively appears in his subsequent films, including *The Search* (寻找智美更登, 2007), *Old Dog* (老狗, 2011), and *Tharlo* (塔洛, 2016). In 2019, he completed his new film *Balloon*, extending his attention to the struggle of Tibetan women in the net of religious beliefs, gender hierarchy, government policies, and female consciousness. Almost all of Pema Tseden's films have

won awards at domestic and international film festivals, helping shape his global reputation. As the case of Pema Tseden shows, the new generation of ethnic minority filmmakers pays more attention to their own ethnicities and prefers to explore the dynamics between their home ethnic cultures and modern societies.

However, minority films have also encountered some challenges during the post-2000 period. During the socialist period, the state sponsored every aspect of the film industry, from production to distribution. Filmmakers therefore did not have too much economic pressure. The blossoming of the minority genre in this period came with the support of the government. But in the post-socialist era, economic reforms extended into the film industry. As the state did not lend its full support to ethnic minority film production, this minority genre encountered severe financial risk after the 1990s and therefore lost its competitive strength in the domestic market, facing the impact of various blockbusters.² Further, most minority films produced after 2000 were low-budget productions. The Deputy Director of the National Radio and Television Administration indicates, “The meager budget resulted in the difficulties of these minority films in production and marketing. Many distributors and theaters worried about the box-office return of ethnic minority-themed films. They, therefore, did not want to spend more on disturbing these films. Even if audiences want to watch more minority films, it would be very hard to access these films in theaters.”³ Since 2000, domestic theaters in China have been filled with various blockbusters and commercial films. The tough competition leaves very limited screen arrangements for minority

² Rao Shuguang 饶曙光, “Shaoshu minzu dianying fazhan zhanlue sikao” 少数民族电影发展战略思考 [Thoughts on the development strategy of ethnic minority films], *Art Criticism*, no. 12 (2007): 41–43.

³ *Ibid.*, 41.

films. They are gradually moving outside the public sight. In addition, many minority films are only available for minority audiences and circulated in ethnic minority communities and regions.

Ordinary audiences' attitude to minority films also changed. In the Mao years, minority films still could be viewed as a popular genre targeting the general masses. However, from 2000 onward, this genre has been separated from popular culture and recategorized into *wenyi* 文艺 films. *Wenyi* literally means culture and art. This category, distinct from commercial films, generally refers to films with a degree of artistic quality. Even though the *wenyi* genre is not equal to art cinema or avant-garde films, in the context of the PRC, *wenyi* is also a synonym for being a niche market targeting limited audiences. The masses, in general, are not very interested in this type of cinema. This classification reveals that minority films in China currently face a predicament. In 2021, a new TV reality show called *Hi Director* 导演请指教 was released in China, which intended to provide a communication platform for ordinary audiences, film experts, and young directors who needed the opportunity to direct films. Degen 德格娜, a Mongolian director, participated in this show and produced several short films about Mongolian and Tibetan people, their daily lives, and their culture. The interesting thing is because of the minority topic, her films were immediately pigeonholed as being in the *wenyi* genre by film experts, audiences, and her peers. No one even questioned this classification. Audiences' interest in this type of *wenyi* film was not very high, however. Some audiences even implied that ethnic minority-related films and minority culture like Mongolian *changdiao* 长调 [long songs] did not align with the general taste of current audiences, even though these audiences also expressed that Degen's films allow the audience to have fun while watching *wenyi* films.⁴ Still, collectively, these responses reflect how

⁴ See *Hi Director* episodes 1 and 4.

minority films are fading from the mass market. Minority films are also often shelved after being tagged with *wenyi*.

The box-office records further clarify the situation of minority film consumption in China. Even though Pema Tsenden has earned a global reputation, his films on the PRC market remain uncompetitive at the box office. For instance, the box-office revenue of *Tharlo* was about CNY 1,127,600.⁵ But the top domestic film, *The Mermaid* (美人鱼), a comedy directed by Hong Kong filmmaker Stephen Chiau 周星驰, was released in the same year and earned CNY 3,397,000,000.⁶ This vast earnings gap explicitly illustrates how Chinese audiences feel about minority films. It is important to clarify that Pema's film should be viewed as art cinema, which is another reason why it can hardly compete with Chiau's commercial film. Yet it would be wrong to assume that no post-2000 minority film is booming at the box office. Zhang Yang 张杨's *Paths of the Soul* (冈仁波齐, 2017) grossed CNY 100,000,000.⁷ Even though the difference with *The Mermaid* was still significant, the box-office performance of this minority film surprised the media, film experts, and audiences. In social media, this film was called a black horse and was believed to predict the spring of *wenyi* film. However, this surprise shared by audiences and media reversely proves that the success of minority films at the box office is not a very common phenomenon in China. In fact, several years have passed, but the record set by *Paths of the Soul* remains.

New changes after 2000 have also emerged in academic studies. In Chinese academia, some scholars have looked for new categories and approaches to classify minority films to distinguish the works of the new generation from socialist minority films. *Muyu dianying* (母语电

⁵ The box office record of *Tharlo*, accessed June 4, 2022, <https://ys.endata.cn/Details/Movie?entId=629073>.

⁶ The box office record of *The Mermaid*, accessed June 4, 2022, <https://ys.endata.cn/Details/Movie?entId=626153>.

⁷ The box office record of *Paths of the Soul*, accessed June 4, 2022, <https://ys.endata.cn/Details/Movie?entId=642783>.

影 native-language films) is one such candidate. From 2000 onward, as scholar Hu Puzhong states, a group of films share the following similarities: the films focus on the dangerous situations of ethnic minority cultures, directly or indirectly reflect on the influence of modernization on minority cultures, and insist on using native languages.⁸ In reaction to this particular phenomenon, scholars like Hu propose using native-language film as the new frame to study “the low budget *wenyi* cinema focusing on local minority culture, made by ethnic minority film crews with non-government investment.”⁹ The linguistic insistence of films is the primary motivation for the recategorization. But it seems that the new term still cannot adequately deal with the troubles proposed in the 1990s academic discussion regarding the categorization of minority films. As Hu himself mentions, this term may exclude some excellent Han-made minority films from the discussion.¹⁰

Regarding the research on minority films, many aspects have not yet been discussed. New approaches emerge to continue the studies in this field. Recently, Sheldon Lu proposed another theoretical framework—Chinese ecocinema—which may inspire research centering on post-socialist minority films. Since the 1980s, environmental issues in China have been becoming more severe due to the fast-paced modernization promoted by the government. This context attracts more Chinese filmmakers to engage with the environmental problems, reflect on the stereotyped anthropocentrism, and re-explore the alternative relationship between human beings and ecology. Chinese ecocinema intends to provide a critical paradigm “to investigate how Chinese films

⁸ Hu Puzhong 胡谱忠, “muyu dianying” de lailong qumai “母语电影” 的来龙去脉 [The ins and outs of native-language films], *China's Ethnic Groups*, no. Z1 (2012): 80.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 84–85.

engage environmental and ecological issues in the active re-imagination of locale, place, and space.”¹¹ In fact, because the geolocations of minority communities are close to nature, minority films, especially those made after 2000, often spotlight environmental issues. For instance, Lu Chuan’s *Kekexili* discusses the poaching activities and the subsequent influence on the Tibetan regions in Qinghai. Even though *Tuya’s Marriage* fixes the camera on the suffering of Mongolian women, the environmental crisis—drought—in Inner Mongolia is the unignored backdrop. In 2022, Pema Tsenden also proposed his new film *Snow Leopard* (雪豹), in which he plans to reflect on the relationship between humans and animals.¹² These post-2000 minority films unfold new topics about the complicated dynamics between human beings, society, modernity, and ecology. There have been several articles examining minority films from the perspective of ecocinema in both Chinese and Western academia.¹³ These articles help place minority films in a new framework and update the general understanding of the functions and meanings of minority films.

This dissertation centers on the production, consumption, and circulation of socialist minority films from 1949 to 1999 to reveal the interactions (collaboration, compromise, competition, and confrontation) among the discourses representing the nation, the Han, ethnic minorities, and the

¹¹ Sheldon H. Lu, “Cinema, Ecology, Modernity,” in *Chinese Ecocinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge*, ed. Sheldon H. Lu and Jiayan Mi (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 1.

¹² “Zhuang sile yizhiyang daoyan Wanma Caidan xinpian Xuebao lixiang” 《撞死了一只羊》导演万玛才旦新片《雪豹》立项 [Pema Tsenden, the director of Jinpa, proposed his new film *Snow Leopard*], accessed June 4, 2022, https://www.sohu.com/a/531850434_114733.

¹³ Several interesting studies have been done in this field. For example, relying on this theoretical paradigm, Donghui He researched the documentaries about Tibet made by Tian Zhuangzhuang and Pema Tsenden. See Donghui He, “‘Reconstructing the God-Fearing Community:’ Filming Tibet in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Chinese Ecocinema*, 271–88. Also See Zhang Xi 张希, “Bei hushi de he bei zhongshi de Kekexili” 被忽视的和被重视的可可西里 [The disregarded and stressed Kekexili], *Film Art*, no. 1 (2005): 75–78; Wang Lili 王莉丽, “Kekexili, zhangxian shengtai dianying chuanbo kongjian” 可可西里, 彰显生态电影传播空间 [Kekexili, highlighting the spread space of ecocinema], *The Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, no. 1 (2005): 72–75, 105–6.

rest of the world. In the first two decades of the PRC, the government attempted to appropriate ethnic minorities as part of its ideology depicting the PRC as a unified, multi-ethnic, socialist nation-state. The film field led by the Han filmmakers in the seventeen-year period actively responded to this national interpellation and made efforts to bring ethnic minorities on the screen to integrate the non-Han into the Han-centered socialist nation-building project. A series of images of minorities and related narratives matching the national discourse was constructed and circulated, functioning as the models and exemplars for the non-Han to follow, mimic, and perform. As minorities joined film activities, the national discourse took advantage of professional film training and activities to discipline minorities' minds, bodies, and affect. Minorities, in this process, comprehensively rectified themselves to fit their assigned social roles. However, the national discourse was not the absolute sole standard or completely non-negotiable. Ethnic minorities could keep their agency to a certain extent. As the cases of Mongolian writer Malqihu and many minority performers show, in creative works like script writing and performance, minorities had the chance to escape the patterns and confines drawn by the national discourse and the Han. Minorities in this sense were not simple puppets parroting the Father's language but could launch negotiations with the national discourse and Han opinions. Consequently, parts of minorities' voices, to some extent, could be tolerated and accepted through a process of negotiation. The national discourse set rules for observing, imagining, and understanding Chinese ethnic minorities through socialist minority films. But this series of national regulations were weakened to various degrees and even lost their efficacy as socialist minority films were circulated in the global market. The local context where the films were consumed played an influential role in decoding and recoding meanings of socialist minority films. As the case of Hong Kong shows in this dissertation, the consumption and reproduction of socialist minority films provided Hong Kongers the chance to engage with Hong

Kong issues, including its geological situation in the Cold War, the immigrant experience, modernity, and the fever for apolitical entertainment, rather than the ethnic relation that was the concern of the PRC filmmakers. By watching, discussing, and imitating socialist minority films, Hong Kongers adjusted their relationship with Maoist China—its national discourse, cultural patterns, and way of representing Han-centrism. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the actions of Han Chinese did not always perfectly align with the overarching national discourse. From the 1980s to the 1990s, some Han filmmakers tried to challenge the national discourse dominating the socialist era by impacting the form in which socialist minority films were produced. As Tian Zhuangzhuang's 1980s minority films show, the alliances between the Han and national discourse also might split. Innovations in cinematic techniques can provide an alternative way to modify and challenge the official paradigm and stereotypes regarding the relationship between ethnic minorities, the Han Chinese, and the nation-state.

Therefore, the production, consumption, and circulation of socialist minority films function as a field for agents, including the nation, the Han, ethnic minority, and the outside of the PRC, to engage in communications to imagine, express, and adjust their relative relationships. The term used to refer to the genre—*shaoshu minzu dianying* 少数民族电影 (ethnic minority films)—hints at and shapes the expectation that ethnic minorities and ethnic issues should be the primary topics. This assumption does work in many film cases. However, it is worth realizing that this term is deceptive to some extent. The discussions that happened in and around these films can extend beyond the scope of ethnic issues. For example, the entertainment-oriented consumption and reproductions of socialist minority films in the 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong can be seen as a typical example. Appropriating ethnic minorities in films can conspire with the PRC's national discourse to promote the principle of a Han-centered nation-state. However, the engagement with

ethnic minorities in films also may function as a means to create distance with the national authorities. It cannot be rejected that the objectification of minorities takes place in this process. At the same time, I propose to see the other side of the same coin, which is shown in the cases where the screen image of ethnic minorities was appropriated by people on the periphery, such as the Han dissenters (Tian Zhuangzhuang) and overseas Sinophone communities (1960s Hong Kong filmmakers and audiences) from 1949 to 1999. These appropriations, intentionally or unintentionally, made efforts to integrate ethnic minorities with various peripheries, thus creating a stance that competed with the authority of the national discourse represented by Maoist China. At the same time, public concern arose on the matter of subalterns, which to some extent had the potential to be developed into a way to approach the possible heteroglossia.

Writing, performing, consuming, and discussing minorities in the film field from 1949 to 1999 provided the chance for the agents, including the nation-state, the Han, ethnic minorities, and the rest of the world, to join communications and negotiations, which could contribute to the re/production and the possible renewal of knowledge. In this process, the four agents coordinated, compromised, and conspired with each other. Meanwhile, competition, exclusion, and oppression also happened. Minority films and the discussions centering on this genre functioned as a platform for representing these interactions. However, it would be wrong to view the seventeen-year period and the 1980s and 1990s as a purely optimistic or idealistic stage triggering free and diverse discourses. From 1949 to 1999, the PRC cultural field was still restricted and under constant political surveillance. It would have been hard for any individual to wholly or directly challenge the domination and hegemony of the national discourse. But I also suggest seeing and crediting the various efforts that individuals, especially the subalterns, made to promote communication and

express their heterogeneous voices in such an uneven power structure, even though these voices in many cases were not as loud as one might expect. This is one of the purposes of this dissertation.

Since the late 1990s, the reproduction and consumption of socialist minority films has dwindled, both nationally and globally. In the new context of the post-2000s, socialist minority films no longer carry the function of supporting broad communication. Instead, they have been transformed into an authoritative canon that tends to restrict people's minds. Tibetan director Pema Tsenden in several interviews used his personal experience to address the tedium resulting from the public's inflexible bias to link his Tibetan status and the socialist minority film *Serfs*. As the citation at the beginning of this coda shows, people's general understanding of the Tibetan people is stuck in the images and narratives shown in the film *Serfs*. Even though the socialist minority pattern has been out of service, the stereotypes produced by this pattern keep autogenerating and continue to chain audiences to the socialist imagination. A new generation of filmmakers in ethnic minority film production has emerged to challenge the past pattern. But audiences can hardly get rid of the hands of clichés and even lose interest in actively looking for or discussing the innovations in this field. The canonized socialist paradigm and the indifferent audience in China are building up a tough, high wall.

Chinese minority films have gone through a history of about one hundred years. These films have witnessed the laughter and tears of generation after generation and have become an important component of people's memories. Even though this genre has gradually lost its former historical glory and experienced a decline, many filmmakers are passionate about exploring minority topics. Recently, the development of new media and the various disputes between countries are making Chinese ethnic minorities more visible to the world. The public reactions of the Chinese government to minority issues making a global impact reflect the significance of

minorities in the national discourse of the PRC. In this background, what is the future of ethnic minority films? Where do different agents and participants go from here? Let us wait and see.

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Hualian Port (hualian gang 花莲港, dir. He Feiguang, 1948)

The White-haired Girl (baimaonü 白毛女, dir. Wang Bin and Shui Hua, 1950)

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Tibet Bathed in Brightness (guangming zhaoyao zhe Xizang 光明照耀着西藏, dir. Hao Yusheng and Jiang Tao, 1952)

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Hasen and Jiamila (哈森与加米拉, dir. Wu Yonggang, 1952)

The Gold and Silver River Band (jinyin tan 金银滩, dir. Ling Zifeng, 1953)

People on the Grassland (caoyuan shang de renmen 草原上的人们, dir. Xu Tao, 1953)

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The Land (tudi 土地, dir. Shui Hua, 1954)

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Dong Cunrui (董存瑞 dir. Guo Wei, 1955)

Railway Guerrilla (tiedao youjidui 铁道游击队 dir. Zhao Ming, 1956)

Shangganling Ridges (shangganling 上甘岭, dir. Sha Meng and Lin Shan, 1956)

Fights in the Desert (shamo li de zhandou 沙漠里的战斗, dir. Tang Xiaodan, 1956)

Li Shizhen (Li shizhen 李时珍, dir. Shen Fu, 1956)

Marriage of the Fairy Princess (Tianxian pei 天仙配, dir. Shi Hui, 1956)

The Romantic Song of Lusheng (lusheng linage 芦笙恋歌, dir. Yu Yanfu, 1957)

Bonfires in the Border Village (bianzhai fenghuo 边寨烽火, dir. Lin Nong, 1957)

Eagles in the Storm (baofengyu zhong de xiongying 暴风雨中的雄鹰, dir. Wang Yi, 1957)

Friendship in Adversity (huannan zhijiao 患难之交, dir. Wang Yi, 1958)

Two Patrolmen (liangge xunluo bing 两个巡逻兵, dir. Fang Huang, 1958)

Five Golden Flowers (wuduo jinhua 五朵金花, dir. Wang Jiayi, 1959)

Million Serfs Stood Up (baiwan nongnu zhanqilai 百万农奴站起来, dir. Hao Yusheng, 1959)

Morning Song Over the Prairie (caoyuan chenqu 草原晨曲, dir. Zhu Wenshun and Zhulanqiqige, 1959)

Jin Yuji (Jin Yuji 金玉姬 dir. Wang Jiayi, 1959)

The Muslim Detachment (huimin zhidui 回民支队, dir. Feng Yifu and Li Jun, 1959)

Five Red Clouds (wuduo hongyun 五朵红云, dir. Hua Chun and Zha Lie, 1959)

Swan Goose (hongyan 鸿雁, dir. Zhao Xinshui, 1960)

Ode to the Qiang Flute (Qiangdi song 羌笛颂, dir. Zhang Xinshi, 1960)

The Colorful Road (wucailu 五彩路, dir. Wei Rong, 1960)

Dai Doctor (moya dai 摩雅傣, dir. Xu Tao, 1960)

Two Generations (liangdai ren 两代人, dir. Chen Gang and Ou Fan, 1960)

Menlongsha Village (menglongsha 勐垵沙 dir. Wang Ping and Yuan Xian, 1960)

Red Eagles (hongying 红鹰, dir. Wang Shaoyan, 1960)

The Red Son on the Mountain Ke (keshan hongri 柯山红日, dir. Dong Zhaoqi, 1960)

Storms on the Grassland (caoyuan fengbao 草原风暴, dir. Lin Feng, 1960)

Qin Niangmei (秦娘美 dir. Sun Yu 孙瑜, 1960)

Daji and Her Father (Daji he tade fuqin 达吉和她的父亲, dir. Wang Jiayi, 1961)

Spring Comes to the Withered Tree (Kumu fengchun 枯木逢春, dir. Zheng Junli, 1961)

Third Sister Liu (Liu sanjie 刘三姐, dir. Su Li, 1961)

Red Detachment of Women (Hongse niangzi jun 红色娘子军, dir. Xie Jin, 1961)

Storms in Ordos (eerduosi fengbao 鄂尔多斯风暴, dir. Hao Guang, 1962)

Ahnaerhan (Anaerhan 阿娜尔罕, dir. Li Enjie, 1962)

Jinsha Riverbank (jinsha jiangpan 金沙江畔, dir. Fu Chaowu, 1963)

Visitor on Ice Mountain (bingshan shang de laike 冰山上的来客, dir. Zhao Xinshui, 1963)

Serfs (nongnu 农奴, dir. Li Jun, 1963)

The Love Eterne (Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai 梁山伯与祝英台, dir. Li Han-hsiang, 1963)

Ashima (ashima 阿诗玛, dir. Liu Qiong, 1964)

The Shepherd Girl (shange lian 山歌恋, dir. Lo Chen, 1964)

Golden Eagle (jinying 金鹰, dir. Chan Ching-Po, 1964)

Lei Feng (leifeng 雷锋, dir. Dong Zhaoqi, 1964)

The Forest Riders (yelin shuangshu 椰林双姝, dir. George Shen, 1965)

The Songfest (shange yinyuan 山歌姻缘, dir. Yuan Chiu-Feng, 1965)

Jingpo Girls (jingpo guniang 景颇姑娘, dir. Wang Jiayi, 1965)

One-Armed Swordsman (dubi dao 独臂刀, dir. Chang Cheh, 1976)

Love Song of Twins (shuangnü qingge 双女情歌, dir. Huang Yu, 1968)

The Hawk of the Yis (yizu zhiying 彝族之鹰, dir. Woo Siu-Fung, 1973)

Chun Miao (Chunmiao 春苗, dir. Xie Jin, Yan Bili, Liang Tingduo, 1975)

Ghost (youling 幽灵, dir. Chen Fangqian, 1980)

Mist Over Fairy Peak (shennvfeng de miwu 神女峰的迷雾, dir. Guo Baochang, 1980)

Drive to Win (sha'ou 沙鸥, dir. Zhang Nuanxin, 1981)

Happy Song (xingfu zhige 幸福之歌, dir. Guang Chunlan, 1981)

Red Elephant (hongxiang 红象, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1982)

Rena The Marriage (rena de hunshi 热娜的婚事 dir. Guang Chunlan, 1982)

My Memory of Old Beijing (chengnan jiushi 城南旧事, dir. Wu Yigong, 1983)

A Girl Who Do Not Want to Be An Actor (budang yangyuan de guniang 不当演员的姑娘, dir. Guang Chunlan, 1983)

Burning of the Imperial Palace (huoshao yuanmingyuan 火烧圆明园, dir. Li Han-hsiang, 1983)

Border Town (biancheng 边城, dir. Ling Zifeng, 1984)

Murder in the Forest (linzhong mi'an 林中迷案 dir. Xu Weijie, 1984)

Outwitting the Beautiful Villain (zhidou meinu she 智斗美女蛇, dir. Liu Zhongming, 1984)

On the Hunting Ground (liechang zhasa 猎场札撒, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1984)

Yellow Earth (huang tudi 黄土地, dir. Chen Kaige, 1984)

Sister (Jiejie 姐姐, dir. Wu Yigong, 1984)

Sacrificed Youth (qingchun ji 青春祭, dir. Zhang Nuanxin, 1985)

Intrigue in Honeymoon (miyue de yinmou 蜜月的阴谋, dir. Li Yucai, 1985)

The Evil Dead in the Barranca (shengu shibian 深谷尸变, dir. Hao Weiguang, 1985)

Baiku Yao (baiku yao 白裤瑶 dir. Fu Jingsheng, 1985)

The Carnival of Life (sheng de kuanghuan 生的狂欢 dir. Hao Yuejun, 1986)

My Lover, My Hate (wuqing de qingren 无情的情人 dir. Chen Guojun, 1986)

Genghis Khan (chengji sihan 成吉思汗 dir. Zhan Xiangchi, 1986)

Confession of a Tomb Robber (gumu jinghun 古墓惊魂 dir. Dong Tao and Sun Zhiqiang, 1986)

The Death of the Beauty (meiren zhisi 美人之死, dir. Guang Chunlan, 1986)

The Big Parade (da yuebing 大阅兵, dir. Chen Kaige, 1986)

Horse Thief (daoma zei 盗马贼 dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1986)

Drum Singers (gushu yiren 鼓书艺人, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1987)

The Last Empress (modai huanghou 末代皇后, dir. Chen Jialin and Sun Qinggou, 1987)

Warriors Errant Black Butterfly (youxia heihudie 游侠黑蝴蝶, dir. Lu Jianhua and Yu Zhongxiao, 1988)

Rock 'n' Roll Kids (yaogun qingnian 摇滚青年, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1988)

Silver Snake Murder (yinshe mousha an 银蛇谋杀案, dir. Li Shaohong, 1988)

The King Songtsan Ganbu (songzan ganbu 松赞干布, dir. Phurbu Tstring, 1988)

The Night Robbery (yedao zhenfei mu 夜盗珍妃墓, dir. Cai Yuanyuan, 1989)

Li Lianying: The Imperial Eunuch (da taijian Li Lianying 大太监李莲英, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1991)

A Mongolian Tale (hei junma 黑骏马, dir. Xie Fei, 1995)

Visitors from the Gobi (gebi laike 戈壁来客, dir. Guang Chunlan, 1995)

Seven Years in Tibet (dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1997)

Kundun (dir. Martin Charles Scorsese, 1997)

The Silent Holy Stones (jingjing de manishi 静静的嘛呢石, dir. Pema Tsenden, 2002)

Tea-Horse Road Series: Delamu (chama gudao: Delamu 茶马古道：德拉姆, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang, 2004)

Kekexili: Mountain Patrol (kekexili 可可西里, dir. Lu Chuan, 2004)

Tuya's Marriage (tuya de hunshi 图雅的婚事, dir. Wang Quan'an, 2005)

The Search (xunzhao zhimei gengdeng 寻找智美更登, dir. Pema Tseden, 2007)

Old Dog (laogou 老狗, dir. Pema Tseden, 2011)

Tharlo (taluo 塔洛, dir. Pema Tseden, 2016)

The Mermaid (meiren yu 美人鱼 dir. Stephen Chiau, 2016)

Paths of the Soul (gangrene boqi 冈仁波齐, dir. Zhang Yang, 2017)

Balloon (qiqiu 气球, dir. Pema Tseden, 2019)