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Pema Tseden and the Tibetan road movie: space and identity beyond the ‘minority nationality film’

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the films of Pema Tseden (པེ་མ་ཚེ་བརྟན།), known in Mandarin as Wanma Caidan (万玛才旦), as road movies. The essay considers the use of the road movie genre as a response to the eclipse of the old ‘minority nationalities’ *shaoshu minzu* (少数民族) category of filmmaking in China, and the rise of the market economy under Chinese neoliberalism. Pema’s films feature male protagonists on repeated journeys to and from certain points, or circular journeys, within the Amdo (ཨ་མདོ།) region of the larger Tibetan cultural territory where Pema grew up. The ‘classic’ 1960s American road movie was considered to be a statement of alienation from American society. While remaining true to the genre’s focus on interrogation of the relationship between society and self and entirely within Tibetan cultural territory and with almost no sign of Han Chinese people, Pema’s films can be understood as asking how Tibetans should respond to the cultural crises brought about by modernization. Furthermore, as they circulate not only in Tibet but across China and through the international film circuit, because they do not offer ready answers, Pema’s films also open up to different understandings of Tibet and being Tibetan.

KEYWORDS

Pema Tseden; Wanma Caidan; Tibet; road movie, identity; minority nationalities; ethnicity

Introduction

Pema Tseden (པེ་མ་ཚེ་བརྟན།) is a Tibetan Chinese filmmaker and author, known in Mandarin as Wanma Caidan (万玛才旦). He comes from and sets his films in an area of Qinghai (青海) Province in the western part of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) called Amdo (ཨ་མདོ།, 安多). Although not inside the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of the PRC, Amdo is one of the main regions in the larger Tibetan cultural realm, which exceeds the TAR.¹ A prolific author as well as filmmaker, Pema is well known as the first Tibetan feature filmmaker, with his debut, *Jingjing de Mannishi/The Silent Holy Stones* (ལྷོང་འཇགས་ཀྱི་མཆོ་རྫོང་འབྲུག་གི་མཆོ་རྫོང་འབྲུག་, 静静的嘛呢石, 2006). What kind of films does Pema make? In the terminology of the People’s Republic, he is a ‘minority nationality’ (*shaoshu minzu*, 少数民族) filmmaker. ‘Minority nationality’ is the standard Chinese government translation into English for the term that designates the smaller ethnic groups living in China alongside the Han Chinese, with the term translated as ‘nationality’ (民族) referring to what could also be

termed in English as ethnicity. However, as I argue here, just because he is a ‘minority nationality’ does not necessarily mean he makes ‘minority nationalities films’ (*shaoshu minzupian*, 少数民族片), a term which refers to a specific type of film popular during the Maoist era and after.

The first section of the essay contrasts Pema’s films to the ‘minority nationalities film’. During the Mao era and into the 1980s, when the film industry was state-owned and directed, these films depicted the 55 recognized minority nationalities of the PRC in ways that communicated the government’s messages about its policies towards them. Today, central control has given way to a market economy and citizen initiative. The minority nationalities are telling their own stories, and Pema’s films need to be understood as emanating from this new context and part of a project of ethnic self-determination and self-fashioning.

With the market economy has come a shift away from classifying films according to themes (*timu*, 题目) in the central plans of the socialist command economy, and the transition to consumer-driven genres (*leixing*, 类型). The second section places Pema’s films in this shift and proposes understanding them as part of the road movie genre. Here, I join other scholars in writing against earlier scholarship that claimed the road movie as an exclusively American phenomenon, and suggest instead that we think about a larger framework within which the American road movie is a variant. Pema’s films are readily understood as part of a global road movie genre. Within this wider understanding of the road movie genre, it is understood that these films focus on questions about society and the relationship of the individual to it, but that this relationship cannot be assumed to be one of alienation and participation in a counterculture.

The third and longest section of the essay therefore examines Pema’s films as using the journey to interrogate the experience of being Tibetan inside the Tibetan areas of the PRC today. I argue that a Tibetan homeland continues to appear in his films, but culture and tradition are being changed and threatened by imports from outside it. His protagonists continue to have a strong relation to the Tibetan land, but their cultural survival and how they should respond, whether understood in terms of preserving traditions or adapting to modernity, is in question.

In the conclusion, I argue this combination of a consistent signification of a culture undergoing transformation by modernity with a variety of different individual responses and no definite assignation of responsibility for the changes that are happening opens Pema’s films up to different interpretations. As his films circulate both inside and outside China and meet a variety of different audiences, they demand attention to the contemporary Tibetan condition. But, in sharp contrast to the old ‘minority nationalities films’, Pema’s films are open-ended in ways that enable the films to travel and open up debate rather than push a particular line.

Minority nationality films and minority nationality filmmakers

‘Minority nationalities films’ were a category of film produced when the film industry was part of the socialist command economy and films were intended to communicate the government’s message to the nation. Their primary purpose was to let the nation know how the government and the Communist Party had liberated the minority nationalities from feudalism and how the Han Chinese majority was assisting the minority nationalities to develop. An often cited key example is the 1963 film *Nongnu/Serfs* (农奴), directed by Li Jun (李俊) in 1963. The main character, Jampa, is employed as a human horse for his

young master. He is rescued from this fate by the Chinese People's Liberation Army when it 'liberates' Tibet, didactically underlining the revolutionary and class struggle dimensions of China's intervention (Berry and Farquhar 2006, 181–184).

In the era of the socialist command economy, films were classified according to 'themes' that corresponded to different policy areas. Today, the market economy has taken over. In the filmmaking arena, that means 'themes' have been replaced by 'genres', which are consumer-oriented ways of classifying films not only according to message but also iconography, style, and more (Berry 1995). This shift in terms can be found in the terminology used in the *China Film Yearbooks* (*Zhongguo Dianying Nianjian*, 中国电影年鉴) published by the China Film Association (*Zhongguo Dianying Xiehui*, 中国电影协会)'s China Film Press (*Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe*, 中国电影出版社). As a result, although the term 'minority nationalities film' is still heard, today it is a commercial form, and Pema's films need to be understood as part of the transformations brought about by the market economy.

This new minority nationality filmmaking can be divided into two tendencies. One extends many of the practices and characteristics of the command economy era, but in commodity form. The films are made primarily for Han majority audiences, often continuing to tell developmentalist stories of Han benevolence towards the backward minorities, which also justify Han domination of non-Han regions in the name of guidance, support, and so forth. Where these films might differ from the command economy era films is in the inclusion of additional market-pleasing elements such as romance.

A highly publicized example is *Hong He Gu/Red River Valley* (红河谷). Directed in 1997 by Feng Xiaoning (冯小宁), a Han Chinese filmmaker, it is set at the turn of the last century against the backdrop of the British invasion of Tibet. The narrative includes the love story of a Han Chinese girl and a Tibetan man. Both roles are played by Han Chinese actors. The larger narrative is about Han Chinese and Tibetans uniting to fight the British imperialist invader. Compared with *Serfs*, not only is romance included, but also in keeping with ideological shifts since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, class struggle has been replaced with anti-imperialist patriotism. Another more commercial example, and in the road movie genre that I am interested in here, is *Zhuan Shan/One Mile Above* (转山), directed by Du Jiayi (杜家毅) in 2011. To fulfil his dead brother's wish, a young Han Chinese undertakes a perilous but also very scenic bicycle trip through Tibet. Colourful ethnic traditions and beautiful landscapes to delight the tourist gaze are found in both films, and both films are made in Mandarin Chinese, emphasizing the primary audience they are directed towards.

The second tendency in minority nationality filmmaking since the development of the market economy is films by ethnic minority filmmakers. These films may have audiences beyond the ethnic minority itself, including inside and outside China. They are part of a wider social process of ethnic minority production of their own subjectivity and culture in the era of the market economy, trade, and globalization. Here, I am using the term 'ethnic minority' to distinguish this era from the command economy era associated with the 'minority nationality' concept. Just as the state has encouraged citizens to take the economic initiative in the new era, so too ethnic minority peoples have taken on the task of attempting to determine their own social identity (see, for example, Litzinger 2000; Schein 2000). This process of self-determination, however, as with all identity projects, continues to be dependent on recognition from those outside the identity group in question, as Jenny Chio has shown in her analysis of the complex negotiation of the production and

commodification of ethnic identity in the tourist economy inside China (Chio 2014). This is particularly the case with those new films, such as Pema Tseden's, which are produced by ethnic minority filmmakers but have a budget large enough to require non-minority audiences as well as local ones.

However, a further distinction needs to be made between those minority nationality filmmakers who operate independently and those who operate within the system, or, in other words, putting their films through the censorship process. Pema Tseden is one of the latter. This is not entirely a matter of choice. The legality of independent filmmaking in China is a grey area, and it exists subject to the toleration of the authorities (Pickowicz 2006). Any social or cultural practice connected to Tibet is considered highly 'sensitive' (*min'gan*, 敏感), and therefore it is hard to imagine that a Tibetan Chinese filmmaker could develop a feature film career independently of the censorship process.

Indeed, Pema trained at the Beijing Film Academy, where he also wrote the script for *The Silent Holy Stones* (Trace Foundation n.d.). This first Tibetan feature tells the tale of a young monk who becomes fascinated by the children's television version of the story about how the Buddhist sutras were brought to China, *Xi You Ji/Journey to the West* (西游记) – or, as it is known in English, *Monkey King* – to the extent that it distracts him from his duties and traditional culture. The film won awards outside China. It also won the Best First Film Award in the 2005 Golden Rooster Awards (*Jin Ji Jiang*, 金鸡奖), often spoken of as China's equivalent to the Oscars, and a Special Jury Award at the Changchun Film Festival the following year (Xinhua 2006). Of course, only films that have successfully gone through the censorship process can be considered for such awards.

To conclude this section, it should be noted that, although Pema is a 'minority nationality' filmmaker working within the system, he is not making 'minority nationality films'. His films are not commissioned by the government, nor does he work for government-owned studios, and his primary target audience is not necessarily Han Chinese. This is not to say that there are no Han Chinese interested in his films or that he does not want Han Chinese audiences. However, as signified by the very use of the Tibetan language in his films, as opposed to the 'minority nationality film' practice of dubbing everything into Mandarin, his priority is making films from within the Tibetan experience. So, if Pema's films are not 'minority nationality films' as that term is usually understood, what are they?

Rethinking road movies

Pema Tseden's dramatic feature films are road movies, or, in a wider sense, journey films. As Robert Barnett has pointed out in a survey of Tibetan moving image production in the digital era, the road movie is a favoured genre among those making dramatic features rather than documentaries or shorter works (2015, 143). In *The Silent Holy Stones*, the young monk journeys back and forth between his home and his monastery. His second film, *Xunzhao Zhimei Gengdeng/The Search* (འཇོམས་མེད་ལྷོ་མེད་ལྷོ་མེད་, 寻找智美更登, 2009), is about a director planning to make a film based on a traditional Tibetan performance piece. As he looks for the right actor, he travels around. *Lao Gou/Old Dog* (ལོ་གུ་, 老狗, 2011) is about an old shepherd and his son. Their Tibetan mastiff has become a very valuable dog in the new market economy. The son tries to sell it in the nearby town, and the film oscillates back and forth between the pastureland and the town, as the old shepherd reclaims his dog and resists the efforts of others to buy or steal it. This favoured pattern of journeying between

two spaces also appears in his *Wucan Shenjian/The Sacred Arrow* (གཡུང་མཚོ་མཚོ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་, 五彩神箭, 2014), a film he has told me in conversation has been his most popular so far with Tibetan audiences in China, but which has not screened outside China as often as his other films. It revolves around an archery competition between two Amdo villages, with resulting journeys between the villages and a nearby town, where a larger competition is held. His most recent dramatic feature, *Talu/Tharlo* (ཐ་ལུ་ཐ་ལུ་, 塔洛, 2015), is in some ways a companion piece to *Old Dog*. It follows a middle-aged shepherd on his journey to town to get a photo made for the identity card he is required to have. There, he meets a woman barber who steals all his money. When his motorbike breaks down on the way home to the pasturelands, he commits suicide.

What does it mean to analyze Pema's films as road movies? What expectations are associated with the genre? In early scholarship, the road movie was considered quintessentially American. David Laderman notes that '... the road movie emerges with distinction through the New American cinema of the late 1960s, as an "independent" film genre, vehicle of anti-genre sensibilities and countercultural rebellion' (2002, 3). In *The Road Movie Book*, Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark argue, 'The road movie is... a Hollywood genre that catches peculiarly American dreams, tensions, and anxieties...' (1997, 2). From this perspective, Pema's films would be excluded simply because they are not American. Including them is part of the process of re-thinking those American-centric presumptions and the associations the road movie carries.

Indeed, it must be acknowledged that even in early work on the topic, fissures appear that break down the American presumption from within. Soon after tracing the emergence of the road movie to the United States in the late 1960s, Cohan and Hark note that it has antecedents in the 1930s Depression movies, which have different characteristics from the post-Beat Generation romantic movies about alienated youth seeking out the freedom of the road (1997, 4). Laderman also acknowledges the late 1960s American road movie's borrowings outside the United States, from Fellini, Bergman and French New Wave films (2002, 5). At this point, the idea of American origin becomes tenuous.

The late 1960s American road movie might have been the trigger for critical attention to the genre, but instead of being the origin or the defining model for the genre, we need to think of it as a cycle in a larger genre we might call the journey film. This logic underlies a wave of more recent scholarship that has gone beyond the United States. Examples include Susan Luckman's work on Australia (2010), Devin Orgeron's work that goes back to Muybridge and extends out from America to Kiarostami (2007), Polona Petek on Slovenia (2010), Kerstin Pilz on Italy (2003), Lucian Georgescu on Romania (2012), and Sarah Brandellero on Brazil (2013). In the introduction to their anthology on the European road movie, Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli speak about them as 'travel films', noting that not only do European road movies pre-date the American cycle of the late 1960s, but also they go back to the very beginnings of cinema, and may involve travel by other means than the private car, obstacles as well as the open road, and other variations (2006, 3–5).

However, while Mazierska and Rascaroli note that the contemporary European road movie differs from its American counterpart, they also acknowledge that Laderman's work has pinpointed a 'constant generic core: the journey as cultural critique, as exploration of society and of self' (2006, 4). Mazierska and Rascaroli claim Laderman's core also applies to the European films examined in their book. Is this core also to be found in Pema's films, and if so what perspectives do they offer on culture, society and self?

To explore those larger issues, I derive my approach from the new directions in the research on road movies. What used to be considered set features of the genre are now variables. Therefore, I propose the following questions to differentiate types of journey film, and use them to interrogate Pema's films in the next section:

1. Where does the travel happen? What sort of physical topography does it traverse? What sort of human social geography is explored?
2. What is the nature of the travel? Is it untrammelled and free, or full of obstacles?
3. What is the route? What is the place of departure and what is the destination?
4. What is the mode of transport?
5. Who travels? And, where the mode of travel requires driving, who drives the vehicle?
6. Why do people travel?
7. How do the cinematic qualities of the films relate to the narrative and the mise-en-scène?
8. What do these films say about self and cultural identity?

Pema Tseden's journey films

This section of the essay undertakes a closer analysis of Pema's features by answering the questions above. Because *Sacred Arrow* has circulated less widely, my comments on it are briefer. The analysis shows that, as well as being films about the transformation of Tibetan culture by modernity, Pema's films depict this process through narratives about Tibetan men traversing their homeland, which the journeys inscribe and survey. Whether this homeland can be considered 'national' and in what sense will be considered again towards the end of the essay.

1. Where does the travel happen?

All Pema's films are set in the part of the Amdo region where he was born, and although the travel is from settlement to settlement, the distinctive high-plateau Tibetan landscape is traversed repeatedly with striking shots of the protagonist set against the landscape.

2. Is the travel free or blocked?

There are no frontiers, boundaries or checkpoints encountered on the journeys. There are two exceptions to this pattern. First, in *The Search*, the filmmakers searching for a lead actor run into situations where their car journey is blocked by goats or yaks crossing the road. Second, in *Old Dog*, we see fences that have been set up to mark out individually owned or controlled pasture lands. The idea of encroaching privatization and enclosure of open space is communicated particularly powerfully in one very celebrated scene later in the film, where a sheep has become separated from the flock and struggles during a very extended long take to find a way back through the fence to join the others. Both examples communicate the tension between modernity and tradition. Even at the end of *Tharlo*, when the eponymous protagonist's motorbike runs out of fuel or breaks down, although

the symbolism of a failed attempt to be modern is clear, there is no external obstacle to his potential travel by other means.

Prior to *Tharlo*, when the protagonist tries to arrange his identity card with his local police chief, who is a sympathetic figure, there are no encounters with the officials of the PRC in any form. In this regard, Pema's films can be contrasted with Zhu Rikun's independent documentary, *Dang'an/The Dossier* (档案, 2014), the second half of which follows Tibetan Chinese poet Woesser and her Han Chinese husband Wang Lixiong as they drive along the highway from Beijing to Lhasa and encounter numerous checkpoints along the way. Not only are there no such encounters in Pema's films, but also his protagonists do not take journeys that cross the frontiers of the nation-state. The travel effectively traces, establishes and surveys a homeland space that they appear to have more or less untrammelled access to.

How should we understand this cinematic imagination of the space of Tibet in Pema's films? One could easily imagine criticisms that this does not represent the reality of internal police and military checkpoints, the open-cast mining and forestry industries, and the influx of Han Chinese migrants that are widely understood to be part of contemporary Tibetan life. A plausible realist response would be that Amdo is not as developed as the region around Lhasa, and also that both of his first two films are set up to twenty years ago, when the territory was calmer and there was less policing. The setting of the first two films in the past can also help to explain the absence of Han Chinese characters.

The recent influx of Hans is also much exaggerated and concentrated in the towns, where the market economy has had greatest impact (Fischer 2008; Ma 2011). The market economy also lies behind the sudden and huge demand from across China for Tibetan mastiffs, which is the premise behind *Old Dog*. And, indeed, it is a Han Chinese businessman called Old Wang in the nearby town who tries to buy the Tibetan mastiff at the beginning of *Old Dog*. He is the only named Han Chinese character in Pema's films. In *Tharlo*, the various policemen the protagonist deals with in his quest to get an identity card are all ethnic Tibetans, even one in town who becomes suspicious when he cannot produce an identity card.

Setting aside questions of realism, the imagination of Tibet in Pema's films remains as a whole and Tibetan territory, with little evidence of Chinese presence, inhabited largely by Tibetans, and still characterized by its magnificent physical landscape. As such, all of the films could be said to mark out a Tibetan cultural and physical territory as the implied patrimony of the lead characters, in the process asking questions about the future of that relationship between the people, their land and their culture.

3. What is the route?

Each film has a different journey pattern. However, all the journeys are return trips rather than one-way departures. *The Silent Holy Stones* could be said to be a three-act film. The first part takes place in the monastery, the second in the young monk's hometown where he returns for New Year, and the third back at the monastery after he returns with the videos of *Journey to the West*, featuring the Monkey King. The three sections are linked by the journeys between the places, which he undertakes accompanied by his father. Each journey is interrupted by a stop at the home of Zoba, the old man who carves the holy stones – the *mani*. On the way out, we discover that Zoba's son has moved to

Lhasa and has not returned for New Year. On the way back, it turns out that Zoba has died. Again, this is part of the story of the eclipse of traditional practices.

The second film, *The Search*, is circular. More precisely, it starts out with the promise of a circle, but the circle is not completed. The film begins with the filmmakers already on the search for an actor to play the part of the self-sacrificing hero in a film version of the national drama, *Drime Kunden* (the *Zhimei Gengdeng*/智美更登 of the Mandarin title). They discover a woman suitable for the lead female role of *Drime Kunden*'s wife. But she insists that she will only play the role if they can get her boyfriend to take the male lead. He has gone to town to become a schoolteacher – another example of the impact of modernity. She insists on joining them on the journey. This sets the film up to be circular, with the filmmakers travelling out on an arc that will lead to the schoolteacher and then bring him and the young woman back to act in the film.

But this is not what happens in *The Search*. Instead, as they travel on, looking for actors and for her boyfriend, one of the men in the car – a confident Tibetan businessman – tells the story of his first love, which stands as a kind of counterpoint to the young woman's story. By the end of the film, the schoolteacher has been found but the roles have not been cast, and we are still on the road somewhere, but not back where we began. The lovers have not been reunited, and the director is confused about what kind of contemporary man could play the role of *Drime Kunden*, which the film has communicated to us is the traditional Tibetan male ideal.

Old Dog oscillates between three spaces. There is the space of the farm, where the old man and his Tibetan mastiff live with his son and daughter-in-law. Then there is the space of the town, where the efforts to sell the dog and the old man's determined efforts to get his dog back take us. But there is also a third space – an old ruin up in the pasturelands, where the old man and the dog retreat. This third location is a bit like the space of the *mani* stone maker in *The Silent Holy Stones*, and it suggests that Tibetan tradition is located not in settled modern spaces but out in the landscape of the high plateau.

The journey in *Tharlo* is another variation on the journey between two spaces with an in-between third space, like the farm in *Old Dog* and Zoba's tent in *The Silent Holy Stones*. The film opens in a police station, which turns out to be the in-between point. Tharlo is a shepherd who lives up in the hills, and Police Chief Dorje sends him into town to get a photo for his identity card. He returns, after a one-night stand with a glamorous woman barber in town, and then returns to his sheep in the hills while he waits for the identity card to be made up. After an accident in which wolves kill some of the sheep and one of the owners of the sheep humiliates Tharlo, he follows the suggestion of the woman barber to sell his own sheep and travel. However, she steals his money, he returns to the police station, and then heads up to the hills and his death. There is no doubt that the town is the site of modernity in *Tharlo*, as in *Old Dog*, with karaoke parlours, photographic studios and barbershops. However, the high plateau is not a space of pure tradition in *Tharlo*, because the beautiful landscape shots are dominated by huge electricity pylons.

Although the journeys in all these films are different, they share the quality of promising completeness and stability by returning to the same point. Yet these promises are not realized. *The Search* sets out to complete a circle, but never does. The journeys back and forth in *The Silent Holy Stones* and *Old Dog* suggest repetition. But what we discover is that things keep changing, and change is precisely the condition of modernity. Furthermore, in these four films, not fulfilling the promise is signals not only the impact of

modernity but also damage to traditional culture. In *The Silent Holy Stones*, Zoba dies and we infer the video culture of the city will change the traditions of the monastery. In *The Search*, it is unclear if the heroic qualities embodied by Drime Kunden can be found in the modern era. Indeed, as the characters discuss, those qualities may appear too gruesome to be considered heroic anymore today, because Drime treats his wife and children as his possessions to be sacrificed in a demonstration of his selflessness. In *Old Dog* and *Tharlo*, the impacts of modernity are manifold and manifested in each journey back and forth. In *Old Dog*, they range from the attempts to steal the old man's dog to the medical investigation that implies the impotence of his son, and his resistance to change is signified by his final decision to kill his own dog rather than see it stolen or sold. In *Tharlo*, the very requirement to get an identity card is a mark of modernity as are so many things he encounters in town, leading ultimately to his destitution, and then his suicide.

Sacred Arrow also features repeated journeys, between two villages, and between the villages and the nearby town. But what marks this film out from his other films as more clearly optimistic is that the change the journeys bring is positive; it leads to resolution of the conflict between the villages through the transformation of the inter-village competition into a modern archery contest.

4. What is the mode of transport?

In *The Silent Holy Stones*, the little monk and his father travel mostly on a horse or walk. In the case of *The Search*, the journey is by Beijing Jeep. In *Old Dog*, the old man travels on horseback or walks, but his son travels on a motorbike, as do the younger generation in *Sacred Arrow* and the protagonist in *Tharlo*. The differing modes of transport are another marker of modernity and change.

However, it is noteworthy that there is no simple equation between villains and modern transport. The younger generation riding motorbikes may be less wedded to tradition than the older generation, but there is no indication that they wish to destroy it. Tharlo is also a motorbike rider. The filmmakers in *The Search* conduct their quest in a Jeep, but, at least in principle, their aim is not to destroy tradition but to disseminate it through the modern form of film. Zoba dies in *The Silent Holy Stones*, and there is no question that the old ways are passing, too. But the younger generations are not so much active perpetrators as those who face the challenge of how to negotiate this change. In *The Search*, there is a clear self-referential element, with Pema recognizing that his own profession is inescapably modern, and the question becomes what he is going to do and what his actions and those of other younger Tibetans like the young monk in *The Silent Holy Stones* or the son in *Old Dog* are going to produce as modern Tibetan culture and identity.

5. Who travels?

Robert Barnett terms the larger cycle of Tibetan road movies 'Tibetan Masculinities on the Road' (2015, 143), and indeed, the protagonists undertaking the journeys in all of Pema's films so far are also male. Barnett points out that 'At the center of all these films is the crisis of Tibetan manhood in the modern context' (146). However, Pema's protagonists, 'while equally driven by troubling questions, are not tormented by them' (150). Neither do they display any of the counter-cultural alienation of the late 1960s American

road movie. Nevertheless, the male survey of his patrimonial territory is common in the road movie genre as a whole, and it applies to Pema's films, too.

In Pema's films so far, there is often more than one man on the journey, and certainly a number of different men are encountered. In *The Silent Holy Stones*, the young monk is accompanied by his father, but, more importantly, he encounters Zoba. When we hear of the latter's abandonment by his son, we might wonder how the young monk will behave in the future. In *The Search*, the businessman serves as a counterpoint not only to the idealized traditional man, Drime Kunden, but also to the director. And in *Old Dog*, the father and son form a clear contrast, and the film follows each of them separately on their journeys, positioning us as much with one as the other. In *Sacred Arrow*, the narrative is driven by a rivalry between two young archers. However, *Tharlo* marks an interesting departure, because here, for the first time, the primary relationship is between a man and a woman. Indeed, he meets not only the female barber Yangtso, but also the female owner of the photographic shop and the female owner of the store where he buys his supplies. The space of the town is marked as both modern and female.

On the whole, female roles in Pema's films are conventional, in patriarchal terms. Teresa de Lauretis has pointed out that in mainstream Euro-American narratives, women are 'inscribed in hero narratives, in someone else's story, not their own; so they are figures or markers of positions — places and topoi — through which the hero and his story move...' (1984, 109). This patriarchal model and its pattern in relation to travel are also largely applicable to Pema's films. For example, *The Silent Holy Stones* is not only male-dominated, as might be expected with a film about a monastery, but also the only significant female character is the little monk's mother. She is associated with his home, where she is always waiting to welcome him and cook for him. In *Old Dog*, the daughter-in-law only gets to leave the farm when her husband takes her into town for a fertility check. Even in *The Search*, the young woman only gets to leave her village because the director comes along and takes her with him on his search for her ex-boyfriend.

However, this woman in *The Search* is a more unusual character, and not only because her demands determine the direction of the journey. She refuses to show her face and stands apart from the group. Furthermore, the camera repeatedly moves away from the male group to focus on her and her movements, and, in one case, the tears in her eyes. She is therefore the first female character in Pema's works to have an autonomous narrative role in her own right. There is also a parallel between her holding herself apart from the process of the film production and what, at the end of the film, we discover is the director's own growing doubts. Not only does she embody his doubts, but also she is ahead of him. The daughter-in-law in *Old Dog* also has her own moments of quiet intervention in the narrative, as when she is shot standing in the doorway to the farmhouse on the morning after the son has been drinking. The reverse shot of the son's motorbike on its side prefigures the revelation of his impotence, and also suggests that the wife is well ahead of the father in understanding his failings.

This deployment of the female characters and their look at the male protagonists to create a questioning distance is taken to a whole new level in *Tharlo*. As is conventional, the male Tharlo moves and the female Yangtso is associated with place, in this case the town and her shop. But she wants to travel, and, just as the young woman in *The Search* expresses a desire to go on the journey with the film crew, she hopes that Tharlo will be her ticket out of town. However, when they argue after he returns with money and that

prospect weakens, she steals his money and travels on her own. Although we do not follow her travels, this makes her a highly ambivalent character. On the one hand, she is a much more independent woman than any other we have seen in Pema's previous films. And faced with Tharlo's patriarchal disapproval of her short hair and smoking, and the attempts of other men in town to control her at an evening concert they all attend, it is easy to see why she cannot resist the temptation to take the money and run. On the other hand, stealing his money not only renders him destitute and underlines his failure to adjust to modernity, but also marks women (and modernity) as deceptive and destructive.

Further complicating our feelings about her, like the young woman in *The Search* and the daughter-in-law in *Old Dog*, the cinematography aligns us with Yangtso's perspective. Approximately 27 minutes into the film, from inside a shop on the other side of the street we see Tharlo exit the photographer's studio. This is confirmed as the barber's shop when Yangtso walks forward and enters screen right to look at him. From this point on, shots of Tharlo from inside the barber's shop are associated with Yangtso and her mixed feelings about him and his money. She is attracted to him, but also sees him as a rube. Towards the end of the film at 107 minutes, from inside the barber's shop we see Tharlo exit the photographer's studio and look across one last time before riding his motorbike back to the police station outside town. Although Yangtso has long gone, this shot is still associated with her perspective, and although it in no way undermines our sympathy for Tharlo, it also makes us aware of how the modern world sees him as a sucker.

6. Why do people travel?

Most of the male protagonists appear to be travelling in order to maintain tradition. The young monk in *The Silent Holy Stones* returns to his family for lunar New Year celebrations. The filmmaker in *The Search* is trying to film a classic Tibetan drama. The farmer in *Old Dog* goes to town to get his dog back and return it to guarding the sheep. In *The Sacred Arrow*, it is the age-old inter-village archery contest that triggers the travel. But in *Tharlo*, the shepherd is travelling to meet the demands of the modern world upon him. Indeed, his submission to the modern order is marked in an extraordinary opening sequence where he stands in front of the 'Serve the People' (为人民服务) slogan in the police station and recites a long passage from Mao by heart. This, and the song that Yangtso sings in the karaoke, is the only Mandarin heard in the film. Yet, Tharlo's submission to the modern state is not enough enable him to survive in modernity. Ironically, after Yangtso has shaved all his hair off in a Samson and Delilah-like episode, police chief Dorje says he cannot even give Tharlo his identity card because he no longer resembles the photo he went specially into town to have taken for it.

As in most road movies, these male protagonists encounter complications that block the protagonists from reaching their goal and extend their journey, as has been noted in the third sub-section above, on routes taken. In the process, a tension between modernity and tradition is revealed in all the films, but not one that can be seen as a simple opposition between the negative and the positive. As a result, the original purpose changes. The little monk is eager to see his family, but he is even more eager to see the family's new television. When he goes to watch a local performance of *Drime Kunden* – the very same drama the director is trying to cast in *The Search* – he gets bored and leaves to try and watch a martial arts movie screening. But if Tibetan tradition seems threatened, this is

complicated by the fact that the video that interests him the most is the bringing of the sutras to China from India – so much so that he determines to bring it back to the monastery, where it excites much interest from the other monks.

In *The Search*, the effort to cast the film fails. But along the way, the director has had a lot of thought-provoking experiences and discussions about traditional values and modernity. When the characters question Drime Kunden's right to sacrifice his family, a trip that appeared to be about casting turns into a more philosophical interrogation about Tibetan modern identity and masculinity. What starts in *Old Dog* as a journey to town to rescue the dog and restore it to its original role ends as a journey up into the hills to kill it rather than see it traded among rich city folk as a commodity pet. Here, the farmer's motivation changes from resisting modernity to protesting against its inexorability. In *The Sacred Arrow*, what started out as competition ends up, thanks to the modern version of the archery contest as sport, as cooperation. Tharlo sets out to comply with modernity's demands by getting an identity card, but is diverted by Yangtso, who embodies all of modernity's temptations, and ends up losing everything. When he lights the dynamite that he has bought to scare off the wolves and blows himself up, some viewers may bring their knowledge from outside the film to think of all the young Tibetans who have self-immolated in protest against Chinese rule in recent years. So, in all cases, it can be said that the experience of the journey transforms the traveller and his original aims, often in devastating ways.

7. How is the travel rendered cinematically?

As has already been noted, the narratives follow the protagonists. And, with the notable exception of the scenes where the female perspective is taken up by the camera, the camera follows and is aligned with the male protagonists. However, despite this fairly conventional narrative approach, the kind of Hollywood editing that leads into shot and reverse-shot exchanges between characters and ever more intense close-ups that might be said take us into an identification with the protagonist are eschewed. Instead, the long take and long shot are favoured. The camera tends to stay back, keeping the various characters in the frame, and then it usually cuts around them rather than entering between them. This is even the case in interiors, where it may result in the camera retreating to a corner of the room. In this way, a distance is established, so that, although we are following certain characters, we are observing them rather than called into an identification with them.

The cutting around the action pattern occurs across the famous 180-degree line preferred in Hollywood, and establishes a 360-degree space. Indeed, a very common pattern in Pema's films is the use of the 180-degree cut. Because he is cutting from long shot to long shot and using long takes, there is enough common material in the shots to ensure that this is not disorienting. The first notable use of the 180-degree cut occurs in *The Silent Holy Stones*. A rehearsal of *Drime Kunden* on an outdoor stage in the young monk's home village is shot frontally. The camera cuts 180 degrees to a position behind the actors as the young monk arrives in the courtyard below the stage. This dramatic shift in perspective also reveals a mountain range towering in the background. The use of long shots and 180-degree cuts has the effect of repeatedly placing the protagonists against the backdrop of a larger landscape in Pema's films, especially when they are on their journeys.

The Search and *Old Dog* use the 180-degree cut more frequently. In *The Search*, a pattern is to show the view in front of the car from what appears to be a dashboard-mounted camera. This is then turned around 180 degrees to show the characters in the car. Apart from placing an emphasis on the landscape in front of the car, because we are not seeing over anyone's shoulder, this shot out from the Jeep is not identified as any particular person's perspective. In *Old Dog*, there are frequent 180-degree cuts around the old man and his son as they travel. Another notable use occurs when the old man eats with a policeman in a restaurant. We look at them from outside the restaurant, with the townscape and the mountains behind it reflected in the windows. When we cut 180 degrees behind them, they are silhouetted against the same scene through the window. In *Tharlo*, the frontal long take perpendicular to the action dominates the film, and some of the takes are very long indeed. But the 180-degree cut is not absent, as for example in the karaoke scene where the attendant returns with liquor for Tharlo and we cut 180 degrees from watching him and Yangtso from in front of them to a position behind them from which we can see the attendant enter the room.

Over the shoulder shots, which position the audience very close to a particular character, are rare, as are shots showing a character's subjective perspective. In *The Silent Holy Stones*, there are point-of-view close-ups on various modern media such as radio sets and school textbooks in Chinese. In *The Search*, sometimes the woman or the director gazes out of the Jeep as the businessman is telling his story, and we see their view of the passing landscape. In *Old Dog*, the son repeatedly pauses in his travels to stare, either at animals such as goats in the town and a dog in a cage on top of a truck, or at the mountains beyond the town. And in *Tharlo*, it is the shot from inside the barber's shop, retrospectively marked as from Yangtso's point of view, that enables us to sympathize with Tharlo and also see him as obsolete. All these shots make us wonder what the character authorizing the shot thinks, and so we are also provoked to consider the significance of what is happening.

In these various patterns composing Pema's cinematographic style, the significance of the physical landscape in Tibetan culture is emphasized. Adopting the road movie facilitates a contrast between the travel through and display of the Tibetan land and what is happening to the Tibetan culture in the human settlements. The land appears largely separate from the humanity that lives in it, in contrast to the all the disputes and difficulties of the transition to modernity in the human settlements. But how should we interpret this contrast? Does it imply that human troubles are fleeting in the face of the eternal Tibetan landscape? Does it suggest that the true Tibet is not in the modern spaces of the city – where the mastiff is taken to be sold in *Old Dog* – and instead on the high plateau – where the old man takes the dog to meet its fate? Or, as in *Tharlo*, do we conclude that even on the high plateau there is no escape from modernity, because the landscape shots are dominated by huge electricity pylons?

Conclusion

This essay has shown how Pema Tsenden's films have broken with the old pattern of 'minority nationality' films made in Mandarin by mostly Han Chinese directors and actors to communicate government policy. They have achieved this break by adopting the road movie genre, although they use the trope of the journey through a homeland to

examine the relationship between the protagonist and society. However, unlike the American 1960s films about alienation and the counterculture, Pema's Tibetan movies display a culture in crisis resulting from the encounter with modernity and protagonists who are not so much alienated from their culture as unsure of where it is going, where it should go, and how they should be involved with this process.

By way of a conclusion, I would like to turn from the consideration of the production context that opened this essay and the analysis of the films themselves in the last section to distribution and exhibition. Unlike the old 'minority nationality films', Pema's films are made in Tibetan, signifying a primary target audience of Tibetans. Indeed, a very intriguing question, but one that is beyond this essay, is why Tibetan audiences inside the PRC responded more positively to *Sacred Arrow* than to Pema's other films. But even low-budget feature films would struggle to break even with only Tibetan audiences, and appeal to other audiences is also necessary. Indeed, Pema's films have gone through the Chinese censorship process, maximizing their possibilities of finding Han Chinese and foreign as well as Tibetan audiences.

Because all Pema's films with the exception of *Sacred Arrow* show the decline of traditional practices and culture in Tibet, often with devastating consequences, their critical acclaim in the PRC is sometimes surprising to those outside China, who assume the films must be pointing the finger of blame for this cultural crisis at the Han Chinese. However, it is important to note that Pema's films do not assign direct responsibility for cultural change in Tibet, but simply depict it as a fact. Indeed, the Chinese government news agency, Xinhua, paraphrases Pema as telling them that, 'Tibetans are facing unprecedented changes in their lives. The "collision" between tradition and modernity creates both surprises and confusion' (Xinhua 2006). We can speculate that many Chinese audiences might sympathize, feeling that modernity has also devastated their culture and country. Other audiences might look at the opening seen in front of the 'Serve the People' slogan in Chinese characters in the police station, and believe that the film holds the PRC responsible for delivering modernity and its consequences to Tibet.

Rather than seeing this ambiguity as something to be resolved definitively so that we can see Pema Tsenden's road movies as making a particular point, perhaps ambiguity is an integral part of Pema's filmmaking. By setting up a variety of male characters embodying different responses to modernity and using a style that leads the audience not to identify with any one in particular, the audience is asked to reflect upon these men and the question of what they should do, just as the characters in *The Search* wonder about Drime Kunden and what a Tibetan man should do today.

However, it would also be a mistake to see the films as entirely open to any interpretation. First, the romantic imagination of Tibet through its landscape has appealed not only to Tibetans but also to those outside Tibet – both Chinese and foreign – for a long time, as is well known. This imagination can easily be criticized in terms of Said's idealizing pattern of Orientalism (Said 1978), which wants to imagine the space of the Other as, of course, backward, but also as uncorrupted by modernity – or, in this case, threatened by modernity. However, as I have argued, by not setting up the more modern characters as villains and by showing Tibet as already and inexorably modern, the films discourage romantic projections. The fate of characters such as the older men in *Old Dog* and *Tharlo* suggests modernity cannot be refused.

Second, many foreign audiences might see in the inscription of a territory inhabited by a particular people with a particular language and culture in Pema's films the trace of something they would understand as a nation-state. But maybe it is not so simple. First, the space that the films take place in is not even in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, but in the province of Qinghai. The journeys cover a particular home area in Amdo where Pema grew up. For Chinese audiences, this inscribes them securely into the imagination of one's 'guxiang' (故乡) or ancestral home, as a physical and cultural spot more specific and local than the nation-state (Duara 2000).

Of course, it could be pointed out that so many of the elements of these films are not just Amdo cultural elements, but key elements of Tibetan culture in general. This includes the dog, which is a Tibetan mastiff, the *mani* stones, and the *Drime Kunden* opera. But even if this is in some sense a 'national' culture, we need to remember that in Chinese there are two words for 'nation' – the nation as a territorial state (*guojia*) and the national as a people and culture (*minzu*). The PRC is a state (*guojia*) with fifty-six officially recognized nationalities, or national peoples (*minzu*). Therefore, again, it is quite possible to see the commitment to the Tibetan land and the Tibetan culture in Pema's films as one that has no political implications for the integrity of the PRC as a state.

These different possibilities in the understanding of Pema Tsenden's films enable them to circulate freely inside the PRC and across the international film festival circuit, but their effect is not only pragmatic. Pema's consistent use of the road movie not only enables him to show the crisis of modernity in Tibetan culture, but also affirms that this is an issue for Tibetan men. Pema Tsenden's road movies open up for all audiences the question of what values a Tibetan man should have under modernity and how he should respond to it. And, in the intriguing if alarming figure of Yangtso in *Tharlo*, for the first time Pema begins to suggest how to be modern is also a question for Tibetan women.

Note

1. A report of the United States Congressional-Executive Committee on China (2009) includes a map of that shows both the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures in other provinces of China.

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