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**Reconfiguring Chinese Diaspora through
the Eyes of Ethnic Minorities:
Tibetan Films by Exiles and Residents
in People's Republic of China**

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Abstract

This paper inquires to what extent the experiences of the Tibetan and other ethnic minorities would be counted in the notion of Chinese Diaspora, and examines in what way the diaspora of the ethnic minorities that have not been counted as part of the whole notion can reconfigure the studies of Chinese Diaspora. It also discusses the diasporic consciousness by comparing two different kinds of Tibetan cinema.

Prologue

The Beijing Olympic drew out many different faces of Chinese diaspora, if, indeed, it is legitimate to categorize all those diasporic communities Chinese. During the Olympic torch relay in the early summer 2008, Tibetan exiles in Europe, North America and Japan, and pro-Tibetan demonstrators carried Tibetan flags and attempted to disrupt the torch relay -- sometimes by violent means.¹ A group labeling itself the Turkestan Islamic Party released a video weeks before the August opening of the Beijing Olympics, in which it claimed responsibility for deadly bus bombings in western Yunnan Province and other recent terrorist incidents, and threatened to attack during the Olympic Games. The group is believed to be the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, an underground diasporic separatist organization that advocates independence for the Xinjiang's Muslim Uighur (or Uyghur) inhabitants. In the video, a man identified as Commander Seyfullah speaks in Uighur, stating their intention to target the most critical Olympics venues, and calling for suicide bombings against several targets, including Chinese airports, railways and tourist spots.

Meanwhile, in order to show their support of the Beijing Olympics, large-scale counterprotests by overseas Chinese and foreign-based Chinese citizens were mounted during later segments of the torch relay. Many who supported China hosting of the Games flew Chinese national flags and displayed the Beijing Olympic mascot, Fuwa. In some American and Asian cities along the route, Chinese supporters outnumbered the protesters, and there were reports of skirmishes between protesters and supporters. Protestors complained of being threatened and jostled by pro-Beijing crowds, and anti-Chinese sentiment reportedly loomed after the torch relay. Some furious diasporic Chinese showed they could be as jingoistic as emotional nationalists who never left home – thanks, no doubt, to internet-based Chinese nationalism.

(Mis-)Uses of the Diaspora Notion

If the notion of Chinese diaspora is appropriated by critics to challenge, pluralize, deconstruct, and subvert a hegemonic and homogenous sense of Chineseness, then the state discourse can be said to co-opt and manipulate the same concept in the opposite way. Chinese diaspora has been used by the state to promote a kind of nationalism (which has been proven to be a double-edged sword, as recent nationalist surges in mainland China have left even the government feeling threatened) and cultural identification that the Chinese nation needs -- and by which it (sometimes) benefits -- in order to assert global Chinese solidarity, to improve its image internationally, and extend its transnational cultural influences as it increasingly engages in the global economy and world politics; however, Chineseness can mean very different things (or even sometimes become meaningless) in different cultural, historical, and political contexts. As more and more diasporic Chinese begin to re-embrace their ethnic identities and attempt to build a closer bond with their ethnic homeland in the face of China's potential rise as a new superpower -- or are involuntarily identified as such

for different socio-political reasons -- another kind of ethnic-nationalist drive is being generated by a different sort of “Chinese” diaspora -- that of non-Han ethnic minorities.

I do not intend to make a blanket condemnation of Han chauvinism or Han-centrism by including other ethnic voices in expressions of Chinese diaspora. The Tibetan or Uighur diasporic communities doubtless do not want to be considered Chinese at all. Neither do I attempt only to examine to what role the emigration experiences of non-Han ethnic minorities might play in our understanding of Chinese diaspora studies in an era of Chinese ascendancy, and to investigate in what ways the diasporas of ethnic minorities that have not been usually counted as part of the Chinese whole can reconfigure the concept of Chineseness. Such a so-called academic endeavor may merely be a trap set by the state for its political appropriation. The concept of diaspora that aims at rendering the invisible ethnic groups suppressed by some national hegemony into distinguishable identifiable communities may also contribute to the reification of Chineseness and other marginalized but exotic ethnic characteristics. Such investment in diasporic cultures only leads to the problem of fetishism, which fails to create any alternative site of resistance against hegemonic domination and allows the ruling power to consolidate its domination and exploitation.

One of the most outspoken groups among the fifty-five ethnic minorities identified by the central government since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China is the Tibetan community that went in exile after the failed Tibet Revolt and the Dalai Lama’s flight to India in 1959. It has since won the general sympathy of the Euro-American world and exerted significant pressure on the Chinese government in Sino-Tibetan negotiations over ethnic autonomy. Owing to the charisma and worldwide popularity of Dalai Lama, diasporic Tibetan people are able to hold the r

moral high ground in the ideological battle with China on the international stage. In Tibetan nationalist discourse, China is portrayed as colonizer and victimizer, which has undermined Beijing's efforts to build an image of the nation as a peaceful and responsible power.

The exiled Uighurs, Muslim minorities from north-western China, have been classified by the Chinese government as Islamic separatist terrorists. Though they are by no means as popular as Tibetans in Western media, these accused diasporic Uighurs are high-profile critics of China, and occasionally draw the world's attention to Chinese government's heavy-handed treatment of Xinjiang² – including human rights abuses, prohibition of Uighur-language instruction in schools, and other oppressive policies on the practice of their Islamic religion. The Hmong people – Miao, as they are officially categorized in China – in North America and Western Europe have taken nostalgic journeys back to China in search of connectedness and business opportunities. The Hmong seeking transnational links with the Miao ethnic group have complex feelings about China (since historically many of them were driven out of the country for political reasons); China in turn is also ambivalent about them -- for the state attempts to treat Hmong migrants just like other overseas Chinese, who might come back to invest and help the economy, but at the same time sees them as a political threat, just as it does the diasporic dissenters.

There is almost no encounter, let alone any dialogue, between (Han-) Chinese diasporic scholarships and the diaspora studies of Tibetans, Uighurs or Hmong, just as there is little interaction between Chinatowns and the communities of diasporic Tibetans or Uighurs (one rare exception was the March 2009 die-in protest staged in the heart of London's Chinatown by a group of young Tibetans holding "missing" posters of Tibetan or Chinese victims of Beijing's repressive policies towards those who speak out on the Tibet issue; Chinatown residents remained indifferent). This is

not only because of disciplinary separation (after all, cross-disciplinarity -- or interdisciplinarity -- is a big lie that has long circulated in academia) or of fundamental linguistic barriers, but also because of the very different political stances behind various notions of diasporas. Apparently, the conflicting political stances have not been reconciled and set the two groups hugely apart, but politics are subject to change with encounters among different forces.

In the Chinese case the idea of diaspora has been criticized for abolishing, significant historical differences among the different Chinese populations worldwide -- thus manipulating Chineseness to serve political exploitation, economic class expropriation, and commodification; and also foregrounding ethnicity and race to overshadow all other factors in contemporary political and cultural understanding. Hence, the place-based sense of historicity that asserts local differences must be returned to the diasporic consciousness (Dirlik 2002). To historicize the diasporic imaginary is effectively to debunk the myth of coherence and solidarity that various parties attempt to forge across diverse diasporans. But the historicization of the diaspora notion is a daunting task, and not simply because it requires tremendous effort to trace the evolution of its meaning;³ it also involves the subtle investigation of how the notion has been shaped and captured in various socio-political contexts in order for different groups to construct cultural or political collectivity.

For the Tibetan exile community, the concept of diaspora is a decontextualized means to set aside all differences among Tibetan migrants of multiple sectarian (religious and cultural) groups and regional identities in order to mount a common struggle to return to an imagined Tibet (whose area is much larger than that of Tibet Autonomous Region) that historically has never been governed by Lhasa.⁴ Although the term diaspora may seem to fit the Tibetan case at least in the restrictive sense -- since thousands of Tibetans took refuge in South Asia because of political or religious

coercion and their identity was well established before the dispersal -- there are also many imaginary elements in its social formation (Anand 2003, 214-5). For instance, Tibetan national identity and the uncontested leadership of the Dalai Lama came about only after the failed uprising of 1959. Although postmodern theorization of diaspora empties it of historical specificity and universalizes the notion to celebrate the subjectivities of alienation and hybridity, the Tibetan community in exile cleverly suppresses its internal differences and appropriates the metaphorical sense of diaspora by manipulating the productive elements of the diasporic consciousness and juggling the ideas of “homeland” and “collective identity” as if they were unproblematic categories in order to gain the international sympathy for its political struggle with China. By subsuming all its internal cultural, religious, and historical differences, the community turns its diasporic experiences into a homogenization of its geographically heterogeneous society and the constitution of an imaginary Tibetan subject. The self-essentialization of a unified timeless Tibet that embodies the identity of diasporic Tibetans is born out of the contingency and survival strategies of their exilic experiences.

Self-essentialization and the Entanglement with Chineseness

At a first glance, non-Han ethnic groups exiled from China function precisely as an alienating element within an encompassing sense of Chineseness by creating an internal (or external?) division and rendering anything other than symbolic Chinese wholeness impossible. Hence, Chineseness as the master signifier of the Chinese nation-state is an empty sign, standing for nothing more than an impossible fullness of meaning, insofar as there is no way for its content to be positivized by minority member of the nation. The pluralism or multiplicity of Chinese identities that ostensibly presents more forms of Chineseness to the diasporans simply conceals the

fact that Chineseness is an empty term – and not only for the non-Han.

The diasporans, particularly those ethnic minorities in exile, might easily say no to Chineseness, if to reiterate Ien Ang's famous term (2001), since many minority movements are already located negatively, in that ethnic autonomy always defines itself by saying no. No, says the Tibetan, I am not Chinese. No, says the Uighurs, we are not Chinese, either. Their "Chineseness" is by no means a rigid designator, in the sense that physically they look like Han Chinese, since they do not essentially have the stereotypical racial markers for Han Chinese such as yellow skin or, epicanthic eye folds.⁵ However, it is rather deceptive to claim that Tibetans or Uighurs have an identity separate from Chineseness, particularly when their identity in exile has been founded upon anti-Chinese ideology. Although Chineseness has never been the natural ethnic essence of minorities, these groups are branches of a so-called living tree that is being coercively transplanted: many ethnic minorities have to accept an imposed Chinese identity as their own. Fluidity and changeability of Chineseness are only for the privileged at the cultural center (which is not limited to a geographical sense); the minorities face the problems of naming and the inevitable acceptance of certain names. In other words, the fluidity of Chineseness, in contrast with its reification, is not a deconstructive liberation, but another potential means of control.

Diasporic Tibetans' inescapable entanglement with Chineseness may have to do with a political decision made by the Dalai Lama-led exile government in Dharamsala, India: that they are not seeking Tibetan independence but only genuine autonomy to preserve the unique Tibetan cultural identity in China. The insistence on reclaiming a geographical homeland, no matter how imaginary renders Tibetan exiles both in South Asia and Euro-America not an end in itself but merely a means to an end. Their temporary host countries can never become their permanent homes since their destiny (including that of the foreign-born second generation) is to return to Tibet. A similar

attachment to Chinese-ruled homeland characterizes the Uighur diaspora, although its leaders seek a politically independent state. A free and separate East Turkistan is possible only when there is a single voice for Xinjiang; the area historically has been a multiethnic (including Kazakh, Hui and others). Hence, the Uighur identity (*Weiwuer* in Mandarin), which was created by Chinese warlord Sheng Shicai (1897-1970) in the 1930s and later used by the Chinese Communist Party in order to “discourage a pan-Turkic movement” (Petersen 2006, 65), has to be embraced by the diasporic community in order to manifest a unified front against the Chinese communist regime. As Dru Gladney points out, “The re-creation of Uyghur ethnicity has come full circle: the Chinese nation-state has identified a people who in the last forty years have taken on that assigned identity as their own, and in the process, those who have accepted that identity have sought to define it and exploit it on their own terms” (2000, 248). China is highly relevant to these diasporic minorities, who long for their own homes in lands that are now part of China. Compared to Han Chinese diasporic communities that might identify themselves as distant relatives and prefer to be counted as outsiders or exceptions, minorities-in-exile have a much stronger attachment to this so-called ancestral homeland.

Without a doubt, diasporic situations bring many changes to the ethnic culture of migrants. But the self-essentializing strategies in the Tibetan case should be taken in account. We know that cultural identity is always constituted by particular historical processes and practices; it is a product of socioeconomic negotiations, but definitely not some fixed universal entity. However, Tibetan identity as a historical construct is always portrayed as an eternal Buddhist image in connection with a peaceful and mysterious Shangri-la -- which is on the verge of extinction at the hands of a brutal Chinese regime. In order to espouse their nationalist cause, to gain support from the Euro-American world, and to resist Chinese authorities, diasporic Tibetan elites

heavily invest in strategic, orientalist self-representation. More than 95 percent of exiled Tibetans live in South Asian nations such as India, Nepal, and Bhutan, and in general they avoid assimilation into their host societies by preserving their refugee status as a patriotic assertion of their desire to return to Tibet. Essentialization or homogenization can be interpreted both as a means of survival and as a symbolic form of resistance in face of Chinese rule. Different sects of Tibetan Buddhism have come under the unified leadership of the Dalai Lama. The dominant discourse of Buddhism as the core of the constructed Tibetan identity has also further marginalized Tibetan Muslims in exile. Gender issues and individual rights are also bound up and framed in the Tibetan nationalist discourse.

Preserving -- or to be more precise, reconstructing -- a language and a culture (which were never unitary) in a diasporic situation is not an easy task. Dharamsala, seat of the Tibetan government in exile, has been called Little Lhasa; monasteries and museums of traditional life are (re-)built there not only to mount cultural and political struggles but also to generate revenue from tourism. Thus, the establishment of a distinct Tibetan identity parallels the commodification and objectification of a “timeless” Tibetan culture. But diasporic Tibetans are not necessarily the victims of exotic commodification of their ethnic culture. Creatively, they seize opportunities to advance their political agenda by appropriating fantasized images of their culture and integrating universalist discourses of human rights, environmental protection, peace, sovereignty, and non-violence into their cultural and religious values.

As Dibyesh Anand argues, “An authoritarian state apparatus in Tibet, combined with censorship of information, ensures that Tibetan nationalism is far more developed in the diasporic community. The discourses of international human rights, democracy, decolonization and self-determination have allowed sophisticated articulations of national identity among Tibetans in exile. The idea in the world media

of what constitutes Tibetanness often comes from the discursive practices of the exile community. The Tibetan national imagination is a product/process of strategic essentialism, oriented towards the goal of reclaiming homeland” (Anand 2000, 274-5). But nationalism is by no means the exclusive byproduct of the Tibetan diaspora, as “cosmopolitanism is an integral part of Tibetan diasporic identity” (Anand 2003, 224). Tibetan diaspora has constitutively mingled with such transnational social movements as environmentalism, spiritualism, and international human rights. However, when it comes to the politics of autonomy and national sovereignty, nationalist discourse always dominates. The very act of upholding the nationalist line is to essentialize the people as a unified group fighting for a single cause. The price of such a self-essentialization project is that being on the periphery does not necessarily create distance from which to challenge and examine the center. On the contrary, the periphery becomes more than ever obsessed with the center, (at least as the center is understood as the structural mechanism of Chineseness in a circulating loop, in which certain acts on the outskirts may cause changes that are manifest to the system via feedback that, in turn, causes more changes – but those changes serve only to (re-)producing and rejuvenating the dominant sense of Chineseness).

Perhaps nationalism can never put nationalism on trial. A Tibetan or Uighur nationalist discourse at the margins cannot really subvert the nationalist ideology of China at the center. On the contrary, the exterior only coincides with the interior, reinforcing the prevailing mechanism of cultural essentialism and affirming a certain kind of nationalist narcissism.

Moreover, the “regress” toward an imagined past as constitutive of a distinct Tibetan identity in the eyes of the world designates the substantial differences between Tibetans in Tibet and groups living in exile, and also between those who are second-generation refugees in diaspora and those who have newly fled Tibet. It is not

simply an issue of how the frozen and nostalgic image of Tibet produced by the diasporic community has caused disillusionment among members of the younger generation visiting contemporary Tibet for the first time. Perhaps the self-essentialization of a timeless Tibetan culture does not really play into the hands of the Chinese Communist Party's ethnic classificatory scheme, which was meant to regulate and contain the threat and growth of the minority populations. But the strategic commodification of Tibetan tradition by the diasporic community does coincide with China's bolstering of internal consumption and tourism in its drive for economic growth. The signifier "traditional culture" connotes a longing for distinctive ways of life -- worlds of sentiment, belief, and nostalgic feelings not confined to the Han, but extended to all ethnic realms -- and has been extensively packaged for domestic consumption. Visual images of ethnic minorities dressed in multicolored traditional garb joyously singing, dancing, or practicing religious rituals are now ubiquitous in China. Colorful but primitive minority subjects are making their way into China's cultural theme parks. The domestic economy of ethnic consumption goes hand in hand with the re-inhabitation of local traditions that contribute to the nationalist erasure of China's socialist past in the project of capitalist modernization.

A reified Tibetanness precisely provides a cultural other by means of which the center of power in China is legitimized not in terminology, but in the conception of modern Chinese society as being composed of socially and culturally distinct peoples who share a sense of common national identity. In light of the political appropriation of Tibetan ethnicity -- as well as those of Han, Hui (a term used to describe all Muslims), Manchus and Mongols -- into the core of modern Chinese national consciousness, cultural manifestos of ethnic minorities can only reinforce Chinese imagined collectivity. In other words, Tibetanness or Uighurness, as the lack or de-centering of Chineseness, permits the interior and the most intimate aspects of

Chineseness (even if Chineseness is nothing but a void) to conjoin to the most radical exteriority, expanding its horizon and influence by absorbing the exotic foreign body into its kernel.

Films of Tibet in a Contested Political Domain

The act of essentializing certain ethnic cultural features can be easily seen in cinematic representation in relation to Tibet. Image-makers in the West, China and Tibetan community in exile each have their own agenda, and conceptualize what it is to be Tibetan in a manner that serves ideologies. The 2000s, however, have witnessed the emergence of Tibetan cinematic self-expressions in the Tibetan diasporic community and in contemporary China. But can Tibetan self-representations in filmmaking survive and even prevail against Orientalist paradigms or orthodox norms imposed on the ethnic group? What new issues, including contradictions and ironies within the notion of authenticity, are constructed and articulated in these new portrayals of “real” Tibetans in the Tibet Autonomous Region and the societies of the diasporans?

Tibetan exiles have been embraced by Western media as the true representatives of Tibetan culture. Emerging Tibetan self-representation in China may challenge this politically oriented bias. However, Tibetans who do not openly resist Chinese authority and who even work with the Chinese in film production could be considered collaborators by critics who have romanticized the notion of resistance. Some Tibetan exiles actually choose to ignore the works of Tibetan filmmakers in China. But, Robert Barnett argues, those “who chose not to go into exile . . . could even be seen now as responsible and brave, since it gave them an opportunity at least to [effect some change] . . . which the exiles were powerless to do” (2006, 27). Tibetans in Tibet, especially those who accept official government posts, as Barnett observes, may

strategically conceal their beliefs. Even so, they are “seen by the Party and perhaps the state as intrinsically unreliable because of their nationality” (49) especially when Chinese nationalism is ascending lately. In other words, Tibetan artists who choose not to exile themselves are caught between the resistant exiles and the Chinese government, and cannot gain the trust of either side. However, by examining *The Secret History of the Potala Palace* (*Budalagong mishi*, dir. Zhang Yi, 1989), a costume film co-produced by Chinese and Tibetan crews, Barnett understands this historical feature about Mongol-Tibetan relations in the seventeenth century as a subaltern Tibetan appropriation subverting the ideological apparatus of the Chinese state because the film implicitly challenges the state promise of ethnic equality by using the socialist rhetoric and solicits some ironic readings from the ethnic viewers who see it with a forbidden message of Tibetan nationalism. He believes that such Tibet-related film “inhabits that dangerous territory where it aims to communicate certain official messages loudly whilst at the same time being vulnerable to *fanhua* [back-speak] readings by its audience” (2002, 284; emphasis in the original).

Since the 1950s, the Chinese government has attempted to use the ethnic minority film genre (dominated by Han cast and crew, with only a few token minorities involved) as propaganda demonstrating the Communist Party’s liberation of Tibetans from despotic theocratic rule and Western imperialism, thereby bringing prosperity to the people. Beijing has since endeavored to integrate ethnic minorities into the Han Chinese majority, although Tibetans have a very distinct cultural identity. The communist government has stronger commitment to Lenin’s directive of equality of the nationalities; but as communist ideology is replaced by Chinese nationalism, there is no longer any guarantee of ethnic equality. The state seems to use the same logic in its appropriation of diaspora into the national assimilation: it is culture, rather than ethnicity, that prominently defines Chineseness. Han culture -- in terms of

ancestry, beliefs, rituals, behaviors, worldviews, written language, socioeconomic institutions and practices -- is said to have successfully assimilated (or sinicized) smaller groups of non-Han peoples within a supposedly homogeneous China throughout its history.

In the past, the dominant Han always sought the passive compliance of the minorities on the borders. However, the Chinese communist regime at first did not attempt any socialist reforms or cultural assimilation when the People's Liberation Army took control of Tibet. It was only after the suppression of the Lhasa Uprising in 1959 and the start of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s that large-scale political mobilization and class struggle mounted in the region. Like the Red Guards in other parts of China, many Tibetans actively participated in destroying their temples and monasteries at the peak of the political movement (Wang 1998). Tibet, like the rest of China, suffered tremendous losses because of the ultra-leftist policies of the Cultural Revolution. In the late 1970s, the central government under Deng Xiaoping endeavored to turn things around in Tibet by reviving and strengthening indigenous Tibetan culture, religion, and language through the process of Tibetanization. Beijing was also interested in persuading the Dalai Lama to return to China. But by early 1990s, the Communist Party regarded liberalization in Tibet as a possible strategy by which foreign forces could divide China; there was a return to much stricter hard-line political policies, although the drive for economy reform in the region remained steady (Goldstein 1997, 61-75; 87-99). There have since been sporadic protests in the region, as well as increasing international criticisms of Beijing's Tibet policies.

Although Chinese ethnic minority issues have come under greater international scrutiny since the establishment of PRC, the minorities acquired unprecedented influences on the ways Han Chinese define their contemporary identity -- domestically and on the global stage. Representing ethnic minorities in artwork and

entertainment not only can demonstrate official benevolence toward marginalized peoples but also offer exotic spectacles and pleasure to the Han majority. As an attempt to sinicize the Western art form, traditional ethnic dance movements were incorporated in model ballet performances during the Cultural Revolution (Clark 2008, 158-9, 170-1). The use of China's minority cultures as cinematic subject matter can also inject national characteristics (*minzu tese*) into the film medium, another Western import. The centralization and homogenization of the cultures of ethnic minorities in various art forms are intended to present "easily recognized signs of ethnic diversity and assertion of multi-cultural tolerance" (Clark 2008, 256). The top-down effort made by Chinese authorities to articulate, rearticulate, and de-articulate the cultural signifiers of Tibetans and other ethnic minorities has already proven that their representation in media is always a site of active struggle in contested political contexts.

The first feature film about Tibet made in Communist China was *The Gold and Silver Plain* (*Jinyintan*, dir. Ling Jifeng, 1953), but *Serfs* (*Nongnu*, dir. Li Jun, 1963) is perhaps the most renowned Chinese ethnic minority film to depict how the communist regime has emancipated Tibetan people from serfdom. Indeed, as Tibetan writer Dorje Tsering (better known as Tashi Dawa, or Zhaxi Dawa in Pinyin) comments, "the very first impression of Tibet received by the vast majority of (mainland) Chinese came through [*Serfs*]" (2008, 273). Fifth-generation director Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Horse Thief* (*Daoma zei*, 1986) has distinguished itself from previous propaganda-oriented minority films and has succeeded in drawing significant international acclaims. But this new wave of experimental film by fifth-generation filmmaker may be yet a different version of Chinese Orientalism, appropriating Tibet to serve China's need or fantasy. More recent Chinese minority films about Tibet include audience-oriented *Red River Valley* (*Hong Hegu*, dir. Feng Xiaoling, 1997)

and *Song of Tibet* (*Yixi Zhuoma*, dir. Xie Fei, 2000), which were popular in domestic markets but relatively unknown outside China. Only Lu Chuan's *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol* (*Kekexili*, 2004), which tells the story of a group of Tibetan and Han Chinese volunteers organizing themselves into a patrol team in order to stop the poaching of Tibetan antelopes in the vast plateau of the Kekexili region, has garnered wider attention overseas and won several international film awards. Tian Zhuangzhuang's documentary series, *Delamu* (*Chamagudao: Delamu*, 2004), which depicts the journey of Tibetan and other non-Han ethnic caravans shipping daily materials on mules from Yunnan to Tibet, was acclaimed by foreign critics, but it resonates explicitly with official Chinese policy: presenting social harmony among all ethnicities.

Chinese cinematic representations of Tibet have been consistently counteracted by Hollywood's fantasmatic representations, such as *Storm Over Tibet* (dir. Andrew Marton, 1952), *Abominable Snowman of the Himalayas* (dir. Val Guest, 1957), the musical remake of Frank Capra's 1937 *Lost Horizon* (dir. Charles Jarrott, 1973), and *The Golden Child* (dir. Michael Ritchie, 1986). Recent big-budget films -- such as *Kundun* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 1997) and *Seven Years in Tibet* (dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1997) -- have turned their focus to the Dalai Lama. There were also independently produced films like *The Saltmen of Tibet* (dir. Ulrike Koch, 1997), *Windhorse* (dir. Paul Wagner, 1998), and *Himalaya* (also known as *Caravan*, dir. Eric Valli, 1999) which capitalize on the popularity of Tibet and succeed in capturing the attention of art house audiences. These cinematic representations have great appeal for Western audiences, and portray Tibetans as peaceful, religious, and nonviolent idyllic people who have been victimized by colonialism and forced modernization at the hands of the Chinese.⁶ Numerous documentaries made by European and American filmmakers over the years have brought world attention to the Tibet issue and

conflated the Dalai Lama with Tibet one way or another. These cinematic texts produced by Han Chinese and Westerners have objectified and stereotyped Tibetan culture, bringing the Tibet issue into the national and international spotlight to serve different political purposes. It is left to Tibetan and other dominated subjects to determine whether they can use the film medium for their own cultural and political concerns ends. In other words, can Tibetan self-representation through film find a more viable form to express the community's own voices, identities and concerns?

Tibetan Cinema for Tibetans?

Khyentse Norbu's directorial debut *The Cup* (*Phörpa*, 1999) may not be the first feature film made by the exiled Tibetan,⁷ but Norbu is probably the first Buddhist lama filmmaker and his film is undoubtedly the first Tibetan drama by a Tibetan that has drawn international attention, earned critical acclaims, and achieved relative box-office success.⁸ Norbu is not actually new to the film industry: he was a consultant for Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha* (1993), and he himself has appeared in several documentaries about Tibetan Buddhism. *The Cup* appears to be a lighthearted, apolitical comedy that treats two teenage lamas in a Tibetan monastery in India who are desperate to see the World Cup Tournament being held in France, and who venture to a nearby village to watch it on live television. The film outwardly conveys the general themes of clashes of culture or of tradition and modernity as well as that of human commonality – no matter who you are (a monk) or where you are (a secluded monastery), human desires are rather similar, and no one can, or really want to, live in complete isolation. Audiences who do not know anything about Tibetan religious life can relate to the community as portrayed in the film: from the adolescent lamas making mischief during prayer sessions and going to great lengths to outwit their vigilant disciplinarian, to the closed world of the all-boy boarding school or

Catholic seminary. However, *The Cup* has an undercurrent of subtle political exigency: the kind-hearted abbot constantly expresses a wish to go back to Tibet, and he welcomes to the monastery two young Tibetans fleeing the brutal Chinese rule in their homeland. This episode is more than a simple political jab at the Chinese regime; it is an expression of the diaspora notion that erases all differences between Tibetans in India and those in China. Yet a certain hierarchy is maintained, in that the teenage lamas exhibit a sense of superiority to the new refugees: the young lama Orgyen, who is obsessed with the World Cup, sneers at the newly arrived Tibetans how dirty (ignorant and backward) they are in comparison to himself.

Filmmaking can be considered a different sort of attempt by the exiled Tibetans to resist the meanings of “Tibetanness” manufactured by the dominant PRC filmmakers.⁹ Tibetan cinema is probably still in its infancy, and Tibetans primarily see documentary as the most effective means to present their own understandings of reality. Exiled Tibetan documentary filmmaker Tenzing Sonam and his Indian wife, Ritu Sarin founded the London-based White Crane Films and have produced a number of works about Tibet in order to advance the cause of a free Tibet and strengthen the drive to return to the homeland. The couple also has made a feature film, *Dreaming Lhasa* (2005), whose executive producers were Richard Gere and *The Last Emperor* producer, Jeremy Thomas. The film follows a female Tibetan filmmaker on a journey of self-discovery from New York to Dharamshala, the exile base in India, where she is to shoot a documentary about a former political prisoner from Tibet. The success of *The Cup* paved the way for Norbu’s second feature, *Travelers and Magicians* (2003), and other Tibetan-made fictional films, such as Pema Dhondup’s *We’re No Monks* (2004) and Neten Chokling’s *Milarepa: Magician, Murderer, Saint* (2006).

Well aware of its Tibet policies have met with international censure, Chinese authorities have made use of a “soft power” strategies of diplomacy and propaganda,¹⁰ and, seemingly, of “yi yi zhi yi” (using barbarians to control barbarians) to fight the ideological battle. The first Chinese Tibetan-made film was *The Silent Holy Stones* (*Lhing vjags kyi ma ni rdo vbum* [*Jingjingdemaneshi* in Mandarin], 2005), written and directed by Tibetan native and Beijing Film Academy graduate Wanma Caidan (Pedma Tseden). Promoting non-Han filmmakers is not an entirely new practice for the PRC’s film bureau; it has been exercised for decades to demonstrate the government’s support for and tolerance of diverse ethnic artists and cultures. These non-Han ethnic directors include Guang Chunlan, of Xibe (also Sibe; or Xibo in Pinyin) ethnic origin from Xingjiang who has made more than twenty features since the 1980s; and Saifu and Mailisi, a Mongolian couple, who have directed several Mongol epics for Inner Mongolian Film Studio in the 1990s; and Mongolian Wuna Tana whose debut feature *Warm Spring* (*Nuanchun*, 2003), has edged out big budget films like *Hero* (*Yingxiong*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 2002) and *Spider-Man* (dir. Sam Raimi, 2002) at the domestic box office. But these ethnic filmmakers are relatively unknown outside China and their works have never been used by the Chinese government to combat diasporic films. *The Silent Holy Stones* reportedly was manipulated by Beijing to serve as a rebuttal to Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin’s *Dreaming Lhasa*. The two films opened in New York on the same day: *Dreaming Lhasa* at ImaginAsian Theatre, and *The Silent Holy Stones* at the Lincoln Center. Chinese authorities reportedly permitted film festivals to screen *The Silent Holy Stones* on condition that no Tibetan films produced outside China were screened with it (Indo-Asian News Service 2007; Sarkar 2007).

As seemingly apolitical as *The Cup*, Wanma’s first feature treats a teenage lama’s journey home for Losar, the traditional Tibetan New Year holidays. Also like *The Cup*,

a television set symbolizes the introduction of modernity from the outside. But now the program that fascinates the little lama is not the soccer game played by European or South American teams but a Chinese classic mythological epic, *Journey to the West*, depicting the legend of Buddhist monk Xuanzang's pilgrimage to India with his disciple, the Monkey King, in order to obtain a collection of Buddhist scriptures. Wanma's film shows us that while in the monastery, the little lama is very drawn to his master lama's radio, and keeps persuading the even younger Little Living Buddha to let him watch the latter's television and videodiscs. When his father takes him home for the holidays, he becomes addicted to watching the *Journey to the West* videodisc series on the family's new TV, and insists on bringing the TV and the videodiscs back to the monastery after the holidays so that his master and other lamas can also watch the drama. His father did so and the young lamas in the monastery enjoyed watching the videodiscs for a night. When his father has left the monastery with the TV and videodiscs, the little lama feels a bit lost, but he secretly keeps the Monkey King mask in his robe and brings it to the religious ceremony.

In portraying how modern Han culture has penetrated into the secluded village and delicately implying how the resulting economic materialism has endangered Tibetan traditional spirituality, the film -- although it is an officially approved production -- makes subtle criticisms. The young lama loathes the violence of the Chinese gangster films and is obsessed with the Monkey King in *Journey to the West*, which is Buddhist in theme despite being sinicized. The reason the little lama wants his master to watch *Journey to the West* is doubtless because the old lama also has a life-long dream to make a pilgrimage to Lhasa. What is revealing about *The Silent Holy Stones* is that Tibetans screened and adopted elements of modern culture brought about by Chinese political control and economic colonization.

The situation faced by contemporary Tibetans as presented in Wanma's film in a way mirrors certain diaspora concepts: dislocation of one's traditional identity, alienation from mainstream (Chinese) society, and hybridity -- because a pure and self-enclosed culture is no longer possible, affected as it is by everyday contradictory encounters that also bring forth the relations of inequality and hegemony. While the little lama's village celebrates the New Year by watching the performance of the traditional Tibetan opera *Prince Drimey Kunden* (early in the film, the little lama watched this on videodisc with the Little Living Buddha), the live show is interrupted by a drunken young adult. The incident may indicate that new social problems such as alcoholism have already invaded the traditional peaceful world. And alcoholism, which has been prevalent in Tibet since the early 1990s, can be considered the minorities' self-destructive response to Chinese repression. Other Tibetan kids also flee the "boring" traditional opera performance to watch Hong Kong gangster movies on videodiscs in a local showroom and enjoy Chinese snacks. The younger brother of the little lama says he wants to study Chinese language so that he can go to the city. As the film unfolds, many Tibetan youths have left the village for the big city to look for business opportunities, and old people like the stone engraver stay in the village and die alone. The young people who remain there long for urban culture, ride motorcycles around town, and dance to disco music after the opera.

The changes brought to the village as presented in the film are open to interpretation: they may be evidence of the prosperity the PRC government boasts that it has brought to Tibet, or simply proof of cultural corruption -- if not the "cultural genocide" Tibetan exiles decry -- that rapidly erodes traditional lifestyles and values. In his second feature *The Search* (*Xunzhao Zhimei Gengdeng*, 2009) -- literally "Searching for Drimey Kunden" -- Wanma tells the story of a Tibetan film crew's search throughout Tibet for the male lead for a film adaptation of the opera *Prince*

Drimey Kunden. Their search uncovers a number of social problems: traditional opera has been largely forgotten by its people; young Tibetans are no longer able to read Tibetan; commercial night clubs have opened in Tibet; Tibetans that suffer from alcoholism, and so on. Assuming its audiences are familiar with the opera, the film never details the traditional legend on which the opera is based. This may be because Wanma does not want to convey directly that the opera is actually about the return of an exiled prince.

Prince Drimey Kunden is the Tibetan version of the story of Vessantara Jataka (a previous incarnation of Gautama Buddha). The charitable prince has been banished by his father. During his exile, he is still very generous, and gives away all his possessions -- including his children and wife. After many years of the exile, the prince begins his return journey. On the way he is asked to give his eyes to a blind man, and he complies, gouging them out with his bare hands. Upon he returns, *Drimey Kunden* becomes king, and his kingdom ultimately prospers. The opera is seen as “a cultural symbol of the Tibetan diaspora” (Ahmed 2006, 158) because it expresses yearning for a return to the homeland, and the story “operates as an effective tool of resistance by successfully mobilizing the notion of Tibetan national identity . . . [since] all the characters are articulated with a primordial past and a homogenized Buddhism” (Ahmed 2006, 161). This explains why the exile government uses the opera as to promote its political cause. However, it is unlikely that Wanma Caidan’s *The Search* is a concealed attempt to resonate with the political tune of the Tibetan diasporic community.

In the film, Wanma, through the mouths of his character, questions what entitles the prince to give away his wife and children -- as if these human beings are simply properties that can be disposed of at will -- and shows some ambivalence to the beliefs established in the story. The film further challenges this traditional story by showing

the impossibility of finding the right person to play Drimey Kunden in contemporary Tibet. That Tibet has become what it is (a place where Drimey Kunden is nowhere to be found) of course can be blamed on Chinese oppressive policies and historical wrongdoings. But, perhaps, Wanma, a Tibetan ethnic minority in China, attempts to reflect on the difficult conditions endured by his people: neither internal exile nor diaspora in a narrow sense, but life in a home that they do not necessarily possess or control. They become strangers in their own home. Unlike diasporic Tibetans, those who do not choose to exile are deprived even of a longing to return to an ideal homeland. When the Chinese state apparatus uses diaspora as a soft-power tool to promote cultural nationalism, Chinese distrust toward Tibetans can become endemic -- and Tibetans living in China, as the Tibetan-made film tells us, are only further alienated as diasporans.

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Endnotes

¹ The demonstrators protested represent a wide range of political issues, such as China’s human rights record, unrest in Tibet, the war in Darfur, China’s support of regimes in Myanmar and Zimbabwe, North Korean defectors, territorial disputes with Vietnam over the Spratly and Paracel Islands, Falun Gong persecutions, and the political status of Taiwan.

² One of the most renowned Uighur dissidents is Rebiya Kadeer, who has been catapulted to a new level of global recognition after the ethnic violence in Urumqi of Xinjiang in July 2009 when the Chinese government accused her of masterminding the uprising. She was once the wealthiest woman in China and a politically prominent member of the National People’s Congress, but was imprisoned for almost six years and then exiled to the United States. Her memoir, *Dragon Fighter: One Woman’s Epic Struggle for Peace With China* (2009), to which the Dalai Lama wrote the introduction, describes humiliating Chinese policies towards Uighurs such as regular business harassment, coercive abortions, mass killings, and barriers to contact with other central Asian neighbors.

³ The origin of the term diaspora is generally believed to be Jewish exile experiences that began in the eighth to sixth century BCE. The term began to be used to describe other dispersed communities, such as Africans and Chinese in the last few decades of the twentieth century and has increasingly become significant to modern scholarship’s conception of many contemporary conditions of existence (Dufoix 2008; Sheffer 2003; Cohen 1997).

⁴ Although the Chinese government insists that Tibet has been part of China since the thirteenth century Yuan Dynasty, Tibetan exiles contend that Tibet has historically been politically independent for almost two thousand years. The dispute also extends to the territory claims: the territory claimed by Tibetan activists is more than twice as large as the Tibet Autonomous Region demarcated by Beijing in 1965. The Greater Tibet claimed by the Dalai Lama's government in exile includes all of China's largest province, Qinghai, Gansu, as well as portions of other Chinese provinces such as Sichuan and Yunnan -- approximately a quarter of China's total land mass.

⁵ The reality is that such misrecognition frequently occurs. In various contexts, Tibetans are mistaken for Han Chinese and vice versa. This misrecognition is due in large part to the narrow definition of Tibetanness. Images of Tibetan racial features promulgated in China and among Tibetans in exile do not necessarily describe the actual characteristics of every Tibetans (Yeh 2002).

⁶ But Tibetan views may have expressed in films by Westerners and Han Chinese. Peter H. Hansen has argued that 1930s British documentaries on Tibetan characters and ceremonies were actually the "intercultural construction" of both Westerners and Tibetans in conversation with one another, instead of being pure Western fantasies or truthful depiction of the "real" Tibet. By the 1990s Tibetans were able to influence Hollywood productions much more directly -- as advisors and cast members. Thus, these films are, in a literal sense, "the product of a double vision" (Hansen 2001, 106).

⁷ According to Jamyang Norbu, "The first Tibetan to actually make a feature film could quite possibly have been the late Gungthang Tsultrim, head of the Tibetan refugee settlement at Clement town in Dehra Dun district, India. Tsultrim was the founder/director of the Amdo Dance and Drama Society and had written and produced a play in the early sixties on the life of the Tibetan Emperor, Songtsen Gampo. Tsultrim hired equipment and technicians from Bombay and shot his film partly in Clement town and partly in Ladakh. This film was made in the mid-seventies, and though having a story line largely recreated scenes of life in old Tibet, particularly Amdo. Unfortunately, because of Tsultrim's political differences with Gyalo Thondup the Dalai Lama's brother and the government-in-exile, this pioneering example of Tibetan film-making has been largely unknown to Tibetan society, and the negative and prints of this film appear to have been lost after Tsultrim's murder in 1977" (Norbu 2004).

⁸ *The Cup*, with a budget of U.S. \$300,000, has been nominated to represent Bhutan in international competition, screened in many major film festivals, and its box-office return (\$1,067,773 in the United States alone) contributed significantly to the Tibet Fund and to the renovation of the Chokling monastery in India, where the feature was filmed.

⁹ Nearly everything related to Tibet is contested between Tibetan exiles, led by the Dalai Lama, and the PRC government. And culture is another site of struggle between the diasporic community and Chinese authorities. For instance, Tibetan exiles use Lhamo, Tibetan folk opera, to evoke nostalgia for a lost world and the struggle to return to the homeland; in China, the genre has been redeveloped to legitimize the Chinese claim to Tibet (Ahmed 2006).

¹⁰ On how China uses its “soft power” to deal with the international gaze on Tibet, for instance, Xinhua 2005.