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Contested Tibetan landscapes in the films of Pema Tseden

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ABSTRACT

This article closely examines the representation of landscapes in two films, *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005) and *Old Dog* (2011), both by the Tibetan director, Pema Tseden. Through mobilizing a range of formal techniques, including the use of long takes, a documentary aesthetic, and foregrounding acts of looking, these films portray Tibetan landscapes as realms of contested meanings between different subjects. I argue that these contested Tibetan landscapes in the films of Pema Tseden open up the space for the emergence of a heterogeneous Tibetan subject whose imagined worlds and lived realities cannot be captured by any singular narrative or dualism between tradition–modernity or resistance–subjection. At the same time, they suggest a form of minority ethnic self-representation that resists homogenizing and re-naturalizing a singular Tibetan voice. This essay situates Pema Tseden's films in a larger sphere of contemporary Tibetan cultural production in the PRC, and proposes connections to projects of cultural activism and cultural renaissance enacted by minoritized groups in other contemporary contexts.

KEYWORDS

Pema Tseden; film; landscape; Tibet; minority; cultural production

> Beneath its alluring surfaces, scraping away at development's economy of appearances, Tibet is a place of ambiguity and… contradictions. (Yeh 2013, 4)

Introduction

In April 2015, a young Tibetan couple, Gerong Phuntsok and Dawa Drolma, shared online their pre-wedding album, which meticulously staged the couple in various settings – from shots of them as stylish cosmopolitan consumers in urban Chengdu, to images of them dressed in traditional Tibetan clothing prostrating at temples, emerging out of nomad tents, serving butter tea and feeding livestock, to scenes of them at romantic holiday vistas in Thailand. The album, which seamlessly cross-references the genres of glossy advertisements peddling monied consumer dreams in contemporary urban lifestyle magazines, 'National Geographic style' (Gladney 1994, 94) settings of minority-ethnic regions, and world traveller vacation selfies, generated more than a hundred thousand shares in less than four hours, and, by the third day, had been seen by 80% of users on the highly popular We Chat (Fang 2015). While the photos garnered intense commentary,

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ranging from the admiring to the disparaging, major news outlets such as Xinhua and CCTV were also quick to make the album, along with interviews with the couple and the photographer, part of their top items of the day (Fang 2015). This social media 'event' raises a set of questions that underlie my discussion of the contested landscapes in the films of Pema Tseden. These questions are about the stakes involved in contemporary Tibetan acts of cultural self-representation within a field of contradictory discourses on Tibet as geographical and political-economic periphery, and Tibetans as minority ethnicity (*shaoshu minzu*) in the People's Republic of China.

The incredible response to Phuntsok and Drolma's album was over its seemingly novel and incongruous combination of the different settings and the couple's Tibetan identity; the album calls into question not only the locations in which 'authentic' Tibetan identity can be claimed, but also its naturalized form within Tibet (readily available to anyone travelling 'there'). If images of people doing markedly Tibetan things in markedly Tibetan clothing and landscapes had appeared in the albums of any number of young middle-class Han Chinese romantically 'drifting' for extended periods in Tibet in order to experience an 'authentic', 'unmodern' life (Zhu and Qian 2015, 145), they would have passed without much commentary. Equally, if Phuntsok and Drolma, as Tibetans, had limited their album to the settings in Tibet, the album may also have passed under the social media radar. Finally, if the couple had not included any scenes set in Tibet, their album would also have remained indistinguishable from a mass of other pre-wedding albums by urbanites in China. At one level, then, the photos disrupt a series of dominant, if conflicting, imaginations of Tibetans and Tibet in the contemporary PRC: that Tibetans are primitive, feudal, poor and violent and thus in need of modernizing developmental rescue and integration; that they and the territories of Tibet are timeless, romantic repositories of spiritual and natural resources, a treasured and immutable authenticity in the face of the vagaries of capitalism and secular modernity; or that Tibet is a storehouse of exotic commodities to be excavated for the spectacular consumption of the metropolitan rich and nouveau riche in China and abroad. At another level, the album suggests an affirmation of Tibetans' identification – though *without* a corresponding narrative of cultural loss – with the grand narratives of progress and prosperity through capitalist development as proffered by the Chinese state for the nation as a whole, but that takes on a particular assimilationist form for its minority populations. At both levels, the photos become disturbing and incongruous in the majority imaginary because they do not fit into what Emily Yeh (2013) has recently identified as the 'notions of false consciousness and romantic views of resistance that plague common interpretations of Tibetans in their relationship with the Chinese state' (13). We could say, along with Steven Venturino in his analysis of contemporary Tibetan literature in the context of a Han-Chinese dominated field of representations, that the album makes use of 'the signifiers (images, texts, forms) that appear identical to those of the dominant discourses' but 'interrupt[s], defer[s] and relocate[s]' them (2007, 278). For Venturino (2007), who considers the affinities between the strategies of contemporary Tibetan cultural productions and those of other minoritized groups in other contexts (particularly African American vernacular, via the work of Henry Louis Gates Jr.), such deferral, even if temporary, challenges 'the rules of correspondence between signifier and signified, rules that shape social and political realities as much as linguistic structures' (278). The affinity of strategies is compelling, and the usefulness of such comparisons of minor cultural politics transnationally is something I will tentatively evoke throughout this essay. Here, we can take up Venturino's argument to

understand the way Phuntsok and Drolma's photos challenge the rules of correspondence of a majority imagination through their investment in a script of ethnic or cultural 'difference' but without an underlying narrative of Tibetans' timeless and radical 'otherness' as a way to shore up this script.

The issues raised by Gerong Phuntsok and Dawa Drolma's re-signification of 'Tibetanness' through a complex set of associations with cultural traditions, contemporary settings, and modern mass media and commercial practices provide an entry point into this essay's examination of how Pema Tseden's filmic landscapes participate in an arena of minority ethnic cultural self-representation in China today. Pema Tseden's work itself sits at the forefront of this wider contemporary cultural sphere, in which Tibetan artistic and media productions from the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), Amdo, and Kuam are engaging and often revising the ways in which Tibet's and Tibetan people's 'territorialization' (Yeh 2013, 5) into the hegemonic cultural and political-economic narratives of the nation-state are configured and understood (see, for e.g. Gyal 2011–2012; Sonam 2011–2012; Barnett 2015; Shakya 2008). In addition to forms of literary and dramatic cultural renaissance evident since the 1980s (Shakya 2008), in which Tibetan cultural and textual traditions and various modernisms have been brought together, new media technologies in particular have opened up the ways in which 'culture in Tibet is produced, transmitted and consumed' (Barnett 2015, 119). As Barnett argues, starting from the arrival of analog devices, but especially so since the advent of digital technologies, Tibetan people have engaged in diverse forms of 'cultural recovery and collective redefinition' (122). On the one hand, new media technologies have opened up access to a range of transnational cultural products that may provide new ways of imagining and expressing Tibetan culture. On the other hand, as Barnett shows, new recording and transmitting technologies have enabled the creation and circulation of a vibrant recorded archive of family life, cultural events, difficult to access religious teachings and rituals, scenes of political action and platforms for debates about cultural identity, in ways that were not possible at the same level before (199–134). Thus, even as these new media technologies may facilitate forms of state surveillance and majority cultural hegemony, they have also enabled what scholars working in other contexts have called new practices of indigenous or minority 'cultural activism,' to name 'a spectrum of practices of self-conscious mediation and mobilization of culture that took shape beginning in the late twentieth century' (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002, 7; see also, Ginsburg 2010, 90). In the case of Tibet, we may also understand Phuntsok and Drolma's wedding album and Pema Tseden's films as different, yet allied, articulations of such a spectrum of contemporary new-media enabled forms of minority cultural activism. Indeed, if, as part of a field of self-conscious Tibetan mediations of culture, Phuntsok and Drolma's digitally staged wedding photos disrupt dominant imaginaries through their playful redeployment, Pema Tseden engages in a different project – that of creating a new visual lexicon of contemporary Tibet through the medium of film.

Although himself a prolific novelist and short-story writer, Pema Tseden has emphasized the centrality of new filming technologies in providing the means to 'record and express' the contemporary lives of people in different Tibetan areas: 'These days,' he recently reflected in an essay on DV films being made by Tibetan University students, 'Tibetan areas are undergoing rapid change, so there is a great need for a visual record of a myriad of things' (2011–2012, 58). For his own practice, he asserts that film is a particularly significant medium for his goal of creating 'a new system of culture' (2010a, 'Creating

a Modern Thangka'). We can understand this assertion in relation to his discussions elsewhere about his search for a new visual method for representing the contemporary lived experiences of Tibetans, which also enables the possibility of 'open interpretation' for diverse audiences (2010b, 'Soul Searching'). As I argue below, by drawing from and developing a range of cinematic techniques, including the 'poetics of contingency' that have become the hallmarks of the new independent documentary movement in China (Robinson 2013, 6), experiments with Buddhist aesthetics, and the concern with 'a re-education of the gaze' (Elena 2005, 153) found in the cinema of Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, Pema Tseden's films open up the space for the emergence of a heterogeneous Tibetan subject whose imagined worlds and lived realities cannot be captured by any singular narrative or dualism between tradition–modernity or resistance–subjection. Such techniques are also suggestive of the possibilities his films propose not only for revising the dominant cultural scripts that have underwritten the imaginations of Tibet in China and the west, but of 'making culture' independently of them. While questions of the political economy of production and distribution, including in the national and international arenas, are crucial to any examination of such a claim to independence, here my focus will be on questions of form and narrative, or the politics of representation in Pema Tseden's films.

The aesthetics of contestation

Emily Yeh has argued that Tibetan regions in the PRC have experienced 'deeply material and embodied… transformations of both subjectivities and landscapes' (2013, 5). These transformations, through different 'modernization' projects directed at material landscapes and people's cultural–economic relations to them, has been fundamental to the ways in which Tibetan regions have been incorporated into the national space of the PRC since the 1950s. Part of this history is Tibetans multiple individual and collective responses to and investments in these transforming landscapes, which, Yeh argues, should make us attentive to 'the cultural politics of Tibetan involvement' in the production of these landscapes, 'as Tibetans negotiate desires, interests and values' (9). Thus, she proposes, via Bruno Latour, that 'landscapes are both material realities and embodiments of the relations, arguments and struggles that go into making them' (10). Foregrounding such entangled relations between contemporary landscapes, subjectivities and agency is central to Pema Tseden's own cinematic-cultural project.

In what follows, I focus on two films, *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005) and *Old Dog* (2011), to discuss Pema Tseden's depiction of contested Tibetan landscapes. As in his other work, these two films both visually and aurally range over the natural and built terrains of the Amdo region – grasslands, mountains, roads, monasteries, ruins, frontier towns and construction sites, village squares, restaurants, homes, prayer and pilgrimage stations, and stone-carving huts. These types of natural and built terrains are encapsulated by different cultural, social and political-economic activities, sounds and technologies (sounds of praying and different forms of work, transportation vehicles, wind in the grasslands, livestock bleating, music from radios and stereos, and the images and sounds from television sets), which are fundamental to each landscape. Indeed, the geophysical, material, and often cultural and political-economic landscapes of this specific Tibetan region of Amdo are not inert backdrops, but alive with forms of activities. They are also brought to life because they are central to the lives and stories of the films' characters, who traverse

them (by a variety of means) repeatedly and whose social interactions, senses of self and world – indeed, their own psychic landscapes – fundamentally shape and are shaped by different material surroundings. It is through drawing out the complexity of and complex interactions between material landscapes, and between psychic and material landscapes, that the films reveal their meanings to be contested. These contestations are not over a simple binary between Tibetan 'tradition' and Chinese or otherwise external 'modernity'; rather they reveal the multiple, and often marginalized, locations of particular Tibetan regions, like Amdo, within different economic, political and cultural configurations – be that the nation-state's developmentalist economic policies, the effects of sinicization, different markets of consumption and production, the encounter between Buddhist cultural forms and new transnational popular cultures, or the advent of technological, media society. In Pema Tseden's films, these act as conflicting forces shaping the imagined worlds and perspectives of the characters (Appadurai 1996, 33), as much as they structure their cultural, political and economic situations into positions of marginality.

In their introduction to *Cinema and Landscape*, Graeme Harper and Jonathan Rayner argue that cinema has been one of the central media contributing to 'the imaginings and definition of national landscapes and communities,' especially through the framing of 'interpretable landscapes' to "represent" their countries of origin' (2010, 23–24). Pema Tseden's films, too, can be said to contribute to (re)imagining and (re)defining Tibetan landscapes and communities. However, I suggest that these acts are not hinged upon the presence of such 'interpretable landscapes.' Rather, Pema Tseden's films resist the interpretability of landscapes, not in the sense that he makes them mysterious or inscrutable, but in the sense that he keeps open-ended their meaning by focusing on the contested nature of the interaction between these landscapes and the different subjectivities that inhabit and shape them. If landscapes in cinema are largely either metonymic or metaphorical in nature (Harper and Rayner 2010, 19–20), then Pema Tseden's films are striking for their resistance to such metonymic or metaphorized landscapes. As part of an aesthetic practice that aims to both undo the dominant imaginaries interpreting the meanings of Tibetan landscapes and lives, and create a new mode of Tibetan self-representation, Pema Tseden often undermines or defers the consensus behind the operation of metonymy and the use of landscape as a point of figuration in metaphor. Rather, he leaves the symbolic associations of landscape themselves open to contestation.

The disruption of dominant interpretations and the activation of new ways of engaging Tibet, which are two aspects of the construction of contested landscapes in Pema Tseden's films, operate through a number of techniques that can be found across his film oeuvre, of which I will focus on two for my argument. The first is his particular deployment and development of the cinematic strategies of *xianchang* 现场 – both in its sense of an 'embodied realism' (or being on the scene), and in its embrace of a 'poetics of contingency' and the particular over the metonymic or metaphorical (Robinson 2013, 6, 29; 2010, 180) – which characterize much of the documentary filmmaking aesthetics in China since the late 1990s. While Pema Tseden's films are not documentaries (and in fact he rejects their characterization as such), he deploys similar techniques, such as location shooting and the use of non-professional actors, to emphasize the experience of living landscapes and lived realities. Furthermore, Pema Tseden's films are notable for their extreme use of the *xianchang* aesthetic's characteristic long takes (see Robinson [2013, 88] for more on the long take in documentaries) to emphasize the unfolding of action and the processual

nature of contingent reality. While in documentary films, long takes may suggest a politics of representation aimed at foregrounding uncontainable spontaneity (Robinson 2010, 181), in Pema Tseden's film's, I would argue, these long takes lend to the creation of heterogeneous subjects and moments of unsymbolized contemplation of the interaction between landscapes and subjects.

The second, interrelated, set of techniques, speaks to Pema Tseden's affinity to the practices of Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami. Pema Tseden has remarked that he was inspired by Iranian films, particularly those of Kiarostami, not only because of similarities in the conditions of film production between Iran and the PRC and the topographical resemblances to Tibet of the Iranian countryside depicted in these films, but also because of their cinematic language (2010b, 'Soul Searching'; see also Yu [2014, 131] and Barnett [2015, 138] for more on this connection). We can draw upon this acknowledged allegiance to Kiarostami to study Pema Tseden's own focus on ways of *looking*, which are fundamental to his portrayal of contested Tibetan landscapes. Jean-Luc Nancy has argued, for example, that Kiarostami's films reveal cinema to be 'the *motion* of what is real, much more than its representation' (2001, 26; emphasis in original). As he explains more fully: 'For the image by means of which, each time, each opens a world and precedes himself in it (*s'y précède*) is not pregiven (*donnée toute faite*) (as are those of dreams, phantasms or bad films): it is to be invented, cut and edited. Thus it is *evidence*, insofar as, if one day I happen to *look* at my street on which I walk up and down ten times a day, I construct for an instant a new *evidence* of my street' (1999, 82; emphasis in original). This description is an apt one for Pema Tseden's own framing of landscapes in ways that provoke the viewer to *look again* at what is taken for granted and to comprehend the evidence of Tibetan reality in new ways. Nancy's argument that Kiarostami's films mobilize the act of looking, or provide an 'education in looking at the world…that amounts to making the gaze move' (2001, 26) is equally true for the films of Pema Tseden. As I illustrate below, the provocation and activation of *looking* in Pema Tseden's films is furthered by the wide-angles and extreme long takes that I discussed above as part of the aesthetic of *xianchang*. If in *Silent Holy Stones* Pema Tseden's mobilization of looking focuses on provoking the viewer to 'look again,' in *Old Dog*, there is a more radical strategy of looking *at* looking itself to create a realm of disjunctive and mutually incompatible ways of seeing the same thing. These 'eye-opening' (Nancy 2001, 12) strategies are central not only in provoking new ways of seeing Tibet but also to the portrayal of Tibetan landscapes as realms of contested meanings between different subjects. Tseden's films thus open up a field of heterogeneous agency for Tibetans in constructing their own subjectivities and landscapes. These strategies also suggest a form of minority ethnic self-representation in Pema Tseden's films which resists homogenizing and re-naturalizing a singular Tibetan voice, including his own, as representative of an entire 'identity'.

Buddhist 'scapes' in *The Silent Holy Stones*

The Silent Holy Stones (2005) was shot on 35 mm camera and is Pema Tseden's first feature-length film. The film takes place over three days, when a 10-year-old monk at a monastery in mountainous region of Amdo returns to his family village for Losar (the Tibetan new year). The main story centres on the young boy's desire to watch television shows, which increasingly distract him from other activities, including his duties at the

monastery. When he arrives home, he discovers his family's possession of both a television and a VCD box set of the serial drama *Journey to the West*, dubbed from Chinese into Tibetan. The boy is fascinated by this story of Tansen Lama and his companions, including, most famously, the Monkey King, as they journey to India to retrieve sacred Buddhist sutras. The rest of the film follows the boy's quest to not only watch as much of the series as possible, but also to take the television and drama series back to the monastery to show his teacher.

Critics have pointed out that in films such as *Silent Holy Stones*, Pema Tseden constructs a 'positive aesthetics of Buddhism' (Yu 2014, 130; see also Robin 2008). Pema Tseden himself has said that these films aim at 'a cinematic portrayal of Buddhism' by 'focusing on its embodiment, not merely in Tibetans' daily routines and social acts, but also in the Tibetan landscape' (as quoted in Yu 2014, 131). We can see such a portrayal clearly at work in *Silent Holy Stones*, in which the journey of the young monk carries us back and forth between the monastery and his home in the village, through open spaces and roads that are inscribed with different material and cultural aspects of Buddhism. In the monastery, the young lama and his mates both learn the scriptures and practices of Buddhist monkhood, while also being distracted from their studies by entertaining Buddhist tales on television and the radio. On his journey home, the young monk is fascinated by the craftsmanship of an old mani stone carver and secures a promise to take one on his journey back. Once home, though, this fascination is displaced by his first viewing of *The Journey to the West*, which competes as an entertaining pastime with the rehearsals of the classical story of the Bodhisattva prince Drime Kunden that is being performed in the village square (with his siblings as main actors).

Throughout the film, we can see clearly the centrality of Buddhist religious and cultural forms to the material and mental landscapes and activities that form the everyday lives of the characters. But if they are central, the mediums through which they are transmitted, encountered and expressed are heterogeneous. The diversity of the forms and mediations of Buddhist culture, which in this film have to do with the competition between new technologies and commodities and older practices of making, disseminating, and consuming culture, create a range of conflicting desires and new senses of the self and the world for the characters. These heterogeneous Buddhist cultural forms also exist in parallel, sometimes in confrontation, with other cultural, and media 'scapes' (Appadurai 1996, 33). Such parallels and confrontations between different mediations of Buddhist culture or between Buddhism and other forms of contemporary global culture, are evident, for example, in the scene where the same young adults who just finished a heartfelt and emotionally charged performance of Prince Drime Kunden's sacrifices quickly turn the square into a dance space blasting contemporary Tibetan pop music, and end up in a tense fight between a drunken intruder and the young lama's elder brother over his girlfriend. Confrontation is also evident not only in the young lama's desire to take the VCDs of *Journey to the West* to the monastery, but in his conflict over having to lay aside the new plastic mask of the Monkey King he bought at a stall when he joins the other monks in prayers at the monastery. Finally, while the boy and his younger siblings are bored with the stage performance of Prince Drime Kunden's story, it is still the stories of Buddhist heroes and adventures – especially that of Tansen Lama in *Journey to the West* – that they find most alluring: when they sneak off to a dark hut selling seats to a viewing of a popular Chinese

martial arts film, they are not that interested in the film and decide to forfeit the cost of the ticket.

Buddhism in *Silent Holy Stones* is thus neither a form of pristine and enchanting spirituality ready-made for immersion, nor a static symbolic resource. At one level, we could say it is a vulnerable 'regime of authenticity' (Duara 2003, 29) for contemporary Tibetan geocultural identity, or a power that acts as a constant locus of identity, producing a deep affect in relation to the pressures of accelerating modes of capitalist consumption and modern mass media. As Yu points out, Buddhism 'is an instrument of identity-reclamation inherently linked with a felt sense of public marginality, and nostalgia, and is contentious and yet entangled in the…modernizing landscape' (2014, 129). Yet, if *Silent Holy Stones* posits Buddhism as an order of authenticity, however vulnerable, it is not one that is denied agency in the public realm (as Duara [2003, 31] notes is essential to the power of such regimes); it is not passive or immutable. Rather, it is an active constant that may respond to, enrich, but also confront and challenge, as much as it is confronted and challenged by, other cultural or political-economic regimes, including those of secular capitalist modernization (Shakya 2008, 80). The interplay between the representations of Buddhism as a set of practices under threat and of it as a flexible cultural agent is suggested in the film in one of the final scenes. The young lama stands for a long time, clutching only the empty box of the *Journey to the West* series and breathing uncomfortably through his ill-fit Monkey King mask as he watches his father disappear up the road with the television and the VCDs, and as the sound of the New Year's prayers at the monastery beckon below. While this scene, at first glance, suggests a tense either/or confrontation, almost to the point of breakdown, in the end, there is a different suggestion – that of possible integration. The young lama returns to his room to change into the correct robes for prayers, but just before he leaves he puts his mask inside his robes. We finally see him hurriedly, perhaps happily – though we are not given access to his emotional state, as he is viewed from a distance – running to join the prayers.

The lack of a singular or definitive narrative (either dislocation or compromise, for example) encapsulating such confrontations, forms part of Pema Tseden's cinematic technique of representing contested Tibetan landscapes. Pema Tseden's films have become known for their use of a very still camera, long takes and wide-angle shots. Critics more familiar with Tibetan Buddhism point to how such techniques are representative of Buddhist aesthetics or concepts (see, e.g. Yu 2014, 136; Robin 2008; Barnett 2015, 148). Pema Tseden himself has discussed that his use of long takes is partly inspired by Tibetan Buddhist arts, such as Thangka paintings, in which entire stories and reflections on human relations and the human condition can be told within one setting, or environment (2010b, 'Soul Searching'). Here, I would argue that they are also aimed at opening up new ways of seeing Tibetan landscapes and lived realities. Two aspects of his technique, as they work in *Silent Holy Stones* are worth mentioning. The first includes both the almost documentary realism of the visual portrayal and the use of natural sound, especially on journeys to and from places. Both of these imbue the film images with sensory lived experience of landscapes, undercutting the wide circulation of heavily symbolic, dreamy and romantic imagery of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism in cinema and photography. The second technique is the stillness of his camera, often so still that one senses its presence as an observer that is perhaps separate from the viewer. The extreme example of this is in a very long scene of a sheep trying to jump back over a fence in *Old Dog*, in which the

practice of not containing through symbolization the contingencies of living spaces and the duration of activities that Luke Robinson has examined as part of the aesthetic of location in contemporary Chinese documentary filmmaking (2013, 30; see also, 2010, 181), comes to the fore in Pema Tseden's own practice. However, even the more gentle use of this technique of a very still and distant camera in *Silent Holy Stones* invites an active gaze on the part of the viewer over what is happening in the image – the details of the setting, the dialogue, characters, sounds and their interactions. We see multiple objects and types of activity in any one space, and gain a sense of the possibility of different desires, visions and imaginations of that space by different figures in it. No space is configured by any singularity, be that material, cultural or psychic, but is rather heterogeneous and configured by multiple forces and subjectivities.

One particular example from *Silent Holy Stones* is a scene in which the young monk is sitting with his younger brother on a stone bench outside the family home and they are looking at the brother's school books in Chinese. This scene, with its backdrop of treeless mountains, the attention to the monk in his robes sitting beside his brother who is in a t-shirt and trousers, and the dialogue in which the younger brother says that learning Chinese is good because it will help him get a job in the city later (contrasting with the young monk's pending journey to Lhasa to accompany his teacher on a pilgrimage), can be read as what Carlos Rojas has called, in a discussion of the Sino-Tibetan writer Alai's story 'Haunted' (Yougui 有鬼), a 'geographical palimpsest' (2010, 121). As Rojas shows, in narrating a non-linear and 'rather complicated' history of a small town's place within different conceptual borders, languages, and imagined political and cultural communities, Alai's narrator suggests a layered geographical history and psychic geography (122) that prevents a single, definitive story (of a ghost in this case) to be told. We can see a similar strategy in this scene from *Silent Holy Stones*, which places the village within different geopolitical and geocultural scales and histories as well as in multiple imagined/desired trajectories – between, for example, the place of Tibet within the PRC, the encounter and confrontation with Buddhist teachings and secular Sinicized education, and the particular physical terrain where this dialogue occurs. In this scene, the technique of layered material and imagined geographies does not work so much through symbolization as through setting into motion a series of complex interactions between the brotherly dialogue, the landscape and the viewers' gaze on both through the length and distance of the shot's composition.

The position of Tibet, and Tibetans, in layers of contested conceptual, psychic and material geographical histories that continue to make their presence felt, is also suggested by a sequence of scenes in *Old Dog*. The first part of the sequence, which takes place during a conversation in a restaurant, radically foregrounds disjunctive modes of looking at Tibetan landscapes – between the two subjects in the restaurant, the camera, and the audience. While I will return to the meticulous composition and effects of this scene below, here I point to the scene immediately following, in which the camera briefly rests on a television set playing a re-run of the 1963 film, The *Serf* (Nongnu 农奴, dir. Li Jun [1963]), one of a genre of socialist realist films narrating Tibet's 'liberation' by the Chinese Communist Party (see, for e.g. Frangville [2011–2012] for more on these films). The camera then turns to the two characters who cursorily look at the screen before switching the channel. *The Serf* is a key text for the imagination of Tibet in China, while also being part of a larger historical archive of depictions of Tibet from the outside. Pema Tseden himself

has often alluded to this film and its currency in the dominant imagination of Tibet in the PRC, and as a mode of perceiving Tibet that he hopes his films can challenge (see, for e.g. 2010b, 'Soul Searching' ; see also Frangville [2011–2012, 10] for more on the continued currency of this film, including as part of the inauguration of 'Serfs Emancipation Day' in China in 2009). The brief glance of *The Serf* in this scene furthers the depiction of contested Tibetan landscapes and gazes on those landscapes that the sequence as a whole sets into motion (as I show below). But, in this scene, unlike the one in *Silent Holy Stones*, the relationship between these contested gazes is not necessarily one of equality and simple heterogeneity. The scene suggests the vulnerability of Tibetan agency in determining meaning, even as it calls for a re-education of the audience's gaze towards Tibet by both referencing and decentring the dominant scripts that continue to write it. Indeed, if *Silent Holy Stones* creates new ways of engaging Tibetan Buddhist landscapes and subjectivities by provoking active contemplation on their possibly multiple interactions, such strategies become bolder and starker, and the landscapes more contested, in *Old Dog*. In this second film, the mobilization of the act of looking itself is foregrounded.

Old Dog and the mobilization of looking

Old Dog (2011), shot on DV camera, is a tale of intergenerational tension between a father and son whose sheepherding livelihood on the grassland is juxtaposed yet closely connected to a bleak frontier town undergoing a constant process of construction. The story's central tension is over the son's attempt to sell the family's nomadic mastiff dog, which can fetch high prices (due to the consumer fad of urban Han Chinese elite for the dogs, which is only alluded to, not made explicit in the film), and the father's refusal of this scheme because mastiffs are at the core of sheepherding practices and culture in the area. The son fears that if the family does not sell the dog on its own, it will be stolen anyway, as has happened to most of the other herding families in the area. This conflict over livelihood is heightened by the son Gonpo's seeming attraction to the life of the town, expressed by his love of drinking in the bars and playing games of pool on the street, and his seeming inability to father a child with his wife Rikso. In *Old Dog*, the sense of confrontation – in terms of cultural and economic life-worlds – is much stronger than in *Silent Holy Stones*. The landscapes in this film also compete with each other much more – between the ugly frontier town with its constant noise and construction, and muddy and unpaved main street; the rather desolate and windswept grassland dotted with abandoned ruins and fenced in where it hits the busy road; and the sheepherder's home in which father, son and daughter-in-law do not speak to each other very much and all absently watch Chinese-language programmes or advertisements peddling fake luxury goods. If *Silent Holy Stones* suggests the vulnerability of Buddhism as regime of authenticity amidst the forces of new media and popular culture, modernization and sinicization, *Old Dog* centralizes the marginalization of people's livelihoods and Tibet's position in the national political economy.

In this film, the greatest visual marker of this political-economic regime is the road, which carries Gonpo on motorbike, and his father on horseback, back and forth between home and town in their confrontation over whether or not to sell the family's dog. The road embodies the confrontation between different economic regimes and modes of livelihood on its own as well – with herds traversing, baby animals playing and lorries laden

with construction materials all competing on the same space. The sounds of the road also reveal this competition – rumbling wheels, plodding hoofs, bleating animals and roaring motors. Finally, the road also opens up to new social behaviours and new personal possibilities: Gonpo heads to the town with the dog in order to make a few extra bucks but also to get drunk and play billiards; the father sends the young couple to the hospital to see if the doctors can tell them why they cannot have a child. Like the road, the town and the grassland are both also spaces in which the natural, built (the ruins, the wire fence), different economic (external consumer market for commodities such as the dogs, and the sheep herding economy of the grassland inhabitants, for example) and psychic, landscapes confront, disrupt, misdirect and only sometimes accommodate each other.

These landscapes are composed through extreme long takes and wide-angle shots, but also by positioning the camera in ways that disconnect what it sees from what the characters themselves may see. If the landscapes in this town do project symbolic associations (metonymic and metaphorical) to larger processes of economic development and marginalization, it is not clear what the meanings or destinations of those symbols are for everyone; the consensus behind symbolic associations is constantly deferred. The camera does not take an authoritative or objective position but acts as only one of the viewing subjects of any landscape, all of whose ways of seeing are mobilized and brought into possible confrontation. Two examples of this technique are significant: first are several scenes with Gonpo, especially one where he is waiting by the road for his wife to finish her appointment at the hospital. The shot is taken from behind Gonpo, placing him within the noisy and busy landscape of the road. The camera allows the viewer to not only focus on Gonpo but also on all the other activities occurring around him. But then, the position of the camera suddenly switches to the front of Gonpo, who is shown to be silently gazing at the very same scene the camera had been observing only a second before. The switch raises the question of whether or not he is seeing exactly what the camera and the viewers had seen, and even whether or not what the camera had shown was actually from the perspective of Gonpo.

The second example is more exemplary of a technique of disjunctive seeing and the mobilization of looking. It is the scene with Rikso's brother (the policeman) and the father having a meal inside a small restaurant in the town, which I briefly mentioned earlier. The shot is taken from outside the restaurant and is mediated by the reflection in the glass of the sliding doors of the restaurant. We can see the two men through the window, but their faces blend into the reflection of the street outside, the buildings opposite, a glimpse of the mountains in the distance and the half-peeling Chinese characters pasted on the doors. Despite the fact that the scene is taken from the outside, we can clearly hear the two men talking and the clinking of dishes in the restaurant, as if we, too, were inside. But, we also hear the constant noise from the street (horns, wheels rumbling, animal noises, hammers, etc.). There is thus a disjuncture between the aural and the visual landscapes here. Just as we realize this discrepancy, the camera switches to a position behind the two men inside the restaurant and we see what was a moment ago reflected in the glass to be the view that they have from the table. There is no gap in hearing their conversation. Again, what we have here is a question of who is seeing the landscape, from what perspective is it being viewed and what does it mean to the viewers we are seeing with, or watching as they see?

As with *Silent Holy Stones*, Pema Tseden here reveals contested Tibetan landscapes through a technique in which 'looking and the real together are mobilized' (Nancy 2001,

26), and *made mobile*. As Nancy argues, setting up the act of *looking at others looking* suggests 'what is real is therefore multifaceted' (26). At one level, then, *Old Dog* takes a critical view on the realities of the Tibetan region's rapid integration into China's deepening 'geographies of inequality' (Yeh and Lama 2013, 136) – as the site of developmentalist projects, and natural resource extraction and commodity production for different national and global markets. If *Old Dog* suggests, as Yeh and Lama do, that 'Tibetans are simultaneously the beneficiaries of increased income from state projects and sustained by the ongoing production of middle-class and elite urban Chinese consumer tastes desires, and also subject to positions of ever greater precariousness and vulnerability' (2013, 136), it also de-naturalizes the meanings of these changes and different positions for its characters, leaving them open to negotiation, tension, contradiction and struggle.

In both *Silent Holy Stones* and *Old Dog*, then, we have a politics of the image that renders Tibetan landscapes mobile and multiple and that gives a heterogeneous, if at times precarious, agency to Tibetan subjects as the inhabitants/viewers/makers of these landscapes. Pema Tseden's films open up this realm of agency to Tibetans in determining their own lives and futures, without circumscribing or even suggesting what forms that agency will take or where it will lead. The camera/filmmaker and audience viewers are not given complete access to the interpretations, emotional constructions or responses of the Tibetan subjects, thus suggesting that they are complex, conflicted beings without a single response or relationship to their surroundings. In other words, if Pema Tseden's films are acts of cultural self-representation – Tibetans taking control of their own images – they resist the setting in place of new boundaries on the modes in which Tibetan self-representations can be articulated. His cinematic constructions of contested landscapes suggest that he is resisting the creation of a new set of fixed and static images that reveal another completely knowable 'truth' of Tibet.

Conclusion: reconsidering the cultural politics of the 'minor'

By way of a conclusion, let me return to the questions I posed at the beginning about the stakes involved contemporary Tibetan acts of cultural self-representation within a field of contradictory discourses around Tibet as geographical and economic periphery and Tibetans as minority ethnicity in the PRC. In my analysis of Pema Tseden's films, I have suggested that they not only attempt to create a new visual lexicon for representing Tibet but also open up spaces for multiple Tibetan subjects to determine their own meanings, without subsuming those voices into a singular narrative. While focusing on Pema Tseden's films, I have also suggested the ways in which they are situated within a larger sphere of contemporary Tibetan cultural productions that are especially taking up new media technologies as a means of making, expressing and recording Tibetan culture. Finally, I have, if only tentatively, suggested ways in which Pema Tseden's films and this larger sphere of contemporary Tibetan cultural production in the PRC can be read alongside, and speak to, what scholars working in other contexts have noted as new forms 'cultural activism' (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002, 8) or cultural renaissance (Martin-Jones 2010, 156) by minoritized ethnic, cultural, or linguistic groups, through their deployment of new media technology and film since the 1980s. This scholarship has looked at these forms of minority cultural activism as opening up possible new scripts of belonging, or forms of 'cultural citizenship' in national or other communities within which they are

positioned (Ginsburg 2010, 85, 88), as much as they explore and recover submerged cultural forms for their own communities. I would argue that Pema Tseden's films, especially through foregrounding disjunctive modes of *seeing* the images his films present, may also propose such possibilities – especially in his engagement with a diverse range of audiences in Tibet, China and abroad. In considering the ways contemporary Tibetan cultural production, and Pema Tseden's films in particular, may redefine categories of 'minority ethnicity' (*shaoshu minzu*) and 'minority film' (*shaoshu minzu dianying*) in the PRC, it is not only the context of a vertical national-local, domination-resistance relationship that becomes most relevant. Indeed, in his project of 'making a new system of culture', which I have interpreted as a project of 'making culture' independently of the dominant cultural scripts that have underwritten the imagination of Tibet in the contemporary PRC, we can turn to the range of cinematic styles and languages that Pema Tseden brings together in his films. In exploring more closely the way his film language deploys, develops and brings together concepts from Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese documentary film practices, and the work of Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, the project of 'making a new system of culture' takes new and productive dimensions that decentre dominant scripts and static authenticity responses to oppose them. As Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih have suggested, a binary model of above and below, or major-minor, may miss 'the complex and multiple forms of cultural expressions' of minoritized groups, including their investments in mapping new creative terrains of affinity, or their 'micropractices of transnationality' (2005, 7). It is such a field of multiple micropractices of cinematic language and form as part of a project of culture-making in Pema Tseden's films, and the allegiances his work may propose to other contexts of minority cinema or minority cultural practices, that I have here sought to trace.

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