

Kwai-Cheung Lo

## Ethnic Minority Cinema in China's Nation-State Building

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ETHNIC MINORITY  
CINEMA  
IN CHINA'S  
NATION-STATE  
BUILDING



*Kwai-Cheung Lo*

## Ethnic Minority Cinema in China's Nation-State Building

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# ETHNIC MINORITY CINEMA IN CHINA'S NATION-STATE BUILDING

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Kwai-Cheung Lo

University of Michigan Press  
Ann Arbor

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*To the memory of Pema Tsenden (1969–2023)*

Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute,  
Columbia University

The Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute of Columbia University  
were inaugurated in 1962 to bring to a wider public the results of significant  
new research on modern and contemporary East Asia.

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I began China's ethnic minority cinema project in 2008 when I prepared a proposal to compete for research funds from the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong. Though the project was funded, I received a comment from one of the reviewers questioning why I did not plan in my budget to go to the ethnic minority regions to do my research. By that time, I probably thought that it was a film study project rather than an ethnographical one. It would not be fruitful to visit the non-Han minority communities in China—or the “autonomous regions” (*zizhiqu*), in the People's Republic of China's political terminology—if my focus was mainly on film productions. I did manage later to interview a couple of ethnic minority filmmakers in Beijing, Hong Kong, and other cities. Years passed. I had other chances to travel to Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, even though these trips were not directly related to my film project. By physically being in those places, I started to relate more to the moving images made of the people and communities there.

But field trips are probably never adequate for such a film research project. It has been the knowledge acquisition of China's multiethnic sociohistorical contexts that occupied me for years. In this long research process, when I mentioned my project to a sociologist from Singapore, he dismissed it as worthless because, in his view, China's ethnic minority films are all propaganda. Implied in that reaction is that the films did not deserve any academic analysis. I didn't feel discouraged by such a comment, however. I also received remarks that my project would be exotic tourism of different ethnic groups if I cover many of them. I have kept all these “warnings”

in mind for this project. At some point I thought that Hong Kong people were an ethnic minority because the “one country, two systems” scheme inherited from the Qing dynasty had been appropriated by Beijing to govern the ethnic borderlands. I fantasized that if I were an ethnic minority, then my project would be a self-representation, and it would not draw criticisms of exoticizing the ethnic groups. Without any doubt, it is just my folly. Hong Kong people enjoy more privileges and freedom than many ethnic minorities in China.

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# Introduction

## *Ethnic Minority Ecosystem in the Formation of Modern China*

Fans in the People's Republic of China (PRC) were shocked that Tibetan pop star Tsewang Norbu set himself on fire outside the Potala Palace in Lhasa on 25 February 2022. The authorities claimed the Tibetan man attempted suicide by self-immolation because he had long been troubled by mental illness. Not everyone is convinced. His songs were soon removed from Chinese music platforms, and discussions regarding his self-immolation had been suppressed. More than 150 Tibetans, including monks, nuns, and ordinary people, have burned themselves to death since 2009 to protest the Chinese rule. Twenty-five-year-old Tsewang Norbu seemed to be the Chinese state's ideal ethnic minority who was educated, urban, fluent in Putonghua, and thoroughly assimilated by the system—his parents were party cadres, he had a university degree, and he performed in many national musical variety shows as well as the Spring Festival Gala. Most importantly, the Tibetan entertainer represented a glossy facade that the Chinese government has been promoting in various forms of propaganda, ethnic minority cinema in particular: an exotic, happy, and grateful non-Han ethnic minority dancing and singing with his colorful costumes who is being lifted out of poverty and backwardness by state-led modernization.

However, activists believe Tsewang Norbu was secretly singing for Tibetan identity. His self-immolation made this clear since he chose the

most sensitive place in Lhasa: Potala Place, the traditional residence of the Dalai Lama. He picked a sensitive date as well: just a few days before the National People's Congress meeting in Beijing. We probably will never know Tsewang Norbu's real intention for killing himself. But it is not uncommon that China's ethnic minorities live in two worlds, one that the official discourse has depicted to the public and another that is not very visible but many ethnic self-representations endeavor to reveal. It is a world experienced by the local ethnic minorities, who feel the structural discriminations in their everyday life, worry about the environmental devastation wrought by state-initiated development, and have witnessed the authorities dismantle their religious institutions, shut down their native-language schools, and jail anyone who objected to the state's campaign of Sinicization.

Although it has always been brute force that has held the Chinese multiethnic nation together (the brutal process of "etatization" or statizing rather than that of nationalization because state and nation are not necessarily isomorphic),<sup>1</sup> concerted efforts at ideological persuasion and imposed representation still play a significant part in constituting a unified Chinese identity beyond the mentality of empire. While the dominant always created a world after their own image, non-Han ethnic groups at the frontiers or in the concealed pockets occupy a key place in the modern imagination of being Chinese and have generated strong effects on how Chinese nationals perceive themselves. The invention of ethnic minority cinema is a significant component in the ecosystem of a new multiethnic nation-state. Tsewang Norbu's self-immolation discloses that the polished world portrayed by ethnic minority cinema for the craving public is challenged by another world where ethnic people endure daily struggles.

While cinema is seen as a fictional simulacrum, indexical realism offers "the recreation of the world in its own image," according to Andre Bazin, indicating that recording a thing's existence through mechanical reproduction is beyond any definite subjectivization and meaning (1967, 21). Cinema could be a "scrupulously honest artist," as Rancière further elaborates, that "does not cheat, that cannot cheat" because it "records [things] as the human eye cannot see them, as they come into being, in a state of waves and vibrations, before they can be qualified as intelligible objects, people, or events due to their descriptive and narrative properties" (2006, 2). Any attempt to use a cinematic image to cheat could be ultimately thwarted.

This book examines how the Chinese regime's endeavor to control and manipulate ethnic images is consistently counteracted by resistant ethnic self-representations, other than the materiality of cinematographic images that cannot be reduced to straightforward ideological meanings. Ethnic

minority cinema in the PRC is understood as a contested site or a force field of plural relations forged not only by the dominant state ideology but also by contradictory tendencies and pressures from local bureaucrats, Han and non-Han filmmakers, general consumers, market mechanisms, and the international circuits. The images made in China's ethnic minority cinema are crystals whose facets are oblique mirrors that are not content with reflecting but rather constitute a prism that generates a spectrum of colors and instigates different deciphering. The PRC's invention of ethnic minority cinema is supposed to serve as a supporting apparatus of the subjective ethnic classification project. Indeed, ethnic cinema plays more than a supporting role in the state's vision of engineering ethnic unity. We should not overlook the fact that—particularly in the founding years of the PRC—its ethnic policy has had a significant cinematic dimension because it has always involved staging, making fiction, forming narratives, reframing, constructing new *mise-en-scène*, and creating a montage of disjointed entities. Ethnic minority films constitute part of the ideological reality since the whole project begins from the creative imagination as a primary mode of being. At the same time, the mundane, physical world—the one Tsewang Norbu and other non-Han minorities live through—is regarded as somewhat inadequate and secondary to be sacrificed. However, the propaganda may not necessarily perform a flawless interpellation to subject its viewers to its ideology. It could unwittingly reproduce a discursive assemblage in which ideologies of the dominant as well as the dominated are entangled in a contradictory or distorted way.

### "Ecologizing" China's "Ethnic" Peoples

My approach to ethnic issues and their representations is metaphorically an "ecological" one: China's ethnic landscape is understood as a vital part of a changing total ecosystem of multiple players and elements in constant interaction or contestation with one another. The consciousness of Chinese cinema emerges in the PRC with the integration of the exotic, ethnic environment as a necessary constituent of its own making. At the same time, ethnic issues in China have never been immune from the outside world. The mechanism of image making circulates beyond the national boundaries, rendering any restricted borders indefensible, porous, and interpenetrating. Much of China's current ethnic issues and their representations are accumulated results from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The historical dimension is foregrounded to explicate how different

historical events and their narratives elucidate one another in the trajectory of their effects. The transformations of the ethnic landscape go beyond the political divide between republican and socialist Chinese regimes.

The national issue in Chinese cinema points to two levels of identity representation: a lower level of ethnic identities for each of all the recognized nationalities (fifty-five ethnic minorities and the Han majority), within which the Han is just one among all, and a higher level of Chinese national identity for every Chinese citizen, including those in the diaspora. The double meaning of the term *minzu* (民族) refers to both Chinese and ethnic minorities, standing simultaneously for the set and its elements; however, this does not necessarily mean they are the same and thus together constitute a coherent whole. Rather, the elasticity of the term consists of relations of exteriority within the whole, and this exteriority implies not only the state of holding together but also the contingencies of mutating, transforming, and breaking up. *Minzu* has been translated as “nationality” in official Chinese usage. A group cannot become a *minzu* without state recognition. Starting in the 1990s, the Chinese authorities gradually rendered the term “ethnic minority.” Such a move is generally interpreted as a state strategy to turn China’s *minzu* issue into a “small number” question domestically (so they are no longer an alien nationality) and an entirely internal affair to prevent any intervention from the international world (because it is China’s minority).

In this book, I do not use the term “indigenous,” though some scholars prefer using it to highlight how the ethnic groups struggle with the history of colonial occupation and marginalization in their land and to bond them with the worldwide indigenous rights movement for self-determination and environmental stewardship in reappropriating land, culture, and knowledge (Visser 2023; Gyal 2021). The Chinese government had representatives in the working groups for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 but did not allow its ethnic minorities to participate. China denies the applicability of the indigeneity concept to its nation because all of its citizens including the Han are equally indigenous. Ethnic diasporic groups beyond the Chinese territories—for instance, Tibetans in exile, as Emily T. Yeh (2007) elaborates—do not find the concept of indigeneity a suitable political claim for them because they aim for sovereignty with separate statehood.

Within the PRC, the only acceptable claims for different identities must be articulated through the category of *minzu*, which is framed under the discourse of *minzu tuanjie* (national unity). As Uradyn E. Bulag (2002) points out, *minzu tuanjie* is the state’s hegemonic and contentious

rhetoric to maintain a coercive unity. Demanding more cultural rights or more autonomy is too politically risky to be accused of *minzu fenlie* (national secession). Even if the notion of indigeneity has not been explicitly adopted in the Chinese context, ecological concerns provide China's ethnic minorities a platform for rearticulating their claims on land, culture, and knowledge.

The key is not whether “ethnic” or “indigenous” is a reality or an invention. More important is the material, sociopolitical, and cultural context constructed for the articulation of such ethnic identities. China's escalating integration into the global ethnic sphere since the twentieth century has placed ethnic issues at the core of Chinese politics and constituted a complicated ecology in which all the varied and conflicting components affect one another. However, to “ecologize” China's ethnic representations means more than just a metaphor.<sup>2</sup> While ethnic minority issues have often been reduced to a specialized as well as a marginalized topic, the ecologization of ethnic cinema seeks the possibility of rethinking the notion of wholeness and decentering the hierarchy between the center and the periphery.<sup>3</sup> China's ethnic issue is not a “border issue.” The habitats, cultures, values, and life practices of the non-Han ethnic minorities are closely linked to environmental politics bespeaking the interests of all entities—humans and animals, organisms, and plants, present as well as future generations. Ethnic issues in the Chinese context are tied intimately to ecological problems, yet they mean not simply crises in nature but also an onto-epistemological crisis. In contemporary Chinese history, non-Han ethnic groups have been rendered as objects to be represented, nationalized, assimilated, and modernized. The modernist dualism of categorizing means and ends should be challenged and redrawn in the face of climate change that triggers the debates on how to manage and reorganize the long chain of complex connections in the ecosystems. Being confronted with anthropogenic climate change, nobody can rank all the implicated factors into a hierarchy.

Meanwhile, the structure of China's ethnopolitics has been much about power struggle, ideology, and material interests over the environment. When significant mistakes were made in nature for the sake of modernization, productivity, and social progress,<sup>4</sup> ethnic minorities' ecology urges for a redistribution of agency, roles, and power relations. David A. Bello (2016) examines how the Manchu state, to consolidate its expansive empire and defend against Russian incursion by imposing greater uniformity rather than adapting to diversity, promoted imperial arablism (arable-ism), a Han Chinese imperial cosmic-political order in agrarian Inner China, or what he calls “Hanspace” in borderland areas in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries. The ecologically unsustainable and culturally destructive top-down policies of Han-style arablization were implemented in the Manchuria forest, southern Inner Mongolian steppe, and southwestern Yunnan mountain. They eventually led to resource depletion, attracted unanticipated Han migration, induced the impoverished ethnic herders' and foragers' reliance on Han agricultural produce, and damaged ethnic identity and their diverse practices as well as intended ecological relations. If the Manchu conquest dynasty inadvertently converted environmental relations to a monolithic form and ruined the ethnic identity by enforcing the Hanspace in the borderland, the modern PRC state goes to the ethnic regions with the unbridled purpose of Sinification to assert the civilizing effects on "barbarian" places. But the state's attempt to integrate ethnic communities into the Han-based nation, if not resisted by the ethnic agencies and interethnic strife, could be bound by complex ecology posing relentless challenges to any endeavor for unifying the immense diversity. Ethnic issues are as intractable as ecological problems to the state's blueprint.

### Territorializing Ethnic Ecologies in Cinema

Most of China's ethnic minority films can be seen as "rural films" or "landscape films," to be enlisted as modern technology to map and create new spaces and a new model of identity for the construction of the nation-state. Serving as spatial reconfigurations, ethnic minority films reclothe the old world with new revolutionary garments. Through ethnic rural or landscape films, a new Chinese map or new vision of Chinese territories has been projected onto the vast, boundless screen of shared popular imagination. At the same time, the indexical filming of nature or ethnic habitat may testify to the brutal and sheer existence of things and peoples but simultaneously act to hollow out any imposed meanings. Bazin's notion of realism highlights the contrast that images may be capable of rendering the ideological narrative and intended illusion, but cinema's ontological link also discloses unintended natural entities, raw materials, or actual realities that resist political appropriations or purposive acts.

The gravity of the ethnic minority issue in modern China is disproportionately great. The non-Han Chinese population, comprising less than 9 percent of the total population,<sup>5</sup> garners a great deal of attention by their meanings to the fundamental ethnic composition of the modern Chinese nation, their location in regions rich in natural resources and strategic military significance, and their political implications for China's relations

with its immediate neighboring countries and with the international community. While most of the non-Han minorities live along China's borderlands from the northeast, through the northwest, down to the southwest, their locations are significantly tied to the survival and future development of various nations inside and outside the drawn boundaries. While the Chinese regime attempts to maintain a strong hold over these ethnic borderlands, at one time or another all these communities have resisted Chinese domination. On China's map of annual rainfall, the 15-inch Isohyet, the line that diagonally cuts the Chinese territories into two halves (i.e., the southeast and the northwest), indicates it gets 15 inches of water per year. East of the line, the areas get more water needed by an agricultural economy. West of the line, the inner dry land restricts Han-based China from occupying these ethnic habitats permanently, as proved by historical precedent.

Besides the Isohyet line, there is another imaginary line drawn from the city of Heihe in Heilongjiang Province on the Russian border to Tengchong in Yunnan Province near Myanmar that crosses diagonally through China to demarcate a vast demographic, environmental, and political divide between the northwest and the southeast in terms of population distribution. This "Hu Line" is named after Hu Huanyong, a Chinese demographer who first identified the demarcation in 1935. The line indicates the huge split between which the northwest has 57 percent of the land and 4 percent of the total population of China and the southeast has 96 percent of the population but only 43 percent of the area. The natural landscape splits along the Hu Line: areas to the northwest are colder, more arid, and more mountainous, while the southeast is flatter and more humid. Analyses found that climate, food, employment, water resources, and topography are the important factors restricting the distribution of population in China. The Hu Line also represents the frontier of economic development. The average GDP per capita in provinces east of the line is about 15 percent higher than in those to the west. Although the Hu Line has rarely been examined from the perspective of the ethnic population, it reveals that the southeast is more heavily populated, wealthier, and more ethnically homogenous with the prevalent presence of Han Chinese, while most of the 8.89 percent that makes up China's ethnic population lives west of the line, where most ethnic autonomous regions and prefectures are located (Gao, Wang, and Zhu 2017). Even though rapid development and massive urbanization happened in China over the last three decades, the fundamentals of the economic and ethnic imbalance remain virtually the same.

The geographical and cultural distance between the ethnic minorities and the Han majority, as well as their economic inequality, renders the ideal of interethnic harmony and national integration hard to achieve. Premier Li Keqiang has repeatedly urged since 2012 the country's modernization campaign to break through the Hu Line to develop the northwest (M. Chen et al. 2016). A similar campaign—"Open Up the West" (*xibu da kaifa*)—had already begun in 2000 by President Jiang Zemin. The earliest call for developing the ethnic northwest took place in the Guomindang's (GMD, the Chinese Nationalist Party) Republican era of the 1930s (see chap. 1). The aggressive state-led push for development and urbanization since the establishment of the PRC through infrastructure construction and internal migration from the Han areas not only threatens the natural environment and cultural diversity of the ethnic-inhabited areas west of the line but also exacerbates the cruel inequities that the influx of internal Han migrants only dilutes and fractionalizes the ethnic regions and further marginalizes the local ethnic groups to their disadvantage.

In the founding years of the PRC, cinema fulfilled its greatest propagandist function to legitimize nation-building projects and modernization campaigns in these remote "ethnic wastelands" (Lü 2015). There may not have been any unified "Chinese" view of ecology in the past, but the environmental history of the Han-dominated Chinese nation is evidently a continuing story of the simplification of biodiversity, peoples, and institutions into the sedentary agricultural ecosystems and then the modern industrialization model. The PRC, either in the Maoist period or in the post-socialist era, is committed to rapid industrialization and economic development to elevate China to the position of a competitive nation-state in the world system. China's utopian impulses and sheer statist intentions to enhance its ruling capacity all rely on bringing Han Chinese migrants, as well as the values, culture, and hardware of modernization, into non-Han peripheries to consolidate and legitimize Han sovereignty over the ethnic borderlands. Cinema made in the PRC for nation building could be accused of facilitating colonial enterprise in the guise of modernization discourse. Colonization, however, is not an adequate or accurate term to fully describe China's relationship with its ethnic minorities.<sup>6</sup> Films serving such a state's mission seemingly succumbed to single-minded control and ideological appropriation, though cinema, as I argue in this book, can resist constraint and is always at odds with the intended manipulation.

The development process in China's peripheries manifests as synthetic forms of territorialization (accompanied by the Sinicization of all ethnic groups into one singular Chinese nationality),<sup>7</sup> the conversion of the natu-

ral landscape, and the expansion of the built environment, by either the greening of the desert or urbanization, which serves as a significant symbol of national modernization. Chinese nation building at the borderlands is mediated by and construed through the environmental discourse. The state territorialization appears in the form of a rescue mission in the ecologically threatened areas, and the state's development projects with environmental protection schemes in these regions have been creating new nationalized spaces to supersede the ancestral places of origin of the non-Han groups. While development with ecological policy in Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and the Southwest is represented as the state's grace to the local ethnic minorities, modernization and environmental rehabilitation in Xinjiang, through the Belt and Road Initiative in the twenty-first century, are seen as a political strategy to defuse potential ethnic unrest and stamp out separatism. The leak of official Chinese documents about the governance in Xinjiang in late 2019 revealed how the regime sees the attempt to eradicate the "erroneous thinking" of its Uyghur minority as an environmental cleanup campaign. A million Muslims, most of them from the Uyghur communities, have been locked up without trial in reeducation camps so the regime can reengineer the minds and behaviors of these "potential terrorists and extremists" (Byler, Franceschini, and Loubere 2022). The official Chinese response to international criticism is unapologetically ruthless: it maintains that detention education is a caring government's way of providing "training" for the ethnic people, who lack the necessary skills to make a proper living and to protect those with the "provincial nature" from falling victim to extremist thoughts.<sup>8</sup>

### Reduction of Diversity and Environmental Injustice

If biodiversity is a key factor for enhancing sustainability and maintaining resilience in ecosystems, the Beijing government may take significant risks by brutally eradicating diverse cultural elements, since the homogenization or consolidation for national unity could lead the nation-state to be increasingly less resilient and to suffer an unexpected collapse in the face of internal and external shocks. The model of adaptive cycles of biological as well as political systems under dynamic changes tells how targeted engineering ignores the interactions of multiple factors and the effects on the entire system of merely maximizing a single variable (Perdue 2013). Although ethnic issues at the borderlands are seen as a historical stage to overcome in China's march toward a powerful, modern nation-state, the

environmental implications of the statist model of Chinese expansion and growth have generated a resurgence of ethnic discontent and unexpected ecological consequences that could become pivotal in challenging the orbit of state power. Indeed, China's ethnic regions may serve as typical examples of environmental injustice and inequity and may exhibit how the social, economic, and political conflicts that environmental problems arise from, and that they trigger, are disseminated unequally, with the hazards falling disproportionately on the ethnic poor and their impoverished communities, parallel to the severe social, economic, and political disparities in the multiethnic nation.

The state-led development over the last four decades has brought the ethnic communities an invisible kind of "slow violence" (Nixon 2011), a sort of attritional, incremental, slow-moving environmental damage that creates long-term impairments to peoples and ecosystems in the borderlands through the activities of mining, logging, farming, dam construction, military operation, migration, nature preservation, resettlement, and tourism. The modernization campaign structurally went together with devastating ecological changes. Such a form of governance-cum-exploitation in the peripheral ethnic regions was trumpeted as the endowment of the Chinese civilizing mission to enhance the living standard of local non-Han communities. Aiming for political steadiness and integration of the ethnic peripheral lands into the Chinese nation-state, these state-subsidized development projects generally were launched without the common consent of the local people. The government claimed the development would bring huge benefits and improvements to "backward" ethnic communities that had no other choice but to accept them with gratefulness and loyalty, no matter how defective and unsafe the development policies might have been.

China's modernization campaign and nation-building project carried out in ethnic frontiers, such as Inner Mongolia, included the exploitation of resources without redress, environmental deregulation for military purposes, tourism that threatens native inhabitants, and conservation practices that drive native people away from their historic lands. In the past 30 years, traditional ethnic modes of livelihood like nomadism, grazing, and hunting in China have been abandoned due to the implementation of stringent top-down environmental governance without participatory and inclusive processes to deal with climate change and ecological deterioration, creating herdsmen resettlements and promulgating laws that prohibit herding and grazing via financial compensation and the policy of "retire livestock, restore grassland" (*tuimu huancao* 退牧還草). While their traditional life-

styles are deprived, the ethnic minorities in these regions do not feel they have benefited from the mining of their resources and the general economic development because of the structural racism in the labor market. In the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, where 80 percent of its local population is Han Chinese due to the long process of internal migration and settlement (Han and Paik 2017), a series of Mongolian protests across the region, including those in the capital Hohhot, broke out in 2011 to express simmering discontent over environmental damage from coal mining (Liu et al. 2014).

The natural resources-rich Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and other ethnic borderlands are undoubtedly subject to state extraction and exploitation. As economic growth and development are integral to China's nation building, and also to its ethnopolitics, struggles over resources and contention over potential environmental consequences lie at the center of battles over power in ethnic regions. The adverse effects of these infrastructure development projects might eradicate ethnic traditional practices that are even more ecologically sustainable and further heighten local resentments and interethnic conflicts (Lafitte 2013; W. Yin 2015; Hong and Yang 2018). Films about the nomadic Mongol herdsman reveal how the state's enclosed pasture policy for protecting the grassland from overgrazing has driven the ethnic people out of their traditional livelihood (see chap. 3). Ecological consciousness is growing in many Chinese feature films, although the dominant tone in China's ethnic cinema still concerns the way the film is used as an agent of modernization to assert that the wild nature at the borderlands is mastered for nation building and economic development to legitimize the Chinese regime. Severe environmental problems have induced cinematic productions that deal with ecological change, particularly in ethnic regions, in a terrain of discursive contestations. The top-down national imaginary of "ecological civilization" (*shengtai wenming* 生態文明) promoted by the central government is aimed at containing social discontent in the name of sustainable development and scientific innovation framed by authoritarian orientation.<sup>9</sup> This opens some space for filmmakers to implicitly express their environmental concerns. The competing visions of the local custom and nativist understanding of nature meet with aspirations for a national good and sovereign rule, giving rise to an intensive disjuncture between the geopolitical and economic spaces territorialized by the state's development projects and the ethnic groups' places of origin. At the same time, the camera's automatism takes on nature to generate a certain suspense of meaning by exhibiting the muteness and indifference of the physical world. Although it is generally assumed that

cinema cannot do without human creative work and narrative frame, there could be a temporal hold of meaning in the eco-films with the spectacle of nature while being not entirely saturated with narrative elements. In other words, films centered around nature may harbor an anarchic contingency that exceeds the full control of the filmmaker, though it is also open to aesthetic or political projection.

### Affects, Revolutionary Voices, and Feared Bodies in the Contesting Site

Nationalists' eyeing the resources in ethnic borderlands is not a recent phenomenon in modern Chinese history. There have been strong passions behind the drive for integrating all the differences into the process of construction and development of the nation form in the past. Several passionate waves of idealizing and romanticizing ethnic minorities have emerged, one after the other, in Han-based China since the early twentieth century, although the perception of non-Han peoples as barbarian continued to perpetuate. Passions could be projected only onto the place itself or the related objects or nonhumans, not necessarily on the people inhabiting it. But when affections turn toward the frontier people, anxiety or fear could arise because of their inscrutable differences. These strong feelings have manifested in different forms of media other than cinematic representations. Indeed, passions and affective thinking began to emerge with the territory and the people at the margins starting from the Republican era, with its "Northwest Fever" (*xibeire* 西北熱) in the 1930s for national revival (see chap. 1). From the 1950s, Mao's China embodied ethnic groups as a new energy for continuing the unending revolutionary mission, both nationally and worldwide under the Cold War ambience (see chap. 2). In the post-Mao society, affects continue to grow around the ethnic borderland that has been designated either as a spiritual asylum to the alienating world of political turmoil and excessive commodification or as a conspicuous icon to express anxiety over environmental degradation and cultural loss. Negative affects are projected toward the potential threats of the Muslim extremists and ethnic separatists (see chap. 4).

Republican China's interest in ethnic regions was fundamentally a proactive nationalist response to potential foreign imperialism mediated through a renewed imagination about the non-Han ethnic groups. Based on Hollywood's exoticization of the ethnic savage in the form of a white hero adventuring in Africa's wilderness, a small studio in Shanghai, Yil-

ian Film Company (藝聯), produced *Amorous History of the Yao Mountains* (*Yaoshan yanshi* 猺山艷史, dir. Yang Xiaozhong 楊小仲, 1933) at Guangxi to contrast the condescending difference between the civilized and the primitive and to “disseminate Chinese civilization to the Yao tribespeople” (*kaihua yaomin* 開化瑤民), as Lu Xun ironically commented ([1933] 2017, 272). Exotically stereotyping the savage, however, was not the only model in the short history of Chinese representing the non-Han peoples.

During the Sino-Japanese War, several Chinese-language costume or period dramas were released in occupied Shanghai as a kind of allegory to implicitly convey the message of resistance against foreign invaders with a focus on some fictional or real figures from folklore and imperial histories. In these films, with plots based on Han and ethnic struggles in ancient historical periods, the patriotic heroine in *Mulan Joins the Army* (*Mulan congjun* 木蘭從軍, dir. Bu Wancang 卜萬蒼, 1937), the Miao (Hmong) woman warrior in *Qin Liangyu* (秦良玉, dir. Bu Wancang, 1940), the anti-Huns intellectual in *Su Wu Herds Sheep* (*Su Wu muyang* 蘇武牧羊, dir. Bu Wancang, 1940), the anti-Jin heroine in *Liang Hongyu* (梁紅玉, dir. Yue Feng 岳楓, 1940), and the faithful Uyghur princess in *Fragrant Imperial Concubine* (*Xiangfei* 香妃, dir. Zhu Shilin 朱石麟, 1940) could be read as symbolic embodiments of Chinese nationalist passions against the Japanese aggression, although the films were more generally seen by the audiences of that time as entertainment movies.

The ethnic representation was left for the pro-communist filmmakers to advance their more progressive political use. A good early example is *Storm on the Border* (*Saishang fengyun* 塞上風雲, dir. Ying Yunwei 應雲衛, 1942), which was shot on location in Inner Mongolia to highlight the unity of Han and Mongols in the war against Japan. As further discussed in chapter 1, a more ambitious project is Zheng Junli’s (鄭君里) wartime documentary *Long Live the Nations* (*Minzu wansui* 民族萬歲, 1941), which covered many ethnic minority groups in the borderlands to mobilize them as a progressive force in the war of resistance against the Japanese invasion. Undeniably, Chinese leftist filmmakers have attempted to politicize ethnic minority films to realize the revolutionary function in an affirmative sense by thwarting the dominant codes of ethnic representations on-screen. Hence, non-Han subjects became a new political weapon against the ethnic consumption and pleasures of Hollywood-like narrative cinema.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was more capable of capitalizing on China’s enthusiasm toward the ethnic borderlands by integrating the story of the ethnic minority as part of the spread of the communist revolution to the colonial world. The political rhetoric of weak nations,

self-determination, and autonomy had been appealing to both the Han majority and the ethnic communities, although the CCP quickly aborted the promised Soviet model of federation by its 1949 victory to inherit the territories of the Qing Empire (X. Liu 2004; Fiskesjø 2006). During the founding years of the PRC (1949–65), Mao's emphasis on revolutionary peasantry had a lot to do with the new fantasizing projection of China's ethnic minorities. In Mao's view, the backwardness embodied by the Chinese peasants and the ethnic minorities gave an advantage to the possibility of seeking an alternate form of modernity for socialist China.

The projection of revolutionary utopianism upon the non-Han ethnic bodies through the arousing cinematic presentations of tantalizing music, energetic dances, colorful costumes, exotic landscapes, and romantic storylines successfully created a dozen ethnic minority blockbusters, the impacts of which still linger in Chinese audiences' minds long after the evaporation of revolutionary passions. Ethnic minority cinema is also invested by the state with the potential to alter people's ability to conceive of what is possible and to imagine new forms of life. Before the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), about 45 *shaoshu minzu dianying* (literally, "minority nationality films") were made in communist China, constituting a substantial portion of its annual film production (one-sixth of the total film productions from the late 1950s to the early 1960s were ethnic minority-themed films). They became the new revolutionary rhapsodies for communist China to resonate with the utopian pulses and rhythms of the world revolution. The new voices from these ethnic revolutionary films served to ritualize utopian goals at a time when many postrevolutionary socialist regimes, including that of the PRC, had been undergoing the process of deradicalization by compromising with the existing political realities.

Since special privileges were offered to ethnic minorities by the Chinese government to gain their faith in the new regime,<sup>10</sup> ethnic minority films were also permitted, in the name of respecting their cultural differences and lifestyles—certain licenses that were taboo in typical Chinese socialist movies in the founding years. Romantic plotlines and feminized or sexualized female characters became the norm in ethnic minority genres, whereas these elements were judged to be immoral and reactionary in other socialist films of the time. To some extent, special film techniques used to enhance the cultural specificities of the ethnic minorities were not discouraged. In a rather short period of cultural thaw, experimental-oriented ethnic films, such as *The Serf* (*Nongnu* 農奴, dir. Li Jun 李俊, 1963), could be produced (see chap. 5). Hence, even under tight monitoring and stern censorship of political content by the state authorities, filmmakers were still motivated to

work in this genre by focusing on the “harmless” aspects of ethnic specificities, such as visually attractive and colorful ethnic costumes and customs, musical folksongs and dances, and non-Han sensual romances (see chap. 2). By balancing the CCP’s ethnic policies and aesthetic maneuvers that provide viewers with entertainment value and accommodate their voyeuristic desires, ethnic minority films developed certain recognizable and predictable formulas in response to the state’s demands on revolutionary routine as well as society’s steady needs. For the diplomatic front and international solidarity with other socialist countries in the Cold War period, ethnic minority films were exported as symbols of China’s revolutionary zeal in support of the global communist causes.

Under the great changes happening in the post-Cultural Revolution society, the ethnic minority film genre was also transforming on its own, prompted by the relative slackening of political censorship, dwindling state-funded film production, and the fast-growing commercialization of the film industry itself. The bankruptcy of revolutionary faith and the implementation of economic reforms after the decade of political turmoil created new contexts for a reemergence of ethnonationalism that would easily ferment racist articulations targeting its exploited proletarian population, which referred not only to peasants and migrant workers of Han origin but also to the poor, backward, and culturally different ethnic minorities. The cultural bias against non-Han minorities that already existed in the genre of the early period has been further exoticized and manipulated—even though, paradoxically, ethnic minority cultures have also been (persistently) fantasized as another world beyond the corrupting influences of the new economy. Continuously taking up a non-negligible chunk of annual film production from the late 1970s (by the end of the Cultural Revolution to 1979, 25 ethnic films were released in the PRC) to the early twenty-first century,<sup>11</sup> ethnic minority films have become more market oriented, featuring exaggerated and spectacular representations of ethnic differences and extravagant landscapes. Nevertheless, the reform era also opened spaces and opportunities for new filmmakers to make anti-genre works to subvert conventional expectations (see chap. 6). While there have been formulas to describe the propagandist nature of pre-Cultural Revolution ethnic minority films (Yau 1989; Zhang and Xiao 1998, 155–56), the complications and intricacies that have gradually surfaced in this genre since the 1980s would require more in-depth analysis to understand their sociopolitical meanings in the current world.

Before dialects and ethnic dialogues were allowed to be heard in the PRC films in the mid-1980s, the soundscapes of ethnic minority cinema

were homogenized into a coalesced national voice, not only for realizing the objective of new nation building but also for resonating with the campaign of socialist internationalism in the Cold War world structure. On-screen ethnic minority heroes, whose voices are dubbed or expressed in Putonghua, stand for the new socialist subject-citizen that the CCP meant to construct as a distinctive affective horizon if not a laboratory, to symbolically resolve China's multiple contradictions and help sustain an imagined worldwide leftist solidarity. In contrast to Moscow's promotion of minority languages in the Soviet arts, China's ethnic minority cinema represents a unified interethnic family more than a class-based, multicultural orientation toward the achievement of socialist utopia at both the national and international levels (see chap. 2).

In the post-Mao reform era, the ethnic minority movies by Han Chinese filmmakers of the fourth and the fifth generations, such as Zhang Nuanxin's *Sacrificed Youth* (*Qingchunji* 青春祭, 1984) and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *On the Hunting Ground* (*Liechang zhasa* 獵場札撒, 1984) and *Horse Thief* (*Daomazei* 盜馬賊, 1986), succeeded in differentiating themselves from previous state-monitored propagandist ethnic productions and attracting important international attention, although they also marked the end of possible alternatives provided by the state funding apparatus. However, their popularity and their grouping into the same category indicated a serious misunderstanding of China's ethnic issues in mainstream society. Films from the Northern ethnic groups and those from the Southern ethnic groups were lumped together by the mainstream market as the same ethnic minority film, revealing that simplistic self-other binarism is still in place.

China's growing economic clout from the turn of the twenty-first century has extended many of its domestic issues, including the ethnic minority problems that the state has attempted for decades to contain within the national boundaries, into international affairs. Films about non-Han ethnic peoples have become a new site of contestation or negotiation within which Chinese authorities and film companies have aimed to defend and promote national interests in the face of international criticisms of China's ethnic policy without diminishing the commercial value of this genre under the market mechanism. With the film industry's marketization reform starting in the mid-1990s, ethnic minority films were also able to draw vital foreign interest in the form of growing transnational investments as well as international awards. Some prominent examples are works by Han filmmakers, such as Lu Chuan's *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol* (*Kekexili* 可可西里, 2004) and Wang Quanan's *Tuya's Marriage* (*Tuya de hunshi* 圖雅的婚事, 2006), that

boldly demonstrate the difficult living environments of ethnic minorities in Tibet and Inner Mongolia under the devastating impact of China's drastic economic developments. The economy-based model prevailing in contemporary China not only has repercussions for the cinematic treatment of ethnic minorities but also brings new opportunities to the ethnic groups themselves, who are increasingly finding their channels of expression. Some non-Han directors, such as Tibetan Pema Tseden, Tibetan Sonthar Gyal, Korean Zhang Lü (Jang Ryool), and Bi Gan of Miao (Hmong) origin, are gaining exceptional support locally and abroad and obtaining larger bordering spaces in which to maneuver (see chap. 6). Simultaneously, ethnic filmmakers are facing unprecedentedly powerful economic and political gambits that further motivate the desire of the state to manage, govern, control, calculate, instrumentalize, and assimilate them.

### The Religious and the Secular Roles in Building a Nation

While the rhetoric of national unity has repeatedly been uttered throughout the (film) history of the republics, there are hardly any persuasive means capable of showing why all the nationalities within the political territory necessarily constitute one single nation. According to the common belief, if the Han majority—which is virtually identical to the Chinese—can emerge as a homogeneous ethnic unity with so-called common origins from what is a mosaic of culturally, linguistically, and regionally different groups,<sup>12</sup> then the other non-Han minorities could also be gradually assimilated into the embrace of the Chinese national family through the *longue durée* of history. Scholars of China studies point out that representing the “Han” as one unified race is a modern invention for the sake of the nationalist discourse (Mullaney et al. 2012). Some even go back much earlier to argue that “non-Chinese,” like “Qiang” (羌),<sup>13</sup> is not only a simple ethnic label used to describe other people but also a shifting ethnic boundary. From the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600 BCE to ca. 1046 BCE) to the Han Empire (206 BCE to 220 CE), the geographic implications of the concept of “Qiang” in the Chinese mind were not stable but drifted onward to the west. More and more of the western populations have been merged into China throughout history. The formation of the (Han) Chinese involved a process of assimilating different ethnic peoples. That means Han itself is also a shifting ethnic stamp (M. Wang 1992, 2008).

The notion of *wuzu gonghe* cannot be smoothly translated as “Republic of Five Nationalities” and is by no means an invention of Republican China.

After the success of the Xinjiang military conquest in 1759, the Qing government was determined to integrate the East Turkestan (renamed as the Uyghur in the 1920s) with Manchu, Han, Mongol, and Tibetans as “one of the five culture blocs that comprised the principal domains of the Qing realm, a status from which such other peoples as the Miao or indigenous Taiwanese, who lacked writing systems, were excluded” (Millard 1998, 197). The Qing imperial polity conceived and portrayed the unity of these five peoples under the empire as a symbol of a unified whole. Under the multiethnic and pluralist Qing Empire, all cultural entities occupied equivalent status, and no civilization could enjoy a privileged position within this vision of universal heaven. By no means was the multiethnic empire maintained only through sheer political slogans. To attain multiethnic loyalty, the Qing emperors learned how to exhibit different facades and value systems to appeal to various beliefs. The formation of the Qing frontier and religious policies has been shaped by the strategic and flexible dealing with several other values and beliefs in the vast territories. As well as absorbing Confucianism, the Manchu emperors also incorporated aspects of Tibetan Buddhism and Mongol rulership into their imperial policies. Deep down, perhaps, it is religion or a belief system that is capable of cementing or splitting an empire or a nation. However, the Qing government gradually under Chinese influences became oppressive toward Islamic communities, sowing the seeds of the violent Muslim uprising against the state authorities in imperial history.

Leaders of the two new Chinese republics sought to find a central authority with new political means to replace the dynastic system and to harness the recalcitrant ethnic minorities along the border regions. While selectively inheriting the Qing imperial policy toward the ethnic groups, the two new Chinese regimes bound by a nationalist ideology have been struggling to incorporate the ethnic borderlands into a unified nation. The religion card played a subordinate role in this process of national integration. Both the GMD and the CCP have called for self-determination for the ethnic minority regions at some specific historical moments but also quickly abandoned such an attempt. The ideologues of the GMD developed a theory of unified national origin by claiming all ethnic peoples in China had shared a common ancestor, the Yellow Emperor (Leibold 2006). The Republican era began to cultivate in the Han majority a paradoxical attitude toward China's non-Han ethnic peoples. On the one hand, the ethnic peoples in the borderlands were categorized as backward and destined to be enlightened, liberated, and rescued. On the other hand, their

authenticity, stamina, and sturdiness were sanctified as precious qualities from which the Han Chinese should learn to rejuvenate the nation.

There is a common fascination in traditional China with the alternate “power of the margins” associated with remote areas where non-Han minority groups often live (Weller 2006). The Sinocentric value in the Republican times was also entangled by the impacts of European views of ethnic peoples. When the CCP took over China in 1949, it followed the Stalinist policy of recognizing and creating nationalities. As a result, fifty-six *minzu* were identified, including Han Chinese, Mongols, Tibetans, Hui, and Uyghurs, each officially endorsed as comprising the mosaic of the multinational PRC. But the multiethnic composition of socialist China did not mean that the regime was more tolerant of religious practices, since the CCP has claimed a monopoly on power, belief, and truth, and as the highest spiritual authority, its ideology is intended to give new meaning to social and individual life. The state embraced the famous anthropologist Fei Xiaotong’s theory of “one unity with diversity” (*duoyuan yiti*) to highlight the national unity of all ethnicities in the twenty-first century. Religious policy followed the Chinese model of “one nation with diversity” (*Zhonghua minzu duoyuan yiti* 中華民族多元一體), resulting in diminishing tolerance of religious practices.

While intimately tying the ethnic issue to the religious issue in its ethnic governance, the atheist CCP has categorized religion as a false worldview and superstitious way of life rooted in the backward old world. However, Chinese communism has never managed to overcome religion and produce a completely atheist society—particularly not in ethnic communities. The atheist conviction of the CCP has failed to fill the sacred space of multiethnic China. In the post-socialist era, when state-led development was meant to erase all differences, with ethnic groups being prompted to pursue material wealth instead of their own cultures and spirituality, films related to ethnic subjects implicitly expressed the mood of spiritual angst and attempted to construct some ethical values based upon religious faith. The bigger picture reveals that the global revival of religions goes hand in hand with the crisis of the secular world (Johnson 2017; McCaffrey 2009). Modern China is neither a truly religious nor a secular society. Secularization or disenchantment is probably not a question of the disappearance of religion, just its reorientation and transformation. The return of religion in post-Mao China manifests in the extravagance and overgrowth of superficial religiosity in society, indicating a profusion of old and new religions that rushed in to fill the spiritual emptiness.

Under the heavy-handed censorship of media coverage of religion, contemporary Chinese filmmakers—especially the ethnic filmmakers with a stronger religious background—have tended to reckon with religious issues as contradictions of modernity. While non-Han filmmakers cautiously handle Islamic religious themes in their productions, Tibetan directors like Pema Tsenden and Sonthar Gyal have attempted to open a critical space between the Buddhist sphere and that of secular modernity as a possible way to remain suspended between blind devotion and rational skepticism, suggesting that the essence of the sacred is to be found through the contact with the profane. In their cinematic works, they use immanent everydayness to articulate the longing for transcendent beings since, for this new generation, there is no absolute distinction and hierarchy between immanence and transcendence (see chap. 5). The politics of the religious is a question of inscribing the transcendent that cannot be accounted for in the immanent frame, constructing a new intervention into the symbolic order based on the secular political ideology. New ethnic films, including the shorts by the Hui Muslims appearing mainly online (see chap. 4), have depicted a religion without religion—that is, a religion without spiritual leaders, institutions, and hierarchy, which could be understood as a faith not waiting for the salvation of any god or any master.

### Biopolitical Governing and Interstitial Spaces for Ethnic Agency

A prevailing strand in Chinese nationalist discourse from the late Qing to the Republican period was the constant harping on the necessity to create a new people or species, a rejuvenated body of citizenry that could accommodate the demands of a modern nation and compete with the West. The call for “racial improvement” among Chinese intellectuals since the late nineteenth century carried so much weight to endow the state with legitimate justification for its aggressive interference in individual bodies and population control. Propositions for sociocultural engineering (*gaizao guomin* 改造國民) induced the general acceptance in Chinese society of eugenics (*youshengxue* 優生學), which was deemed after World War II a reactionary pseudoscience based on the idea of breeding out innate biological characteristics categorized as inferior. Frank Dikötter (1998) understands it as the indigenous strains of racism in traditional Chinese perceptions of barbarians and its historical continuity in the encounter with the Western ideas of race. However, more recent scholars like Yuehtsen Juliette Chung (2002, 2014) revised Dikötter's arguments to emphasize

that eugenics in China served as a counter-imperialist discourse and was deployed for national improvement to resist racial stigmatism. Anthropometrics was also employed in Republican China for bodily measurements of the citizens to alert Chinese people of their nation's weakness and inadequacy while nurturing them for national self-transformation (J. Fu 2016).

The Chinese discourse of race based upon the concept of a nation as a single racial group was used as a tool to mobilize Han Chinese revolutionaries to overthrow the Manchu dynasty. But after 1911, when the new republic was established, Sun Yat-sen advocated the coexistence of five ethnic groups under the principle of *wuzu gonghe* as a new Chinese nation to fight against foreign imperialism. Reformers like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao promoted racial intermarriage in the hope of renovating the Chinese people, though Kang envisioned the idea of interbreeding with the superior white race (Teng 2006). It was the well-known Chinese eugenicist Pan Guangdan (潘光旦) who proposed non-Sinocentric miscegenation and helped draft the guidelines for the National Population Policy under Chiang Kai-shek's Republican government in 1941. The guidelines encouraged interethnic marriage as a means to consolidate national unity and provide new resources for military conscription during the Sino-Japanese War. Pan yearned that "the Han Chinese and the frontier minorities could supplement one another in order to reproduce better Chinese offspring" (Chung 2010, 270).

For the communist regime after 1949, the process of governing and transforming the "low-end" or low-quality populations has always been the Leninist biopolitics of administrating and reengineering their collective human life by intervening in their reproduction, managing their size and growth, and raising their quality through the enhancement of their health, education, social morality, and political commitment (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). For more than a century, the Chinese people have become ever more preoccupied with producing a globally competitive race and world-class citizens. Animating such a concern has been a major objective of the Chinese statecraft in its "governmentalization," in the Foucauldian sense, of the populations and justification for its broad and deep interventions in human life.

In post-Mao China, a popular imaginary icon about ethnic minorities has circulated widely over several decades: the one from the novel *Wolf Totem* (*Lang tuteng* 狼圖騰) by Jiang Rong (姜戎). In the novel, the wolf represents the aggressive Mongols under the leadership of Chinggis Khan (1162–1227 CE), who conquered half the world and established their huge cross-continental empire. Such a courageous and ferocious animal embod-

ied by the brutal, savage, but noble non-Han nomadic ethnic people is diagnosed as an antidote for the illness of Chinese society, which is embodied in the sedentary figure of the timid sheep. Hence, in Jiang Rong's view, the culture of wolves on the extensive grassland is a model from which the stumbling Chinese nation should learn. *Wolf Totem* concurs that Han-based China is inauthentic, obsolete, and parochial compared with the vastness and magnificence of the wide green wilderness. If anxious China aspires to be stronger and more competitive, it must become the desired Other and eliminate the weak inner self. The narrative does not just expose how desperate China was in the reform era to catch up with the world by emulating the ethnic Other; it also reveals the persistent problem of China's self-identity.

Modern China's lost sense of unadulterated selfhood makes it continue to fetishize and fear the small numbers of ethnic minorities by treating them contradictorily as an inspiration for revival, an obstacle to progress, or a major threat to political order and social harmony. In the nation-building agenda, the dialectical law of transforming quantity into quality is realized in the idea that ethnic minorities will eventually be absorbed into the national body, thus eradicating any ethnic differences. The ethnic Other, sometimes despised and sometimes eulogized, has its cycles and conflicts to contend with, between the promise of a progressive future and the reality of degeneration within the historical rotations in the Chinese nation-state. Operating in cyclical forms like journeys of departing and returning, ethnic minorities are merged into China's hard kernel, serving as an ideological core to allow for the intersection of complex sociopolitical issues and tensions—especially those related to the national identity or modernity.

As the post-socialist regime put great emphasis on the differential quality of human labor (the so-called *suzhi* 素質), the rural people (the mix of peasants and ethnic minorities) can no longer be understood in terms of the Maoist egalitarian mode of valuing manual work. Instead, they are destined to be transformed to develop their modern and entrepreneurial capabilities. The modernization project was accompanied by a significant shift from politicizing ethnicity in terms of nationalization and territorialization by asserting minorities' nationality status until the end of the Cultural Revolution to culturalizing or depoliticizing ethnicity since the 1980s, with the emphasis on non-Han peoples as the nation's ethnic minority rather than as diverse nationalities. Increasing numbers of voices in contemporary China, including scholars such as Hu Angang and Ma Rong and bureaucrat Zhu Weiqun, have advocated "de-politicizing" ethnicity, or the so-called

second generation of ethnic policies, to urge the state to impose a single and unified political-national identity on all Chinese nationals modeled on American melting pot policy (Rong Ma 2007; Hu and Hu 2011; Elliot 2015; Tobin 2015).

The CCP leaders long emphasized socioeconomic development as the crucial element for political stability and harmony along the ethnic borderlands, even though the PRC's ethnic policy since its establishment has always been in constant flux. Yet the rapid but unequal economic growth has led to new ethnic disputes and resentments between the Han majority and the ethnic minorities. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the new waves of ethnic unrest alarmed the Chinese regime about their similarly precarious ethnic situations. The present regime under Xi Jinping began to implement heavy-handed methods to foster interethnic mingling and fusion for the sake of forging "the communal consciousness of the Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu gongtongti yishi* 中華民族共同體意識) (Xi 2019; Leibold 2019). Reengineering the Muslims through correctional reeducation in Xinjiang is only a part of the project. Other "strike-hard" policies include urgent Sinicization of ethnic cultures, patriotic education, and equalization of service provisions by getting rid of ethnic-based preferential programs.

The biopower necessitates the intrusive monitoring and regulating of human life in the name of enhancing the species and improving the life, health, and welfare of the individual and the collective. The enhanced state capacity enabled the PRC to impose more regulations on the life capabilities of the population by governing the man-as-species at its target. While the non-Han communities are already vulnerable to the uneven distribution of costs and benefits associated with the man-made changes in the environment, the Muslims in Xinjiang Province have been particularly subjected to the state's disciplining techniques and surveillance apparatuses. For the nation-building agenda of containing instability and curbing insurgency, the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs, who constitute a fateful internal difference generating fear and threat, have been preemptively monitored, observed, profiled, and represented in multiple forms to serve the purpose of control and security (see chap. 4). The drive toward narrative in film history is indeed motivated by the surveilling capacities of the camera since surveillance has been a practice of cinema since its origin (Zimmer 2015). The Chinese regime has been putting substantial resources into surveillance practices to facilitate the production of knowledge about its governed subjects through visibility. The cinematic apparatus has been co-opted as a surveillance technology for visualizing and disciplining human

bodies while serving to satisfy voyeuristic pleasure and panoptic observation. Many films about ethnic minorities fluctuate between the spectrum of the two political positions: to negotiate with the dominant power to make cinema accommodate to the society of control or to critically reflect the dominant form to generate something different out of it.

The Chinese state engineered ethnic minority cinema for different purposes. Other than legitimizing and propagating the ethnic policy, such films may invigorate people's capacity to envision an idealized, if not utopian, community with strong national cohesiveness and material affluence. But other cinematic productions either by Han or ethnic minority filmmakers may implicitly or explicitly offset such utopian drive. Although the regime has the monopoly power to bring such film genre into existence, to define its meaning, and to treat it as an ideological apparatus, there is plurality in the field of ethnic cultural production. The power structure of the Chinese regime is a complex edifice, comprising party, government, security, and cultural-religious institutions at both the central and the local levels. Even if the Chinese ruling elite is not directly accountable to society or constrained by the governed population in its actions, the policymaking process and power mechanism are more complicated than the label "authoritarianism" indicates. The matrix of its power relations is embroiled with bureaucracy, factional politics, central-local tensions, coterie rivalries, and stern contests over conflicting missions and resource distribution. There have been at least two contending factions in the CCP's ethnic policies—the ultraists pressing for rapid assimilation to achieve national fusion and the gradualists urging a slower approach (Connor 1984, 407–30). To what extent can the emergent agencies—either ethnic minority or not—maneuver in the gaps, leaks, and loopholes of the power matrix to gain freedom and imagine differently?

Non-Han and Han filmmakers of ethnic minority productions are not necessarily the state's mouthpiece. Ethnic minorities engaging in film productions in China are particularly sensitive to the vexed questions of agency and representation under the wider context that most ethnic minority movies in the PRC have been and still are being made by Han directors who mostly do not even speak the ethnic language of their films. Generally educated in the PRC system and empowered by the accessibility of digital video technologies, these ethnic minority filmmakers share certain doubleness—that is, the articulation of complicity and the need for self-representation—with a self-reflective ambivalence about the urge for individual self-expression and the need-cum-expectation to speak for their native collective. Their orientation toward transnationalism, through

foreign capital and circulation in international film festivals, helps them to move slightly beyond the Chinese national narrative as well as against the ideology of ethnic essentialism, thus recognizing the importance of multiple epistemologies in the pursuit of social justice, struggling to think beyond the terrain of ethnic minority cinema and intensifying the issue of authenticity as a battleground of representation (see chap. 6). Unlike the state that posits a utopian dream as paradigmatic of the fullness of being, ethnic minority filmmakers may instead see in the imaginary mode of existence a deficient kind of being in their moving images. The international circulation of their films through different localities and platforms offers a possible plurality of imagined forms of being, as well as forging new cultural encounters with others (through which China's ethnic minorities are no longer just the marginalized Other in the Han-dominant nation) and cultivating cosmopolitan sensibilities beyond the confining borders of the nation-state system. Working in the interstitial spaces of the state system, market mechanism, and art-film circuits, these ethnic minority filmmakers utilize transnational channels of funding, marketing, distribution, exhibition, and sometimes even support of creative personnel, which help them to generate a cosmopolitan aesthetic disposition in their banal reality.

While this book does not aim to present cinema historiography, the study does challenge a conventional history of national cinema, the linear historical narrative of which depicts the development of a cinema within a specific national territory without questioning its coherence and unity. Ethnic identity formation, its (self-)representation and related affective feelings, though always silently accompanied by historical and institutional burdensome encumbrances in a particular ecological system, could be products of plasticity that may generate openness rather than exclusive closure.



## Cinematicity, Ethnic Gestures, and Republican China's Rescue Mission

The rise and proliferation in the use of various flags in Republican China may reveal how the state and its citizens understand the components of the new nation. The “Iron Blood 18-Star” flag (*tiexueshibaxingqi* 鐵血十八星旗) was first used by the Chinese revolutionaries during the Wuchang Uprising in 1911. The 18 stars represented the 18 provinces of China, the homeland of the Han majority. However, it was the five-striped colored flag representing the five major races in China under the concept of *wuzu gonghe* (Five Nations in Harmony 五族共和) that became the national flag. Although both flags were officially abandoned by the Nanjing government in 1928, in favor of the “Blue Sky, White Sun and All Field Red” flag (*qintian bairi mandihongqi* 青天白日滿地紅旗), all these flags were widely circulated and reproduced in society for the first few decades of the republic, as they appeared on the covers of books and magazines, on matchboxes, on product packaging, and as ornaments on tiles and walls. The coexistence of these flags and their proliferation may tell us about the ambivalent racial vision of the modern Chinese nation-state.

This chapter examines the sociopolitical phenomenon of Northwest Fever in the 1930s by explaining the Chinese enthusiasm for narrating and visually documenting the non-Han ethnic people on the borderlands. A photo or cinema camera serves as a political apparatus that captures the fragments and disjointed pieces of the ethnic existence of imperial China and converts them to spectacles and coherent nationalist narratives that accommodate the needs of modern times. In this chapter, I use the notion

of cinematicity, a term for intermediality, to understand how the Han Chinese photojournalists used the still images of the ethnic figures they shot on the borderlands to generate stories of national unification and salvation for the new republic. Such cinematicity is produced in Chinese modernity's demarcation of ethnic people and their bodies through the articulation between fetishism and narrativity. The fetishizing cinematic imagery was an endeavor to incorporate the ethnic peoples at the northwest margins into the Han-based ecosystem. The prosperity of print cultures in metropolitan Shanghai of the Republican era culminated in the widely circulated pictorial magazine *Liangyou* (良友 *The Young Companion*), with the imbrication of the visual along with the textual, effectively cultivating in its urban-based mass readers the multinational consciousness and belief in the necessity of integrating the ethnic peripheries into the Han-dominated China. The Republican ethnographic travelers, such as Wang Haisheng, Yang Jiaqing, and Lin Pengxia, with movie mind, sought to assimilate the captivating still images of the northwestern ethnic folks into a coherent narrative flow of nationalist ideology. At the same time, their photography and narrative also significantly augmented the colonizing gaze toward the exotic frontiersmen who were subjugated to be parts of the new nation-state. Lauded by the media as the patriotic female hero, Lin used her Northwest adventure to uplift the national consciousness of gender equality and to praise the upbeat features of the "barbaric" ethnic groups as well to channel her discontent with the corrupted Han Chinese society.

Giorgio Agamben's thesis on cinema urges us to consider the politics of cinema through the issue of "gesture," with cinema as a tool to seize unbinding forms of life. For him, a gesture is a pure mediality that makes a means visible, paralleling what he understands by politics, which is "the sphere of neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of pure mediality without end intended as the field of human action and of human thought" (2000b, 117). I use Zheng Junli's documentary *Long Live the Nations* (*Minzu wansui* 民族萬歲, 1941) made during the Sino-Japanese War to illustrate how the filmmaker's intention to stage the ethnic groups in the plot of foregrounding national unity has been transgressed by the amateur ethnic non-actors' mindless body gestures. The ethnic gestural movements articulate a certain heterogeneity that the cinematic narrative for promoting nationalism cannot fully enclose. But in the Republican context, the "pure ethnic mediality" has been bent by the fetishizing cinematic apparatus into a specific means to serve the national ends. It is a politics that emerges outside of the givens provided by the dominant discursive power.

As is well documented in historiographical writings, the nationalist revolution led by Sun Yat-sen was intended from the very beginning “to drive away the Manchu Tartars and to revive the Han Chinese nation” (*qubū dalu, huīfù zhōnghuá* 驅除韃虜, 恢復中華) to gain the political and moral support of Sun's Han compatriots for establishing a single-race modern nation-state, which also resonated with the traditional formation of imperial Han-centric China. However, the historical circumstances did not allow the modern Chinese nationalist discourse to readily converge with a racist (Han chauvinist) discourse.<sup>1</sup> The success of the Wuchang Uprising on October 10, 1911, did not lead smoothly to the downfall of the Qing Empire and the establishment of a Han nationalist country as foreseen by the revolutionaries, who were primarily from the southern part of China. Rather, the established political powers in the north were able to compel the advancing revolutionary force into negotiations and to push for the idea of “Five Nations in Harmony” or “Five Nationalities under One Union”<sup>2</sup> to protect their vested interests and the privileges enjoyed by the Mongolian, Tibetan, and Muslim ruling elites. Under the threats of political and military stalemate and the potential long-lasting civil war, Sun and his associates had to succumb to the idea of “Five Nations in Harmony”—the five were Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui, and Tibetan. The emphasis on their social and political equality could immediately protect the existing interests of the aristocratic ruling class from all these groups. The Han nationalists had to compromise not because they were previously unaware but because they had recognized that a “pure” Han nation could mean the dissolution of territorial integrity and the dramatic loss of enormous lands populated by the non-Han (as well as Han) ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup>

The declaration of Outer Mongolia for independence immediately after the 1911 Revolution had already created an imminent territorial encroachment problem for Chinese republicans (with the revelation of Russian support for the Mongolian secession), and it could be understood as the anticipatory Mongolian upset against radical Han Chinese nationalism. The revolutionaries' dream of a unified Han nation had been overly molded by the nationalist ideology (the notion of one race, one language, and one culture) borrowed from the European model, as well as by a conviction about the rejuvenating capability and international competitiveness of a supposedly more united Han Chinese state (the so-called China Proper or Inner China, in opposition to Outer China, which might be vulnerable to disunity and disintegration).

The Qing legacy for the modern Chinese nation-state is not merely territorial but also ideological. The successful Manchurian military cam-

paigns in Inner Asia during the eighteenth century redefined what China was and converted the minds of many Han intellectual elites to the idea that China was a multiethnic empire (Zhao 2006). This form of consent might not have worked well at the individual consciousness level of the Han Chinese majority in terms of their self-identification during the Qing government, but it was widely accepted by the literate classes and elites when grasped in terms of its sociopolitical functionality. Nevertheless, even the famous Qing scholar of the statecraft school, Wei Yuan (魏源), sometimes identified “China” as all the territories of the Qing Empire yet also saw it as just the eighteen provinces of the Han-based polity, excluding Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang, Manchuria, and Taiwan (Ge 1993, 26). The ideological notion of China being a multiethnic nation reveals itself as a commanding instrument of legitimation, with its effective function and use, in the struggle for its survival and continued existence. As more and more old and conservative forces, including the former constitutional monarchists, joined the revolutionary camp, the aspiration of a new republic to embody all the five major nationalities became prevalent. The practical view of seeing the frontier areas as a buffer zone (*pingfan* 屏藩, *fanli* 藩籬) to protect China Proper from foreign imperialist intimidations also gained momentum in the public debate. As Joseph Esherick (2006) argues, even if Han nationalists doubted if non-Han ethnic peoples would be considered Chinese once the Qing Empire was overthrown, they eventually accepted the inheritance of Manchu's colonial conquests for functional purposes in defense and economic development. Frontiers from the Qing Empire created constitutive boundaries for the perception of a modern Chinese nation-state. The negotiation between southern revolutionaries and the northern military power not only led to the abdication of the Qing emperor and the transfer of the presidency from Sun to Yuan Shikai but also gave rise to the affirmation of the five nationalities (*zu*) vision as a new way of thinking for the Chinese republic.

### Northwest Fever in the 1930s

More than a decade went by before the neophyte Chinese nation-state began to understand that its ethnic borderlands represented more than a bulwark to provide strategic depth for repelling foreign invaders. Although the decade of warlordism in the 1920s was gone after the Northern Expedition military campaign (1926–27) and China had nominally been unified, the Nanjing Nationalist government could barely exercise its state

sovereignty over the distant northwestern parts ruled by some autonomous warlords and local officials. Against all the odds, the Nationalist unification efforts during the Nanjing period attempted to assert the authority of the central government in the remote borderlands by instigating the Chinese public to conscientiously care about such an inaccessible and culturally alien place. In the 1930s, Republican China's ethnic frontiers in the northwest (*xibei* 西北) became a new site for Inner Chinese society to fantasize about national revival, resilience, and salvation when growing numbers of Chinese elites as well as the general public felt anxious about the foreign imperialist infringements and were disillusioned by the failed modernization modeled primarily on Western patterns.

Chinese policymakers and intellectuals found that investing all effort in matching the Western civilizational standards could neither ward off colonial aggression nor earn them respect on the international stage. They had been looking for an alternative model to strengthen the nation-state other than closely imitating the Western paradigm. Instead of looking outward, the Chinese elites began to shift their attention inside China's border, especially its rural countryside and its hinterland, when the coastal areas became more and more susceptible to foreign—Japanese in particular—economic and military aggression. The trend of looking inward may have a lot to do with the impacts of foreign imperialism on the Chinese economy and politics. Ironically, the 1930s international economic depression accelerating worldwide protectionist policies and the European Fascist advocacy of self-sufficiency for strengthening the nation were also the incentives for Republican China to look internally for solutions. The dialectic of inside and outside could be understood as dynamic interactions between domestic and foreign forces. The Republican imagination of the Northwest under the specific historical circumstances of the time epitomized the conflict and exchange between the interior and the exterior.

It took Republican China more than two decades to “discover” its northwestern ethnic borderlands as the source of inspiration. As one significant driving force for the change, Han China's new fascination with its northwestern region has been tied to the fall of the northeast caused by the Japanese invasion and occupation. A puppet state, Manchukuo (1932–45), was established there under Japanese control. In the imminent threats of further territorial loss, the Chinese public under the propagation of the state began to project the northwest as a possible heartland for the development of a modern national future as well as a place where the unique Chinese spirit could be resuscitated. Looking toward the northwest was also a national hope to tackle the concurrent capitalist crisis in the

Great Depression era of the 1930s, since abundant untouched resources remained in this remote inland, ripe for national economic exploitation to deal with the loss of international markets caused by growing protectionist and autarkic policies worldwide (Zanasi 2006).

The term *xibei* (literally, “northwest”) could also be rendered in Chinese as *xibu* (西部 western parts) or *xiyu* (西域 western territories). It loosely refers to the lands beyond Han-based China. In different understandings, the northwest could mean different geographical sites. For example, “the North-West exhibition of cultural artifacts organized by the North-West Development Association in Nanjing in 1936 included exhibits from ten ‘provinces and regions’: Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Chahar, Suiyuan, Mongolia (i.e. Outer Mongolia), Xikang and Tibet” (Tighe 2009, 68). China’s Western Development Program of the 1990s has further expanded this notion. The definition of the term fluctuates in the modern era, showing that it is more than simply a geographical concept.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1930s, Republican China increasingly promoted the northwest as the heartland of ancient Chinese civilization, the embodiment of new nation building. Leading Nationalist ideologist Dai Jitao (戴季陶) had attempted to conceptualize the northwest as an economic and spiritual region to realize his proto-fascist agenda, which included the objectives of reviving traditional values, fighting communism, establishing a self-sufficient political economy, and constructing national unity (in the sense of integrating the ethnic frontiers as one body) to suppress any new political demands and curb the decadent values brought by Western liberalism (Tai 2015). “Northwest Fever” (*Xibeire* 西北熱) could be understood as part of the state-initiated New Life Movement (*xin shenghuo yundong* 新生活運動), which aimed to promote a new lifestyle to urban citizens paradoxically based on traditional Confucian values of “propriety, righteousness, honesty, and shame” (*li, yi, lian, chi* 禮義廉恥) and to change the Chinese people’s bad habits of body and mind as the foundation for national regeneration (Judy 2016; Tsui 2013).

The movement’s ideology of mobilizing urban citizens in the service of the state and shaping compatriots to endure hardship for the collective good paralleled the call for learning from the northwest. While the northwestern people were regarded as not so civilized by modern standards, their toughness, authenticity, and endurance were deemed to be necessary for the survival of China and were valued as the precious qualities that would rejuvenate the Chinese nation. The New Life Movement could be understood as a biopolitical discourse that endeavored to cultivate Chinese people with a widescale corporal reform by improving their health, nutrition,

and hygiene and enhancing their discipline and spirit to strengthen the race-nation-body in the global competition of the interstate world system. The New Life Movement has been criticized for its resonance with Social Darwinist eugenic ideas and as a manifestation of the fascist tendencies in the Nationalist Party of the 1930s in terms of its population management strategy and counterrevolutionary stance. However, unlike the Italian Fascists and the German National Socialists, the GMD ideologists did not offer the Chinese people any visible public enemies or scapegoats—not even the Japanese and the Communists—as a cathartic channel to explain the miseries of the status quo (Dirlik 1975).

The young Republic of China indeed complied with the rhetoric and the practice of international cooperation or internationalism promoted by the League of Nations in the 1930s not to take unilateral action against Japan after the Manchurian Crisis but rather to rely on the league and the international community to settle the issue with Japan. By doing this, Chiang Kai-shek could focus on his campaign against the communists in 1934–35. The ethnic peoples in the northwest were thus not treated as objects for the expression of aggression but instead could be embraced as elements contributing to the reinforcement of national cohesiveness. As the Nationalist government of the Nanjing era (1927–37) was suspicious of any new politics, including the rise of individualism and class conflicts, and also fearful of losing control over the emerging social forces, its perception of the newly included non-Han ethnic nationals remained conservative and failed to offer them any political role to play during most of the Republican era (let alone using ethnic labor for maximizing the accumulation of capital and then ethnicizing or proletarianizing their labor power to justify the very low wages for whole segments of the labor force).

In the difficult times of saving as well as building the nation, the Chinese people were greatly encouraged to turn their eyes toward the northwestern borderlands, where they would have more opportunities to encounter the non-Han ethnicities. But such encounters were not necessarily physical since the Northwest remained inaccessible to the majority of people in Inner China due to the region's poor transportation infrastructure. The ways in which the young republic in this period “encountered” or reacted to the emerging ethnic bodies looming on its horizon were generally mediated by visual images produced by photography. I describe China's ethnic issue in terms of the body because, for a long time, the Chinese ruling regime and its elite class persistently addressed the subject position by turning the ethnic Other into an object. In Chinese historical writings, the Han-based institution orders such a Han-alien (*Hua-Yi*) world and pro-

duces an elaborate picture of that world. In this relation of representation, Han-dominant China is the active subject while the ethnic Other is a passive matter to be acted upon. But with the advent of modernity, the Sino-centric representation of such a world has been made more complex, particularly given that European representations of China's non-Han ethnic peoples had already penetrated society.

The pressures from the larger outside world, as well as the changing internal dynamics, demanded that the new Chinese nation-state make more effort to adjust conventional relationships with ethnic groups, which could no longer be smoothly objectified, even though they had always been mistaken as objects. In the Republican era, Chinese society's increasingly active engagement and extensive contact with these ethnic peoples required new methods and interactive models, thus producing different kinds of relations. The elites of Republican China attempted to turn the ethnic bodies into objects or media through which they could do manipulations in pursuit of their agenda and reflect upon themselves and their society. However, those bodies may remain irreducible to be objectified or mediated and stay opaque as a matter for deciphering meaning.

The linear perspective provided by the camera generates a vision from a single vantage point in which the photographed object is rendered inert and passive and the viewing subject is transcendent. The privileging of the observer's perspectival gaze does not only polarize the subject-object relationship but also secures a central epistemological figure within a discursive visual order through which knowledge and objectivity can be possessed by a direct reproduction of vision of the outer world (Crary 1990; Lalvani 1993). Since the nineteenth century, racialized bodies of non-Western Others have been viewed by European photographers as cultural objects, and their works were often naively assumed to represent an accurate and objective recording practice. Photography serves as a significant tool to enhance the colonizing gaze and consolidate the racializing evolutionary theory through the visual representation of human physical variations as markers of biological determinism. The taxonomy studies of the human body and the pseudo-scientific generalization of human races under the concepts of Social Darwinism have been instructive to the use of photography on non-Western peoples and influential to the perceptions of the Han Chinese about themselves and their ethnic compatriots.

The sweeping transformation and radical restructuring in China of the early twentieth century delineated and fabricated a potential new subjectivity not only for the model of representation but also for the sites of knowledge and power that were simultaneously both a product and a constituent

of modernity. Under the global design of the hegemonic Western production of knowledge and its conceptualization of almost every category, China was bound to exhaust itself in responding to the impacts brought by the outside forces and their imposed epistemology. Modernity as a new structure of power productively molded material and epistemological conditions of Chinese life, thought, and action. Under these conditions, there was less agency role for the emerging conscious subjectivity. While China may have identified itself as a victim vulnerable to the Western colonial encroachment and its accompanied epistemic enforcement, the importation and adaptation of the overwhelming Western discourses—the visual technologies in particular—were a double process of hegemonic allocation and subaltern relocation of meaning and identification not only to China's self-perception-cum-construction but also to the depiction of its internal ethnic Others. However, even if the Chinese vision was identified with the Western gaze toward the ethnic groups, the Republican photographers aimed to include the non-Han as members of the new nation while simultaneously highlighting their differences.

Catching up with the Western ideas of race and racial hierarchy backed up by anthropometric measurements as an “objective” standard to categorize different peoples in terms of their civilization level and hence to justify imperialist aggression, Chinese elites accepted the ideological functions of Social Darwinism as the guiding perception for national degeneration and rejuvenation under the biological principle of “survival of the fittest.” With the global circulation of ideas about race, corporal improvement, as revealed in the objectives of the New Life Movement, was generally regarded as an important area for revitalizing the Chinese race and nation. Republican academics, along with the “scientific” practices of the ethnological and ethnographic studies of the early twentieth century, appropriated anthropometric methods to carry out body measurements of both Han and ethnic countrymen for the sake of national development (J. Fu 2016). The intellectual enthusiasm and embrace of eugenics and Social Darwinism in the Republican context have been seen as a “counter-imperial” discourse aimed at resisting external imperialist impositions and scrutinizing the national body for its rejuvenation (Chung 2014; Sakamoto 2004).

Even though the state-supported ethnographic expeditions in the northwest and the southwest in the 1930s and 1940s followed the footsteps of their Western counterparts by using devices to measure the physical bodies and somatic features of ethnic minorities, their visual archive demonstrated that Republican ethnographers did not emphasize the inherent physical difference between Han and the ethnic groups in the purpose of

pursuing an inclusionary nationalism to defend against the foreign threats (J. Zheng 2016). Inspired by the discovery of the Peking Man fossils at the Zhoukoudian site by foreign paleoanthropologists in the late 1920s, Chinese intellectuals quickly turned the Peking Man hominid into the common ancestor of the Chinese nation. Under the pressing demands of wartime circumstances, Chinese scholars increasingly saw Central Asia (Inner Asia)—or China's northwest—as the cradle of Chinese civilization and started constructing their theory of the monogenesis of all the ethnic groups within the Chinese territories by fashioning the explanation using modern scientific disciplines of archaeology, anthropology, ethnology, history, and linguistics (Yen 2014; Leibold 2006; Sautman 2001b). Chinese eugenicist Pan Guangdan, when participating in drafting the guidelines for the national population policy in the 1940s, proposed encouraging inter-ethnic marriage to strengthen national unity and produce better Chinese offspring for the projects of social engineering and nation building (Chung 2010). However, to associate the Chinese intellectual understanding of the ethnic body and eugenics only with progressivism may shift our attention away from how the state authority has manipulated such discourse to justify its oppressive mechanism of controlling and monitoring individual bodies in the name of national interest.

The Nationalist regime's encouragement to go to the northwest may have generated narratives about national character, heroism, and geopolitics with the non-Han ethnic groups in the background. It also symbolizes how the GMD party-state, originally a southern power based in the lower Yangtze Delta, endeavored to extend its sovereignty and influence in the traditional northern borderlands. From a southerner's perspective, the Northwest provided an overpowering environment where human capacities could be tested and national character could be augmented. In the face of a large-scale movement of autonomy from the ethnic communities and the pronounced Japanese penetration into the northwest that would create dangers of further territorial dismemberment, Republican politicians of the 1930s called for an "Open Up the Northwest" (*kaifa xibei* 開發西北) campaign to retain (or obtain) sovereignty over the remote region after the loss of other areas and to mobilize society by shaping citizens to be responsive to national progress. At the same time, they also attempted to deal with the economic problems under the state plan by migrating the surplus population and the unemployed en masse to the region, restoring agriculture to sustain the national economy, redistributing resources between the coastal cities and the deep interior, and channeling the discontented masses away from the influences of communist ideas as well as other

Western-imported fashions that were still confined to the cities (Tai 2015; Tighe 2009). In other words, the state aimed to both arouse national aspirations and build national energies and also to rechannel these leanings. The frontier and ethnopolitical issues have been used by the Nationalist government to fulfill its state building and regime-consolidation objectives (H. Lin 2006).

A 1935 article published in the Canadian journal *Pacific Affairs* reported that “during recent years [in China] there has been much talk of colonization as a means of relieving the pressure of population.” Regarding “the possibilities for colonization in northwest China, including the great and much discussed province of Sinkiang, or Chinese Turkistan, . . . with the utmost optimism we [the Chinese researchers] cannot possibly hope to find room for more than 10 million new settlers in all of the great northwest” (Thorp 1935, 447–49). T. V. Soong, or Soong Tzu-Wen (Song Ziwen, 宋子文), the finance minister, who was a strong advocate of economic development through the expansion of national production, traveled to the northwest in 1934 to launch economic projects there. He praised the northwestern people for their energy and uplifting spirit, which represented the hope for China’s revival (*Shen Bao* 1935, 5). Yet, under the radically constraining circumstances of that era, these economic blueprints were only chimeras of the GMD ideologists.

The New Culture Movement of the 1920s was intended not only to target the corruption of traditional Chinese religions and every form of superstition but also to attack Christianity (both Catholic and Protestant missionaries), even though the Christian church had once been regarded as an inspiring element to nurture the younger generation of Chinese patriots and reformers. The Christian church’s historical links to the Western imperialist powers made them vulnerable to Nationalist critique, and the Christian missionaries were seen by the GMD government and Chinese travelers as a somewhat suspicious presence, even though the financial resources, expertise, and experience of the Christian institutions were needed to modernize the northwest in the 1930s. Indeed, the Nationalist government’s initiative for the Northwest exploration was also meant to leverage the continuing presence of Christian missionaries and the morally discredited European expeditioners in the frontier lands.

Missionaries and Western archaeological expeditions were sometimes used as pawns to put pressure on the local officials, who mostly ignored the GMD’s orders.<sup>5</sup> For some progressive and feminist Chinese intellectuals, the impact of Christian girls’ schools and orphanages on female education, as well as of missionary sisters as role models, could not be underestimated.

It was the Han Chinese, compared with the Muslims, Buddhist Tibetans, and Mongols, who were most susceptible to the Christian belief in the northwest.<sup>6</sup> The foreign presence in the Northwest served as a kind of model for the Republican Chinese to explore the ethnic borderland and visually record the ethnic inhabitants there.

### Visual Documentation of the Northwest in *The Young Companion*

Such a power game led the Nanjing government to issue visas to Xinjiang for some French filmmakers who “proceeded to humiliate China on the world stage with footage gleaned from their travels” (J. Jacobs 2014, 61) in the documentary *La croisière jaune* (*The Yellow Cruise*, dir. André Sauvage and Léon Poirier, 1933). As a sequel to the documentary on the expedition in Africa, *La croisière noire* (*The Black Cruise*), which was released in 1926, *La croisière jaune* shows off the power and technology of the French-made car Citroën amid the Asian deserts. The film portrays how the French explorers drove the Citroën Kégresse model, a truck converted into a half-track and suitable for rough roads, across Central Asia in 1931–32 and completed a 30,000-kilometer journey from Beirut to Beijing, supposedly along the epic route taken by Marco Polo. But the China presented in the French documentary was no longer the glorious one Marco Polo had visited. Violent images of war, brutal warlords, poverty-stricken peasants, backward cultural practices (such as foot binding), perplexed Han Chinese bystanders, and exotic ethnic people on horses with derogatory French voiceovers appeared in the film, but they were all overpowered by the fleet of the Citroën automobiles, which demonstrated how the cultural sovereignty of China's different ethnic groups had been expropriated.<sup>7</sup>

Visual documentation of China's northwest and its inhabitants by Europeans actually began in the late nineteenth century. Photography arrived in China with imperialist aggression in the 1840s. But unlike the European photographic documentation of Inner or Coastal China from the 1860s onward, the Western visual representations of the Northwest were not necessarily commercially oriented and the photographic works were not always widely circulated because they had been part of the “Great Game” in which the European powers struggled for hegemony and control over Central Asia.<sup>8</sup> The European visual recordings of China's ethnic minorities and landscapes were the outcome of Western archaeological expeditions and intelligence-collecting missions financed by the British or Russian governments for strategic planning toward Qing China.<sup>9</sup> These

photographs might have followed the European tradition of forging an essentialized and timeless China with a focus on its ethnic borderlands, justifying the foreign presence and even invasion that was grasped as a necessary move to help the ancient country to transform itself to take its place in the modern world. They stand for the European expansion of their powers in their ability to appropriate and decontextualize time and space and those pictured within the frame. Although these European representations of the northwest may not have been widely accessible at that time, the Shanghai-based bilingual popular pictorial magazine *Liangyou* (*The Young Companion*) had already begun disseminating the images of non-Han ethnic peoples to its Chinese readers in 1926. In the 1930s, this popular photographic journal adopted a new printing method to increase its ability to reproduce higher-quality photographs by publishing more color pictures (H. Wu 2016, 128).

Starting from its early issues, *The Young Companion* regularly published China's ethnic images, borderland landscapes, related travel writings, and ethnographic reports. Other than some from foreign sources, most of the ethnic materials published in the journal were the works of Chinese commissioned journalists and academics, as well as contributions from its Chinese readers, covering the non-Han peoples in the northwest and southwest. Issue no. 4 in 1926 published a travel essay entitled "Mr. Wang's Adventure" (Wangjuntanxianji 王君探險記) by the famous newsreel photjournalist Wang Haisheng (H. S. Wong 王海升),<sup>10</sup> who briefly described his one-year trip from Shanghai to Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet in the short piece. While Mongolia and Xinjiang were mostly uninhabited deserts threatened by banditry, Wang found Tibet's landscape and customs most fascinating. The photographs Wang provided were predominantly about the Tibetans and their festivals.

Images of the unfamiliar non-Han ethnic peoples were brought closer to the Chinese masses through inclusion in popular magazines and mass-circulation newspapers in the early twentieth century. Mass-produced photographs served as a new educative and didactic cultural force to teach the urban citizens that different kinds of "Chinese" existed on the faraway borderlands, thus asserting the presence of a multiethnic nation. At the same time, in the lucrative visual economy, the exotic ethnic images were turned into a category of mass consumption and displayed to please the hungry eyes of the Chinese public. There began a long-lasting consumption period of ethnic materials in Chinese society. Although the source of visual fascination or pleasure does not necessarily lie in the articulation of meaning from the visual object, the narrations of the ethnic photos in *The*

*Young Companion* tended to affirm the viewer's sense of coherent subject position and generally conformed to the nation-building agenda and the Nationalist discourse. For example, a contribution from a reader reported in issue no. 92 of 1934 how the European missionaries had built a secret independent nation in the Hetao (河套) area (the great bend or meander of the upper Yellow River in Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and Shaanxi) of the northwest, while criticizing how the foreigners had violated China's national sovereignty but simultaneously admiring their relentless efforts over many years to develop the borderlands. The contributor expressed his grief that, in comparison, the Chinese compatriots only went there to visit yet failed to do anything constructive for the development project. Although *The Young Companion* is primarily image oriented, Chinese and English bilingual captions are included with every photograph, and some relevant short essays are also included to guide readers in deciphering the visual exhibits. Through visual images and related brief writings, the popular journal played the role of educating and persuading its Chinese readers about the necessity for the development of the northwest. The gaze that brought the isolated stills in line with narrative causality by transforming the elusive images into units of narrative progression became the mainstream vehicle for the ethnic matters of the time.

The importance of visual images with the addition of verbal-textual descriptions manifests in the ideal model of "texts on the right and pictures on the left" (Teng 2003) in some early modern eighteenth-century Chinese works, including *Huang-Qing zbigong tu* (皇清職貢圖 *Illustrations of Tributaries of the August Qing*) and *Bai Miao tu* (百苗圖 *Miao Albums*). The former is a pictorial-geographical description of foreign countries and non-Han peoples within the borders of the Qing Empire, while the latter is an ethnographic depiction of ethnic groups residing mainly in China's southwest, compiled by local officials posted to the frontiers (Hostetler 2006). With the help of European Jesuit missionaries, in the early eighteenth century, the Qing rulers began detailed cartographic projects of making precise maps and ethnographic representations about the places and peoples under imperial governance to consolidate and expand the empire (Hostetler 2001). If these early pictorial paintings designate the desire of the rulers over the governed subjects and their lands on the empire's peripheries, the modern representational technologies and mass proliferation of photographic images not only reinforce such desire by bringing the "remote past" of the frontier folks closer to the Republican present but also help to weave the ethnic images into the narrative of modern nation building. Yet these new photographs did not necessarily symbolize the endeavor to give

visual and political representations to subaltern groups whose presence and voices had not been acknowledged throughout Chinese history since most of them were not taken from the perspective of the ethnic people. The visual displays of the ethnic figures were presented as something to be looked at with pleasure and as educational materials for urban readers. But they also might stand for a new type of desire in the Republican era. The images of the non-Han ethnic symbolizing the lost past could be saved and preserved by the photographs that were absorbed into the grand writing of national rejuvenation and development in the present that was meant to bring the ethnic peoples forward in time, thus legitimizing the integration of the ethnic borderlands and their administration by the modern state, which claimed it was taking up the responsibility for bringing forth social progress.

While the Nationalist state had its political calculation for promoting the Northwest, social elites and intellectuals also actively participated in firing up the passion of the urban folks for the ethnic borderlands. The reason why the social and intellectual elites identified with the GMD discourse of the Northwest, despite their dissatisfaction with many state policies, was rooted at a much deeper level. The social elites probably shared the system of the nation-states more than its internal conflicts, since they recognized that the sovereign state was not only the guarantor of self-determination and the provider of identity but also the most powerful agency for interstate economic and military competition for resources in the world system. A large array of magazines and academic studies emerged from the Chinese public and the intellectual world dedicated to exploring the region and advocating northwestern development and defense. There was a significant escalation in the Republican social and academic attention to the Northwest during the 1930s. As Tighe describes the boom:

Over 70 different periodicals dedicated to the northwest appeared in China between 1931 and 1945, as opposed to just five before 1930. Universities throughout China organized northwestern survey expeditions, teams, and clubs. Chaoyang University in Beiping created a course in northwestern studies, and two books exclusively devoted to northwestern geography appeared in 1932 and 1933. (2005, 92)

At least one movie, entitled *Go Northwest* (*Dao xibei qu* 到西北去, dir. Cheng Bugao 程步高), was released by Shanghai's Mingxing studio in 1934. Travelogue was the major form for recording the trend at the time.

Between 1928 and 1945, there were about 150 travel books, not including articles and features, about the northwest published in Republican China (Y. Wang 2005; Shang 2003), which set the exotic tone and also forecast the later emergence of the documentary film and adventure genres focused on the region decades later. Republican travel writings, even though only some of them were from government envoys, always had a strong sense of self-appointed fact-finding and rescue mission to engage in the national discourse on state building and national development, to help resolve China's plight of international power struggle (since Britain, Russia, and Japan were deemed to have ambitions regarding the vulnerable and unprotected northwest), and to seek methods for national fortitude and revival (Newby 2014). While these Republican travel writings and photographs were infused with the excitement of explorers about the exotic frontier people, they also showed some influences of ethnological and ethnographical methodologies at the time, even though most of the writers and photographers were not academically trained. Accompanied always by the pictorial depiction of the non-Han ethnic peoples, these travel scripts appealed to a more comprehensive notion of "cinematicity" as they pushed a narrowly conceived concept of literariness and pure textuality toward the orientation of visuality.

### The Notion of Cinematicity and the Resistance to Narrativization

Here, "cinematicity" does not refer to the aesthetic notion of "pure cinema," with the emphasis on the uniqueness of moving images as an artistic and expressive medium. Instead, it addresses the complex way in which the cinematic or the moving image interacts and entangles with other media and is embedded in the changing modes of human perception under the impacts of modern technology. In Geiger and Littau's scholarly understanding, the term is used to

express the sense of cinema as dynamic, interconnected and inter-related not only with those media it closely resembles but with a broad range of art forms and expressive modes, even those that came before the watershed year of 1895 and that is likely to outlive the photochemical era of celluloid film projected to an audience in a movie theatre. (2013, 8)

In such a sense, the term could also be associated with today's media studies notions of "remediation" and "transmediality," which designate the nego-

tiation process and dialectical relations of the new medial inventions with the existing practices or systems. I would even push a definition of cinematicity as the flow of consciousness or time expressed in the form of narration that connects one moment to another, links up a retained past through an immediate present with an anticipated future, and associates the causality and effect of one thing with another. In short, I understand cinematicity as a new ecosystem that drives synthesizing the passive, fragmented, and disconnected viewing and perceiving into a certain economy of movement or progression.

The popular demand for the visual or the cinematic indicates a general belief in the objectivity and scientific knowledge of such pictorial representations produced by modern technologies. The photographs, regarded as an advanced technology generating images of greater truthfulness than the paintings, stand for some kind of empirically verifiable realities, which are believed to have only minimal human intervention, even though the visual representations of China's ethnic Others are never disinterested depiction, even if they did not exactly identify with the gaze from the West toward the non-Han peoples. The "cinematicity" revealed in the Chinese-language pictorial magazines and travel writings about the ethnic northwest during the Republican era could be understood as a collective drive that anxiously seeks to subordinate the captivating images to some kind of narrative coherence. Such drive to narrativize the image is to bring the isolated or contingent shot in line with the purpose of storytelling progression, thus converting the image into an integrated unit of aesthetic or ideological meaning rather than simply some kind of disjointed but autonomous visual display. In other words, a photograph as a flash or a slash of light is very much contained and transformed into a narration or an explanation with reason. While visual experience is always wedded to compulsory narrative conventions to satisfy human longing for meaning, the photographs of the northwest produced in Republican China generally reinforced such connection with their specific historical demands, understood as the collective will of Han-based China to "rescue" the ethnic borderlands from the danger of vanishing in the newly established republic and to incorporate them into the narrative of nation building.

But the image can resist narrativization, and the cinematicity generated by photo description and travelogues does not always possess omniscient power. A photographic image may resist the determinate signification brought by the narrative. This resistant factor poses a challenge not only to the "apparent meaning" of the image but also to the obvious presence of the desire for meaning. Such resistance to meaning could give rise to a certain emotion and unleash particular affect while suggesting the possibil-

ity of what lies beyond meaning and even seeking the fissures of meaning. It is out of these fissures that new possibilities for sense beyond the given can be produced.

In an environment within which the global circulation of China's ethnic images and picture postcards was already widespread, the photographs made the ethnic people less strange and less threatening to Chinese viewers. Although they might not have had a very clear intention to use their photographs during their journeys as scientific evidence or objective systematic record, many photographers unconsciously adopted the style of ethnological photography to portray the ethnic peoples with their tangible markers of difference, such as distinctive physical attributes, ethnic clothing, hairstyles, ornaments, weaponry, and other native tools. Certain gestures through the medium of photo images were grasped as the sphere of ethnos that endures and characterizes their primitive cultures. Almost all the photographed non-Han women in *The Young Companion* are in their traditional ethnic clothing, and most of their images were captured in their serious postures directly facing the camera for a studio-like situation, even if they were outdoors. Figure 1.1 shows two ethnic (Mongol) women, with the relatively brief English-language caption "Attires of the Tsinghai [Qinghai] women." The Chinese-language caption was more detailed in describing how the ethnic clothing was mainly made of leather and that they rarely washed their clothes; only the wealthy class could afford silk, and women were very attentive to their chignon hairstyle as they only washed their hair every several months and spent days caring for it. These women stood out in particular because they were not only photographed for their full frontal image but also portrayed from behind (no. 103, 1935).

Apparently, the photographer (credited as Yang Jiaqing [楊嘉慶], who was the director of the social journal *Southwest Review* [*Xinan pinglun* 西南評論] and also the leader of Fudan University's Northwest investigation team in 1934) wanted to show readers the unique features of the ethnic dress, adornments, and other accessories on the front as well as on the back of the women. The attempt to convert China and its Han and non-Han peoples into a display subject through photography had been initiated by the Western explorers in the nineteenth century, particularly by the European colonial nations. The "objective," "scientific" all-around portrait of ethnic persons in China's frontier was not uncommon during the Great Game in the late nineteenth-century mode of information collection and scientific research. Living peoples, landscapes, and objects were photographed from different angles for academic purposes and in the service of the expansion of imperial knowledge. The human figures were more than



Fig. 1.1. Ethnic Mongol women, front and rear. In *The Young Companion*, no. 103 (1935).

often subjected to anthropometric measurement on photographs. Many photographs of the northwestern ethnic groups published in *The Young Companion* may have reiterated such an (imperialist) endeavor to preserve and protect a culture and a place full of treasures waiting to be harvested. Indeed, many Republican travelogues were published with “credible” illustrations or images to stamp the mark of authority and truthfulness as the descriptive text.

By that time, small handheld cameras easily maneuvered by amateurs and carried into many different situations were already available. But what might make the Republican Chinese travelers of the 1930s slightly different from their European counterparts is that the photographs of the ethnic persons not only represent a new discovery but also simultaneously carry a strong sense of imminent loss, even though the content of every photograph, in general, was already history, already gone. When these ethnic

images pointed to what was intractably or irremediably gone or over, the travel writers strove to retrieve and reassimilate it into the ongoing, present story of the nation's construction project. It was a retroactive attempt to give what was transient and the fluid in the photograph a solid form to be designated as part of the new nation.

The same two women being photographed from the front and the back may imply how the captivating images have been fully investigated, penetrated by the omniscient gaze and spoken for in order to bring about narrative closure and completion. The shot from behind orients the viewer's eye toward something that they usually cannot see. Photographing the backs of the ethnic women may metaphorically imply that objects of the gaze are turned around to reflect upon the dynamic and creative origin that is the hidden source of the given world of the still objects. Moving the camera around to the back of the photographic objects may also generate a cinema-like narrative that goes beyond the static and isolated nature of the snapshot. It is as though the portraits are not just being looked at as some still and detached image but are more thoroughly examined and related to a broader context and a deeper timeframe of genesis and narrative flow. In a (symbolic) sense, the dynamic photograph somewhat rescues the imploring eye and mind from the immediacy of the present and the isolated image and places the image back in the broader temporal flux of connection from which it emerges. Hence, such a move is associated with a temporal mission: it does not simply look at the still image but tries to recognize the projection and movement from which the image emanates—that is to say, the eye behind the camera and the photographer's relation to the image. It reveals an external existence that controls the representation without being represented.

On the same page of the front and back photographs of the two ethnic women is a picture of the photographer, Yang, taken with a Mongolian prince (fig. 1.2). While the Mongolian aristocrat is in his traditional ethnic costume with a sword, Yang is dressed in a Western business suit with an ethnic hat and is holding a portable camera. Although the Mongolian prince is taller in physique, the Han photographer appears to be more advanced in terms of his outfit. His handheld camera also asserts that he is the one who created and controlled the image.

Non-Han ethnic communities, while geographically located at the far ends of the Chinese nation, are usually associated with the "remote past," since they have not been considered as living in the same modern times as their Han compatriots,<sup>11</sup> although the photographs appear to be a spontaneous emanation of reality or the natural being there of the objects. As the



Fig. 1.2. The Chinese photographer Yang with a Mongolian prince. In *The Young Companion*, no. 103 (1935).

foundation of the modern nation-state is built upon the notion of progress, the Han-dominated government and society have to position themselves as the representative of the present or even the future to legitimize their leadership.<sup>12</sup> Even if the ethnic photography of the 1930s was about the external objects of the gaze, it also narcissistically referred to the photographer, who constituted their own self through the act of taking pictures. But the height of the two figures in the picture may induce a different interpretation. As the discourse of ethnic or racial hierarchy puts great emphasis on the physique and somatic characteristics, the taller Mongolian prince revealed that the Han narcissistic representation could be permeated with anxiety and self-scrutiny. If the photograph confirms the observation of the

photographer and the “truth” of his account, the physical advantage of the ethnic could not be empirically denied.

The photographer's desire for self-expression or self-manifestation had been insatiable, and the representational ethnic figure of the photographer carries the photographer's vision from the outside. The visible presence of the Han photographer in the ethnic world also suggests a strong urge for intervention from the Chinese society into this remote borderland by integrating it as the heartland of the republic. While cinema, or the implication of cinematicity, confronts the viewer with a continuum of images and a constantly continuous flow of time, it is the stillness of the photograph that opens up a space of pensiveness and a foothold for critical reflection. It might be possible that the still and autonomous image resists the narrativization and functions as some kind of interruption or punctuation of the continuous narrative, since the content of the photograph may be “still” but its reading is not.

Another photograph in the same issue showed that all the ethnic women preferred not to show their faces, enacting this by turning their back to the camera (fig. 1.3). Once again, the English caption was too brief to reveal anything, whereas the Chinese description said that “the women in the picture stood with their backs toward the photographer, because women were shy.”

Meaning can shift in a delicate relationship between the creator and the consumer or viewer. Deciding how to read this photograph undoubtedly leads to some interpretive complexity. Since a photograph is never simple evidence from today's perspective, the cultural or sexual difference articulated in the Chinese caption remains an ideological problem, not an apparent reality. Why can't the ethnic women in this photo be like the two women in the previous picture, showing their backs to the photographer to fully demonstrate the elaborate ornaments of their dress? Why were these ethnic women contained by a conventional gender stereotype? Indeed, such a stereotype usually applies to (civilized) Han women, whereas non-Han females have generally been categorized as not timid in front of strangers. Is the act of turning away from the gaze a recalcitrant reaction to the narrative attempt of the photographer? Perhaps ethnic matters may speak with their withdrawal or avoidance. Turning one's back could be interpreted as submissiveness (being shy to the intruder) or as resistance to any discursive domination. As if resonating with what Agamben says in “Notes on Gestures,” the photograph of ethnic women with their back to the camera stands as “fragments of a gesture or as stills of a lost film wherein only they would regain their true meaning . . . [and it is] not at all an immobile arche-



Fig. 1.3. All Mongolian women with their backs to the camera. In *The Young Companion*, no. 103 (1935).

type as common interpretations would have it, but rather a constellation in which phenomena arrange themselves in a gesture” (2000a, 55–56). The turning gestures of the ethnic women are probably communicative acts but without a definite code. Thus, they set in motion a process of interpretation that reveals more of their enigmatic quality than their transparent meanings. It is precisely this enigma that continuously fascinates the gaze of Han viewers.

### Mutual Rescue and Ethnic Gestures

One of the famous pieces of travel writing on the northwest was by a female explorer, Lin Pengxia (林鵬俠), an overseas Chinese returned from Singapore, whose book *Xibei xing* (西北行 *Journey to Northwest*) was published in 1936. It depicts in detail the remote places and the ethnic populace. It is an eyewitness account in diary form that describes Lin’s experiential and ethnographical knowledge about China’s northwest and its people during her six-month trip there. The daughter of a wealthy father who was nick-

named the “King of Rubber in Singapore,” Lin had the privilege of studying aviation in the United Kingdom and the United States—indeed, she was lauded by the Chinese media as “China’s only female aviator.” A patriot and a Western-educated woman who was praised by *The Young Companion* as a “female role model” for her “adventurous spirit” (*maoxian jingshen* 冒險精神),<sup>13</sup> Lin at first planned to join the voluntary army against the Japanese invasion but soon found out a peace agreement had been made between the GMD and Japan. She then mounted a solo expedition with a camera in 1932 from Shanghai to the northwest in order to prove to her Chinese compatriots that if a woman was able to overcome the obstacles of the remote frontier lands (such as extreme weather, natural disasters, distant landscapes, and threats of bandits and warlords), so could everyone. She believed her trip would raise social awareness of the inaccessible borderlands and boost China’s determination to develop and defend the Northwest.

In the beginning, Lin admitted that she was ignorant of the Northwest until she was asked about the place by her Western schoolmates during her study in the West. She heard from the Westerners that China’s northwest was “the paradise of the world” with “the world’s secret treasure” ([1936] 2000, 2). When she went back to her hometown of Fujian in China, she met a female Christian missionary who has just returned from the northwest and was speaking about the serious famines and generally adverse conditions faced by women there. With the encouragement and support of her patriotic Christian mother, Lin began her “nation-saving” journey in November 1932. She began her expedition in Shanghai, passed through Shaanxi, Gansu, and Qinghai, reached the edge of Xinjiang, returned to Inner China, and arrived at Beijing (Beiping) in May 1933 by way of Ningxia and Suiyuan, spending about six months on the road. Lin published her travelogue only three years later. Unlike most of the vernacular Chinese-language (*bai hua* 白話) travel writings about the northwest at the time, Lin’s book was written in a mixture of classical Chinese. The use of old-style language could be seen as her declared loyalty to the Chinese tradition (especially for an overseas Chinese) and as a means to preserve her experiences in perpetuity in the classical tradition. The book trumpets the prominence of the author herself by publishing her self-portrait and the photographs of her parents in the preliminary pages immediately after the table of contents. Her self-portrait (fig. 1.4) implies the awareness and connotations of the self: while sitting on an antique Victorian-style Gothic throne chair with her legs crossed, she is dressed impeccably in a men’s Western suit with a tie, wearing long boots. The caption says: “The



Fig. 1.4. Lin Pengxia: the author's image in the expedition. In Lin's *Journey to Northwest*.

author's image in the expedition" (*zuozhe luxingshi zhi zaoliang* 作者旅行時之造像). The picture looks like it was taken in a portrait studio rather than photographed during her trip.

The masculine appearance of Lin's attire implies her feminist consciousness of gender equality. Her Western suit once again represents her self-awareness and projection of historical and material progress, as she wrote in the preface that her northwest trip was meant to develop the place to compete with the powers on the world stage and to make the inaccessible wasteland better than Paris and New York ([1936] 2000, 5). The classical language may reveal how she would have inherited the idea of a Confucian civilizing mission for her trip, even though she put forward her Christian faith. Stevan Harrell argues that there have been at least four "civilizing projects" carried out by the three successive Chinese governments and by

Western missionaries in China's recent history to transform the peripheral ethnic minorities to be more like the dominant transformers themselves, no matter whether the project was labeled "Confucian," "Christian," or "Communist." Indeed, these belief systems are not necessarily mutually exclusive: they serve a rather similar function by claiming the transformer to have a higher degree of civilization and a commitment to elevating the peripheral peoples' level of civilization (Harrell 1997). Lin's northwest expedition may look like such a civilizing project but with a twist. She borrowed the phrase "When propriety is lost in China, search for it in the wilderness" (*lishi qiuzhuyue* 禮失求諸野) from the *Book of the Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書) as a section title in her travel writing, which staunchly resonates with the principles promoted by the New Life Movement (although the movement was not officially launched until February 1934, two years after Lin's northwest journey).

While consistently emphasizing the progress and significance of modernization to a nation, Lin also observes that it is the poor, the backward, and the primitive people, not educated and modernized urbanites, who could continue ethical virtue, preserve moral customs intact, and embody them with human simplicity and innocence. Even if she might strongly believe that modernity meant progress and enlightenment, Lin cannot help sharing Confucian and Daoist modes of thought that history is a process of degeneration from an idealized past. Repeatedly, Lin laments in her book that the more civilized her city-dwelling compatriots are, the greedier and more self-interested they become. Her obsession with the community's moral decline can be attributed to her Christian belief as well as her adherence to the objectives of the New Life Movement.

While having a greater sense of the multiplicity and equality of the ethnicities in the new republic than most Han elites of the time, Lin generally follows the prevailing racial prejudice by calling the non-Han ethnic people *fan* 番 (barbarian) in *Journey to Northwest*. The dividing line between Chinese and barbarian was still predominant in the minds of Lin and many other Republican travelers to the northwest. While Chinese social elites and intellectuals have tried to redraw the line by constructing a sense of belonging to the new republic through the inclusion or nationalization of the northwestern ethnic minorities, the notion of frontier remains equivocal. The antagonism between the Chinese civilization in the central plain and the northern nomads prevailing throughout ancient Chinese history has to be overcome for the making of a new Chinese nation to confront the challenges and threats from the foreign imperialist powers. Yet, the dialectic

tic of external and internal is rather ambivalent in the northwest venture. While the project of converting the northern ethnic tribes—China's traditional "external" opponent—to be internal members of the young republic was placed on the table, Chinese social elites shared much more in terms of faith, behavior codes, and sets of values with the Western powers—their modern "external" enemies. But frontiers that separate inside and outside are never fixed. With the acquisition of broader cultural and geographical horizons, frontiers then become liminal areas to generate different perceptions and new definitions of community or identity.

By and large, though, Lin held a more positive view of the Hui and Mongols than of the Han she met on the roads (as well as the general Han Chinese to whom she referred). The criteria she used to identify the merits and shortcomings of the ethnic people were usually their physical health, personal hygiene, self-discipline, daily habits, communal cooperation, and other stoic behaviors. These were the yardsticks advocated by the biopolitical discourse of the New Life Movement. Arriving at Gansu Province, Lin visited the Hui community, where she found that

Hui people were particularly tall and strong with rosy cheeks because they did not have the habit of smoking opium. However, the Han people were often not very motivated and were used to loafing their lives away as they had been addicted to opium. Most of them looked haggard and skinny. ([1936] 2000, 44)

Similar upbeat features could also be seen in the Mongolian women in Lin's encounter:

The Mongolian barbaric women (*Mengfan funu* 蒙番婦女) were all strongly built, and good at horse riding and archery. They loved manual work, lived a thrifty lifestyle, and appeared to be very lively and courageous. With such natural-given advantage, if the Mongolian women had been educated, their achievement could have exceeded our mainland Chinese women. Mongolian barbaric women were so strong that, even if they were pregnant, they could still work as usual, and did not mind at all. . . . However, women in Inner China during their pregnancy were always sick because they did not work and rarely exercised, thus leading to laziness and a weak physique. If we did not quickly find the solution, our species would probably have the danger of gradual extinction. (163)

Like much travel literature, the account of the northwestern ethnic groups serves as a medium for the author to reflect on her society and culture. Consistently adopting a comparative perspective, Lin further comments on how ethnic women enjoy more freedom and power in their society than their Han counterparts, who are inhibited by the Chinese-corrupted culture. With a very affirmative assessment of the Hui Muslim culture and community, she concludes that the origin of Han-Hui conflicts is not an interethnic but rather a political issue, since the state policy from the Qing era has been oppressive toward Hui communities that have been unwilling to succumb to the unequal treatment and have often chosen to rise against the local officials. Throughout the book, Lin highlights the possible solutions to China's gender inequality problem, inspired by the non-Han ethnic women and their ways of life; she believes there should be a more positive role for Chinese women to play in the process of nation building. Such positive perceptions and even rather romanticized depictions of the non-Han ethnic communities may have more to do with her dissatisfaction with Han Chinese society, as she held a critical position that material advancement always results in moral decline. However, by contrasting the virtues of ethnic minorities with the avarice and materialism of Chinese society, the self-reflexive critique does not necessarily mean a genuine desire to return to antiquity in a Confucian or Daoist sense or a longing for the ethnic lifestyle. By describing the remarkable physiques of non-Han people, Lin not only celebrated the galvanizing effects of the wild Northwest but also mourned Han China's decline and its loss of prowess in the modern age.<sup>14</sup> Lin's proactive response to the call to revive the Chinese nation by means of learning from the Northwest might only echo the state-initiated political conservatism under the influences of a proto-fascist ideology that aimed to revitalize the nation by restoring moral order and to manage the unrestrained masses.

Lin did not dismiss the advantages of modern civilization, and she insisted that the ethnic barbarians possessed the potential to become civilized. Although not as detailed and thorough as academic ethnographic studies, Lin's book documents a wide range of ethnic customs, including cooking, cuisine, dress, habitat, wedding, and funerary and burial practices, to add weight to the notion that non-Han minorities remained rather primitive in all aspects of their lives. As she did not speak the ethnic languages, all she could do was record the visual realms of physiology, customs, rituals, cultural attributes, and other visible actions and objects to constitute a typological image of the ethnic people. Lin's attentiveness to the ethnic bodies and physique, however, has entirely missed their gestures,

which are indeed distinct from bodily movement. A gesture is a particular way of (unconsciously) performing oneself or using one's body that is marked in some manner. As an investigative spectator (re-)viewing such ethnic gestures, Lin came up against a kind of Lacanian real that is not necessarily readable as she intuitively realized. In Agamben's words, a gesture is "a pure and endless mediality" (2000a, 59) that provokes understanding but also constitutes a rupture in the narrative flow and thus is excessive to the narrative.

### Long Live the Ethnic, Long Live the Nation

At the height of the Sino-Japanese War, left-wing filmmaker and actor Zheng Junli (鄭君里) from the Shanghai-based Lianhua Film Company traveled with a GMD military education group to the northwestern borderlands for nine months in 1939 to make a wartime documentary, *Long Live the Nations*, produced by Chongqing's China Movie Studio (Zhongguo Dianying Zhipianchang). It aimed to depict how ethnic minorities were mobilized to join the resistance against the Japanese invaders and to provide resources such as raw timber and build roads for the nation. The documentary covered the everyday customs and patriotic activities of Tibetans, Mongols, Miao (Hmong), Yao, Yi (named Guoguo in the Republican era), and Hui. In the end, it looked at how the ethnic ground soldiers and horsemen joined forces with the Han modern army (including a mobile cannon team, armory tank, and air force) to fight the Japanese (J. Zheng 2016). The significance of *Long Live the Nations* lies in it unconsciously or even scandalously setting a precedent for the later ethnic minority films in the PRC era: merging documentary with drama feature, directing ethnic non-actors to perform, and continuing and conflating all Republican ethnographic interest in ethnic peoples into the consummation of cinematicity.

Although Zheng at first wanted to make a documentary, the work turned out not quite to be an ethnographic film. Rather, it carried the tension between the aesthetic demand and the true portrayal of the ethnic peoples. Zheng admitted that he was more interested in a dramatic presentation of the materials than conforming to the rules of cinema verité. Under the emergency against which the Japanese opponents tried every means to alienate the non-Han ethnic groups from the Chinese republic, Zheng had to propagate national unity through attractive images and footage. Given the stringent conditions when there was a severe shortage of celluloid film reels and a lack of filming equipment and film crews, Zheng

simply could not afford to patiently wait for long hours to capture people's natural behaviors and spontaneous actions. Every time he needed to shoot a scene, he had to rely on the local authorities to mobilize the nomadic ethnic inhabitants within a couple of hundred miles to travel with their families, animals, and accessories to the designated shooting scene for him to film their "lives" (J. Zheng 2016, 47). Zheng also whined about how difficult it was to teach these "amateur" people to act in the documentary:

In Xikang [a province of the Republic of China, a Tibetan area, that is today Qinghai Province], I spent exactly three hours shooting a Yi tribe man to smile and wave. While hundreds were waiting on the sideline, I became so impatient that I could not help stamping my feet. The tribe man was so nervous that he did not know where to place his hands. In the end, I had to stop the camera and allow him to get rest and relax. . . . When doing a close-up, it was almost impossible to take any candid shot. Their eyes kept rolling around to stare at the camera lens, ostensibly wondering, "Am I doing it right?" (48)

Referring to Vsevolod Pudovkin's theory of non-actors, Zheng lamented that he did not have the skills to draw the ordinary reality into the artificial construction of the film set to get the non-actor to behave unselfconsciously and free him from stiffness. However, Zheng seemed to forget that, with the advent of the camera, the expression of emotions is no longer signified by the actor alone. The affects or emotions can be delivered and stirred by a montage of elements between and within shots as much as, if not far more, by the performance of the actor.

With an inspirational music soundtrack as background, intersected with occasional voiceovers (including the voice of the commentator, the lyric recitals, and the supposed voices of male and female ethnic characters all dubbed in Mandarin), *Long Live the Nations* is composed primarily of montages as well as vignettes of borderland landscapes, Yellow Emperor stele, GMD military parades, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's speech, industrialization and factory production of modern weapons, nomads' daily lives and their animals, Tibetan religious rituals, Mongolian livestock herdsmanhood, ethnic music and dance performances, highland tribes' forestry, railroad building by manual laborers, and other war preparation and mobilization activities, culminating into the last sequences of the ethnic peoples joining the national army and of the military marches and deployments by different combat units. While the political message of the film is



Fig. 1.5. The amateur ethnic actor cannot help not looking at the camera. Screenshot from Zheng Junli's *Long Live the Nations*.

loud and crystal clear, it is the fragmented images that lodge themselves in the audience's memories quite apart from the logic of the narrative plot—for example, the back image of a man striking a big bell, the close-ups of the embarrassed ethnic faces, the awkward goodbye waving gesture, the sword given by the Tibetan woman to her lover who is going to the war, and other affect images. These partial images or objects may function like “gestures” that become pure means extracted from the ends they are supposed to serve in the narrative causality (Agamben 2000a, 57–59).

Agamben argues that because “cinema has its center in the gesture and not in the image, it belongs essentially to the realm of ethics and politics” (2000a, 56), although, we need to add that, cinema when manipulated as an ideological apparatus levels gesture to homogeneity. The bodily gesticulations and expressive movement of the ethnic figures captured in *Long Live the Nations* may parallel the actions in the silent film era since the non-Han non-actors were unable to speak the Chinese language. The film's voiceover has tried to make these gestures redundant and less legible, but their gestures remain a means of expression that cannot directly and smoothly be translated into words or narrative. Indeed, while their



Fig. 1.6. The awkward goodbye-waving gesture. Screenshot from Zheng Junli's *Long Live the Nations*.

gestural movements were by no means motivated or explicit in their intentions, they express some kind of heterogeneity and singularity of being that the patriotic narrative for national unity cannot entirely contain. As body movements express a particular being, gestures are actually far more private, personal, and individual than words. They are the singular emerging from any instant, rather than any archetype fixed by the state classification and simplification. Zheng's documentary tried to level and convert all these singular gestures of the ethnic groups through the means of clear narrative logic of cause and effect toward homogenization and unification of all actions, with the emphasis in the last part of the film on the sequences of organized, uniformed soldiers marching forward together to the front line. However, film as analogue technological media is able to capture materials that exceed symbolic representation. It can record "nature" itself, including things or gestures that are not necessarily syntactic or linguistic signs, no matter how unique, contingent, and chaotic they are.

In *Long Live the Nations*, we witness ethnic vernacular gestures evading and even disrupting their instrumental use for propagating national unity. While gestures may suspend the narrative schema of cause and effect, they

become legible as affect images only by means of another logic of cause and effect. The Republican enthusiasm for the ethnic minorities stands for the collective will of Han-based China to “rescue” the ethnic borderlands from the danger of disappearance or separation from the new nation and to incorporate them into the narrative of national unification. What Zheng’s documentary reveals is that the ethnic groups could also play an active important role, if they accepted the national mobilization, in “rescuing” the fragile nation from disintegration. In other words, their unintentional gestures captured in the film may not be just pure means that suspend the narrative ends; rather, they may return to a crusade to verify their agency and power. Yet, gesture, for Agamben again, is a “speechless dwelling in language” (1999, 78) and “essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language” (2000a, 59). It is a not yet spoken that demands to be understood but can never be fully articulated in language. When the filmmaker endeavors to instantiate the gesture by montage to wrest a new potential from the past, the rigid ideological agenda may either reify it as a fetish or convert the stilled into a movement of cause and effect as well as of means and end.

However, Zheng Junli’s filming tactics of staging the ethnic realities in his documentary may forecast the executive skills commonly practiced in the PRC cinematic productions after 1949. In socialist ethnic cinema, there was strong intergeneric borrowing between documentary and fiction films. For example, in the productions on Tibet, different genres were mobilized for their affinity to serve the political campaign in the liberated area. The fiction film *Serfs* (*Nongnu* 農奴, dir. Li Jun 李俊, 1963) directly draws imagery and footage from a documentary: its composition and shot of the beginning sequence are unambiguously taken from the stairs scene of the documentary *Millions of Serfs Arise* (*Baiwan nongnu zhanqilai* 百萬農奴站起來, dir. Hao Yusheng 郝玉生, 1959), demonstrating the strong thematic and stylistic affinity of the two genres when dealing with the Tibetans (Braester 2008). It should be noted that documentary and fiction films are not exactly two different categories of the PRC’s ethnic cinema. The fiction film about China’s ethnic minorities emerged out of the insufficiencies of documentary cinema. Fiction films dominated the representations of China’s ethnic minorities during the 1950s and 1960s, and not just because the heavily censored official media only allowed bright, positive, and optimistic images. Although there is a striking mismatch between the social reality and the propagandist images in the officially endorsed portrayals of ethnic minorities, the ethnographic documentary approach is not necessarily more authentic in terms of offering a more adequate represen-

tation of real life in the ethnic groups. The documentary could not deal adequately with the deadlock inscribed in the ethnic issue of China, let alone sufficiently render its core problem, so it had to “reinvent” itself and pass over into fiction. Only fiction cinema could actualize the notion of the Chinese multiethnic state by guaranteeing its consistency. Fiction cinema does not present a fantasized world as reality; instead, it makes the viewer experience the dire, drab, staid, and boring reality as something colorful, fantastic, and uplifting. It is indeed the “blank” nature of China’s ethnic minority cinema under the Han gaze that allows documentary and fiction films to interact and substitute for each other.

The ancient dichotomy of Chinese (*hua*) and aliens (*yi*) may still structure China’s present view of the cultural others, though the boundaries between them could be shifting throughout history. Traditionally, when the sage kings traveled to the margins of Chinese civilization to teach the uncivilized tribes, the simplicity and efficacy of some of the savage customs were used to question the excessive practices and the value judgments that may have gone awry in the central kingdom, even though the aim was to manipulate perspectives rather than honor the alien cultures. Because of the ancient belief in the transformative power of teaching and cultivation, cultural differences are not immutable; hence, the boundaries between Han Chinese and aliens are also sometimes flexible. This shifting of views in the encounter with the aliens or the frontier peoples developed rapidly in the modern period. The change of perspective is a self-reflexive gesture in the mode of seeing from the margins or fringes to examine the center. However, in the modern Chinese travelogue, the frontier aliens are used not merely to challenge or reverse the established views but also to rejuvenate and reenergize the declining Chinese spirit and vitality.

Undeniably, the Han majority embodied the hegemonic modernist narratives of liberation, enlightenment, development, and progress in their understanding of the “five nations” vision in relation to the ethnic borderlands of China. Like all revolutions, the 1911 Revolution opened a persistent struggle between the traditions of the old order and the modern values of the revolution that endeavored to destroy those corrupted traditions. The sharp conflict between the new and the old that made the revolutionary leadership so determined to drive a radical transformation of people and society also led the Han Chinese majority to tendentiously categorize the ethnic minorities at China’s periphery as “traditional” destined to be changed, liberated, and cultivated. Compensation for the systematic annihilation of the old patterns and eradication of every traditional protection against competition and disaffiliation brought by capitalist moderniza-

tion would come in the form of the planned construction of an “imagined community”—that is to say, the new Chinese nation—in which the ethnic peoples would no longer have the status of “dependent subjects” (*fanshu daiyu*), as the Qing Empire and all previous imperial states designated them, but would become citizens of equal status under the sovereignty of the modern republic. In other words, the “five nations” republicanism is both a new ideal and a new type of control, from the Han conscious or unconscious perspective (unconscious because they did not know they were also captives of the new mechanism), over the peoples at the periphery through the modernizing-cum-civilizing process of converting them into national subjects—although probably as second-class citizens—and relocating or “protecting” the nomads or stateless peoples within the state territories, as well as incorporating their (supposedly backward) life into the universal, linear, progressive capitalist temporality of the (Eurocentric) world system.

With the hierarchy deeply rooted in mind, the modern travel writings about the ethnic frontiers attempt to privilege “heterarchy” over hierarchy, if not simplistically reversing the ranked system, to find an alternative perspective and to seemingly celebrate symbiosis, commensalism, and the like. However, projecting a modern morality that rightfully privileges equality on a relational ethnic landscape is still a form of Han-centric narcissism that renders the travel writers blind to the nested complexities of the world beyond them. Without realizing it, they attribute to the ethnic people qualities that are more their own. Then, to compound this, the Han travelers narcissistically asked the ethnic Others to provide them with corrective reflections of themselves. Nevertheless, encountering ethnic Others at the frontiers can be considered a practice of decolonizing one's thoughts, or liberating one from one's own mental enclosures, to destabilize the taken for granted and to change the very terms of perception, analysis, and comparison. Yet, subjecting oneself to the cinematic technologies (including photography and travel writing) is equivalent to framing the world into a certain perceptive system. Such perception could preclude one from seeing and living the world in other possible ways.

Northwest Fever dramatically staged the contradictory field of forces that generates the encounters of at least two bodies. One tried hard to measure up to the international standard of the time and, by doing so, to direct and mold; the other was being directed and molded, but not without resistance. They were in structural inequality. The encounter staged a sense of mastery and struggle. However, it would be wrong to see the codes and values brought by one body simply as a means of oppression and to see the muteness or passivity of another body as a means of resis-

tance. It would be too romantic to celebrate the diversity of ethnic cultures and regret the impositions of the norms from the outside. There is no easy way to simply go back to embrace the ethnic differences as the locus of autonomy and freedom against the repression of the suffocating mold. There is no simple way of giving up on mastering social and cultural codes despite their profound complicity with the ruling regime. Perhaps there is no encounter without contradiction and no simple way of getting out of this predicament. Although the Nationalist government during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) decided to relocate to the southwest (the GMD government under Chiang Kai-shek moved to Chongqing in 1937) and the Republican passion for the Northwest soon subsided, the 1930s wave paved the way for the further growth of the politics of national identity (in the sense of constructing a unified “Chinese” national identity)—although, ironically, it was also the era when many northwestern non-Han ethnic societies were actively pursuing their own national identities and independence.

## Hearing Like a State

### *Revolutionary Voice, Musical, and the Making of (Hetero-) Utopia in the Socialist China of the 1950s and 1960s*

Starting from the 1950s, the first decade of the PRC state-owned studios began to produce films about dozens of the officially recognized ethnic minorities to propagate ethnic policy, foster national unity, and educate the mass audience that China was a multiethnic socialist country.<sup>1</sup> However, *shaoshu minzu dianying* (少數民族電影, literally “minority nationality cinema”) only became a commonly circulated term during the reform era of the 1980s, three decades later.<sup>2</sup> “Minority nationality” or “ethnic minority” in the Chinese context could be grasped as the Derridian notion of “différance” in the double sense of difference and deferral through which the non-Han serves as a “distinctive but constitutive other” in modern socialist Chinese identity formation, whereas its definitive, fixed meaning is endlessly deferred and flexibly created rather than given. But to claim that the early PRC ethnic films did not convey any sense of otherness but rather were an integral part of “people cinema” (*renmin dianying* 人民電影) and to attribute such a distinguished ethnic marker as a bad outcome of Hollywood influences is simply misleading.<sup>3</sup> By no means is “minority nationality cinema” ontologically secure, though it does not necessarily follow that “minority nationality” or “ethnic minority” has no referential reality or ontological foundation. It is a product in the making under China’s high modernist ideology, and its representation precedes and constitutes the existence of its reality,<sup>4</sup> though non-Han ethnic groups appear to the Chinese as if they had been there, outside of them from the beginning.

In this chapter, I discuss how minority nationality films were created by the state to preach ethnic policy for national unity and to appropriate the on-screen non-Han protagonists as a revolutionary subject and an inspiring new voice to celebrate the arrival of a socialist utopia. Nevertheless, the top-down projection of utopia imaginary on the ethnic minorities cannot be overstated, especially during the founding years, 1949 to 1966—the so-called Seventeen Years (*shiqi nian* 十七年), in mainland Chinese parlance—when the communist regime had not fully developed its statecraft and capacity. Even if the governing mechanism became more mature at a later time, there were still factors of plurality in the field of ethnic cinematic production with many stakeholders and local circumstances involved in the process. To engage in the question of how minority nationality film educates people and aims at interpellating them into certain ideological beliefs, I focus in this chapter on the musical film *Five Golden Flowers* (*Wuduojinhua* 五朵金花, dir. Wang Jiayi 王家乙, 1959), which depicts a Southwestern ethnic group, Bai zu (白族), in the mysterious and spectacular Dali of Yunnan Province. This romantic comedy served as a bizarre agglomerate of traditional romanticization of periphery ethnic qualities and socialist progressive dreams toward the upcoming world. Even though the film production was a direct order from Premier Zhou Enlai (周恩來), in terms of its geographical setting and ethnic minority content, to commemorate in a happy mood the tenth anniversary of the PRC and to promote socialist China to the international world, the popular romantic comedy is far from univocal while engaging in complex negotiations of different values, visions, and voices.<sup>5</sup>

### From Blank Sheet to the Remaking of Ethnic Minority on the Chinese Screen

Inspired by Lenin's remark that "of all the arts for us the most important is cinema" (Lunacharsky 1988, 57), the Chinese state, recognizing that the masses were in great need of entertainment after years of turmoil and that cinema was the most effective medium to popularize projects of national modernization and to transform audience members to socialist citizens, allowed filmmakers to produce feature films based on popular conventions and genres in the first two decades of the People's Republic. Mobile film projection units had been assigned a mission to disseminate national and international messages to the remote areas and frontiers they reached and to function as modernizing agents to ensure that local inhabitants (par-

ticularly in the rural and ethnic regions) viewed and learned from the films they brought there since cinema did not merely deliver the political message but also signified the advent of modernization (C. Zhou 2016). Thanks to the efforts made by the socialist state to promote film viewing in the countryside through its mobile projection units, the expanded exhibition network beyond port cities and urban areas made films more accessible to peasants, workers, and soldiers. New spectatorship was created, and viewership that had been confined mainly to urbanized, middle-class, and educated groups before 1949 was extended to heighten a stronger sense of egalitarianism and commonality via Chinese cinema.

Filmmakers captured images of the frontier landscapes and peoples to define the new contours of the nation-state and create a new national consciousness about the composition of the Chinese people. The early PRC films actively participated in mapping national space and narrating national history. The ethnic borderscapes were not merely governed by the Chinese state as newly integrated territorial spaces but also managed as soundscapes to be homogenized into a unified national voice, while simultaneously representing a new vital kind of vocal expression. Films about the ethnic borderlands—whether fictional or ethnographic—were released mostly in standard Chinese for inland audiences. However, China's ethnic minority film is less a genre in itself than some generic entanglement or intertextuality, since it includes many different genres, such as spy thriller, adventure, war film, costume drama, musical, opera, romance, comedy, melodrama, animation, and children's movie. Other than placing ethnic character or landscape as its most visible component, the PRC ethnic cinema often combines multiple genres within one film, failing to constitute any aesthetic unity and generic convention but generating productive tensions.

As if producing a new ecosystem on a sheet of “blank paper”—a metaphor frequently used by Mao to describe Chinese peasants and the masses—the ethnic minority film genre is meant to be painted in whatever colors, uttered with whatever voices, and folded in whatever shape the political leaders like to see and hear in order to enhance the nation-building project. Like the general peasant masses, “poor and blank” ethnic minorities are a screen upon which socialist revolutionary ideals and a newly founded national image can be projected. As Mao (1958, 3) said, “On a blank sheet of paper free from any mark, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written, and the freshest and most beautiful pictures can be painted.” While it is tempting for any political leader and regime to try out and realize an idea on the people who are presumed to be readily receptive and malleable, ethnic minority cinema emerged in the founding years of

the PRC more as the quality of a possible sensation, feeling or idea than as something definitive like a film genre per se. Its “blankness” invites utopian projection that carries transformative power while simultaneously containing tensions because utopia is never just a “blank sheet.” Ethnic minority cinema in the early years of the PRC, the ethnic musical film in particular, may be comparable to what Deleuze refers to as “affection-image,” which is pure feeling or intensities, “because it is felt, rather than conceived: it concerns what is new in experience, what is fresh, fleeting and nevertheless eternal.” It is a potentiality belonging to “the category of the Possible,” while “it gives a proper consistency to the possible [and] expresses the possible without actualizing it” (1986, 98). The relevancy of Deleuze’s *Cinema* books to our context is their historically grounded approach, even though his primary reference is confined to prewar and postwar U.S. and European examples (with a few mentions of Japanese filmmakers). As Chris Berry offers a different reading of Deleuze’s Bergsonian notion of time, we can aspire to seek how cinema (in our case, China’s ethnic minority cinema) can have a role in “the construction of different temporalities in different societies, politics, cultures, classes and so forth” (2009, 113). Deleuze’s way of treating films as new relations between movement and time, sound and image, also asserts that which has not yet existed in the realm of the dominant ideology. Although many outstanding ethnic films in the early years were the outcomes of top leaders’ instruction to deliver a specific political message, the effects and affects they generated were not necessarily under the state’s full control.

The image of blank paper as a *tabula rasa* may suggest the possible emptiness and absolute vulnerability of the masses to the indoctrination of revolutionary ideas or the interpellation of a socialist and national subject. The metaphor neatly demonstrates that the mass line promoted by Mao was by no means democratically oriented, but only indicated that top-down political engineering was exercised on the innocent governed people. For Mao, China’s backwardness had its advantages, and not only in the sense that it could borrow the technologies and experiences of foreign countries to speed up its development while avoiding their social mistakes. Most importantly, backwardness meant a “clean sheet of paper” that carried intrinsic moral and political virtues. It was the “poor and blank” peasants and young people uncorrupted by capitalist values and bourgeois ideology who could truly become the bearers of socialism and communism. The metaphor was a political leader’s fantasy, assuming the “innocent” people were entirely subjected to the authorities’ appropriations. The common feature of many state powers when equipped with improving statecraft share is that official

observers are not interested in representing the actual society they depict but are eager to provide an optic to simplify or refashion reality into a state map of legibility, or an “abridged map” (Scott 1998, 3).

In the ethnic minority context, the blank paper image also stands for an “uninhabited space” that invites thorough remaking and submits to the uncontested expropriation and the reality of settler colonialism.<sup>6</sup> In the 1950s, many visual artists under the guidance of state policy intensively portrayed the recently occupied ethnic borderlands with their focus on the newly built railways or roads—major symbols of developmental narrative and state capacity. These early PRC paintings exalted the advent of modern technology represented by new infrastructure, trains, and cars in the technologically animated “virgin land,” with the minimal representation of the indigenous inhabitants or the rendering of the border places populated only by nonhuman animals. These utopian-driven artworks simply ignored the people and ecosystems that already existed in the sites to be converted into the nation’s dreamland.<sup>7</sup> The ethnic was viewed as a prototype to be destroyed, unimagined, or emptied (for its particularities) but also as a model to be imagined and recreated for the revolutionary utopian future. Such projection of “blankness” onto the habitats of the non-Han ethnic communities was paralleled by the extensive national appropriation of the natural environment and extraction of resources there. Not only was their habitation de- or reimagined, but the ethnic minority character in various art forms was ideologized or sublimated as a lofty, metaphysical, revolutionary subject elevated from individual or gregarious human animality. Before the revolutionary baptism, they were merely species programmed to strive to persevere in life, although there has been a long literary tradition in Han culture to value the rustic ethnic barbarians for their preservation of archaic virtues (Yang 2018).

Set in a beautiful landscape with colorful ethnic costumes, attractive fairs, and exciting horserace, *Five Golden Flowers* is about a romance between a Bai couple in Yunnan. A young blacksmith of the Bai minority group, A Peng, goes to the March Third Festival—a big traditional festival celebrated by Han and multiple minority groups—to participate in horse racing. On his way, he meets a group of Bai girls, including Jinhua (literally, “Golden Flower”), with whom he falls in love at first sight. He helps the girls fix their broken cart, and then Jinhua and A Peng have their rendezvous by the side of Butterfly Spring and promise to meet again the following year. When the time comes, Jinhua does not show up as promised, so A Peng decides to look for her, even though he knows almost nothing about her except her name. During his journey, he runs into two

(Han) artists, musician Li and painter Meng, who have been sent from the Changchun Film Studio to collect materials about the Bai minority following China's long history of collecting traditional folk cultural practices for creative adaptation. This resonates with the socialist ideology, which privileges collectivization and communal innovation.<sup>8</sup> The use of ethnic minority songs as the basis of propaganda materials has been considered a significant symbol of China as a multiethnic nation. These two intellectuals, however, provide comic relief in the film. *Five Golden Flowers* resonates with the Maoist ideas not only in its glamorous characterization of the poor and young ethnic peasants as the driving force of society but also in its derogatory but comical portrayal of these two inept intellectual artists who know nothing about manual labor (they are not able to maneuver a horse cart, thus allowing the horse to break the telephone wire that cuts off contact between Jinhua and A Peng; they stupidly misidentify Jinhua as the bride in a wedding ceremony they encountered and mislead A Peng to believe that Jinhua is in love with another). Their clumsiness, compared with the agility and attractive appearance of the ethnic characters, may sow the seeds for the Maoist anti-intellectual bashing, though the musical only marginalizes rather than demonizes them.

Although "Jinhua" is a common maiden name in the Bai ethnic group, A Peng and the artists consecutively meet four girls with the same name. The four Jinhuas are all professional women or model workers in various fields: manure fertilization, the livestock industry, mining, and tractor driving. The real love interest A Peng seeks is the deputy director of a commune. Like the formula of many romantic comedies, the two protagonists, A Peng and Jinhua, run into a series of missed encounters and misunderstandings (e.g., A Peng thinks Jinhua has married another man, then Jinhua becomes suspicious that A Peng is in love with another woman), which keep them apart until the very end, where they meet again by the side of Butterfly Spring and have their romantic union. All the other Jinhuas and their lovers show up to congratulate the couple. This boy-meets-girl romantic comedy genre with the conventional plot of the couple overcoming all obstacles and living happily ever after is only superficially similar to the Hollywood model. The musical comedy's set conventions of idealized plot and characterization and its privileging songs, dance, and slapstick humor are perfectly compatible with the demands of state propaganda to express ideological enthusiasm and optimism about the socialist construction. Learning from the Soviet understanding of cinema as a tool for educating the masses, serving as a political weapon in the proletarian struggle for cultural and political hegemony, and entertaining the people through

artistic means, films, as the CCP saw them, were one of the most effective apparatuses to construct collective political consciousness and provide mass enjoyment within the boundaries of aesthetic ideology or aestheticized politics. Rather different from opera films (*xiqu dianying*), Chinese minority musical films carried no historical burden and were free to imitate Stalinist musical comedy and go beyond it. The emergence of musical film in the PRC was endorsed by its capability to elicit more spontaneously enthusiastic reactions from mass audiences. The pre-1949 developments of prerecorded soundtrack technology and the star system laid a solid platform for ethnic musical films.

Almost all national popular cinemas at one time or another have produced musicals (Creekmur and Mokdad 2012), but *Five Golden Flowers* conveys implications that go beyond the particular existing nation. The musical film means more than passionately compelling summons for people to identify with the revolutionary cause in the future. Its story also visually resonates with the nostalgia for returning to a virtuous, pastoral, and simple life. The remote land of ethnic Dali provides the audiences in the new republic with an “uncontaminated” realm to depart from the old, ugly past and launch a new journey toward a socialist utopia. The early music analogy or metaphor of film as “visual music,” “sounds for the eye,” or “music of light” may not necessarily hold cinematic representation in check or turn a film into an abstract art (Bordwell 1980). Even today, critics still compare the film to music for its common denominator in terms of movement, rhythm, and time (Kulezic-Wilson 2015). The impure nature or the mixed representational mode of cinema may even harness the abstract autonomy of music and its pure aesthetic pleasure under certain social and ideological functions.

The Maoist ethnic film musical is biased toward a fusion of convergence between sound and image, even with the premise that sound or music is bound to serve the image’s political function. But there could be a dialectical moment in which the two do not coincide. Their non-synchronization, tension, or conflict, while not generating an integral audiovisual whole by a single penetrating emotion, gives rise to certain emotive structures, which are motivated by but ultimately transcend the narrative. Subjectivization, subjection, or interpellation can still take place though, since the feelings latent in the drama are expanded and intensified.

Recreating and recomposing ethnic materials, including the thematic, generic, and stylistic elements, under the guide of a political agenda could be considered a national device of the PRC ethnic minority cinema. However, a sheer nationalization of ethnic issues by turning them into internal,

domestic problems in the hostile Cold War environment was not possible and viable, since China's ethnic groups had also been mobilized for the national branding to the world and the international socialist campaign against Western imperialism. Ethnic minority films were exported to display the new Chinese nation to the international community (though the screening was often restricted to the Soviet Union, Eastern European countries, Southeast Asia, some African countries, Hong Kong, and Macau) (T. Chen 2009) to articulate national subjectivity, engage in global socialist revolution, and realize united proletarian internationalism. The purpose was to collectively create a distinct international socialist culture with Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe against the bourgeois capitalist bloc.<sup>9</sup> *Five Golden Flowers* was shown in 46 different countries, symbolizing the overseas success of the PRC cinema during the 1960s (G. Wang 2013, 96) and indicating a different aesthetics beyond that of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry and their division system. While the propagandist cultural productions from both ideological camps usually did not offer any significant role for Asians to play, such a PRC ethnic musical appeared to gain its agency by articulating the national-local causes to disseminate on the international stage. Chinese socialist ethnic cinema, though not in a position to defend the local or the national against the contention for global supremacy, also experienced a global circuit during the Cold War.

### Ethnic Ventriloquism for the New Voices

Unlike Hollywood, which ghettoized ethnicity as a minor marginal genre and presumed the American nation was above or beyond it, early Chinese socialist movies following the Soviet model identified ethnic issues as being at the core of the new nation to claim the legitimacy of inheriting the Qing's multicultural empire for fabricating a utopian communist society. Like many Hollywood classics that preached an assimilationist melting-pot discourse, discarded ethnic values in the name of Americanism, and obfuscated any possibility of ethnic self-representation, early PRC cinema's approach was different though still vehement in incorporating ethnic heterogeneity (with its own ploy of artificial hierarchies of language and dialect) for Chinese national unity. Most of the ethnic minority films were released in Putonghua, although some of them had been dubbed in minority languages for ethnic audiences only.<sup>10</sup> Ethnic languages and Chinese dialects were not allowed in the communist mass media until the 1980s.

When ethnic minority films first appeared in the PRC, the natural sounds (i.e., the mother language) of the non-Han ethnic actors could not be heard by general audiences. As the dubbing technology was still imperfect, the movie dialogues and the way the ethnic characters moved their lips were often not well synchronized in Chinese ethnic minority films. For instance, the non-synchronization of *Red Blossom of the Tianshan Mountains* (*Tianshan de honghua* 天山的紅花, dir. Cui Wei 崔嵬, Chen Huai Ai 陳懷皑, and Liu Baode 劉保德, 1964), which is about how a Kazakh woman overcomes sexist prejudices from her traditional culture to successfully establish a commune with the CCP's guidance in her village, may not necessarily have induced a spatial magnetization of sound by image—that is, audiences would use their mental spatialization to locate the source of sound to a certain image. The Putonghua delivery of the Kazakh cast was dubbed clumsily, demonstrating obvious temporal gaps between the lip movement and the sound.

When synchronized sound first came to the cinema in the 1920s, many critics saw it as something redundant to the image-based cinema. The sound had historically been seen as something “unnatural” to movies. Soviet socialist filmmakers such as Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov remained suspicious of the American invention of the talkie, and they believed that such a technological advance in film had been employed by the capitalists for commercial exploitation and for naturalizing (in the opposite sense of historicizing) the viewing process as a sheer sensational (but not intellectual) experience. Instead, they called for a more radical use of sound in film as a contrapuntal use or non-synchronization of sound with visual images (Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov 1988). However, the not so synchronized soundtracks in the PRC's early ethnic minority films were not some intentional products but rather technical defects, although dubbing was considered an advanced technology in the 1950s. What the audiences heard from the dubbed movies was already a new kind of sound that was the product of modern technology, and it became part of their compelling experience of modernity accompanied by the birth of a new nation-state. The introduction of sound to cinema did not create much disruption to the Chinese filmmakers—probably because, unlike their Soviet counterparts, they were less concerned about image-oriented cinema surrendering its uniqueness to the dialogue-based theater. Indeed, there is a close affinity between theater and cinema in China, resulting in the production of many opera films in the 1950s and model works (*yangbanxi* 樣板戲) during the Cultural Revolution. Rick Altman argues that

the sound track is a ventriloquist who, by moving his dummy (the image) in time with the words he secretly speaks, creates the illusion that the words are produced by the dummy/image whereas in fact the dummy/image is actually created in order to disguise the source of the sound. Far from being subservient to the image, the sound track uses the illusion of subservience to serve its own ends. (1980, 67)

Scholars of film sounds tend to take a phonocentric approach to reverse the image-sound hierarchy. Using Altman's metaphor, sound has even been anthropomorphized into a conspirator who manipulates behind the scenes. Those critics who lean heavily on the psychoanalytic theories also ontologize voice (not being confined to the film context only) as archaic and endow it with "presence," which is compared to the soothing voice of the mother from the womb long before the baby is able to see. The mother's voice precedes any language or meaning to the child, offering the first model of auditory pleasure and imaginary cohesion but also posing the possible trauma of dispersal and division. Such ontological speculations, however, could not apply to all practices in cinema (Altman 1992, 37–39).

While the ideology of forging unity is always emphasized in the function of the film sound in relation to the image, the Han audiences of ethnic minority films are fascinated by seeing "oneself" (the coincidence of image and sound) being the Other (as an exotic ethnic as well as a new socialist self), creating certain tension between scopophilic drive and imaginary identification. In other words, they are more attracted to the internal gap than to the co-optation or suture in watching socialist ethnic minority films. The apparent image-sound unity (or unified identity) designates its very division or split. Even if it has been domesticated and sinicized, sound/voice can never be entirely contained, as it is the intrusion of the outside into the inside (paralleling the advent of modernity and socialist rule that turns the traditional order out of joint). Specifically, it is the alien, exotic quality that constitutes the point of attraction and identification to general Han viewers, though the reactions of the ethnic audiences to the same movie would be rather different, such as the way the Bai spectators watch *Five Golden Flowers*. But the dazzling visual and acoustic pleasures generated by a popular musical like *Five Golden Flowers* arguably can stitch together, from the Han majority's perspective, the scopophilic gaze on the (ethnic) object of desire and the narcissistic identification with the on-screen ideal image.

Given that the landscapes of ethnic borderlands were already spectacular enough to Han moviegoers, many early PRC documentaries simply did not allow the ethnic minorities to speak on-screen. In the 1950s–1960s, the

PRC ethnic documentaries, such as *Military March Toward Liberating Tibet* (*Jiefang Xizang daijunxing* 解放西藏大軍行, dir. Chen Feng 晨烽, 1951) or *Light Shining on Tibet* (*Guangming zhaoyaozhe Xizang* 光明照耀著西藏, dir. Hao Yusheng and Jiang Tao 郝玉生, 江濤, 1952), yoked voiceover speech to a rhetorical assertion that became political didacticism or simply propaganda. The ethnographic impulse served an argumentative purpose rather than being observational, through which images function fundamentally as illustrations for the rhetorical claims of a spoken commentary with its political guidance and problem-solving bent. The voiceover commentary in documentaries such as *Army's Reclamation and Battle Song* (*Junken zhang* 軍墾戰歌, dir. Yang Zhenya and Deng Pu 楊振亞, 鄧普, 1965), portraying the development in Xinjiang, is not, in fact, a unified voice (image and sound combined) but rather a disembodied one (lacking any specification in space or time and not yoked to any character). It is presented as something outside the ethnic space of Xinjiang. But it is this radical otherness to the diegetic world that bestows a certain authority on this voice. As a form of direct address, the commentary voice speaks without mediation to the audience, bypassing the “ethnic characters” and constructing a complicit relationship between itself and the spectator. Precisely because its voice is not localizable, the documentary can have the privilege of interpreting the images and producing the truth. The dummies (i.e., the ethnic minorities) are not needed in this documentary since they only constitute obstacles to the socialist government transforming the desert wasteland into a productive agricultural zone. It is a typical example of how sound establishes itself as more powerful than the image. As ethnic minorities are considered backward and ignorant of modern knowledge, it is the socialist state that succeeds in bringing changes and improvements to the wilderness; by doing so, it legitimates its governance. Modernization discourse is often accompanied by a colonial enterprise in the nation-building project. Colonization, however, is not an adequate or accurate term to fully describe China's relationship with its ethnic minorities in the founding years of the socialist republic.

The special ability of sound or language in ethnic minority cinema serves as an effective tool for the construction of identity and state building, whereas the didactic, disembodied voiceover in the ethnic documentary could not achieve such a purpose in the long run. There have to be bodies/dummies, and they have to speak, even if it is the art of ventriloquism. The link between language ideology and broader attitudes toward national identity can sometimes be quite direct. The revolution—first political and then industrial—has brought about demographic shifts that have changed

the linguistic profile of the new nation started by the GMD government and continued by the communist polity. To portray the non-Han ethnic minority groups as singing and dancing peoples could be labeled as a derogatory strategy of Orientalism from today's perspective; however, we could not deny the possibility that such attribution to the marginalized group or class is a means to give the new revolutionary socialist culture a new image of ventriloquism, a new way of expression, and a new vocabulary of revolution. The state is hungry for new words, or new voices, to describe concepts that simply have no traditional Chinese equivalent, in part a product of the utopian dream that the entire sociopolitical landscape, language or soundscape included, has to be redefined from scratch. We bear witness to the emergence and development of the Maoist language from the 1950s onward until the post-socialist era of the 1980s, which is the bizarre process of Chinese language innovation and mutilation, as well as a mixture of neologisms, enumeration, bureaucratese, and high Marxist rhetoric; it imparted a linguistic jolt to the public like none China had ever experienced. This linguistic tumult or uproar has an enormous breadth extending beyond the restricted boundaries of the educated elites, technocrats, and ruling class to directly affect and engage the interests, concerns, and voices of the masses in a country dominated by non- or semiliterate peasants and ordinary people.

Lacking the material bases, the new communist leadership did not have too many options available but had to depend primarily on ideas about the proletarian state and revolutionary world order to legitimize its power symbolically. The party-state did not attempt to conceal the specific ideological goals of the press, media, and education policy, which are the mighty weapons for the state's influence over the masses. Yet, these ideological tools also provide the public with the opportunity for conscious participation in the political life of the country. The Putonghua-dubbed ethnic minority cinema is part of the production, dissemination, and legitimation of a new, authoritative language befitting the state and citizens of the future and is constituted as a source of newfound empowerment that shapes young socialist citizens and confirms the linguistic identity and authority of the new communist state.

The newly born ethnic minority cinema displayed wide and conscious experimentation in both language and voice. The ethnic "dummies" did not just speak a common national language; they also spoke with the new socialist voices. A large portion of the "student" population targeted by the cinema consisted of nonreading adults whose education through cultural literacy programs was of paramount importance for the successful trans-

mission of socialist ideas. The Putonghua-dubbed ethnic minority cinema as an audiovisual mode of communication was a practical need caused by the high rate of illiteracy among Chinese citizens. Reflecting the general utopian spirit of the time, the Putonghua ethnic minority films promoted the belief that all aspects of society, including speech, could and must be leveled and built anew. The Putonghua spoken and sung by the non-Han ethnic performers signified a universal (but also national) language with the power to convey the revolutionary message to those who were as yet unbelieving in the 1950s and 1960s, in both an authoritative and meaningful way. The manipulation of sounds (dialogue, song, and music) in ethnic minority films is remarkably striking, while the interplay between image and sound has become a central dynamic of the new audio-visual culture. Rather than “some inchoate beyond of representation” to disrupt the visual hegemony (Steintrager and Chow 2019, 4), the place of sound in the early ethnic minority films contributed to the establishment of a new national cultural order. The hypnotizing capacity of political ideology finds its best form in the aural rather than in the visual. It is the voice or noise coming from the outside that takes over the mental space of the individual. The interiority of the private space is hence violated by the force of the revolutionary sounds from the exterior. The Chinese ethnic minority films of the 1950s and 1960s were directed at mobilizing mass audiences, with a new voice and new language, to serve a didactic function by providing a positive and larger-than-life model of the non-Han characters.

It is through the intermediality of image and sound, visual and audio, that a political message, from the state’s perspective, can be planted solidly in people’s minds. The songs or soundscape in ethnic minority films became a medium and symbol for a revolutionary zeal that not only called for the abandonment of old ideas but also demanded fresher, newer, and livelier forms of language by which to escape the world of dead institutions, values, and thoughts. Its “aural fold”—that is, the multitude of sound layers or waves present in any given visual shot—propels and engages the audience in a continuous state of becoming. Such aural fold could efficiently mesh audiences with the projection on-screen, reshaping the relationship between the spectators and the film.<sup>11</sup> Finally, it shocks the audience into a new awakening (if not mesmerization) and leads them to a reinvention of the self in order to accommodate the summons from the socialist state. The soundscapes of ethnic minorities on-screen function to demonstrate the power of eloquence in inspiring, persuading, and inciting the masses in society amid fundamental social and political transformations to instigate the people to take an active role in the construction process by sacrificing

their time and energy toward realizing the visions of a new society. The Putonghua-eloquent ethnic performers, like those in *Five Golden Flowers*, are bestowed with the gift of tongues, employing the language of the state in appropriate contexts with authority and conviction, standing for the “linguistic capital,” and combining the revolutionary, popular, national, and party-state voices. Other than giving voice to the masses (non-Han ethnic included), the popular ethnic-national songs return the living word to the people by empowering them with the charismatic gift of tongue, lively evocation, and effective oratory, to enable them to merge into the collective “I” embodied by the party-state authority.

Ventriloquism is not necessarily a one-way monological delivery; there could be a certain vacillation between the ventriloquist and the dummy. The situation is not simply that a ventriloquist makes a dummy speak but that the dummy also retroactively talks back to the ventriloquist, making them react to what is said, even if what has been said is the product of the ventriloquist's performance. The intentions or agenda of the ventriloquist may not be given a special status outside the voices of the dummies that are made to speak. In short, the ventriloquist should be seen as ventriloquated as much as ventriloquating. During the Seventeen Years, while most ethnic minority films were made by Han production crew (though many ethnic films had almost an all-minority cast), there was only one ethnic movie, *The Son of Herdsman* (*Muren zhizi* 牧人之子, 1957), codirected by a Mongolian filmmaker, Erji Guangbudao, and cowritten by a Mongol ethnic, Da Mulin, who also was the scriptwriter of *People on the Prairie* (*Caoyuan shang de renmen* 草原上的人们, dir. Xu Tao 徐韬, 1953). The state might not deliberately exclude ethnic minority participation in film production since efforts had been made to actively seek their involvement. Their little engagement in the production plan did not necessarily insinuate that their role was entirely passive. By making the ethnic characters speak the new revolutionary voices, the Chinese communist regime can create a distance—which also designates a form of undecidability—between what is affirmed in the speech/text and what the authority is supposed to believe or think. While using the ethnic dummies to announce the arrival of a new revolutionary society and the formation of a new multiethnic nation, the government also needs the dummies to persuade itself to hold on to such beliefs. The dummies perfect the cinema, to borrow Deleuze's words, by constituting “an immense ‘internal monologue’ which constantly internalizes and externalizes itself: not a language, but a visual material which is the utterable of language” (1989, 241). In ethnic minority cinema, it is the big

Other (i.e., the state's belief in the progress of revolutionary history) that moves into the position of the *acousmètre*, the disembodied voice.

The production of ethnic minority films symbolically denotes the constitution of a new Chinese subjectivity that is different from the old form, which postulates a simple dichotomy of interiority and exteriority. The sonic turn of ethnic minority cinema strives to conflate spectator and spectacle, making the strange familiar and closing the distance by allowing the viewer to become more involved with the cinematic subject and the screen. However, the anticipated result is not always an allegedly harmonious whole, as if any utopia always comprises tensions. The communion between the audience and ethnic minority film through the dominance of sound and its aural folds is far more malleable than steady, plunging the spectators into a perpetual state of change. Reinvention or transformation of the self is constituted in the movement of the aural fold and does not belong to a fixed mode of representation but instead is expressive of affects. Such affects under effects of sounds can be turned detrimental to the state mechanism, as evinced during the Cultural Revolution. Mao's China advocated radical revolutionary breaks with the existing drab reality. The affects generated by ethnic minority cinema were the intensive power that propelled actions. Deleuze describes how watching a film can take viewers into the "domain of the perception of affection" where the affection-image creates a change, which may be cognitive, perceptual, sensorial, intellectual, or structural. The affective power of the close-up of the ethnic face in these new PRC films releases the energy to make the action appear as a result. From an initial perception, the feeling is conceived as an affect (or "affection-image," in Deleuze's terminology), and the intensity or affective quality has been transformed into action. The Chinese regime intends to monitor and control such transformation process of affects into action. The musical *Five Golden Flowers* precisely aimed at mobilizing the mass audiences' energy and passions for socialist modernization. However, action in the Great Leap Forward (1958–62), the grand economic campaign for competing in the Cold War, could give rise to violence and destruction. Propaganda is understood as an effective part of political education work. It is used as a means to bring enlightenment as well as indoctrination to the masses to instill (class or multiethnic) consciousness among the people. However, the political doctrines delivered by aural elements may have produced mixed and diverse effects, because sounds are received by the audience individually, not necessarily as a coalition.

Utopian Countryside, Aural Affect,  
and Close-Up in *Five Golden Flowers*

In his essay on Chinese ethnic cinema, Paul Clark asserts that (Han) Chinese audiences see films as imported, exotic art forms and subjects. With fewer foreign films on Chinese screens after 1949, audiences' search for the exotic led them to crave "the most non-Chinese parts and peoples of China, her minorities in the northwest and southeast."<sup>12</sup> These movies about ethnic minorities, Clark believes, "had an appeal not dissimilar to the earlier Chinese fascination with Hollywood's presentation of American life in the films of the 1930s" (1987, 22). Clark's comments reveal that ethnic minority films can cater to Chinese viewers' exotic tastes, serving a similar function to the way Hollywood entertained Chinese filmgoers, even though Chinese ethnic minority films and Hollywood cinema apparently look very different. If Hollywood as "an incarnation of the modern" (Hansen 2000, 11) was able to teach Chinese audiences modernity, offer models of identification for being modern, and articulate their fantasies, anxieties, and repressed libidinal energies, the PRC ethnic minority film also helped to fulfill, at least to a certain extent, viewers' imaginations and sublimate their desires and uncertainties, as well as trigger their collective longing for a new kind of socialist-styled modern life. The ethnic minorities that were represented cinematically did not necessarily stand for economic and cultural backwardness even though, in reality, the common and official view was that these minority nationalities were unable to progress without help from their more advanced and civilized Han brothers.<sup>13</sup> Instead, the ethnic heroes on-screen were portrayed as the agency of a radical, anti-traditional, revolutionary and modernizing force, which could even be associated with the Soviet socialist future or modern Western rationalism. Indeed, the values and worldviews the Chinese communist regime adopted from Marxist socialist goals and visions actually made "new China" somewhat like the Western nations, which emphasized the pace of economic development. Ethnic minority heroes or heroines were elevated subliminally from their subordinate sociopolitical position in reality to be a leading and inspiring symbol on-screen for general viewers, not just to exploit their exoticism for visual pleasure but also to explore their novelty and difference for imagining a rosy socialist modernity.

Western capitalist nations had been remaking the world after their own image, and Hollywood was one of the contributing factors in this process. The PRC also remodeled the world of ethnic minorities following its own ideal image, with the ideological function performed by the

ethnic minority cinema. The Chinese communist state, even in its most revolutionary moments, always sought to realize the long-held nationalist objectives of making the nation rich and strong in the modern world system of nation-states. Although the regime resisted Western bourgeois liberalization from the 1950s onward—and continues to do so even at the present day—it never rejected the modernization or industrialization that took place in many Western countries a century ago and welcomed the economic and technological progress that industrialism could bring. Albeit under a socialist banner, the contemporary Chinese nation was repeating the economic transformation of the Western industrial societies, especially after its political estrangement from the revisionist Soviet Union. As mentioned previously, Mao's China endeavored to assert its leadership in the socialist countries of the developing world. In the PRC, Marxism was less a project of building socialism than an ideology of modernization. Chinese communist leaders who were also nationalists perceived that the future of their country and the course of history were highly determined by economic strength. As a major critic of bureaucratic institutionalization in post-revolutionary China, Mao was also primarily an advocate of modernization. In the Maoist discourse, ethnic minority film was precisely one of the effective tools to modernize non-Han ethnic groups under the guidance of the Han brothers toward the construction of a new and powerful Chinese nation-state. At the same time, the ethnic heroes and heroines, as demonstrated in *Five Golden Flowers*, were depicted as models for emulation with the embodiment of self-discipline, self-sacrifice, diligence, and honesty—ascetic values that were desirable for Chinese modernization and that resonated with the Protestant spirit highly conducive to the rise of capitalism in the West.<sup>14</sup> Antagonistic sociopolitical systems and contrasting ideological worldviews even in the Cold War could appropriate similar values for their different routes to modernization.

In the midst of the industrialization process, Mao's China had, however, erratically gone against the modernization currents of simply urbanizing the countryside but endeavored to “ruralize” the city in terms of how urban dwellers were obliged, if not coerced, to learn revolutionary virtues from people in the countryside. The industrialization process carried out in the first Five-Year Plan based on the Soviet model led to the exploitation of the rural areas to finance the socioeconomic development of the cities, the increasing inequalities within the working class, and the growth of a huge bureaucratic state apparatus. The objective of industrializing the nation with the effects of exploiting one part of society (the countryside) by the other (urban regions), disciplining laborers for demanded higher

productivity, and constructing a professional and administrative-oriented bureaucracy to implement the projects tended to further alienate the CCP from realizing its revolutionary ideals and carrying out its socialist mission. The Maoists' distrust of the city and its urban intelligentsia has indirectly been revealed in its emotional investment in the ethnic minority film, which was always intimately tied to the peasantry and the countryside. Cinema, an extremely popular medium, was used as an educational tool to teach urban public socialist moral values. The Chinese ethnic minority films of the 1950s and 1960s, reaching the pinnacle at the utopian musical *Five Golden Flowers*, were directed at mass audiences to serve a didactic function by providing a progressive and over-the-top model of the non-Han characters. The genre was an extension of Maoist voluntarism in the sense that the subjective will to achieve national unity and socialist aims could overcome any objectively determined limitations, given the historical reality that China by that time could not offer the necessary material and social preconditions for socialism. The propagandist role of the film genre is precisely to plant the will or the consciousness in the human mind. This cinema suggested that if the ethnic minority could become the historical actors dedicated to utopian visions of a perfect future, by relying on the strong will rather than on the objective forces of history, economically backward lands like China could skip the process of capitalism and directly advance to the socialist world.

The opening sequence of *Five Golden Flowers* has made full use of the festive mood of the March Third Festival to deliver the utopian message of how all nationalities of the new Chinese nation-state can live in harmony with material affluence, economic prosperity, and collective happiness. A Bai man blowing a horn started the first shot and was followed by two Bai male elderlies singing and a chorus of young Bai men and women dancing and singing romantic melodies for the festival. Big banners were held in the middle of the festival indicating "the Retail Units of the Dali Departmental Store" to symbolize an ideal consumer paradise that the socialist modernization dreams about (see fig. 2.1). A long panoramic pan shot, meant to sweep everyone in an all-embracing movement, shows crowds in different ethnic costumes (including many plain-clothed Han Chinese) overflowing the March Third Street, and medium shots present their smiling faces and show how everyone is busy with shopping and vending (see fig. 2.2). The March Third Festival demonstrates the national unity of all ethnic groups and reveals their prosperous lives with an abundance of consumer goods. The camera cuts back to numbers of Bai youths singing and dancing joyfully in the congested lakeside market before the narrative sequence shifts



Fig. 2.1. The banner reads: "Retail Units of the Dali Departmental Store." Screenshot from *Five Golden Flowers*.

to the horse-racing ground. The portrayal of a socialist multiethnic utopia also carries a sense of nostalgia for the traditional Chinese pursuit of a pastoral, folklore-like, virtuous, and blissful society in the land of the periphery.

The soundtrack of the opening sequence has been overwhelmed by the chorus singing. No natural voices and noises from the shopping crowd can be heard, although the film apparently tried to give an ethnographic sense of a lively community or marketplace. Ban Wang (2009) and Ying Bao (2008) argue that the crowded fair spatially eliminates any distancing and the intent of "othering," while the festival music edits out all-natural noises and channels them into a simulacrum of social order and political integration. The loud music, in my view, functions as a nonrepresentational signification to embody the utopian feelings that stimulate viewers' identification as well as to immerse them in the merry aural fold, other than visualizing the topographical image of utopia at the mystical Dali countryside. The mass scene and the choral singing play to the emotions of the audiences and weaken their intellectual resistance to the message of the film. The mass scene also serves as a way to draw viewers into the action and



Fig. 2.2. Shopping during the March Third Festival. Screenshot from *Five Golden Flowers*.

uplift their emotions. In that diegetic world, Han and other ethnic minorities live together cheerfully and peacefully, though their individual voices have to be absolved into, if not silenced by, the choral singing.

The well-known film music composer Lei Zhenbang (雷振邦) proposed to the scriptwriter of *Five Golden Flowers* that all dialogues be changed into duets or alternate, antiphonal singing. The music works more effectively than an illustration of the images to depict the mood of the picture on the screen. It serves as a key ingredient to construct a larger sense of identity than simply the narrative. The dominance of sound over image helps to unify individuals by synchronizing their movements to give the impression that the well-cohered and well-choreographed collective is a new driving force for change. Lei was also the composer of *Third Sister Liu* (*Liu Sanjie* 劉三姐, dir. Su Li 蘇里, 1960, a film about the Zhuang), *Visitors on the Icy Mountain* (*Bingshan shang de lai ke* 冰山上的來客, dir. Zhao Xinshui 趙心水, 1963, a film about Tajikistan), and many other ethnic minority musical films. Of Manchu origin, Lei worked for Changchun Film Studio to produce more than one hundred film songs throughout his career, many of

which became pop songs nationwide. Most of the songs he composed were based on ethnic folk songs he collected from the ethnic minority regions.

Although folk music is a useful tool for preaching, its ability to slide out of the boundaries and create unexpected feelings or meanings is a constant challenge to ideologists. Ethnic folk songs are often cyclical, continuously in motion, and repetitive, spinning a sense of timelessness that goes against the future orientation of socialist propaganda. Hence, the popular folklorist tune adapted from ethnic music, the Xishan (West Hills) tune from the Bai ethnic culture, appropriated by the film score composer in *Five Golden Flowers* has to be accompanied by other appeals, such as the countryside setting as the topography of utopia. The village incarnated by the commune is itself a self-sufficient microcosm with efficient technologies. Not merely reinforcing the Maoist idealization of the rural as the elevated place of purity, the film musical also alludes to the traditional Chinese reverence of idyllic nature, which is not simply a refuge or an escape but a place of origin to which one is longing to return. The peripheral (ethnic) utopian countryside doesn't just symbolize a spatial alternative that reminds Han Chinese of the mythical "Peach Blossom Spring" (*taohua yuan* 桃花園) in traditional Chinese literature; it also designates a temporal difference as if the audiences, through their identification with the characters, are in some way living in the innocent past or ideal antiquity, thus constituting a strategic haven separated from outside influences.

The Maoist utopianism ideology permeates the movie, which debuted at a time of mass famine in China.<sup>15</sup> Such ethnic musicals endeavored to transcend not only pure entertainment or sheer propaganda but also harsh reality, by creating a rosy and elated utopian land with multiethnic harmony. It thus offered audiences a great psychological asylum and euphoria from the highly ideologized and sociopolitically harsh society. In other words, it performed a transcendence for the masses, while at the same time subscribing to a hope for a new society based upon parity, harmony, and social justice. Perhaps, unlike the escapism offered by bourgeois fantasy films, the early PRC ethnic musical comedy stands for a kind of naivety encompassing unsophisticated dreams for a new life of justice, equality, freedom, dignity, and hope. By watching the lively and uplifting movie, audiences were encouraged and stimulated by the music and songs to long for the revolutionary reign of the people and a new equalitarian socialist life under no exploitation. The Maoist musical strived to transcend the prevailing dichotomies of Han and ethnic minority, self and other, modern and traditional, past and future, urban and rural, rational and emotional, reality and representation, revolution and entertainment, and political mis-

sion and amorous pursuit not into a sublimated synthetic state but into a discourse of utopia encompassing the tensions of all these coexisting opposites.

The unforgettable actress Yang Likun (楊麗坤), who was of Yi origin, stood for the Chinese erotic phantasm of the ethnic Other.<sup>16</sup> Many close-up shots of her pretty face (the ideal example of an affection-image) in the film succeed in generating emotive reactions to a range of affects, articulating a new icon sign for the ethnic minority but also simultaneously decontextualizing or cutting the image off from its diegetic and the real worlds. Deleuze points out that the close-up abstracts the object, that is, the face, “from all spatio-temporal co-ordinates, that is to say it raises it to the state of Entity” (1986, 96). In short, the close-up transforms Yang into a “thing larger than life,” or that utopian model audiences have to look up to, while simultaneously provoking a sense of proximity, intimacy, or even possessiveness since the allure to get hold of an object at the close range is associated with the desire for possession. Yang’s close-up photogenic shots in the film serve as a privileged receptacle of passions inviting audiences to project their erotic fantasies and to produce an illusory sense of ownership, but their large scale (“close-up” in French is *gros plan*) that exploits the dimension of a human face on the expanse of the screen also generates the feeling of transcendence and unattainability (see fig. 2.3).

The utopia portrayed in *Five Golden Flowers* was as transcendental and unattainable as such to the viewers under the disastrous consequences of the Great Leap Forward. As the real world in China of that era was predominated by ascetic ideologically loaded but sexually drab films, the musical’s highlight of the actress’s erotic beauty and spectacular scenery became a rare channel for audiences’ affective outburst. Although the sharp critique of the Han tendency to feminize and eroticize ethnic minorities could be valid in the general cultural politics of China’s ethnic representations, the erotic implications of *Five Golden Flowers* overcame the ethnic majority-minority divide and manifested the affective investment of its national viewers beyond sheer othering. Unlike other socialist films that had to sublimate individual romance to sheer dignified revolutionary goals, *Five Golden Flowers* could openly and unashamedly eulogize libidinal love and romantic desire. The celebration of the close-up of the female lead from the ethnic musical, as Mary Ann Doane argues, is to reassert the space of the spectator and reaffirm its corporeal existence because the cinematic spectator clings to the close-up as an autonomous entity, a fragment “that can be taken and held within memory” and that one “can indeed see and [from it] grasp the whole, in a moment rich with meaning and affect”



Fig. 2.3. The close-up images of actress Yang Likun. Screenshots from *Five Golden Flowers*.

(2003, 109)—hence, empowering the spectator to be an “analyst of, rather than vessel for, meaning” (107).

The industrial modernization campaign carried out under the first Soviet-modeled Five-Year Plan intensified the inequalities of the rural-urban divide and within the working class, while simultaneously building a vast state bureaucratic machine. The modernization objectives incongruously rendered the CCP further away from achieving its revolutionary goals and communist pursuit. In short, the political means to attain socialism had already undermined the socialist ends. Maoism precisely displayed the resistance to the restoration of the old sociopolitical order and the fading of the socialist vision of a future utopia—although, ironically, Mao was also an enthusiastic modernizer. Other than aiming at surpassing Great Britain in some production categories within a short period under the intense Cold War atmosphere, the launch of the Great Leap Forward campaign at the beginning of the second Five-Year Plan in 1958 that imposed unrealistic targets on grain productivity was meant to deal with the differences between modern urbanized areas and the backward rural hinterland, between intellectuals and the peasant masses. Non-Han ethnic groups symbolized in the film as “the masses with new consciousness” were mobilized to strive against the comeback of urban intellectuals and what they stood for, though there was no visible violence, hostility, and enemy in the musical.

The anti-intellectual inclination of the PRC’s ethnic minority film is very similar to that of Hollywood cinema, especially its “lower genres” like adventure, thrillers, and slapstick comedies, with their emphasis on action, speed, spectacles, and thrills. If Hollywood’s anti-intellectual tradition

originated in the virtues of the American frontier period, when courage, endurance, virility, and staunchness were far more important than academic ability and intellectual attainment, the ethnic minority cinema of the PRC also made use of the non-Han frontiersmen as the new heroes to revive ascetic values and revolutionary commitment and to play an antithetical role to the party bureaucracy (with the emergence of a professional elite class that was loosely classified as intellectual) and the institutionalization of the postrevolutionary state. The communist regime fervently appropriated mass-line culture to serve political purposes, which undoubtedly led to the marginalization and oppression of any insurgent voices and reflective views. Anti-intellectualism is a common facet of totalitarian regimes, designed to silence political dissent. Mao's China did not need to learn it from Stalinist Russia. That the anti-intellectual discourse became dominant in the ethnic minority films was actually a Maoist populist means to challenge the distinction between rulers (bureaucrats) and ruled (masses), to criticize the privileges of the urban technocratic and intellectual elites, and to dismantle the huge division of mental and manual labor.

The anti-intellectual tone in *Five Golden Flowers* is much lighter than that in other musical films like *Third Sister Liu* and *Ashima* (阿詩瑪, dir. Liu Qiong 劉瓊, 1964), which are typical examples of vocal music overwhelming objective observation and reflective contemplation by expressing disparaging ideas about intellectuals as a way to arouse the creativity and enthusiasm of the masses for building a socialist revolutionary society (Q. Liu 2021; U 2010). In these musicals with a militant Maoist manner, a new mode of causality developed, as if to indicate a rebellious gesture and aggressive social plan, wherein the music and its rhythm now initiated image and movement rather than the other way around. In these films, it is the music and singing that create an anti-intellectual weapon to condemn, ridicule, and eliminate the caricatured high-class elites from the forthcoming ideal world.

Unlike the conventional plot in the PRC films of the time, there is no evil character in *Five Golden Flowers*, except some "weak" intellectuals who are mocked. Its ethnic heroes and heroines are so progressive that they no longer need any patriarchal figures of the CCP to guide them through, as seen in many other minority nationality movies. The absence of class conflict, war, or even personal rivalries underlines the utopianism of musical comedy. Sexual and ethnic equalities are asserted, and women hold up half the sky, though it is a state-monitored "feminism" primarily for enhancing women laborers' output. The female protagonist is a devoted and competent deputy director of a commune. Indeed, the female char-

acters invariably play the leading role in many scenes, and it is they who contribute to the productive labor force. The life depicted in the commune manifests prosperity and happiness. The backyard steel furnace campaign is also integrated into the film, as the male protagonist, A Peng, is a skillful blacksmith who helps the commune to make good-quality steel. In a sense, it is not simply an ordinary romance but rather a story about how a simple-hearted young peasant of an ethnic minority background is drawn to what the commune represents.

Although it is standard in the musical comedy genre that all characters happily show up in the finale scene, in this case at Butterfly Spring, the union of the lovers, the formation of all the couples, and the integration of everyone into the big family community fervently symbolize the realization of collectivization in choral form. The collective singing reaches its apotheosis to demonstrate the love union and the arrival of utopia, symbolizing through the popular folk song not only the unity of male and female but also the combination of natural countryside and progressive modernization (the finale scene was shot in the studio setting of Changchun, two thousand miles away from Dali). The dream of overcoming all differences has been encapsulated in the sweet rhythm of the popular song:

As we two are in love; from now on two of us will never separate  
 We grow old together and love forever  
 As we two are in love; from now on we will not separate  
 We grow old together and love forever

(哥有心來妹有意，從今兩人莫分開  
 白頭到老同甘苦，地久天長永相愛  
 哥有心來妹有意，從今我們不分開  
 白頭到老同甘苦，地久天長永相愛)

The revolutionary romanticism expressed by the sweet song and music would induce audiences to leave the cinema humming the tune. But the romantic union scene with the participation of every character delivers less sense of happy domesticity than a sense of collectivity. The musical not only presents a model of a utopian world but also embodies the utopian feelings that stimulate audience identification. This is rather different from the way the songs in *Third Sister Liu* and *Ashima* have been used as a political armament to struggle against the upper class and to differentiate the class difference. The union of all in *Five Golden Flowers* expressed through songs and music exemplifies the utopian sensations to engross the audience. The

songs and music provide viewers, whatever their current hardship, with a channel to experience and feel for themselves a future utopian world or a timeless pastoral life depicted in the ethnic musical. The Chinese comedy genre of the early twentieth century is always a satire against authorities and social inequalities, but under the principle of socialist realism,<sup>17</sup> the PRC comedy depicted reality as it could be—a comedy that envisions the joy of all Chinese people in a socialist utopia and a genre changed to paint a happy socialist reality of the future. *Five Golden Flowers* has transcended the Soviet model of socialist realism to adopt a new romantic notion of realism by recrafting reality and envisioning it with utopianism, that is, “revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism combined together,” which Mao advocated in the eighth National Congress of the CCP in 1958 as the guiding principle for proletarian artistic creation. While ethnic minorities are treated as subordinate by the Chinese majority and cannot easily be integrated into mainstream society, the music plays to the emotions of the audience by softening any possible intellectual resistance and stimulating viewers with a feeling that they are part of that on-screen world by eliding the immediate reality with the utopian world.

### The Cold War Atmosphere and Heterotopia of Other Ethnic Films

The spirit embodied by *Five Golden Flowers* strongly echoes Mao's belief presented in the Great Leap Forward: the subjective consciousness, moral values, and dedication of people are the decisive factors in determining the outcome of history. It is not about accepting life as it is but about dreaming of life as it will be. The aspiration may find strong resonance in many developing countries under the Cold War division and rivalry between the two nuclear-based superpowers competing for control of the world and the loyalty of their client states. As if the national popularity of this musical comedy was not sufficient proof, *Five Golden Flowers* had been widely circulated internationally in 46 foreign countries as a “reel utopia,” earning Best Director and Best Actress awards at the 1960 Cairo Film Festival (*Lun Zhongguo shaoshuminzu dianying* 1997, 381). Minister of Culture Xia Yan executed Premier Zhou's order to closely monitor and oversee the whole production of the musical film from the beginning to the end, which included choosing the director, casting the actors, scrutinizing the song composition, and organizing other details. Wang Jiayi from the Changchun Film Studio was selected to direct the film mainly because he had the experience of codirecting with French filmmaker Roger Pigaut for a

children's film, *The Magic of the Kite* (1958, originally released in French as *Cerf volant du bout du monde*), which was a PRC coproduction with France to promote internationalist solidarity. Xia Yan instructed the production crew and cast of *Five Golden Flowers* that they should aim at making the film appealing to as many audiences as possible and releasing it in as many countries as possible to enhance China's public image in the world.<sup>18</sup> With the international viewers in mind, including those in the capitalist nations, the production team had been granted the license to skip the socialist political message and to avoid any associations with the CCP, though a political slogan about the people's commune was successfully inserted.

This demonstrates that popular musicals could have enormous appeal beyond their original audiences. Viewers everywhere look for escapist entertainment in times of collective stress under economic hardship and in a sociopolitical maelstrom. The international circulation of China's ethnic minority musical offered a new orientation for ordinary citizens living under the pressures of Cold War military threats and revolutionaries elsewhere who were no longer followers of the Stalinized Soviet Union. Utopian visions are of little significance if no one is listening or co-dreaming. The receivers' complicity with the utopian exercise may have been tied to the emotional uplift enhanced by the musical and a longing for flight to the future or an idealized past. After all, striving for utopia is the dynamic reality-transcending force in history by elevating human beings to become active change agents. This is despite utopianism being condemned as a sinister energy in modern history; utopian visionaries who rely heavily on human will and manipulate human desire always feel morally free to employ the most immoral means to attain their desired end—especially when they lack any real methods to achieve their goals (Meisner 1982).

Ideology may provide the interpellated subject with a certain opportunity to negate or call its identification into question, allowing it to imagine a potential transgression or distancing that is, paradoxically, a necessary part of interpellation. So the musical film may not exactly perform the compensatory function (it offers what the reality lacks); instead, it allows the viewers to live in the "beyond" or the imaginary transgression from the interpellation presently conferred upon them. The utopia depicted in the comedy may cast an illicit critique of the society currently constituted. Utopian visions may obliquely criticize existing social orders, making people more aware of the present flaws and moving them to strive for transforming the status quo, though it may be politically unlikely in China at that time. It is the excess the ethnic film has promised that cannot be entirely absorbed by the internalization of ideological meaning and truth.

Non-Western agencies articulated through aesthetic products hardly had any role to play in the world arena of the Cold War. The denial of Asian agency goes along with the general perception of Asian subjects as indistinguishable crowds or figures with no histories or personalities. The rare gap that *Five Golden Flowers* broke open revealed to the world, though only in a glimpse, that the “subjects without histories” can dream, love, and sing with their voices, inspiring international viewers to long for something different even if the Cold War rivalry limited the realization of any imaginative possibilities and if the hegemonic formation of power centers undermined the emergence of alternative thoughts. But the Chinese state-initiated aspiration toward its own ethnic minorities who bore the mission of transcending major divides had its severe limitations. A conflict beyond the politico-ideological alliance between a reviving China and an expanding Soviet Russia was bound to happen. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's denouncement of Stalin and his project of de-Stalinization triggered the major split between China and the Soviet Union in 1956, resulting in the final Sino-Soviet split. Mao's China then engaged in competing for leadership of the developing world by taking up the role of bridging world revolution and decolonization that the “white, imperialist Soviet” had failed to undertake. But such an endeavor was not necessarily cosmopolitan in nature, let alone a voice for other oppressed groups and nations.<sup>19</sup>

The utopia portrayed in *Five Golden Flowers* is imaginary, but at the same time, it is not built in a void but contains and preserves all possible tensions of its circumstances, paralleling what Foucault (1986) designates as “heterotopia,” which is a real, heterogeneous space retaining complicated and even contradictory meanings. The classification of non-Han minorities into limited numbers of officially recognized categories under the early communist rule did not necessarily give a complete sense of stability. Since ethnic minority film has been used as a tool of political enlightenment and nation building for both national audiences and international spectators, arbitrary appropriations to serve given ends would loosen the fixated identities and substitute their inherent localization.

We should note that the so-called local or regional ethnic cultural traits are very much the contingent recreation of the filmmakers to facilitate the nationalization of all cultures under the Chinese socialist sovereignty. While it might have been rather difficult for the general audiences to differentiate one Southwestern ethnic group from another in terms of their cinematic representations, the distinctive culture and identity of the Mongol, the Tibetan, or the Uyghur on-screen is also haphazard. The Chinese authorities combined different ethnic customs and freely appro-

priated assorted ethnic forms to ensure that cultures of all ethnicities could move beyond their traditions and develop along with the state-led social progress.<sup>20</sup>

The utopian vision of harmony in *Five Golden Flowers* may lay the groundwork for some other minority nationality films to envision multi-ethnic unity in the CCP's most celebrated notion of recognizing oneself (i.e., the socialist subject in the ideal world) in one's mirror image. Foucault refers to utopia as a mirror because of its placelessness, but he also points out that a mirror is simultaneously a heterotopia insofar as it (as a surface of the glass that reflects a clear image) exists in reality. From the standpoint of a utopia mirror, one directs the gaze from the virtual space on the other side of the glass toward the place where one is and reconstitutes oneself there (1986, 24). But what Foucault has not fully elaborated on in his short essay is that the two sides of the mirror are not a rude binary opposition of illusion and truth. Neither are utopia and heterotopia two opposing entities. The duality only refers to two aspects of the same mechanism, and the two incompatible spaces overlap. Like utopia, heterotopia has a function to create space as other, as perfect and as well arranged since the real one is "messy, ill constructed, and jumbled," while "juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible" (27, 25). Though following the Soviet model of recognizing ethnic minorities as different nationalities, the early PRC also attempted to promote the principle of inclusiveness by emphasizing that all ethnic groups, including the Han, are different but united as one family. Even though Fei Xiaotong's notion of "unity in diversity" (1988) emerged only in the late 1980s, the CCP had already begun to experiment with unifying in the metaphor of a family unit its ethnic diversity in the 1950s and 1960s. Instead of highlighting class rivalry in accordance with orthodox Marxist doctrine, some ethnic films were framed as socialist family dramas.<sup>21</sup> Ethnic conflict was understood in terms of family ideology in the early years: many ethnic minority films feature a kind-hearted fatherly party cadre who is always Han. The CCP played the role of caring patriarch to the non-Han groups, especially when their own ethnic leaders were portrayed as corrupted and they failed to provide paternal protection. The implicitly omnipresent father of the collective socialist family serves as the avuncular patriarch of all ethnic peoples.

There were numerous examples of such a fatherly figure on the PRC's ethnic screen, including the Communist Officer Su in *The Victory of the Inner Mongolian People* (*Neimengrenmin de shengli* 內蒙人民的勝利, dir. Gan Xuewei 干學偉, 1950, about the Mongol); Company Commander Zhang

in *A Horse Caravan* (*Shanjianlingxiang mabanglai* 山間鈴響馬幫來, dir. Wang Weiyi 王為一, 1954, about the Miao [Hmong]); Political Instructor Liu in *Eagles in the Storm* (*Baofengyu zhong de xiongying* 暴風雨中的雄鷹, dir. Wang Yi 王逸, 1957, about the Tibetan); Platoon Leader Wang in *Reed Pipe Canso* (*Lusheng liange* 蘆笙戀歌, dir. Yu Yanfu 于彥夫, 1957, about the Lahu); Old Yang and Dr. Zhang in *Beacon Fire on a Frontier* (*Bianzbai fenghuo* 邊寨烽火, dir. Lin Nong 林農, 1957, about the Jingpo [Kachin]); Captain Cao in *Moya Dai* (摩雅傣, dir. Xu Tao 徐韜, 1960, about the Dai [Tai in general in Southeast Asia]); Hong Jiang in *Meng Long Sha* (勐壠沙, dir. Wang Ping 王苹, Yuan Xian 袁先, 1960, about the PRC's Dai ethnic group); Zhang Jie in *Anaerhan* (阿娜爾罕, dir. Li Enjie 李恩杰, 1962, about the Uyghur); the People's Liberation Army officer in *The Serf* (*Nongnu* 農奴, dir. Li Jun 李俊, 1963, about the Tibetan); Secretary Liu in *The Hero of the Grassland* (*Caoyuan xiongying* 草原雄鷹, dir. Ling Zifeng 凌子風, Dong Kena 董克娜, 1964, about the Kazakh); Secretary Sa in *Red Blossom of the Tianshan Mountains* (*Tianshan de honghua* 天山的紅花, dir. Cui Wei 崔嵬, Chen Huai Ai 陳懷皚, and Liu Baode 劉保德, 1964, about the Kazakh); and Wang Da in *Girl in Jingpo People* (*Jinpo guniang* 景頗姑娘, dir. Wang Jiayi, 1965, about the Jingpo [Kachin]).

The Han characters—even the marginal ones—always serve as radiating centers of consciousness to sieve ethnic cultures for the implied Han audiences. In another formula, the Han protagonist discovers that the offspring of an ethnic minority family is actually his lost child (e.g., *Da Ji and Her Fathers* [*Daji he tade fuqin* 達吉和她的父親, dir. Wang Jiayi, 1961, about the Yi ethnic group]). In other words, Han and non-Han share the same blood. In some films (like *Visitors on the Icy Mountain* [*Bingshanshang de laike* 冰山上的來客, dir. Zhao Xinshui 趙心水, 1963]), the ethnic villain is faked by a wicked Han, who is a GMD spy. Recruiting the ethnic minorities as communist members is also a gesture of embracing their entry into the socialist family (e.g., *Hasan and Jamila* [*Ha Sen yu Jia Mila* 哈森與加米拉, dir. Wu Yonggang 吳永剛, 1955, about the Kazakh], *The Detachment of the Hui People* [*Huimin zhidui* 回民支隊, dir. Feng Yifu 馮一夫 and Li Jun 李俊, 1959, about the Hui], and *Storm over the Grassland* [*Caoyuan fengbao* 草原風暴, dir. Lin Feng 林豐, 1960, about the Tibetan]). Not necessarily foregrounding class conflict and exploitation, the official ideology of the ethnic minority genre of the 1950s and 1960s was that all nationalities should live like a loving family under the Chinese heaven, which was in pursuit of social equality. But its actual foundation was nonetheless the idolatry of patriarchal authority. This does not simply mean that the ethnic minorities were forced to submit to the patriarchal power of the communist regime.

Indeed, the strong father image was made for Han viewers. There had been a popular demand by the Han majority (after all, they constituted the dominant portion of the audience) in the 1950s for the establishment of a powerful and authoritarian paternal state that would be capable of creating national political order, handling severe problems of domestic economic impoverishment, and withstanding formidable and hostile international forces. With the outbreak of the Korean War, the threat of another foreign intrusion, and the appeal of patriotic sentiments to counter the external dangers, the new socialist republic was able to gain the popular support of the intelligentsia and urban population, even though the power of the CCP was based in the countryside. To be more exact, there was no popular resistance from the suspicious urban populace since for them the communists were the only alternative to the discredited and hopeless GMD government. The massive national backing facilitated the new socialist state to legitimately carry out its oppressive dictatorial practices.

The metaphor of family harmony in many of these ethnic minority productions, while closely following officially endorsed patterns, sometimes gave way to articulating the regime's stance toward the hostile international environment with the highlights on the stereotypical portrayal of good and evil characters. These ethnic-related stories were mainly about destroying the GMD enemies, exposing espionage agents, and glorifying the heroic communist fighters, as in *People on the Prairie* (*Caoyuan shang de renmen* 草原上的人們, dir. Xu Tao 徐韜, 1953, about the Mongol), *The Gold and Silver River Band* (*Jinyintan* 金銀灘, dir. Ling Zifeng, 1953, about the Tibetan), and *Dawn of Meng River* (*Menghe de liming* 猛河的黎明, dir. Lu Ren 魯韜 and Zhu Danxi 朱丹西, 1955, about the Tibetan), whereas the spy or adventure genre, with films such as *A Horse Caravan* and *Mysterious Travelling Companion* (*Shenmi de luban* 神秘的旅伴, dir. Lin Nong 林農 and Zhu Wenshun 朱文順, 1955, about the Yi), combined with romance elements, did provide a slight difference (in particular, physical intimacy between the romantic couple was more often seen in ethnic films) from other tightly controlled propaganda films that shared a similar mission of building a socialist Chinese nation against all odds.

While saber-rattling in the internationally hostile environment of the Cold War, these ethnic films also provided mainstream viewers enjoyment in a libidinated space of otherness. The integration of the non-Han groups into the nation-building project and the state's mission of constructing a new national image for the world at the same time reproduce the power relations of the self-other dichotomy. Hence, utopia and heterotopia are not essentially opposing or symmetrical. We are seeing not a polarity of

illusion and truth but a displaced One whose symmetry is always already broken but leaving tensions behind. In comparison to the utopia model of space construction in *Five Golden Flowers*, these other nationality minority movies are a heterotopian interplay of real spaces or sites in terms of contestation, displacement, exclusion, incorporation, inversion, juxtaposition, and reconfiguration. Early PRC ethnic cinema did carry an inherent signification of heterogeneity and presupposed a system of opening and closing that allowed the products penetrable, as these films were not banished from immediate China's domestic and international politics. They are the heterotopias that lie outside to address the mechanism of centering and peripheralization depending on the ideological needs of the power. The multiple functions of non-Han ethnicities in the PRC socialist representations rendered the entity not yet ontologically constituted in full.

The Chinese state might generally like to hear the harmonious reverberation from its cinema, but given the radical political fluctuations in the early era, the state also wanted to hear new voices and see new bodies to tear down the political barriers against its advancement. From the state's perspective, *Five Golden Flowers* served as an exemplary of "seeing oneself looking" in the mode of "hearing oneself speaking/singing," a look that abolishes the distance of intellectual reflection and obtains the immediacy of vocal self-affection. It resonated with the revolutionary passions of the socialist republic in its early stage and the utopian drive of the Great Leap Forward campaign in an unfriendly international world, while looking away from their horrendous consequences.

This appealing power is not diminishing after fifty years but growing, with the film increasingly being affirmed by mainstream audiences in contemporary times, under the psychological complexities of retrospective nostalgia, as a positive idealism, optimism, and national wholeness of the Maoist era in contrast to the contemporary materialist, demoralized, and corrupt post-Mao present. Millions of Chinese tourists flocked to Dali because of *Five Golden Flowers* to enact their collective nostalgia for the long-lost communal spirit and to realize the fantasy of the exotic, though they were not interested in seeking any authentic interaction with real Bai people there. The influx of tourists also transformed the place. Local officials in Yunnan have used the film to promote tourism and investment by overhauling the place to match the tourists' film-framed expectations. However, older Bai villagers viewed the musical as a historical document of the destruction wreaked on their old landscape during the revolutionary era (deforestation and elimination of wildlife due to the state's ambitious development projects in the Great Leap Forward and later political move-

ments). While hesitating to talk about the terrible time of starvation and famine tolls, elder villagers saw the film as a memoir of their suffering and the loss of the beauty of their old environment (Notar 2006). The affects of the film may appear as a potential agent capable of modifying the world, in contrast to the majority who are reduced to passive seers witnessing its horrors and injustice. Though the Maoist musical was partly shot in a prearranged studio setting in order to produce its designed affection, the movie never fundamentally ceases to be a representation of the world. For Bai viewers, since a large part of the film was shot on location, *Five Golden Flowers* stood for a lost landscape that now was forever lost. For recent Chinese tourists, because most of the romantic rendezvous scenes were filmed at the studio of Changchun, they were ironically disappointed by the real site they visited in Dali, for its mundanity had ruined the magic of the film. Meanwhile, local officials invested in revamping the actual location by building artificial trees to imitate the visual representations from the film.

Bazin's notion of cinematic realism may remind us of the benefit from the absence of subjectivity or human affection in the recording of images. Such capacity of film allows the indeterminate piece of reality to exist and enables the real to appear beyond the inevitably framed meaning: "The nature of the 'image fact' is not only to maintain with the other image facts the relationships invented by the mind. These are in a sense the centrifugal properties of the image—those which make the narrative possible. Each image being on its own just a fragment of reality existing before any meaning, the entire surface of the scene should manifest an equally concrete density" (Bazin 1971, 37). Rather than being entirely subjected to human will and meaning, the world and the things that come into the cinematic view serve as a condition for our shared habitat, while demanding a response that may do justice to their sheer existence.



### THREE

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## What Came after Chinggis Khan

### *The Steppe Reimagined in Ecological Politics*

In her memoir, the famous Chinese actress Li Lili (黎莉莉) wrote that she and forty film production crew members rode on three trucks during the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1940 to go to Inner Mongolia from Chongqing, the wartime capital of Nationalist China, via Yan'an, where the Chinese Communist Party was based, to shoot on location China's first fiction feature about the Mongols, a "national defense film," *Storm on the Border* (*Saishang fengyun* 塞上風雲, dir. Ying Yunwei 應雲衛, 1942).<sup>1</sup> Despite having the blessing of the major communist leaders, including Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Zhu De, the film crew throughout the journey, as vividly described by Li, was continuously harassed by the local GMD officials within the Nationalist-controlled territories, even though the two parties formed the National United Front in the war of resistance against Japan.<sup>2</sup> Once they arrived at Ejen Khoroo Banner, Yeke Juu League in Inner Mongolia,<sup>3</sup> after three months on the road, they immediately faced the challenges of harsh weather, alien geography, and unfriendly local people.

After overcoming all these difficulties by succeeding in mingling and befriending the Mongols to impersonate them on-screen, finding the right lighting and places in the desert for composing the *mise-en-scène*, and tackling the poor living conditions in the ten months they spent there, Li experienced a very dramatic episode that happened toward the end of their location shooting. On a stormy night, the Japanese army had invaded another banner just five miles away from where the film crew was staying

and severely engaged in an armed battle with the Chinese defense force. One of *Storm on the Border's* crew members was in a panic and had accidentally knocked over an oil lamp, causing a small fire. "It was a calamity approaching with rain, fire, swords, and guns," Li exclaimed (1980, 61).

Although Li has depicted quite thoroughly the formidable violence and disasters and the representational obstacles they encountered during her Mongolian trip of the 1940s, she might have had absolutely no awareness of the calamitous repercussions that their filmmaking brought to the Mongolian community for decades afterward. I refer to a kind of "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) that was long in the making—the long-term disasters and burgeoning conflicts that arose from the degrading conditions in which life was sustained in the ethnic habitat. Filming or photographing of the Mongolian space and people by Han Chinese travelers began in the 1930s as part of the wave of northwestern frontier studies, as discussed in chapter 1. The spatial visualization of the ethnic frontiers undoubtedly attracted more people from Inner China to travel there not simply for pleasure but also for natural resource extraction, settler colonization, indigenous displacement, and gentrification—all under the name of border strengthening and state building.

The visuals exposed the Chinese to such a distant place in their country and led them to discard the notion of proximity while simultaneously reinforcing the unbridgeable (cultural and ethnic) distance. The scale of multi-ethnic China became the miniaturization of the ethnic world by violating distance and reducing the non-Han to the category of ethnic minorities. It was quite common for these (often self-claimed) frontier investigators to praise the ethnic minorities for their toughness, simplicity, and courage, which enabled them to survive in the harsh environment; however, they also criticized contemptuously how the local inhabitants had "wasted" their vast land by not cultivating or making full use of it. The Sinocentric agrarian values combined with the modernist evolutionary conception justified the Chinese intervention in the ethnic borderlands as a means to help the "primitive" to progress and become civilized. The notion of how land is made into a possession (and hence sovereign territory) has also been ethically portrayed as cultivating and interacting with the land. Therefore, the right to property would only be present to those people who have labored upon the land and used it in a particular "productive" manner.

I examine in this chapter how the Chinese state enforces its Sinocentric policy in Mongolian communities by reclaiming Chinggis Khan as a Chinese national hero. But to assert the ownership of Chinggis Khan legend is by no means the PRC's monopoly. The mythological Mongol warrior-ruler

is indeed an object for contestation in the arena of international politics and an inspiring source for worldwide filmmaking concerning the power of the environment over human culture. Within the Chinese territories, the state's attempts to transform the Mongolian ecology without considering sustainability led to the emergence of many concerned environmental films about the place. Mongolian filmmakers have to be very cautious in treating the subject of ecopolitics by not stepping into the forbidden zone of ethnopolitics.

Then how do we understand the political ecology of Inner Mongolia in China?<sup>4</sup> Other than focusing on the environmental damages caused by the state-led economic development in Inner Mongolia, the straightforward ecological approach may dig into how the Mongol and the Han Chinese interact with their living circumstances, what mechanism determines the survival and even the triumph of one species and the decline of another, which kind of political economy constrains the multiplicity of cultures and values in a given region, and what necessary conditions prevail for the continuity of such a system. Yet ecology means more than environmental problems and the conservation and preservation of nature. It could refer to an intricate system or complexity in which various entities are delicately tied to one another. The term "ecology" etymologically derives from the Greek *oikos* (house, household, dwelling place) and *logos* (word, language, reason), indicating the study of the household of the organism—that is, the relations of organic things among themselves and with their surrounding world.<sup>5</sup> In my hypothesis, ecology also refers to a complex sociocultural ecosystem that challenges us to examine the interrelationships as more than mere objects or texts, with an alertness to the changing circumstances, possible contingencies, limitations of the prescriptive top-down politics, and wisdom of the crowd.

In what way does the cinematic apparatus have a role in the ecological politics operating within the Mongolian space of the modern Chinese state? Cinema as one of the many modern technologies has brought changes to the fundamental ontological conditions of space and time that make up the density of everyday life in Inner Mongolia as well as the larger Chinese society. While the Mongolian steppes imprinted on the filmstrip of *Storm on the Border*, the two-year film production as a consumer and emitter of fossil fuels also left its carbon footprint on the Mongol land.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the transformation or even loss of certain spatiotemporal experiences that come with the accelerating pace of travel, communication, and information is an ecological problem insofar as it concerns living conditions (Virilio 2003, 2009). The politics of ecology, or ecopolitics in this con-

text, challenges and defies the state-directed description of political space contained strictly under the sovereign territorial authorities. The narrowly defined space of sovereignty—whether ideological, social, or natural—fails to capture the diversity of the ecopolitical milieu since no state apparatus can fully contain and restrain the flows of cultural, economic, political, and ecological activities.

Cinema with its perspectival projection and pictorial representation may help to divide up the geopolitical realm into particular and separate sovereign territorial states. Its cartographic dimension serves to perform the function of cognitive mapping to posit and monitor ideological perception by tying one's identity to a specific locus. Space is mapped through the narration of the film to register a proprietary cinematic gaze and to determine the coherence of figures and actions in the frame. It indicates to viewers that such a filmed world exists in space and time through its authoritative claim, which marks its presence. But its modernist reflexivity—whether epistemological or phenomenological—and its global circulation as well as fluid flows of transnational capital can also render the enclosed state borders and any restricted areas pathetically ambiguous and porous. The filmic introduction of vast spatial incongruities may also challenge the stable sense of place upon which cultural and national identity is built. How is it possible to examine the environmental potential of Chinese films about Inner Mongolia from an ecocritical standpoint? How does the construction of sounds and images shape perceptions and attitudes about the Mongolian and nonhuman worlds?

The value of location shooting over that of a film set is undoubtedly the appeal of many PRC ethnic minority films. The beauty of many ethnic moving pictures is always identical to the beauty of nature they depict. However, an interest in the beauty of nature is not equivalent to an interest in film or art. The former may direct the individual to the ultimate purpose of moral good while the latter may not necessarily perform such a role since, unlike nature, art or film usually has a purpose other than itself. The beauty of nature shot in the PRC ethnic cinema is not without purpose; indeed, it carries a strong and clear political purpose. If nature is caught in such film, it is not only transient and impermanent but also indexical in the sense that it is evacuated of any content while only indicating that something is there. It is only when nature becomes more than an illusory duplicate of the outside world that it participates in molding reality into the fabric of its representation, a reproduction in the making in which humans no longer play the commanding role. Natural landscapes represented in the film may contribute something to the natural order rather than merely

offering a substitute for it in some specific historical context, thus forming a mutual constituency of landscapes and (cinematic) narratives as well as blurring the borders between the natural and the social.

The first ethnic minority film produced after the establishment of the PRC was *The Victory of the Inner Mongolian People*, named and written with his calligraphy by Chairman Mao. During the Sino-Japanese War in the 1940s, the leftist filmmakers with the approval and support of the CCP leaders made a fiction feature about Mongolia, *Storm on the Border*. Among all the recognized minorities in China, the Mongols were the first ethnic group cinematically represented in the PRC feature film. This act tells the significance of Mongolia in modern Chinese politics and the complicated process of how the Han majority reclaimed Mongols as Chinese nationals under changing historical contexts. It was the Mongols who, among all other non-Han ethnic groups, first declared independence when the 1911 Revolution in China erupted and who constituted the first major “ethnic minority problem” to the new Chinese state, thus internationalizing China’s ethnic issue beyond its sovereign territory. Retrospectively, the Mongolian revolution was labeled “Asia’s first modern revolution” because the Mongols were the first Asians at the beginning of the twentieth century to expel their foreign rulers, the Manchu and Chinese, to pave the way for independence and reorganization of their society (Onon and Pritchatt 1989). With the Mongols’ open defiance, it would not be hard to imagine the Han-dominated Chinese cinema portraying the Mongols as the citizens of the republic since the new Chinese nation had declared itself the “Republic of Five Nationalities” (*wuzu gonghe*) after modifying or even abandoning the anti-Tartar barbarian direction of the Han-led nationalist revolution. Appropriating the Mongols for cultural-political purposes was never an exclusive Chinese business, however. The powers engaging in the politics of that region have all been involved in the ideological battles of representing the Mongols for their political interests. Since the mid-twentieth century, Chinggis (or Genghis) Khan, the most outstanding icon of the Mongols, and other nonhuman entities, such as the steppe, the desert, and the animals, including horses or camels, have been “marching triumphantly back into both regional and global politics” (Bulag 2010, 32) after the thirteenth-century world conquest of the Mongol Empire. But they are all indices or hollowed signs testifying to the existence of something and offering only their effects. Although (ideological) meanings have been projected endlessly in these films about Mongolia, this harbors potential meaninglessness, making the mere fact of existence mute speech or the returned gaze of the natural world to the cameras.

### Contestation over Chinggis Khan Legacies

The legend of Chinggis Khan constitutes a site of contestation among Chinese, Mongols, Japanese, Russians, and even Westerners for various ideological struggles and real political conflicts. The single-minded scramble for Chinggis Khan as an icon for political purposes in the modern context depletes Mongol diversity and ultimately reduces or even eliminates the expanse of the Mongols' geophysical environment. If the mission of Lacanian-Althusserian film theory is an "attempt to disengage the cinema-object from the imaginary (the ideological) and to win it for the symbolic (the real mode of production)" (Metz 1982, 3), the ideologues serving the state authorities or other political purposes intend to do the reverse, by wresting the imaging and imagination of Chinggis Khan from the symbolic and deploying it in the imaginary. The political appropriation of Chinggis Khan can be traced back to the times of Kublai Khubilai Khan (1215–94 CE), the emperor of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). Kublai built ancestral temples in the capital to worship Chinggis in order to legitimize his authority in the Mongol community (since he usurped the throne from a more legitimate heir by staging a palace coup) on the one hand and to ingratiate himself with the Chinese by emphasizing ancestor worship, a practice critical for Confucian China, on the other. The new ritual of worshipping Chinggis (in temples rather than in the traditional Mongolian yurts), which was based on Confucianism as well as Buddhism (a religion to which Kublai and his successors had converted), has since served as a direct form of sanctioning the political regime. During the seventeenth century, other than the ordinary Mongols commemorating Chinggis Khan as a folkloric figure, it was the Manchu imperial court that once again attempted to own him for political reasons: the Qing emperors presented themselves as the reincarnation of Chinggis Khan to validate their rule over Mongolia. The Qing rite of the Chinggis cult was even more Buddhist oriented because Buddhism functioned as one of the effective apparatuses found by the Qing court to tame and control the Mongols.

The political manipulation of the Chinggis cult symbol continued in the modern era when the disintegrating Qing ruling structure was threatened by the external encroachment of the imperialist powers and by the increasing strength and discontent of the Han Chinese. Facing the possible Russian infringement of the Mongolian border in the early twentieth century, the Qing court aimed to reform the habitat of the Mongols drastically with a series of new policies, including installing stronger military forces there, reforming the administrative structure, and further transplanting

more Han Chinese to convert Mongolia into a farming region. But these governing strategies that would severely undermine the Mongols' original social structure and drastically transform their ecological environment alienated Mongolia from the Manchu regime and provided an impetus for the Mongolian independence movement. Their political leaders sought help from Russia and Japan, while these two imperialist powers after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 showed entirely different attitudes toward the Mongols as well as their icon, Chinggis Khan. Russia prioritized its concern in Europe rather than in Asia and only supported the Mongols' desire to maintain their autonomy through diplomatic channels without encouraging them to sever their relations with the Qing Empire. However, Japan took a far more aggressive approach in Mongolia by supporting the Mongols' bid for independence. The different political stances of Russia and Japan toward Mongolia can also be reflected in their treatment of the Chinggis Khan myth. Having been invaded and ruled by the Mongols for almost two centuries, the Russians hungered to be accepted as an equal and civilized people rather than being associated with the backward, barbaric "Mongoloid."<sup>7</sup> Soviet Russia was even anti-Chinggis Khan because of its stance against a pan-Mongolian unification drive that might create instability in the Soviet Union's own Mongol areas, including Tuva and Buryatia (X. Liu 2006).

In contrast, Meiji Japan endeavored to create blood ties with the Mongols by reinventing Chinggis Khan as a Japanese hero, intentionally ignoring the historical fact that Kublai Khan had sent troops to invade the Japanese islands. In the Japanese mythological discourse, a thirteenth-century samurai, Minamoto Yoshitsune, went to Mongolia after being defeated by his brother and eventually became Chinggis Khan (Bulag 2010, 40; Miyawaki-Okada 2006; Fogel 2008–9). Imperialist Japan made use of the myth of race about the Altaic group (a speculative theory spread in the nineteenth century to emphasize the family connection of Turkic, Mongolic, Tungusic, Japonic, and Korean languages and civilizations)<sup>8</sup> to establish its ethnogenesis in Inner Asia. It served to denigrate the centrality of China, undercut European imperialism in Asia, and assert Japan's historical role as well as leadership in the regions. Japanese historians after the Meiji Restoration invented *tōyōshi* (Eastern history) to counter the West and to uphold the significance of Japanese history in Asia (Tanaka 1995). The construction of blood unity and organic ties into one familial race (between the colonizer and the colonized) is quite common in East Asian racial discourse. By cultivating a pan-Asian ethnic national identity in response to the oppression of Western colonial powers, Japanese ideologues and impe-

rialists tried to blend Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Mongol, Tibetan, and Manchu into one Asian collectivity to lay the foundation for their empire building and to legitimize the multiethnic nation-state of Manchukuo/Manshū-koku (1932–45).

Ironically, in a rather similar mode, to deter the Japanese all-round aggression on China in the 1930s and 1940s, Chinese intellectuals—particularly historians and archaeologists—began to weave together new narratives and ethno-genealogies of national belonging and inclusiveness through tracing the origins and roots of Han and ethnic minorities to the common ancestors to justify the racial unity of the Chinese nation. After the establishment of the PRC, although the notion of common descent from a single origin supported by the GMD was denounced, leading ethnologists like Fei Xiaotong still talked about an organically unitary yet pluralistic Chinese race, nation, and culture. Their studies were built upon a firmly bounded notion of Chinese national territories (Leibold 2011). Unitary China is only a political power buttressed by economic control and military forces, while the pluralistic nation consists of diverse races and different societies. The PRC cinematic and visual representations of the Mongols and other ethnic groups all trod the same narrow path to promote and perpetuate such political unity.

During the second GMD-CCP alliance of the late 1930s, Chinggis Khan was lauded as the hero of the Chinese nation, the defender who could unite all Chinese people into one heart to defeat the Japanese enemy. When the GMD government removed the Chinggis shrine from Ordos, which had aroused some controversies in the Mongolian community, via the communist-controlled areas to Gansu in order not to allow the shrine to fall into the hands of the advancing Japanese-Mongol forces in 1936, Mao Zedong wrote the name of the newly set-up Chinggis Khan Memorial Hall in Yan'an to welcome the shrine to pass through. In the face of the Japanese threat, Chinese nationalists of the 1930s turned Chinggis Khan into a resistance fighter and a hero of China. With the support of some pro-China Mongol politicians, the Chinese ideologues conjured up the Mongol invasion of Japan in the fourteenth century to emphasize that the Japanese were the Mongols' historical enemies and argued that Kublai Khubilai Khan, Chinggis Khan's grandson, was the earliest anti-Japanese resistance fighter (Bulag 2010, 45). The Nationalist government under the GMD promoted the assimilation policy toward the Mongols by endorsing their "Chinese" identity and affirming them as an inseparable part of the new nation, which was not particularly appealing to the Mongolian majority. In contrast, the Japanese were more sophisticated in dealing with the Mongols through the ideological appeal of pan-Asianism and the experi-

ence of integrating five major Asian nationalities into the administration of Manchukuo. In 1944, a grand Chinggis Khan temple was built in Manchukuo to express Japanese respect for the Mongols and to arouse pan-Mongolian nationalism in Outer Mongolia, where Chinggis Khan worship was banned by Soviet Russia.

The Chinese communists learned more from the Japanese than from the GMD about dealing with the Mongols and partly succeeded in rallying the Mongols against the Japanese and the Chinese Nationalists throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Mao ([1935] 1999) addressed the Mongols by calling them “the descendants of Chinggis Khan” and encouraged them to work with the CCP to wage a revolutionary war to expel the Japanese imperialists and the Chinese warlords from Mongolian territory. The Chinese socialist state’s continuous courtship with the Mongolian community manifested in the considerable publicity given to the return of Chinggis Khan’s bones in 1954 to the mausoleum at Ordos. Chinggis Khan was treasured by the CCP as a national hero, and his Mongol Empire was lauded as a Chinese dynasty to justify the Chinese rule over the Inner Mongolian community and to foster a sense of identification from both the ethnic Mongols and the Han Chinese with a multiethnic China. The PRC’s strategy of hallowing and appropriating Chinggis Khan is primarily a defensive move to justify the status quo, though the recent interpretation emphasizes his trailblazer role of globalization to set the rising China on the path to the international stage. The Mongol conquest of the European and Islamic worlds has rarely been brought up in the official Sino-nationalistic discourse. While Chinggis Khan has been disparaged for decades in the Mongolian People’s Republic (1924–92) under the sway of the Soviet Union, the postcommunist Mongolia that underwent a peaceful democratic transformation in the 1990s also began to restore the status of Chinggis as its symbol of national independence and remained unwilling to share such a legacy with neighboring China. Similar to China’s approach, contemporary Mongolia treasures Chinggis Khan for his merit of uniting the Mongol tribes within its current border rather than for his invasions and conquests (A. Wang 2016). It is the cinematic apparatuses about the legend of Chinggis Khan that explore and exploit his conquest history.

### The Conqueror and Landscape Film

Since the silent film era, the legend of Chinggis Khan has been a popular topic for filmmaking based upon different agendas. From the 1950s, cinematic depictions directly of Chinggis Khan and his empire appeared

more frequently. The Philippines, India, Pakistan, the United States, Russia, Japan, and Turkey all have their adaptation of Chinggis Khan.<sup>9</sup> Most of them are part of the adventure genre, infused with romance and engaging action sequences. Their storylines focus primarily on how the young Temujin strives hard to prevail over his opponents, forges the Mongolian alliances, and becomes the emperor and on the never-ending intrigues on the steppe. While the Western popular culture, with its racist undertone, may caricaturize Chinggis Khan as a barbaric, brutal, and unsophisticated warlord, these filmic adaptations at least depict the historical figure presiding over the largest land empire as a mighty person with cunning and skill.

While interpreting Chinggis Khan in rather different ways in their storylines, these fictional features share one commonality: the steppe landscape setting. Whether categorized as costume drama, war film, or adventure genre, all these Chinggis Khan cinematic adaptations could broadly be termed “landscape films.” A landscape is a framed nature shaped by a certain view of the camera lens or human eyes. “The form of landscape is thus first of all the form of a view, of a particular gaze that requires a frame. With that frame nature turns into culture, land into landscape” (Lefebvre 2006, xv). Sometimes more than just a backdrop, these outdoor natural settings can correlate individual humans’ mental universes to reflect the inner subjective states of the principal character in the film, thus forming the “landscapes of mind” as outward manifestations of the protagonist’s psyche (Melbye 2010). Sergei Eisenstein (1987) describes the landscape in the film as a “nonindifferent nature” that functions like a music component to express emotions or “whole cosmic conceptions,” while not confining to the psychological dimension of the character(s). But could nature captured by film resist cinematic manipulation or any imposition of allegorical meanings? In his famous essay “The Ontology of Photographic Image,” André Bazin argues rather cryptically that while all arts “are based on the presence of man, only photograph derives an advantage from his absence. Photograph affects us like a phenomenon of nature” (1967, 13). He continues to claim that, by the power of photography, “nature at last does more than imitate art: she imitates the artist” (15). With the advent of cinematographic technology, the natural landscape has revealed to us how it can become an active artist in the moving and still images of its own representation. Does this mean that nature—even if framed as a landscape by cinematic image—can dynamically produce itself and transcend its realistic model of reproduction? The objective lens has the capacity to remove the natural objects from preconceived concepts and to expose something not consciously motivated. The nature filmed or photographed is not only

rendered as if for the first time but also snatched from the mundanity and ordinariness of an unconscious dimension, interrupting habits and pre-determined ideas. Perhaps Bazin's notion of ontology might have already shared the discernment of the new materialists of the twenty-first century to celebrate the dissolution of animate-inanimate distinction and the active role of nonhuman actors, though for him photography and cinema play a unique and privileged role in bringing out such objectivity and objectness.

Russia made the first film related to Chinggis Khan in 1928. Soviet master filmmaker Vsevolod Pudovkin was dispatched to shoot *The Heir to Genghis Khan* (*Potomok Chingiz-Khana*) on location at Lake Baikal at Buriat-Mongolia, making it one of the first Soviet films publicly screened in China. When the film was released in Shanghai in 1931, its title was changed to *Storm Over Asia* (*Yaxiya fengbao* 亞細亞風暴),<sup>10</sup> and this Soviet montage film instigated Chinese interest in Russia-related cinema. Pudovkin's film was made in the currents of the new Soviet regime using modern machinery, including film, to map its huge and boundless territory in order to create a new social and spatial totality. Through cinema, a new Soviet map could be projected onto the vast, shared screen of popular imagination. Film expeditions were sent by the state to the peripheries to acquaint the center with the "real, working life of [non-Russian] peoples of our Union" (Widdis 2003, 113) as a prerequisite for achieving solid state building and for promoting the genuine equality of all peoples. Although Pudovkin's feature was not a scientific ethnographic film, it presumably shared a similar emphasis on learning about the non-Russian nationalities in the new nation with an implicit message that "all the Soviet peoples fought for revolution" (Widdis 2003, 115). *The Heir to Genghis Khan* narrates how a young Mongol named Amogolan, influenced by the Soviet Red Army, was awakened to fight the imperialist invaders of his nation. The Mongolian protagonist has been manipulated by the foreign (Anglo-American) imperialists who tried to make him the head of a puppet Mongolian regime when his amulet reveals that he might be a direct descendant of Chinggis Khan.

The movie about Mongolia in the 1920s also manifested Soviet Russia's interest in the Far East and its engagement in the Great Game in Central Asia since the British were portrayed in the film as the imperialists. However, when the silent film was released in Western Europe, not only had its title changed to *Storm Over Asia*, but the intertitles were also altered by referring to the Mongol occupying forces as anti-Bolshevik troops under the command of the renegade Russian baron. There have been arguments concerning the British reception in the 1920s of this Soviet film about

whether Pudovkin's work was pure art that could transcend national conflicts or communist propaganda aimed against the peace enjoyed by the British Empire (Stollery 2011). In the Chinese context, *Storm Over Asia* was received as an art—but an art of propaganda. The Chinese left-wing filmmakers were excited to learn the new film language—that is, the Soviet montage technique—from the works of Pudovkin and other Soviet directors, to proselytize their political ideas more effectively to the general public.<sup>11</sup> But Pudovkin's use of montage is different from Eisenstein's style, which is not meant to be a collision of images to provoke disturbing and astonishing reactions from the viewers. His montage skill depicts consistency and unity. As in *Storm Over Asia*, the opening sequence in Pudovkin's montage of open sky, desert, sandstorm, steppe, and nonhuman animals leading to the scenes of Mongolian culture and tradition, such as dances, music, and masks, are united by montage to convey the idea of a traditional community after the collapse of the Mongol Empire centuries ago. The editing integrated the grand landscape of forest, mountain, and wilderness to establish the notion that Mongolian life is at one with nature. As Pudovkin is inclined to present his hero as an individual human being rather than merely a symbol of historical forces, as in Eisenstein's films, Amogolan takes time to develop into an agent of change: from an ordinary person ignorant of politics to a hero awakened with political consciousness and ideological commitment after trials and ordeals in his life. These all became a source of inspiration to the Chinese left-wing filmmakers wanting to portray their ethnic heroes.

Unsurprisingly, Ying Yunwei's *Storm on the Border* follows the footsteps of *Storm Over Asia* quite closely—not exactly in its plot but in its celebration of the Mongolian landscapes and the positive view of the “barbaric” Tartar as well as its portrayal of strong women. The film actress Li Lili, famous for her fashionable, energetic, healthy, and sexy image popularized by *Queen of Sports* (*Tiyu Huanghou* 體育皇后, dir. Sun Yu, 1934), played the leading female Mongolian character. The first shot of Ying's film is a peaceful scene of the mausoleum of Chinggis Khan at Ejen Khoroo Banner, Yeke Juu League, with the titles on-screen indicating this is the land of Mongols. The first clearly seen human figure in ethnic costume appears only after two minutes of footage of numerous sheep, cattle, and horses grazing on the steppe and a caravan of camels crossing the desert. Like its Soviet model, *Storm on the Border* also declared that the Mongols charging across the steppes could be mobilized and converted into positive figures of the revolution and anti-imperialist struggle. Both the natural landscape and the Mongol people are plastic enough to be subjected to

human will for change. In this sense, nonhuman nature has been ascribed an agency symbolically, as some kind of “actant” or “vibrant matter” with which human beings and cultures intersect and interact,<sup>12</sup> although, in the Chinese political context, the political potentialities of the nonhuman have been harnessed by a structure of Han domination.

Not many adaptations would have the chance to shoot on location on the Mongolian steppe, but they all engaged in their environments in different ways to reveal how their images and stories were not entirely separated from what was depicted in them. One good example is the 1950 Filipino adaptation directed by Manuel Conde, who himself played Chinggis Khan. Shot in the tropical hilly landscape near Manila to conjure the imaginary vast plains, the film with a shoestring budget portrays a modest Temujin who conquers not by brute strength but by his wits and whims to prevail over his bigger and more powerful opponents. The camera made good use of the grassy hilly location to enhance depth in its battle scenes, in which limited numbers of sword fighters and horses fully occupied the frame to engage in bloody combat. Although approximating the same formula of Hollywood adventure films, Conde’s *Genghis Khan*, which was the first movie from the post-World War II Philippines to compete at the Venice International Film Festival in 1952, showed that a historical epic did not need to be a product of huge financial investment but could be a clever ideological investment in nature with good sensitivity to the environment it engaged with. Conde’s small-budget film represented how a small nation attempted to redefine itself in the power game dominated by the super nations in the postwar era.

In contrast, the Howard Hughes-produced CinemaScope widescreen epic *The Conqueror* (dir. Dick Powell, 1956), starring John Wayne and Susan Hayward, has been ranked by critics as one of the worst films of all time, and its landscape also defied itself as merely a subservient setting where Hollywood could relentlessly exploit the Eastern legend. Its outdoor scenes were shot mainly in St. George, Utah, which served as a stand-in for the Gobi Desert. The Utah Valley was downwind of a lakebed in Nevada where the Atomic Energy Commission had tested eleven nuclear weapons in the early 1950s. According to rumors, the levels of radiation were still high during the thirteen-week film shot. Worse, Hughes shipped sixty tons of the radioactive Utah dirt back to Hollywood to give retakes a sense of authenticity. After two decades, 91 of the 220 cast and crew had been diagnosed with different kinds of cancer. Forty-six died from it, including John Wayne and director Dick Powell, although there has never been conclusive evidence that their deaths were caused by the location filming. Nature in

Hollywood is often treated as both fragile and retaliatory, such as in the sci-fi film *Avatar* (dir. James Cameron, 2009). In *The Conqueror's* case, the landscape even severed itself of narrative subservience to become vengeful, perhaps for the environmental impact the extravagant production practice might have brought. The “titanic” production was a typical example of how Hollywood orientalized the American West to simulate the Asian desert and made the film as much a Western as an Eastern in the Cold War imaginary of the foreclosed China. It served as a metaphor for America's engagement in a polarized Cold War world by calling upon ancient Oriental stories to explore “subjects like good vs. bad, individual will vs. fate, and the like” (Francaviglia 2011, 266).

However, the barbaric images of Chinggis Khan and his Mongol warriors have been revamped in twenty-first-century productions to become more sensitive human figures while post-Soviet Russia is involved in a different geopolitical game with the West. Contemplating the Russian national identity in the multiethnic state in his previous movie *Prisoner of the Mountains* (*Kavkazskii plennik*, 1996), actor and director Sergei Bodrov further explores the Eurasian origin of Russian culture in *Mongol: The Rise of Genghis Khan* (2007), the first part of a planned trilogy. The post-Soviet Russian view of ethnicity and nationhood has largely been influenced by the historian and ethnographer Lev Nikolaevich Gumilev (1912–92), who radically revised Russia-Mongol historical relations of the thirteenth century in his *Old Rus and the Great Steppe* (*Drevniaia Rus i Velikaia Step*) by changing the conventional narratives of Slav versus Tartar to one of Russian and Mongol cooperation on the steppe. In symbiosis with the Mongols, who tolerated all religions, Russians could preserve Christian Orthodoxy as a source of their moral and political force. Russian nationalists embraced this idea of a symbiotic Russian-Asian civilization, which distinguished their nation from the West and supported the belief that Russia was a genuine bridge between Europe and Asia (Bassin 2016). Bodrov admits that “Gumilev had provided the intellectual/historical framework for the movie” (Eng 2018, 5). Gumilev's Eurasianist visions have become commonplace in Russian cinema in recent decades. Resonating with Gumilev's idea of “passionarnost” as the eruption of ethnogenesis, Bodrov in *Mongol* portrays the steppe as the ethnosphere where specific cosmic energy manifests. With its numerous scenes of the steppe to exhibit the otherworldly beauty of the landscape, Bodrov's film took advantage of its location shooting in Kazakhstan and Inner Mongolia to recreate the spiritual world of Tenggerism (Heavenism), the Mongol shamanism. *Mongol* mysteriously showed how Temujian won over his enemies with the help of

the Tengri (God). Temujin, as depicted by Bodrov, was an agent of cosmic radiation that empowered him to be a great world leader who founded laws and presaged the emergence of the Mongol Empire and eventually the Russian nation.

Released in the same year as *Mongol*, Japanese-Mongolian coproduction *Genghis Khan: To the Ends of the Earth and Sea* (Aoki Ōkami: *Cbi Hate Umi Tsukiru Made*, literally, “The blue wolf: To the ends of the earth and sea,” dir. Sawai Shinichiro, 2007) is preoccupied with the theme of mixed blood. While filming on location on Mongolia’s steppe and featuring many Mongolian extras, the majority of the cast and crew are made up of Japanese talent and Japanese is the film’s spoken language. In this Japanese adaptation of Morimura Seiichi’s historical fiction, Temujin and his son Jochi have been troubled by their “bastard” bloodline, thus emotionally struggling and making tremendous efforts to prove they are really from “the blood of blue wolves.” Although it is probably the only Chinggis Khan film that fully shows Temujin’s enthronement as the Khan, as most adaptations end immediately after Temujin has united the Mongol clans under his banner, the Japanese feature is more a biographical picture than a historical epic, revealing the Japanese obsession with Chinggis Khan’s racial identity as a Japanese in the Meiji myth. Intending to revamp the historical impressions of the notoriously bloodthirsty conqueror, the Japanese production portrays Temujin as a dynamic, forgiving, but emotionally torn leader who wants something more than just territorial expansion. The strong sympathy with the Mongol aggressor may echo Japan’s nostalgia for a historically misunderstood imperialist nation that had worked hard during the war for the good of its Asian neighbors. The Japanification of the Chinggis Khan story is probably implicit, but the theatrical visual style of the battle scenes reminds viewers without the difficulty of the cinematography of Kurosawa Akira’s samurai warrior films: the armored cavalry with distinctive striking colors unfolds and spreads out across the vast Mongolian landscape, leading to powerful visual impacts when the horse troops charge, with galloping horses and flying arrows sweeping across the whole soundstage. The slow-motion sequences of cavalrymen falling from their horses to symbolize an overwhelming defeat allude to the iconic moments in Kurosawa’s *Kagemusha* (*Shadow Warrior*, 1980). However, the landscape where the battle scenes are shot could be as stagey for scopical pleasure, not because nature is a purposive aesthetic object but rather because its quotidian and spontaneous manifestations resist political codification, metaphorization, and manipulation.

### Geo-Determinism and Ethnic Nature: How an Empire Is Shaped

The PRC's epic-scale films and television productions about Chinggis Khan began in the 1980s as part of the marketization of China's media industry. The two most outstanding movies were the four-hour-long *Chinggis Khan* (*Chengji sibai* 成吉思汗, 1986) by Han filmmaker Zhan Xiangchi (詹相持) and *Chinggis Khan: The Proud Son of Heaven* (*Yidaitianjiao Chengjisi bai* 一代天驕成吉思汗, aka *Genghis Khan: Warrior King*, 1997) by Mongolian husband and wife team Sainkhüü and Mails (their names appear more often as Saifu and Mailisi in sinicized transliteration). The Chinese interpretations of the Chinggis Khan legend have been invested with political agenda and ambition: the Han saw in the Mongol king and his conquest history an embodiment of empire building or nation building, a brilliant endeavor of unifying the country, and an assertion of Asian greatness and glorious accomplishments on the world stage. This ideological content is made to appeal to Han audiences. These two PRC adaptations put great emphasis on how Temujin became Chinggis Khan by unifying all the tribes, leaving aside the later Eurasian adventure. While Zhan's four-hour drama foregrounded detailed accounts of the major battles Temujin took to complete the mission of unification, Sainkhüü and Mails's *Chinggis Khan* tends to humanize the conqueror with a Bildungsroman storyline and a focus on his relationship with his mother. With the political agenda upheld highly in the two PRC films, the steppe still has a role to play not merely as a spectacular and thrilling battlefield for a wave of horsemen rushing down the hills to engage their opponents but also as a natural universe that provides a nurturing landscape or an ecological niche to generate a special character or identity.

The Han Chinese describe it as a "grassland culture" (*caoyuan wenhua* 草原文化) as part of China's cultural atlas. Named as a "culture" to suggest a kind of social construct, the stand-in term for the Mongols is a combination of geographical environment and ethnic stereotype, presumably rooted in a certain natural landscape. The PRC defines grassland culture as static and ahistorical, and it belongs not to a specific group but rather to a certain geographical space in order to emphasize the geo-body of the Chinese nation-state to retain the culture within the bounds of China (Bayar 2014). Although the CCP was fundamentally committed to the project of reshaping the human material of its backward country into an ideal socialist society by affirming the primacy of nurture over nature, the view of ethnicity as a biological-natural phenomenon has never entirely vanished—especially when handling its non-Han ethnic minorities. The officially

endorsed interpretation of Chinggis Khan in the two films may implicitly have conveyed the notion of ethno-environmentalism that naturalizes the Mongol ethnicity as a natural entity by virtue of its organic connections with a natural landscape—the steppe. The natural environment functions to essentialize and determine the ethnic Mongol. Given that Mongol ethnicity is tightly grasped as a component of “Chinese identity,” the CCP discourse of nature and nationhood incongruently allows a naturalistic view of ethnic entity to give rise to an ecology of ethnicity. Such a zone of ambivalence, however, has created room for the later Mongolian films to establish a vital connection between ethnicity and its respective ecosystem.

Despite placing the political mission of unification to the fore, the two films from the PRC failed to perceive the ecological implications of the Mongols’ rise as a world power. It could have been the climate rather than any political purpose that motivated Chinggis Khan to conquer the Eurasian continents. The regional warm and persistently wet climate conditions characterized by fifteen consecutive years of above-average moisture in Central Mongolia promoted high grassland productivity and favored the conquests of Chinggis Khan in the thirteenth-century Mongol Empire (Pederson et al. 2014). Yet the Mongol Kingdom did not aim to build a centralized polity and a sedentary civilized world, as the Chinese films projected. The steppe environment does not facilitate the concentration of power in the form of absolutist centralism, and the prairie land habitat lifestyle means the Mongolian population is perpetually on the move. The Mongolian polity was more a loosely organized confederation than it was a united and homogenous nation-state, as modern Chinese cinema imagined. The legacy of their steppe wisdom, as Joseph Fletcher argues, compelled the Mongols to wreck and plunder the urban civilization, and the nomadic tradition showed them that the best defense was dispersing rather than erecting walls or barriers. Chinggis Khan and his Mongolian warriors asserted power by deliberately and thoroughly destroying any built structure associated with settled agriculture that they despised. Mongol confiscation and devastation of agricultural land by restoring the untilled land as steppe continued in the northern part of China for more than a century after the conquest. Rather than mere aesthetics, their tactics to restructure the ecologies of rival sedentary societies were based on the preference of Mongol armies to extort rather than colonize the strange landscapes. The survival and cohesion of the Mongol Empire were predicated upon continuous wars of conquest that helped the relatively autonomous tribes to acquire wealth rather than espousing some glamorous mission to construct a steady governing state, a long-lasting agrarian economy, a settled society,

and a continuous or even everlasting civilization (Fletcher 1986). From a holistic-historical view, the largest land empire was destined to be short-lived at the very moment when it was formed.

With the political appropriation of the Mongol Empire story accumulated for several decades, twenty-first-century China has expressed new concerns about and interest in reviving and recycling the narratives of the legendary Chinggis Khan and his descendants. On the surface, the rising China in the new millennium appears to promote an aggressive spirit through the glory of the past Mongol expansion and to gain an ever-increasing ability to control and manipulate the natural world. But two key cultural products released coincidentally in 2004 in the PRC tell a different story that reveals the Chinese project's depiction of the Mongols' anxiety about the drastic changes occurring in the surroundings. The first indicator was the television series *Chenjisi Han*, which was completed in 2000 but only broadcast in 2004 after a lengthy process of official reviews and revisions. The second revelation refers to the semi-autobiographical novel *Wolf Totem* (*Lang tuteng* 狼圖騰) by Jiang Rong (the penname of Lü Jiamin), published in 2004 by the Changjiang Arts and Literature publishing house. The novel has sold over four million copies nationwide and has been translated into many languages. Both products have implications for the intimacy between ethnicity and the particular geographical environment in which it develops. *Wolf Totem* even describes how the two are integrated to form interactive and interdependent networks.

The leading ethnic Mongol-cast *Chenjisi Han* television series was based closely on *The Secret History of the Mongols*,<sup>13</sup> with its edited-out and altered dialogues and voiceover commentary. It has received an unprecedentedly enthusiastic response from the citizens of Mongolia (Eng 2018). However, the PRC censors made substantial cuts to several episodes about Mongol military aggression in Europe and the Mongols' slaughter of Muslims in order not to reinforce the Western fear of a resurgent China and not to undermine diplomatic relations with the Islamic world. Though exaggerating Chinggis Khan's admiration of Han Chinese culture and scholarly tradition, the television series places stress on the importance of external geographical influences—those of steppe and desert in particular—for the constitution of the Mongols' distinctive character. This kind of holistic belief about the intrinsic interconnection between organic life and the natural environment is not uncommon in Han-based China, especially in the ways ethnic cultures are projected as being subject to their native geographical landscape. *Wolf Totem* has gone even further to put forward an idea of the ecological totality or closed system of ethnicity and geographi-

cal landscape: the grassland, the wolves, and the Mongols symbiotically form a nexus of relations that must stand in delicate equilibrium to enable the survival of any integral part, as well as of the entire ensemble or ecosystem. The novel's notion of ethno-landscape totality helps to explicate why Mongolian military power could emerge and dominate, to sweep across the Euro-Asian continents: cunning but selfless Mongolian wolves surviving in the harsh environment of the steppes serve as the best teachers and practice partners for the Mongols in learning their warfare strategies.

Under the scrutiny of the novel appearing in the forms of fictional description and long polemic essay, Mongolia's landscape conditions its ethnic people in the most formative stage, and the Mongols are compelled through generations to adapt to the geographical conditions they inhabit. The peculiarities of climate, soil, geological structure, animals, flora, fauna, and human activity all blend into a single harmonious whole. The Mongolian uniqueness (or stereotype), material culture, economy, and spiritual life are all inextricably tied to the specific natural-environmental conditions of their respective ecological niche. For Jiang Rong, ethnic differences or diversity is precisely an outcome of the ecological dependency on the landscape. The wolf-spirited Mongolian nomads and the sheepish Han peasants are essentially products of a fundamental environmental challenge—that is, a species' adaptive response to the unique physical habitat. In the lengthy appendix to the novel, which has been left out in the English translation, the author conveys his political understanding of Chinese history through the conversation of his characters by arguing that the wolf might be the origin of the dragon, the mythical totem of Han China to symbolize cultural essence and power.<sup>14</sup> Even if the nomadic tribes from the north aggressively engaged in wars with the agrarian state in the south throughout ancient times, the peaceful eras also witnessed their interaction and intermingling. When the wolves migrated to a new environment, they were often transformed through amalgamation with other ethnic groups, and the new geographical conditions acted to reshape and change their ethnic character. Hence, in Jiang Rong's interpretation, the dragon might be the mutation of the wolf, implying that the wolf spirit lies latent in Chinese civilization.

This urging of Chinese compatriots to learn from the wolf by pursuing success regardless of the means in *Wolf Totem* results in critiques of the book's fascist undertone. Its cinematic adaptation by French filmmaker Jean-Jacques Annaud in 2015 has eliminated such ultra-nationalist statements and rendered it a typical spokesperson of environmental protection (Lo 2019). The juxtaposition of the shameless worship of supreme

power and the sensitive environmental concern in the novel seems to be incompatible and even contradictory to many of its readers. However, if we look at how German and Italian fascist thoughts have developed a tradition of associating nature with nationhood, we can understand how fascism can converge with environmentalism (Lekan 2004; Bruggemeier, Cioc, and Zeller 2005; Uekoetter 2006; Armiero 2013). While maintaining that national character is the root of economic growth, social progress, and territorial expansion, *Wolf Totem* also unconsciously reveals that the nurturing environment that can forge and mold such ethnic attributes no longer exists in China. In the novel's epilogue, the protagonist revisits the Olombulag grassland for the first time in thirty years and sadly finds that the fertile, verdant green grass has thoroughly yielded to hard, yellow sandy soil across the region after decades of inexorable economic development and resource exploitation.

#### Boundless Sand or Enclosing Fence: Modernization and Environmental Consciousness

The conspicuous Chinese concerns about the Mongolian environment displayed in these film productions date back to the early 1950s. Nevertheless, such interest in the natural environments in the ethnic borderlands was part of “Mao’s war against nature” to realize his top-down socialist utopia (Shapiro 2001). The drive for modernization and development was the dominant message in these movies. The visual media—and particularly film, with its ability to juxtapose images and sounds and its quick cuts to new sequences—arguably became the chief carrier of such a message in the Chinese socialist culture of the time. To legitimize state authority in environmental governance, resource extraction, and management, these films always have an enlightened Mongolian protagonist who either has been baptized by modern education or actively seeks help from the modernized Han regime to introduce economic development and modern management to the ethnic group and to implement industrialization for the mission of eradicating poverty and elevating the whole ethnic society. Local conflicts and resistance toward the process of primitive accumulation carried out under the name of nation building and natural resources management were usually dramatized as tensions between the progressive young generation and the traditional feudal lord, as a life-and-death battle between the patriots and the foreign (Japanese) invaders, or as an

enthraling struggle between the devoted communist cadre and the malicious GMD spy.

It was only in the mid-1990s that the more ambivalent or even reserved attitude to economic development that has brought forth profound environmental changes was tentatively allowed to appear in films. *A Mongolian Tale* (*Hei Jun Ma* 黑駿馬, 1995) is an outstanding example. Directed by the renowned Xie Fei (謝飛), the prominent figure of the “fourth-generation filmmakers,” and adapted by legendary Muslim writer Zhang Chengzhi (張承志) from his novel *Black Steed* (1993), the film tells a story of a young Mongol, Beiyinpalica, who returns from his study in the city to the idyllic steppe but discovers that his childhood sweetheart, Somiya, whom he plans to marry, is pregnant with another man’s child. While Beiyinpalica is shocked by the incident, he is even more frustrated by Somiya and his grandmother, who adopted him and brought him up after he was left by his father, for their total acceptance of this situation. While spending most of her life taking care of several left-behind children in the grassland, the grandmother laments in front of Beiyinpalica that it is so hard to be a woman, but she welcomes the birth of Somiya’s (illegitimate) baby. While the male protagonist is already used to city life and modern culture, he also admires a lifestyle and values remote from the urban civilization to revitalize his transcendent spirituality. However, communal life on the ancient grasslands could pose a severe challenge to the modern values of individual ownership, private property, and the derived social relationships that city-educated Beiyinpalica can no longer swallow. The film expresses a sentimental and somber nostalgia for the virtues of the rural grasslands, an area not yet conquered by modernity and urbanization. In its tonality and mood, *A Mongolian Tale* presents green and blue as their predominant colors. The representation of grassland and blue sky is meant to convey a defensive posture against the logic of modernity. However, the vastness of the steppe remains distanced even if the protagonist attempts to reembrace it. The sweeping landscapes and far-reaching skies of the spectacular Mongolian prairies are seen through the camera as objects of remoteness and distance, pertaining to the very cinematic mode of presentation.

This sentimental portrait of harsh but pure life on the grasslands precludes full identification with it. Close to the end, the audience learns the predicament of Somiya, who is still generous even in her difficult life in requesting that Beiyinpalica send her his children if he has any in the future, so she can nurture them and bring them up in the nature of the Mongolian grassland, beneficial to all beings. But we cannot feel full com-

passion for her. We are only reduced to a passive position like Beiyinpalica, who accepts that he will be the nominal father of Somiya's daughter and then walks away from the steppe. The impossible return to the thick inertia of the grassland also designates the futile attempt to revert to spiritual values in the age of modernity. No redemption can save the loss of spirituality, even if the scriptwriter-novelist Zhang had converted to Islam to seek his spiritual transcendence and had become a prominent dissident voice against China's ethnic inequality. The film bemoans that the disappearance of the grassland and its community is imminent and inevitable but also accepts that almost nothing can be done to change this destiny or reverse the trend. Although environmental movements began emerging in China in the 1990s, the film apparently did not gravitate toward such consciousness, let alone pick up any confrontational elements. It shows only the big changes: after twelve years when Beiyinpalica returns to the grassland, he finds that Somiya is married to a truck driver and lives in a fenced house (even though a yurt is set up next to the house). The Mongols Beiyinpalica meets no longer live a nomadic life, and Somiya works as a laborer in a local school. The nomadic lifestyle has already quietly disappeared.

It has been said that the countries of the Global South, including developing China, are too poor to be green. Environmental protection in the nations of the developing world was distrusted as a form of conservation imperialism, a conspiracy imported from the capitalist countries of the Global North to keep the South forever underdeveloped. From the perspectives of many developing nations, environmentalism represents international vested interests designed to block the progress of the poorer nations to develop their resources and become economically independent. The PRC was probably the exception in the South, rebuking the idea that ecological concern was exclusively a rich nation phenomenon and being willing to sign several international environmental agreements. Other than dealing with real environmental issues, the Chinese state's environmental protection programs could also be used to fulfill political objectives. At the same time, a clearly articulated environmentalism also exists in the local communities of China. Perhaps poor communities and individuals may not be enthusiastic about the sheer protection of wild species and natural habitats, but they do respond to ecological destruction that affects their way of life and prospects of survival. The local ethnic stakeholders who voice their concerns understand their struggle is as much environmental as it is political under the authoritarian regime.

For the Mongols, pastoralism is not only a livelihood but also a way of living that is crucial to the persistence and survival of their cultural iden-

tity. Unlike the agricultural tradition of the Han Chinese, which values intensive fortification, protection, and cultivation (or it will become a barren wasteland), as well as meticulous spatial regimentation of the land, the Mongolian sense of space cherishes a boundless landscape characterized by mobility and mutability, although the Mongols also practice seminomadic pastoralism supplemented by agriculture and hunting. In the arid steppe, constant mobility enables maximum access to a wide range of key resources that are ephemeral throughout the seasons. Indeed, not only nomads and their animals are moving in the environment; the environment itself shifts and moves since powerful wind and water erosion keeps changing the terrain. But in the reform era of post-socialist China, the nomadic Mongolian communities have to face the government-directed spatial enclosure movement on the rangelands for the sake of national progress, economic development, and scientific management in the desert-steppe environment (Williams 1996). The state subsidizes wire to the Mongolian herders to privatize and parcel the open range for intensive husbandry production and irrigated pasture management. The fence may stand for the line that marks off civilization from barbarism in the traditional Chinese mindset, and in the setting of capitalist modernization, it performs as an instrument to legitimize private ownership of the land and its resources. If the Great Wall is what defines imperial China and serves as a gate to keep the outside savage from entering, the modern fence or barbed wire in Inner Mongolia represents the efforts the modern nation-state has made to deeply integrate and include the alien borderland or unfamiliar frontier into its sovereign territory.

There has been an intensive “Greening the Desert” campaign in Inner Mongolia since the 1950s. The simple slogan promoted by the state-led development was to turn “yellow” into “green”—that is, turn sand into vegetation. In contrast, Mongolian herders see “yellow” sand as living sand, as it can still sustain vegetation, while only sand that appears white cannot do so and is considered infertile. Instead of greening every area, herders value ecological diversity as a critical dynamic of seasonal pasturage and regard sand as a necessary resource, since sand helps to regulate the body temperature of livestock while sand dunes provide shelter for the animals from excessive exposure to both wind and sun in a region with very few tree stands (Williams 1996, 678). Fence, grass, and sand are therefore part of the local ecosystem, but they have also become highly charged symbols for the Mongols to rethink themselves, their living spaces, and their relations with others.

The changing environment constitutes an arena of contestation and

compromises between what the Chinese authority aims to establish and what the local folks prefer. In short, the physical landscape has been flipped into a social construct or a medium of expression that displays the corporeal marks of power and conflict. Walls, fences, and other physical barriers originating from outside constitute a major challenge to traditional Mongol spatiality and become symbols for the Mongolian community in the struggle for ethnic expression and assertion. As Dee Mack Williams observes:

The enclosure policy effectively reconstitutes the open range in accordance with the environmental preferences and cultural biases of the Han Chinese. Regimented space replaces open horizons, dichotomous patchwork replaces a heterogeneous patch matrix, concentration of resources replaces landscape diversity, sharp boundaries replace the casual mix of grass and sand . . . [thus] reproducing a national discourse concerning the frontier that affirms fundamental assumptions about the accomplishments of the reform era, the benevolence of the Chinese state, and the superiority of Han civilization. (1996, 687)

China's modern nation building is repeating the historical process over the past four thousand years of the simplification of environments, peoples, and institutions. The expansion of agriculture characterized by small farming households and supported by a powerful central state transformed the natural environment into less complex agro-ecosystems by stripping them of biodiversity. Loss of natural biodiversity went hand in hand with a loss of human, cultural, and political diversity as Han Chinese eliminated, assimilated, or uprooted the non-Han peoples who previously had inhabited and derived sustenance from an immense variety of ecological foundations (Marks 2012).

### Connect and Divide: Two Sides of Border

The power of the line of demarcation—in both the literal and the metaphorical senses—between good and evil, inside and outside, personal and public, nature and culture, rural and urban, ethnic and national, and commercial and art has become a significant topic for many filmmakers, both Han and ethnic minority, in contemporary China—probably because the border has already inscribed itself at the center of their daily experiences.

To the ethnic people, living and being brought up and educated under PRC sovereignty, the cultural, linguistic, urban, or symbolic boundaries they encounter are not necessarily articulated in fixed and static ways as conventional geopolitical borders. Instead, they connect, disconnect, intersect, and overlap in changing, proliferating, and unpredictable ways, shaping new forms of domination, exploitation, and interaction. The operations of border crossing, border shifting, and border reinforcement have organized the everyday life of many ethnic minorities, resulting in the constitution of the border as their epistemic angle (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Ethnic subjects (forced or willing) in motion and their experiences of the border provide a significant thread to grapple with different concerns in the various films made by the PRC directors over the recent decade. Although ecopolitics may urge us to look beyond the borders of the sovereign territorial state, the nation-state adjusting and reformatting itself in the contemporary world has rendered the border, far from merely obstructing passages of people and objects, a central device for articulating identities and relationships. Many ethnic films related to environmental issues in the new century are inclined to appropriate the commercial genre with exotic ethnic themes and spectacles to convey politically sensitive contemplation. With the increasing presence of borders in the growingly complicated interethnic world of the PRC, some of these films reveal how inclusion within the borders of modernity and nationhood could be as violent as exclusion from those boundaries.

Mongolian actor-turned-director Ning Cai's comedy debut *Season of the Horse* (*Jifeng zhong de ma* 季風中的馬, 2004), in which he plays the lead role, shows how modernization and urbanization have brought problems to the nomadic Mongolian herdsmen. The beginning panning shot displays the width of a yellowish, barren, and windswept grassland circumscribed by wires. The boundless expansion of the sterile steppe by the wide shot ends with a small human figure dancing and yelling for rain amid sand land. The traditional migratory community has now been confined by the divided and fenced-off grassland policy implemented by the Chinese government. The fences don't just limit the free movement of the herdsmen and their animals but even coerce them to change their centuries-old lifestyle by settling in town since there is no longer adequate pasture for grazing livestock when the lands have been allocated to each household for their use and been separated by barbed wire as private property. The state initiatives to modernize animal husbandry production and to terminate the communal ownership of the rangelands by enclosing pastures for grazing drastically reshaped the ecological environment and

transformed the nomadic way of life. The film shows fences crisscrossing the once wide-open rangeland. However, the built structure on the grassland by no means guarantees the settled, sedentary existence of the nomads, who still relate to the areas with their own sense of vernacular space. The Mongolian herder Wurigen (played by Ning Cai) may have no sense of how to survive in the city and no skills to do so—even though migrating to an urban area seems to be the only option left for him and his family. His dignity won't let him sell yogurt by the roadside as advised by others. He cannot give up the traditional mode of life of which he has been proud, nor can he sell his loyal old horse that represents his good old days and symbolizes the glorious legacies of the Mongols. But his cultural and ethnic pride is useless in the face of the family's financial pressures, the encroachment of economic development, and the continuing desertification of the steppes. Meanwhile, Wurigen is consistently urged by his wife to sell the horse in order to cover their son's school fees, thus cutting off any possible return to the traditional way of life.

Under the pressing conditions of modern life, the old must sacrifice themselves to secure a better future for the next generation. The new economic realities imposed by a state intent upon modernization have threatened the integrity of the local inhabitants. The film blames no particular agency for the devastating conversion of the herdsman's life. Instead, the story implies—largely in comic mode—that the brutal economic reality and socioecological transformation disregard any human and environmental concerns that may get in the way. Ordinary ethnic people, like all Han citizens in China, can only adjust to such a maelstrom of changes. In the end, Wurigen, in modern clothing instead of the Mongolian robe he has worn most of his life, accompanies his son to move to the city. His assimilation into the dominant urban culture is represented in the act of his border crossing from the steppe to the city, paralleling his ethnic identity radically altered by the process of forced relocation and loss of control over natural resources. The final scene shows the released white horse strolling alone on the freeway, where a long line of trucks are driving toward the barren grassland, accomplishing integration into the new environment.

While the fifth-generation director Tian Zhuangzhuang's pioneering ethnic minority works, such as *On the Hunting Ground* (*Liechang zhasa* 獵場札撒, 1985) and *The Horse Thief* (*Dao Ma Zei* 盜馬賊, 1986), might have set some unprecedented examples for Han filmmakers to handle the ethnic topics in a way that deviates from the official line, the early twenty-first-century productions by the award-winning Han director Wang Quan'an (王全安) provide some ironic twists and reversals to Tian's avant-garde act.

In resonance with the Root-Searching Movement, Tian's films of the mid-1980s reimagine the ethnic minorities as noble savages or as a source of rejuvenation for a failed nation. Their exoticized absolute differences, in terms of their primitive customs, religious rituals, and even incomprehensible languages, function as the cradle of inspiration for the corrupted Chinese majority to picture a different world and a different culture, without the presence of the CCP and its enlightenment. While the fifth-generation filmmakers have been preoccupied with the national allegory genre at the early stage of economic reform, the Han Chinese directors of minority cinema in the twenty-first century, such as Wang Quan'an, have a stronger feeling about the homogenizing power of the market economy and have begun to see the lack of validity in the utter differentiation between the Han and the ethnic minorities in such circumstance, although stereotypes and mythification of the ethnic characters are now mingled with some sense of redemption. But no longer following the pleasure-frustrating presentation style of Tian's minority films, Wang's *Tuya's Marriage* (*Tuya de hunshi* 圖雅的婚事, 2006) is more market conscious while ambiguously revealing some structural inequalities in the interethnic relationships. It is a transgressive story about a Mongolian woman, Tuya, who plans to remarry on the condition that her new husband will take care of her disabled ex-husband and two children. Crisscrossing the morality-immorality border, the story involves a subversive reversal of the husband-wife roles (a strong woman with a dependent man) and the prohibition into some obscene imperative against the patriarchal family morality (a female simultaneously having two male mates).<sup>15</sup> The female protagonist's home is the remaining household in the desertifying steppe, and her nomadic family also seems doomed to collapse if she remarries an urban dweller. In this sense, home/family for Tuya is a space conceived in terms of multiple trajectories, which are under construction. Place consciousness or place attachment critical to the Mongols for their construction of cultural identity is then contested by an alternative understanding of place as a provisional, open-ended construct rather than an immutable geographic foundation or structure that could be affixed by wall or barrier.

The rule brought by the logic of economic modernity is now experienced as new freedom by the female protagonist. She can have the autonomy to choose a different life with a different partner to fulfill her desires, even if it may only be a forced choice. While conforming to the old impersonating practice of casting a Han actress (Yu Nan) to play the Mongolian character and using conventional Putonghua dialogue in the ethnic minority genre, Wang turns the usual Han portrayal on its head by radically

demonizing them. The two Han Chinese wives married to the Mongolian men in the film are depicted as vulgar money-oriented folks who abandoned their husbands because their male partners failed to satisfy their materialistic lifestyle. Although both women do not diegetically appear in the film, their values and influences already permeate and corrupt the world inhabited by the Mongols. The Han women are the people spoken of but not seen in the film. Rather than in visible shape and form, the Han ubiquitous presence incarnates in the discursive embodiment found in cultural codes and in juridical practice. The film straightforwardly brings out what has allegedly been repressed in traditional ethnic minority films: the Han characters relentlessly bully and exploit the ethnic groups even though the Han are ostensibly there to serve and lead the non-Han out of backwardness and poverty.

### The Mongol as a Becoming

Even if the nomadic Mongols decide to come to terms with the sedentary urban life, frustrations, obstacles, and disillusionments, if not revelations, await them. Mongolian director Hasichaolu's (Haas Chaolu) *Urtin Duu* (*Long Tune/Chang Diao* 長調, 2007) articulates the intricate relations between local and national/global places by emplacing, if not displacing, the Mongolian couple in the big city from the beginning. In a reverse fashion, it is now the Mongolian people who adventure into the site of the border—the city—articulating the routes of passage and demarcating dangerous, forbidden zones. Qiqige, a Mongolian *urtin duu* (long tune) singer, goes to Beijing to perform her art with her veterinarian husband, Batu, probably because of the current Chinese fashion for “primordial” voices (which is called *yuan shengtai*, literally, “original ecology” singing or music, referring to cultural authenticity). But soon she loses her voice after being traumatized by the sudden death of her husband from a car accident. UNESCO has proclaimed *urtin duu* an intangible cultural heritage, and its performances and compositions are closely linked to the pastoral way of life of the Mongolian nomads on their grasslands. On the surface, the film calls for a return to the homeland and lays the blame on the external forces that bring negative impacts to traditional life and even makes the lyrical chant, *urtin duu* (a significant symbol of the Mongol culture), disappear, symbolized by Qiqige losing her voice. The logic is that if her husband had stayed in Inner Mongolia to take care of the animals, he would not have worked in a horse-racing club in Beijing, not have engaged in a fight with Qiqige about releasing a Mongolian horse there, and not have been killed by a car.

Yet the explanations of the external factors (such as modernization, commercialization, or even the Chinese rule) are not able to deal with the internal transformation of the artistic styles of *urtin duu*. If *urtin duu* is a live art and if Mongol culture is not dead, it will be continuously undergoing changes and interacting with external forces. External challenges hence can also be considered as an internal challenge, constituting an inherent impossibility or obstacle yet to realize itself fully. However, the obstacle turns into a driving force for its inherent evolution and transformation. The externality functions to deconstruct the illusory, self-contented, and self-enclosed totality. It is only when Qiqige is displaced in an alien environment, has lost her husband, has lost her voice, and has been exposed to parodic abuse of long tunes or vulgar pop music (by the Han truck driver who gives her a ride on the freeway as well as by the young girl who has tried to learn singing from her) that the drive for her to find a different way to sing emerges—that is to say, to sing with one's heart, not one's throat. Although the contrast between the city and countryside is conspicuous in the film, the home place to which the female protagonist returns is not the idyllic green grassland imagined as a place of paradisiacal abundance that audiences generally expect from Inner Mongolia but rather a desolate, massive, and sandy desert area (the film is shot on location in Alxa League). Returning to the arid barren desert home is by no means a guarantee of a promising new beginning, but the desert functions as the topographical and iconographic border of difference. It is the real and imagined border-scape that affirms Mongolia's distinctiveness from Han China. Although concerted efforts have been made by the Chinese to incorporate the desert into the discourse of multiethnic China, not as a foreign but rather as a domestic territory, its geographical and ecological otherness continues to stand as a unique ethnic and cultural significance. The desert landscape becomes an important ideological power in the film to refashion Mongolian subjectivity. From an ecological perspective, a desert is a place where the absolute value of technological and economic progress is challenged (no signal for the cell phone; the motor vehicle is broken down in the vast desert) and where priority to private ownership has to give way to a shared, communal belonging. For instance, Qiqige takes a long camel trip across the desert to deliver her baby cradle to a neighbor with a newborn; the village chief shares his mother's camel's milk to feed Qiqige's calf. It is also an exemplary landscape that actively participates in the identity (re)formation of individuals and nationality.

While Mongolian nomad culture and its *urtin duu* as an intangible cultural heritage are facing possible elimination due to social progress, the film shows that it is the harsh milieu that generates the soul of the com-

munity, its art form, suggesting *urtin duu* and other Mongolian cultures are not necessarily a vanishing tradition to be conserved and protected but rather a dynamic force that could regenerate and change to survive. Unlike other Mongolian films lamenting the loss of fertile grassland that has become desertified, Haas Chaolu's *Urtin Duu* offers a sheer desert look of Inner Mongolia throughout the film (until the end of the film, where the Batu specter on horseback disappears on the desert horizon, which is gradually turning green). The desert in the film is more than a setting to be represented as a historically, culturally, and aesthetically valuable landscape of the Mongols and a heterotopic alternative to the general stigma of being regarded as the worst and worthless topographical adversary. In the film narrative, the desert is the significant medium for the female Mongolian protagonist to go through mourning and self-regeneration, while the sand land as an ideological rhetoric could be used to reinforce or subvert notions of nationality, nationalism, or nation building. *Urtin Duu* ambivalently strides on the thin borderlines between life and death (the Batu specter keeps recurring in the film), human and animal (strong identification of the human characters with their animals, and both humans and animals in a similar situation of losing their loved ones), desert landscape and the other spaces, to discursively construct a new ethnic subjectivity that is not necessarily Han, masculine, or modern. Close to the end of the film, Qiqige regains her voice when the situation urgently requires her to sing to encourage the mother camel to continuously provide milk to her adopted calf. As her voiceover comments, though, the regained voice is not necessarily something sweet to listen to.

While the female protagonist is watching the traditional camel race in the desert, the scene is montaged spatially to Chinggis Khan's all-cavalry army raiding the steppe by seemingly wiping away the historical separation of the two worlds (figs. 3.1 and 3.2). What is the implication of this blending of but not erasing of the boundaries from the present slow movements of camels to the blitzing raiders' blast of the glorious Mongol Empire? While the general use of montage focuses on the dimension of time, Haas Chaolu aligns the two realities spatially within a moving sequence. Borders between the two different worlds in silhouette have not been erased. Rather, in the montage sequence they retain their separate identities instead of being merged into a single space. Unlike the avant-garde style of juxtaposing radically different realities within a single image or the Hollywood compositing to glue different images into a seamless illusory unity, the different worlds of camel race and cavalry charge in *Urtin Duu* can clash semantically to generate different kinds of meanings and

emotional effects. Given that the Mongols are labeled as the descendants of Chinggis Khan, the allusion to his warriors could be read as a (clichéd) nostalgic longing (from the perspective of the female protagonist) for her own and the ethnic revival. However, such a montage sequence does not necessarily perform its associative ability to link shots seamlessly. It creates an unbridgeable gap between shots.

Instead of generating an organic whole concerning the narrative sequence of the film, the montage of the camel race and cavalry charge interrupts the chain of images by inserting an indeterminable disjunction in their relations. The combination of the two separated shots is somewhat like the “any-space-whatever,” to which Deleuze refers in his *Cinema 2*; it evokes a disruptive interval to disconnect spaces: “Visual framing is now defined . . . by the invention of a point of view which disconnects the sides, or establishes a void between them, in such a way as to extract a pure space, an any-space-whatever” (1989, 251). The striking effect of such a montage sequence is that there is no clear indication of what one should feel in accordance with the rules of a response or an action. Should one be proud of the glamor of the ancient Mongol Empire? If the viewer happens to be an ethnic Mongol, will they be ashamed of their current camel-slow society compared with the speedy kingdom their ancestors have created or feel encouraged as the camel symbolizes their survival in the harsh environment even though their horse empire is long gone? The montage method here constitutes an interstice that disturbs the linear and chronological movement of the images, rendering the audience immobilized, wavering between the virtuality of the past and the indeterminacy of the future. While the continuity of Chinggis Khan’s legacy might have been questioned as the indiscernible border or frontier is rendered visible, the film also implies that the two different images could be transformed dialectically into a new identity.

Such fragmentation of Chinggis Khan (without using him as an encompassing whole to affirm the historical continuity of the Mongol community) is also found in a scene of *Season of the Horse*, in which a Mongolian artist who paints Chinggis Khan memorabilia for a living uses the crest-fallen and beaten-up Wurigen as a model by dressing him up with armor and posing him on the white horse. The so-called descendant of Chinggis Khan has been severely ridiculed in the film. The unbridgeable gap between the past and the present generates the Mongolian subjects as a force of “becoming-other.” Indeed, the current situation or landscape faced by the Mongols in the PRC, as these films depict, is a *becoming* rather than a subsistent actuality and being. Disconnecting the link with the past glo-



Fig. 3.1. Camel race. Screenshot from *Urtin Duu*.



Fig. 3.2: Cavalry charge. Screenshot from *Urtin Duu*.

ries and fragmenting the imposed image of Chinggis Khan may challenge those attempts to paint their nature in terms congenial to political longing.

The political struggle over ecology takes place on the borderlines, while the practice of Chinese governmentality is about transforming both the ethnic populations and the borderlands to its desired ends. Engaging in the construction of Mongolian ethnic identity and the demarcation of their lands for various purposes by the state and the mainstream society in governmental, disciplinary, exotic, or romantic modes, Mongolian filmmakers oscillate in the real and symbolic borderscapes by putting forth their modern sensibility to transcend the ethnic stereotypes and reflecting on their cultural heritage. While the problem of ecological politics cannot be reduced to an issue of geopolitical boundaries, the immediate threats brought by the state-led economic development might have further delimited the Mongols to their own borders and enclave. The ethnic defense against the exogenous influences has forced the local inhabitants to dangerously turn their community and identity into some fixed and enclosed entity. It would be alarming to uphold the belief that native Mongols are “naturally” predisposed to a nomadic herding life, although they do not have to make themselves into “productive” members of society through their labors in the city. Ethnic populations as well as particular individuals are not given but rather are created. The process of creating particular individuals through certain activities cannot be divorced from the impact of these activities on the lands that are transformed into demarcated territories.

Ecopolitics is never just about questions of porous or permeable geopolitical borders, although it urges people to think beyond sovereign territorial boundaries. It is more about the human practices at work that construct those borders and the peoples, nonhuman species, and lands within and outside them. Not just the borderlines between Han and non-Han, between human and nature, between urban and rural, but also those that set apart the private from the communal or that divide the reach of sovereign state institutions and the beyond—that is, the state of nature. The films discussed here have problematized the model of clear-cut borderlines by depicting the changes from the old hierarchical order of domination by the sovereign state to the more complicated and scary networks of control—not only the capitalist logic that may supersede the state governmental power but also the invisible wall or fence constructed in one's community, family, and social relation that may collaborate to bind and constrain. Although the Beijing government tries very hard to establish a powerful state in the global age, ecopolitics does not entirely follow the

sovereign territorial state structure of politics. Rather than serving as a sheer manipulative object upon which meaning is imposed, nature plays an active role in the films discussed as a localized subject working to create meaning. As the films on natural reality or ecosystem reveal to us, it is only with things outside ourselves and things that stand freely of the human capacity to impose an order on them that we can build dynamic and meaningful relationships.



## Ecology of Fear

### *Cinematic Surveillance and Biopolitical Governance of Islam*

Islam as a religion and Islam as an ethnic category have been linked as a conjoined entity in the Chinese discursive formation of ethnicity. Of the PRC's fifty-five officially recognized minority peoples, about ten groups are predominantly Muslim (Hui, Uyghur, Kazakh, Dongxiang, Kyrgyz, Salar, Tajik, Uzbek, Bonan, and Tatar). They live primarily in Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia, known as the "Quran Belt" of China. There are more than 20 million ethnic Muslims in China, making up about 16 percent of the total ethnic population and ranging from the Uyghurs of Xinjiang, who speak a Turkic language, to the sinicized Hui groups found in almost every city and province. Islam has been regarded by the Chinese regime as a threatening alien, and the objective of its governance is to contain and weaken the religious morale of the ethnic populations by creating an immersive ambiance of dread and fear.<sup>1</sup> The state's anticipation of the Muslim threat is operated under the logic of fear to legitimize biopolitical control, coercive acculturation, surveillance, and necessary oppression as preemptive tactics. As China's largest province, occupying one-sixth of its land area, the Uyghur Xinjiang is also a huge mineral-rich region crisscrossed with key trade routes; it is home to China's nuclear test site and has the nation's largest oil and natural gas reserves as well as other strategic resources. The region serves as a significant piece in the complete puzzle of multiethnic China. Yet, for generations, it is a large chunk that has remained outside and untamable in the sense that its protruding frays

and unassimilable differences have not yet been successfully leveled out and converted into an integral part of the national totality. The Belt and Road Initiative repositions Xinjiang as the strategic region for the trans-continental project and further elevates the region as Beijing's top security concern. The state-led modernization brought structural transformation to Xinjiang's ecology and society while simultaneously contributing to an environment that is hostile to Islamic allegiance, cultural heritage, language, and customs.

The Muslim faith, which stands out as a distinct identity and culture from Han-based China, becomes a target to be feared, tamed, and sinicized. While discussing Islam is taboo in the PRC media and the representation of Islam has been monopolized by the state, the Chinese media has been fluctuating in its depiction of the Islamic ethnic groups and is struggling to offer any alternative discourse about Muslims. The Hui Muslims' short films mainly circulating online, however, were the rare exception that directly asserts the Islamic faith and its religious rituals. Due to the principle of ethnic solidarity, the Chinese regime prohibits nationals from instigating ethnic hatred and disparaging ethnic customs;<sup>2</sup> hence, the state media become the dominant source to represent the ethnic groups—the Muslims in particular—for Chinese citizens. To avoid trouble, mainstream media producers or filmmakers tend to follow the state ethnic policy and usually fail to provide any different angles on their portrayal of Islam.

Such an attitude is revealed in the way montage in ethnic films is approached by Chinese filmmakers, who tend to edit or weave the disparate ethnic elements together in a seemingly continuous, coherent nationalist manner. It is Kuleshov and Pudovkin's montage of relational continuity editing, rather than Vertov and Eisenstein's dialectical method of emotional shock, that has won the favor of PRC filmmakers in a highly censored environment. Montage, in short, does not necessarily generate greater realism or technical perfection, but it does make ethnic cinema a medium of conceptual thought. When Jean-Luc Godard bluntly asserts that cinema is a montage,<sup>3</sup> he fundamentally means it as a metaphor that moments of history can be resurrected through the image making of the cinematograph. Cinema serves as a privileged visual witness that offers a glimpse of history. Such a constitutive link between cinema and history, in Giorgio Agamben's understanding, involves a history that has to do with salvation (2014, 25–26). The salvation role of montage cinema here is understood as more than just how cinema was grasped in the context of the nineteenth century as a powerful eye- and mind-opening vision machine capable of revealing hitherto imperceptible physical realities. Montage

designates the relationships between things, and through it people can see relationships with themselves in the manner that conjunction is found in the clash of incongruous or even antagonistic images without ever seeking a synthetic unity or reconciliation, revealing the order of disorder in the disorienting modern world. The power of montage for salvation is precisely to rescue cinema from its surrender to the spectacle with historical amnesia by redeeming it with forgotten histories and at the same time dismantling illusions of progress.

In this chapter, I argue China's cinematic representations of Islam could be understood as a "montage" in the broadest sense that the endeavors to cement and connect the differences for the sake of totality have left out pieces of the past from history that are meant to be rescued.<sup>4</sup> The cinematic production in Xinjiang is contextualized against the history of how the CCP introduced socialist modernization with the operation of Bingtuan, the militia organization performing surveillance over the non-Han Muslim communities in the region. While the Han gaze on the Xinjiang people was cultivated by the combination of biopolitical governing and visual craving for the ethnic exotic, the reform era of the 1980s–1990s drew Uyghur youngsters closer to the PRC mainstream values and tastes through the commercial flicks by Sibe filmmaker Guang Chunlan. I also analyze certain contemporary productions by Uyghur directors with a primal focus on Saipulla Mutalip's documentary via Agamben's concept of repetition and stoppage. In the final part, Hui cinematic features and shorts are examined to dissect how the subtle fabric of the unassimilable Muslim identity and culture generates alienation in the Han-dominated nation.

### Cinemas in Xinjiang under (Post-)Socialist Modernity

The first PRC drama feature film about Muslim Xinjiang, *Ha Sen and Jia Mila* (*Ha Sen yu Jia Mila* 哈森與加米拉, dir. Wu Yonggang 吳永剛, 1955), was scripted by a military writer, Wang Yuhu (王玉胡), who went to Xinjiang with the People's Liberation Army in the early 1950s. Having served as the secretary of the legendary general Wang Zhen (王震)<sup>5</sup> in Xinjiang for a short period, Wang Yuhu developed his scriptwriting career to finish several Xinjiang films, including *Gobi* (*Shamoli de zhandou* 沙漠裏的戰鬥, dir. Tang Xiaodan 湯曉丹, 1956), *Victory in Oasis* (*Lvzhou kaige* 綠洲凱歌, dir. Zhao Ming 趙明 and Chen Gang 陳崗, 1959), *Desert into Oasis* (*Huangsha lulang* 黃沙綠浪, dir. Jiang Yusheng 江雨聲, 1965), and *Effendi* (A Fan Ti 阿凡提, dir. Xiao Lang 肖朗, 1980). While these films of the

1950s and 1960s function to consolidate ethnic unity and bridge the great difference between Han China and the peripheral ethnic Xinjiang, they also aim to shape the ethnic community as well as the larger Chinese society by dividing the people into the dichotomous categories of new socialist subject and the class enemies.<sup>6</sup> In the logic of montage, diverse elements of ethnic minorities and Han China are juxtaposed and sutured together to form a national-socialist whole by superimposing the discourses of class struggle and revolutionary movement on the ethnic groups. More often, a new, progressive, and rebellious ethnic female character is created in these Xinjiang films to embody the vitality of new national-socialist subjectivity, in contrast to the traditional, conservative, and hierarchical (Muslim) male ethnic collective resisting any change. While sexual equality is the central tenet of the socialist revolution, the stories pit the ethnic Muslim women's historical and social status as their male counterparts' subordinates against the advocacy of dynamic sexual politics concerning cultural and political transformation.

For the revolutionary cause and nation-building project, the Uyghur woman who works in the commune in *Victory in Oasis*, for example, divorces her smuggler husband and defies her father-in-law, who supports the counterrevolutionary, to ascertain her autonomy and prove her loyalty to the CCP. Another Uyghur female commune worker in *Desert into Oasis* sees both the harsh natural environment and the malicious class enemies as the same obstacle to overcome in order to achieve the state-led agricultural campaign. I call such political endeavor "montage" because it represents the primal emphasis on a theme that serves as the only driving force behind the narratives of these Xinjiang films in that historical period. These works are structured not so much by the character-centered causality of the classical narrative but by political themes, concepts, or slogans presented in forms accessible to the broad masses.

Although the Chinese filmmakers of the 1950s generally demystified the inscrutable Soviet montage theory and practice of the 1920s by reducing montage to film editing,<sup>7</sup> montage in ethnic films meant more than the arrangement of individual, fragmented pieces into a sequential, meaningful whole in a diegetic sense. They tended to embrace Pudovkin's somewhat didactic but practical montage method, in which a scenario is broken down into scenes, sequences, and camera setups to provide shots from certain angles, thus grasping montage as some formulaic filmmaking procedure. In contrast, Eisenstein's eccentric approach to montage was rather pejoratively called "jugglery montage" (*zashua mengtaiqi* 雜耍蒙太奇), a Chinese term used to refer to "montage of attractions" (1974). In

adherence to the political objectives and ethnic policy, montage in these Chinese films is a mighty means for offering alternative constructions of space and time (barbaric ethnic borderlands turned into a modernized socialist world) and creative remolding of human character and nature (the emergence of new ethnic women and the transformation of desert into green farmland). The superimposition of revolution discourse and modern socialist values into Xinjiang ethnic cinema, however, could be understood as an Eisenstein-styled montage of collision or attraction, which functions as a shocking affective register aimed at enabling viewers to perceive the final ideological conclusion.

Free choice of love, voluntary participation on the communist side, and willingness to modernize traditional belief and culture, including ethnic music, as parts of the state-initiated socialist-secularization campaign to be emancipated from the feudalist past and religious practice become the criteria distinguishing a good ethnic from a bad Muslim in the Xinjiang films, such as *Anarkhan* (*Anaerhan* 阿娜爾罕, dir. Li Enjie 李恩杰, 1962) and *Visitors on the Icy Mountain* (*Bingshan shang de laike* 冰山上的來客, dir. Zhao Xinshui 趙心水, 1963). The concepts of socialist revolution and the cultures of modernity are arbitrarily selected elements independent of the story's action, but they are inserted into the films to ideologically influence the newly liberated people. The montaged or superimposed ideas manifested through moving images turned the ethnic space into a laboratory where perception and ideological awareness could be shaped decisively. These filmic productions collaborated to construct a biopolitical apparatus that was part of the structural reality under which some human lives (i.e., those of the proletarian class) were deemed more important than others. Through such a mechanism, the state strives to create new socialist citizens best suited to fulfilling the utopian aspiration of a socialist nation by excluding some living beings from the projected ideal world.

Over the years, the state authorities have continued to redefine Xinjiang in visual terms with continuous experimentation and ad hoc adjustment. Tianshan Film Production Studio was founded at Urumqi in 1959, specializing not only in producing films but also in translating and dubbing film dialogues from Chinese to Uyghur and back.<sup>8</sup> Emphasizing the principle of ethnic equality, the new Chinese state claimed to be doing the Uyghur community a big favor by translating Chinese-language films into a Uyghur edition. The CCP followed the political model of the Soviet Union not to Romanize the written language of the Arabic-scripted Uyghur in order not to strengthen pan-Turkic relations.<sup>9</sup> However, after the bitter Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s, the Chinese authorities began to develop a new

Uyghur alphabet script based on the pinyin system to supplant the Arabic script in order to make the minority written language different from that in Soviet Central Asia. Such a Uyghur New Script was pushed into official usage for years until the post-Mao period of the 1980s, when the Arabic script was reinstated (Janbaz, Saleh, and Duval 2006). Undeniably, during the 1950s and 1960s, China poured in a large number of resources to translate Uyghur materials into Chinese as well as to render Chinese and other foreign languages into Uyghur. A group of Uyghur-Chinese translators has emerged because of government investment (Abuela 2012).

The very name of the region, Xinjiang (literally, “new territory” or “new frontier” in Chinese), was given by the Manchu rulers of Beijing after they conquered the area in the late 1750s and converted it into a province in 1884. The Chinese communist government since 1949 has been insistently claiming that there is a long history of Chinese rule there, dating back two millennia (since the Han dynasty, 206 BCE–220 CE). However, the local Turkic people are generally not convinced, and they strongly uphold the view that the region has been their ancestral homeland from deep antiquity down to the most recent times until China invaded and occupied it. The singular and linear historical discourse of both the Chinese regime and the Uyghurs would be severely challenged by Foucault’s notion of genealogy, which accounts for the constitution of knowledge and discourses rather than focusing on a transcendental reference upon which all events run in its empty sameness throughout the course of history. Undeniably, Xinjiang throughout history has been pulled and shaped in different directions by external gravitational forces to create something like powerful centrifugal tendencies. The Far East scholar Owen Lattimore has called Xinjiang “the pivot of Asia,” given its peculiar position on the so-called Silk Road at the junction of different civilizations (Lattimore 1950).<sup>10</sup> The region acts as a cushion, a buffer, and a zone of transition among the different outside forces, none of which could entirely determine its essential character. Yet contemporary China’s rapid development has more than ever succeeded in integrating the remote and huge Xinjiang into its modernization and nation-building orbit, although it can be seen as part of a larger process of globalization since China itself is becoming increasingly engaged with the global economy. However, the revival of Islam in Central Asia and the world and the establishment of Turkic sovereign states in the formerly Soviet-ruled sector (such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan) also offer alternative imaginaries to the Uyghurs in Xinjiang for counteracting the assimilation and global integration model China is promoting (Starr 2004, 3–24).

## Guang Chunlan and Her Modernized Uyghur Characters

It should be noted that China's assimilation policy has been effective in the Uyghur community for a while, especially during the Deng Xiaoping reform era after the Cultural Revolution. Harsh treatment of religious practices was tentatively lifted away, leading to flourishing cultural and religious revivals. The post-Mao regime seemed to change strategy in its ethnic governance from direct repressive coercion to economic incentive, if not a continuity of economic colonization, through the unbridled homogenizing power of economic modernization. The promotion of a happy future built upon material wealth was now more successfully implemented by state-led development than by the sheer socialist slogans. In addition, good diplomatic relations with Muslim nations were significant to China's rebuilding of its economy after the Cultural Revolution. Some movies produced in Xinjiang during that period appeared to serve such purposes well.

In the 1980s and early 1990s—a brief period of new freedom for Uyghurs caused by market liberalization—the leading and most prolific Xinjiang-based filmmaker was Guang Chunlan (廣春蘭), a female director of the Xibo or Sibe (錫伯) ethnic group. Unlike other filmmakers, who mostly came from other areas and temporarily stayed in Xinjiang only to complete their cinematic projects, Guang was born and grew up in Ili in northwestern Xinjiang, then studied film directing at the Beijing Film Academy. Most of the Putonghua-dubbed films she made for Tianshan Film Production Studio are light comedies and musicals, which may function as a dose of distraction or anesthetization from the waves of turmoil and avarice brought by economic development. They were well received not only domestically but also in many Muslim countries, such as Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Algeria, and Tunisia, effectively showcasing the PRC as a robust multiethnic and multireligious nation-state (Y. Wu 2017, 94). Neither a Muslim nor a Uyghur speaker, Guang was able to earn the trust and support of the local Uyghur people in Xinjiang probably because her film projects emphasized her care and respect for the ethnic religion, culture, and community.<sup>11</sup>

In close collaboration with Uyghur, Kazakh, and Han crew members from the Tianshan Studio, Guang's features focused on humor, liveliness, a cheerful mood, and romantic or family relationships. On the surface, little attention was paid to the political message of ethnic solidarity. Instead, Guang's films highlight the dramas that emerged from the new liberty triggered by the market economy and how social transformation in the coun-

tryside was reflected in the local community. In Guang's popular musical films, such as *The Girl Who Wants to Dance* (*Budangyanyuan de guniang* 不當演員的姑娘, 1983), *Mai's Love* (*Maimaiti waichuan* [Mehmet] 買買提外傳, 1987), and *Crazy Dancers* (*Xibu kuangwu* 西部狂舞, 1988), and romantic comedies, such as *An Actress in Drag* (*Nanzihanwuting de nvmingxing* 男子漢舞廳的女明星, 1990), *Strive for Love* (*Qiu'aibiedongdui* 求愛別動隊, 1992), and *The Hot Youth* (*Guntang de qingchun* 滾燙的青春, 1993), the bombardment of music, songs, dances, body movements, and comic senses by way of the acceleration associated with economic development and urbanization may have overwhelmed the urban dwelling audiences under the maelstrom of marketization. Most of Guang's works can be loosely categorized as "youth films," though such a genre is hard to define. They are all about positively and joyfully representing Uyghur ethnic young people, who have usually been placed in sites such as performing arts schools, dance halls, fashion show venues, restaurants with a dance floor, and theaters. Their depiction reinforces the stereotypical images that they are sometimes funny and sometimes happy singing and dancing ethnic folks; however, it also creates a new type of ethnic screen hero and heroine dressed in modern suits, attached to an urban setting and longing for upward mobility.

Unlike later Xinjiang films, as required by the different political agendas of the 1990s, Guang's films did not put too much emphasis on regional politics as part of the national grand development into the film narratives but rather featured comedic elements and performance as the driving force of the story. They suggest a change of body control through a different kind of affective economy. Guang's cinema became an effective management of the new mobility of the Uyghur younger generation, making their experiences of the rapidly modernizing urban world adaptable, beginning from the 1980s. As part of the governing dispositif, the cinema of Xinjiang constitutes meaning and shapes experience by reorienting its audience and generating affect to accommodate changing social needs. These films can be considered an integral part of the policy incentivizing voluntary assimilation into a Han-dominant mainstream society, which is framed as opportunities to succeed for the ethnic minority in the modernizing environment. At the same time, all these ethnic productions are made to target the mainstream Chinese market, and they confidently assert that Uyghurs are ready for social change. In this sense, Guang's comedies can be understood as a means that connects and blurs the line between diegetic and extra-diegetic, between the surface of the screen and its surroundings, and between the marginal and the core, transforming the traditional and inscrutable ethnic community into a mutable, secular, upscale, and oneiric

field of attraction. The cinematic montage of this period is more or less a parataxis, which puts the ethnic minority beside or adjacent to mainstream society. The ethnic may be still distinct from the dominant Han, but they are conceived as analogous. If the Uyghurs imitate the Han-led model that coincides with the national dream, they can still be hopefully converted into one.

Economic imperatives push filmmakers' enthusiasm to work on location to showcase landmarks and spectacular landscapes in order to attract tourism capital. While there was an odd absence of military in the cultural imaginary of the popular entertainment films directed by Guang in that decade, she did produce some spy films modeled on the Hollywood Western genre, such as *The Mysterious Caravan* (*Shenmi tuodui* 神秘駝隊, 1985) and *The Girl's Love* (*Gunv lian* 孤女戀, 1986), and costume dramas, including *Death of a Beauty* (*Meiren zhi si* 美人之死, 1986). Although these films were set in certain historical periods, the landscapes captured in the cinematic images are "dehistoricized" as sheer spectacular products for consumption and sites of attraction for the tourist gaze. These works of Guang that highlight Xinjiang's natural environment and ethnic features have pioneered and prompted the interest in producing Xinjiang's new Western genre films in the 2000s as a means to facilitate the state-initiated "Open Up the West" campaign (*xibu da kaifa* 西部大開發).

### China's Westerns, Initial Surveillance, and the Establishment of "Bingtuan"

"Westerns" (*xibupian* 西部片) is a loose term picked up by the famous film critic Zhong Dianfei (鍾惦棐) to refer to the emerging non-didactic Chinese films produced by Xi'an Film Studio in the 1980s. Xi'an Film Studio led by Wu Tianming (吳天明) has become the haven for many innovative fourth-generation and fifth-generation filmmakers in the post-Mao reform era, producing well-known features such as *Life* (*Rensheng* 人生, dir. Wu Tianming, 1984), *Yellow Earth* (*Huang Tudi* 黃土地, dir. Chen Kaige 陳凱歌, 1984), *In the Wild Mountains* (*Yeshan* 野山, dir. Yan Xueshu 顏學恕, 1986), *Old Well* (*Laojing* 老井, dir. Wu Tianming, 1987), and *The Horse Thief* (*Daomazei* 盜馬賊, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壯壯, 1986). Zhong labeled these works as "Westerns," but they only had loose reference to the Hollywood Westerns in his mind. He did tell Guang to make China's own *Lawrence of Arabia* in Guang's retrospection.<sup>12</sup> The Westerns made by Han filmmakers, however, commonly depicted the desolate poverty and back-

wardness of the northwest steppe as their backdrop, to allegorically deal with China's contemporary problems. Since then, the concept of China's Westerns has been widely used by film scholars in the PRC to discuss many other national productions that portray geographic northwest landscapes, explore ancient histories of the region that has been regarded as the cradle of Chinese civilization, and promote the conquest of the wilderness as a symbol of national progress. The attention, however, was predominantly, if not exclusively, placed on Han-dominant culture, even though the western part of China has mostly been populated by non-Han ethnic peoples.

While the "Open Up the West" campaign was launched by the central government in 2000 as a major nation-state-building project to reduce economic inequalities, encourage endogenous economic development, and safeguard sociopolitical stability in the ethnic borderlands, the notion of Westerns in the Chinese film industry was brought up again around the same period. But this time, critics advocated the idea of "new Westerns" (*xin xibu dianying* 新西部電影), which functions to assimilate the ethnic minority themes and crews into the core. Xinjiang cinema has thus had a more important role to play, resonating with the state's claim of sovereignty over the western region through the commitment to economic development and modernization and with the state's intended inclusivity toward the ethnic minority by converging all nationalities into a common *goumin* (national) or *Zhonghua* (Chinese) identity. The invocation of "new Westerns" was also intended to brand the locally produced films to make them more marketable for mainstream audiences. Ironically, the reiteration of Westerns by Chinese film critics in the context of the state-led Western Development may easily make one associate with how such a popular Hollywood genre attests to the historical process of the United States' westward movement. Such a westbound campaign was anything but internal colonization, although the political and pejorative connection with colonial enterprise was generally dismissed in the PRC. Yet, to Xinjiang, none of these "new Westerns" would tell audiences how the dominant group expropriated or possessed exclusive rights over the land and resources of the western region and subjugated the ethnic peoples to its rule.

The emergence of such a Western genre set primarily in Xinjiang can be traced back to the Chinese historical relationship between vision, knowledge, power, militarization, utopian ideals of technology, and calculated management of space and population, culminating in contemporary concerns with biopolitics.<sup>13</sup> The historical uses of visual devices, such as photography, for biometric or anthropometric measurement of human bodies to categorize different races were widely found in European colo-

nial projects, as well as in Republican China's survey of the non-Han peoples on its borderlands (see chap. 1). The cinematic apparatus developed from photography serves as a cultural technology to analyze, manage, and discipline the human body for medical and scientific purposes. According to Catherine Zimmer (2015), the functions of cinematic production have been combined with surveillance practices and technologies. The drive toward narrative in film history is indeed structured around the surveilling capacities of the camera. Because of its ability to track individuals over space and time, cinematic continuity or narrative is predicated on visualizing or policing criminally illicit behaviors and capturing the actions that unfold to expose and discipline. The early American experiences have indicated that "it is race in particular that has been historically produced as visual through surveillance practices and technologies," while both narrativity and racialized criminality are entangled as part and parcel of the visible field that camera can offer. For decades, cinematic apparatus and surveillance techniques have facilitated the systematic repression of basic civil liberties in communist-ruled China.

The tensions between Uyghur Xinjiang and the Chinese state have been long-lasting since the Qing conquest of the region in the 1750s. The Turkic Muslims, or the Uyghurs (a term revived in the twentieth century by a Chinese warlord, Sheng Shicai, who ruled Xinjiang from 1933 to 1944),<sup>14</sup> have often been described negatively by the Chinese authorities as a menacing separatist force in the modern era of the nation-state because they had rebelled and established two Eastern Turkistan republics in 1933–34 and 1944–49, respectively. For decades, China's reaction to any unrest or instability coming from the Muslim Xinjiang has been a kind of fear that has concealed profound anxiety.<sup>15</sup> Fear is considered a way to ease anxiety by attaching an object or a signifier to what is an unidentifiable, porous, and liquid experience of uneasiness. Thus, the invention of the object(s) of fear is intimately tied to the avoidance of anxiety. Fear is a crystallization of anxiety by creating an imaginary arbitrary object or a crude signifier around which the phobic subject can reconstruct a different world or a new space to keep anxiety at bay and to avoid the overwhelming and unfathomable abyss. In other words, the object of fear protects the subject from anxiety and naturalizes the anxious affects caused by social contradictions.<sup>16</sup>

While Xinjiang's territory borders eight other countries, which are mostly Muslim, Xinjiang's major population is both Turkic and Muslim—that is, the Uyghurs, the ethnic group regarded as the most violent and resistant to Chinese rule. The Uyghurs are a Turkic ethnic group who are Sunni Muslims and write with an Arabic-style script. Although the Uyghur

is the titular ethnicity in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, other Turkic peoples and Muslims are living in the province, including Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and non-Turkic Tajik and Hui. Other non-Muslim ethnic groups have also made Xinjiang their home, including the Tatar, Xibo, Manchu, Mongol, Daur, and Russians. The migration of Han Chinese from the inland since the late eighteenth century, during the Qing era, has greatly transformed the demography of the region. Because of its huge numbers, the Han immigration to Xinjiang has been unwelcomed by local Uyghurs, instigating serious conflicts in the region.<sup>17</sup>

Since the establishment of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 1955, the Chinese communist regime has started to regulate Islam with the forces of law and order, managing and training perception to define reason and intelligence for the Turkic ethnic group. Religious leaders have to be trained and recognized only by the state institutes, and public-sector employees are not allowed to openly practice their religion or engage in any Uyghur customs associated with Islam. How ethnic life in Xinjiang has become the object target for the technologies of power under the Chinese communist rule is closely related to China's security strategy in the fluid and uncertain environment of Central Asia.<sup>18</sup> Since the early 1950s, immediately after the end of the civil war between the GMD and the CCP in Xinjiang, a distinctive Han-populated military-agricultural settlement and production unit, Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (Xinjiang shengchan jianshe bingtuan 新疆生產建設兵團), which is usually called "Bingtuan" (literally, "militia corps"), composed of demobilized soldiers and their families, has been set up to implement the CCP's ethnic governance. Inheriting the traditional military-agricultural colony upon which imperial China's frontier governance relies, the different divisions of the Bingtuan, with their militia organization, occupy the expanding areas (mainly key geostrategic localities, such as at the headwaters of most of Xinjiang's major rivers) of the region. Their mission, as part of economic modernization, is to open up the wasteland by converting it to productive farmland and to defend the frontiers for the state. Since then, the military system in Xinjiang has served as a motor of its future modernization and economic development. The deployment and operation of Bingtuan divisions in different parts of Xinjiang have successfully fragmented the extensive regions traditionally controlled and exclusively inhabited by ethnic minorities. Bingtuan-controlled areas are usually close to oasis villages of the ethnic minorities but are segregated from them to avoid ethnic competition and ethnic intermingling (although ethnic minorities are hired as production corps farmers and factory workers), serving as barricades or buffer zones

for security and political purposes as a continuation of the imperial policy to divide and rule. The maintenance of a reliable Han population base not only gradually tilts the demographic balance in favor of Han Chinese but also actively shapes the regional identity with a significant institutionalized Han presence and growing influences.

The notion of *Xinjiang ren* (Xinjiang people) hence not only refers to Uyghurs or any native ethnic minorities but includes residents of all ethnicities in Xinjiang, particularly the Bingtuan members (Zhu and Blachford 2016). Such a “military plus” system being transformed and extended throughout several decades has become the biopolitical mechanism that administers and regulates the biological existence of the Islamic communities in terms of putting the ethnic groups under surveillance, providing immunity to Han-based China from the danger of ethnic uprising, and gradually turning the ethnic population into “bare life” in an Agamben-esque sense.<sup>19</sup> However, it was the dramatic labeling of Uyghurs as terrorist threats by the Chinese government in the 2000s, through adopting the rhetoric of a “global war on terror,” that rendered the whole ethnic population into “bare life,” since terrorists are regarded as a danger to humanity and thus are deprived of all legal rights from the civilized world (Roberts 2018). To accommodate the central grand plan of the “Open Up the West” campaign, the Bingtuan has been transforming since the late 1990s from a military-rural organization into a more flexible urbanized and civilianized military-corporation complex to create a more stable and compliant political and economic environment in Xinjiang as a strong foothold for China in Central Asia; this is intended to make Xinjiang function both as a source and as a passageway for energy resources. The evolution of Xinjiang’s Bingtuan bears witness to the consolidation phase of the territorial integration of the frontier zone into the core region of China through military and economic means.<sup>20</sup> Xinjiang’s economic development harnessed by strong state intervention did not necessarily bring huge benefits to the poor native ethnic communities. The structural violence of ethnic discrimination and uneven development enabled Han migrants to replace Uyghur businesses and employees, resulting in the local Uyghurs’ loss of economic opportunities and the rising cost of living. The gradual exclusion of the Uyghur population from Chinese society through economic exploitation and dispossession ironically goes against the social principle of absorbing the ethnic minorities into the Han-dominant nation.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike the Western capitalist-democratic countries, the PRC never hides its culture of militarization and its ubiquitous presence in the fabric of everyday life. As the military-entertainment-propaganda mechanism,

cultural media (film and other visual representations in particular) under the PRC form a significant part of this biopolitical apparatus that subtly takes the biological life of the Muslim populations as its object of knowledge and control, as well as an entity of aesthetic pleasure, thus ensuring that the Chinese majority is insulated from any potential menace. Huang Zhou (黃胄), a Chinese painter who is famous for portraying Xinjiang, worked for the cultural unit of the People's Liberation Army and was stationed in Xinjiang for years to carry out his sketching and artworks. His colorful visual representations of exotic Xinjiang from the 1950s onward usually appear in the forms of beautiful dancing female Uyghurs and cute animals. Feminization and animalization have been the norms of Chinese representations of the non-Han ethnicity throughout history (Fiskesjo 2012; Pines 2005; Gladney 1994). The landscapes, human figures, and animals of Xinjiang, under such embellished and glamorized portrayals, became appealing spectacles to Chinese viewers. The voyeuristic desire for the exotic ethnicity doesn't just operate alongside the social and political context of surveillance; the two mutually construct each other. The celebratory mode of painting is meant to highlight the new vitality, national spirit, and bright future brought by the communist government to the ethnic community at the borderlands. Many other artists, such as Liu Bingjiang (劉秉江) and Ma Quanyi (馬泉藝), have followed the model established by Huang to paint Xinjiang in the form of images of bizarre distinct culture and ethnic harmony.

The commonality of their colored ink paintings is that the artists' aesthetic pursuit of a political mission has been prioritized over any realistic depiction of the region and its inhabitants. These artworks were the outcome of the painters' field trips accompanied by military surveillance and deployment, and they were produced under the physical infrastructure of racial segregation, which constitutes part of biopolitical governance. For years, these visual representations have rendered Chinese viewers complicit in the political projection of Xinjiang and made them accept the military information and governance that are a recognized mode of civilian life. They indeed help reorganize the field of observation and visualization in ways that gradually change the relationships between Han and ethnic populations, identities, territories, and individual human bodies. Politics and aesthetics are linked through such visual representations, which function in concert with political rule and surveillance practices. The ongoing historical problems of race, class, and gender are somehow repressed and reformulated through consumption, making the Muslim population visible as objects for study, pleasure, surveillance, and management. The colorful

ink paintings began to valorize the mode of visualization as a technique to command and control a world of unknowns and its possible unpredictable transformation.

### Reanimating the Ethnic Life in the Twenty-First Century

The collapse of the Soviet Russian Empire and the subsequent independence of Central Asian states in the 1990s shocked the Chinese regime and significantly heightened its security measures in Uyghur Xinjiang. China began to explore a tighter approach to the national question, sensitive to the potential danger brought by liberal reforms, even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Film productions soon followed to give more emphasis on national unity. One good example was *Uncle Kurban Visits Beijing* (*Kurban dasbu shang Beijing* 庫爾班大叔上北京, dir. Li Chen Sheng 李晨聲 and Dong Ling 董玲, 2002), produced by Tianshan Studio. The film highlights how the ethnic figure at the remote borderland longs for the charm of the Chinese elite at the political center, symbolizing the mercy of the core toward the periphery and the loyalty of the margin toward the kindness of the central government. Uncle Kurban was a legendary Uyghur figure promoted by the state media as a lower-class peasant exploited by landlords but saved and endowed with a happy life by the CCP in the 1950s. Living in Hotan (Khotan) in southwestern Xinjiang, Kurban was so grateful to the Chairman Mao–led CCP that, as the state media portrayed, he even wanted to ride a donkey from Xinjiang to Beijing in order to meet Mao in person. Finally, in 1958, Kurban was invited to join the Xinjiang agricultural delegation to Beijing, where he was given a precious opportunity to meet Chairman Mao in the Zhongnanhai compound.<sup>22</sup> The meeting between Mao and Kurban was photographed, and the picture was widely circulated in China for several decades (fig. 4.1).

The photo shows an old, bearded, and grateful Uyghur in ethnic costume shaking hands with a smiling Chairman Mao, who stands much taller, serving as an icon for the ethnic minority's admiration of the great communist leader. Numerous artistic reproductions inspired by and adapted from the image, including drawings, posters, songs, literature, sculptures, artworks, textbook materials, operas, and films, emerged to speed up the dissemination of the story, converting it into a myth in the Chinese collective memory under the communist regime. Some of the most prominent reproductions were a popular folk song, "Salam Chairman Mao" (*Riye xiangnian Maozhuxi* 日夜想念毛主席), composed by famous musician



Fig. 4.1. Uncle Kurban meets Chairman Mao Zedong.

Wang Luobin (王洛賓) in 1959 when the Mao cult was accelerating to its peak, and a colorful brush-ink painting also entitled “Missing Chairman Mao Day and Night” by the renowned painter Huang Zhou in 1976. In both the song and the painting, Uncle Kurban has been constructed as an ethnic subject who openly declares his undying and fervent passion for the Chinese political leader. Huang Zhou’s painting was sold in an auction for US\$2.75 million in 2013.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the decades, such Chinese-dominated representations of Uncle Kurban were never intended to give any voice or agency to the Uyghur protagonist, who is passively reduced to a simple-hearted, faithful ethnic peasant who has been stripped of his Islamic religion and Tur-

tic linguistic differences. In resonance with the “main melody cinema” (*zhuxuanlu dianying* 主旋律電影), which is a euphemistic term for the PRC propaganda movie subjected to the central government’s agenda, the 2002 film adaptation ventriloquizes Uncle Kurban in Putonghua lingua franca and arbitrarily depicts him with anti-GMD sentiments and a liberal attitude to willingly marry his daughter to a non-Muslim Han Chinese soldier. Against the backdrop that religious issues have inevitably returned to ethnic representation in twenty-first century China, *Uncle Kurban Visits Beijing* attempts to summon the old myth of ethnic loyalty to the CCP and to glue radically different, if not conflicting, realities into a seamless illusionistic image embodied by an imagined Uyghur character. The film’s last shot montages the handshaking action between Kurban and Mao to the still image of the renowned black-and-white photograph, probably revealing how a different time and space may clash rather than form a single world.

While folklorization and Disneyfication of religions of the ethnic minorities (see chap. 5) have been carried out widely since the 1990s, the reform era also planted the seeds for the non-Han ethnic communities in Xinjiang to nurture their own filmmakers, such as Xirzat Yahup and Tahir Hamut. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, economic reforms provided more opportunities for Uyghur filmmakers to produce low-budget films using a VCD format exclusively targeted to Uyghur viewers. About two hundred Uyghur-language films produced in such a format were made in that period, although they did not circulate beyond the Uyghur community.<sup>24</sup> But within the official establishment, Guang Chunlan of Xibo ethnic origin is a prominent example, as mentioned earlier. The Kazakh filmmaker Xirzat Yahup began his directing debut in collaboration with a Han director in his 2006 Tianshan production *The Turpan Love Song* (*Tulufan qingge* 吐魯番情歌, dir. Jin Lini 金麗妮 and Xirzat Yahup), which was a big-budget feature film along the official lines of national development and ethnic harmony. The film foregrounds the affluent and peaceful life enjoyed by the Uyghur rural families where their members preoccupy themselves with romantic pursuits.

Xirzat’s next feature film, *Mehmet’s 2008* (*Maimaiti de 2008* 買買提的 2008, dir. Xirzat Yahup, 2008), was made to celebrate the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics from an ethnic perspective to promote interethnic solidarity. The story is about how a county Uyghur cadre has been demoted to a village and reappointed as a football coach there. In order to motivate the rural young kids to play football, he lies to them that if they can win the championship, they will be sent to Beijing to attend the Olympic Games. The plot of the comedy aims at displaying how the Uyghurs can be mobi-

lized to support and be part of the great national event. Closely toeing the official line seems to be the only way for ethnic filmmakers from Xinjiang to continue their careers in twenty-first-century China. In line with the patterns of Guang's Xinjiang films, Xirat's works fundamentally remove any religious reference, ossify certain ethnic cultural norms out of their historical contexts, and advocate interethnic cohesion. Borders of different worlds, ethnic or mainstream, have to be erased to compose a unified virtual space—virtual because such a diegetic world eliminates all cleaves and frays of the social realities and its compositing is not used in the service of traditional realism.

In 2014, a light comedy titled *Money on the Road* (*Qian zai lushang pao* 錢在路上跑, dir. Aersilang Abudukelimu, Mulati M, and Zhou Jun, 2014), starring the famous Uyghur stand-up comedian Abdukerim Abliz, tactfully touched upon the realities faced by contemporary Uyghurs in the PRC. Made at a time when Tianshan Film Studio had started overhauling its production technologies into digitization, the Uyghur-language comedy was the first ethnic-related digital film to be purchased by China Central Television for the exclusive rights of broadcast on television. *Money on the Road* is a typical story of some country bumpkins going to the big city and winding up with some lessons learned about their relationships, human decency, and the corrupting power of money. The three Uyghur villagers, named Kerim, Selim, and Alim, came to Urumqi as migrant workers to ask their cousin Musa, who is in charge of a construction site, to find jobs for them to seek their fortune. The youngest one, Selim, is desperately in need of material wealth to satisfy the avaricious mother of his beloved bride-to-be. However, they soon find out that working on a construction site for urban renewal cannot help them earn a lot of money.

The dramatic plot begins when they suddenly unearth a box of 1953-edition renminbi paper money from the debris. The three stooges believe it is a windfall that will make them rich, but at the same time, the godsend money also tests their friendship, mutual trust, and moral values. While running away from their cousin Musa, who wants them to return the money to its rightful owner, the three men incidentally encounter a Han businessman who attempts to corrupt them by placing the three villagers in a deluxe five-star hotel to take advantage of their ignorance about the real value of the old bills. The Uyghur countrymen are not as stupid as the Han believe (they deliberately communicate among themselves in Uyghur in front of the Han entrepreneur to hide their real intention, a move usually done in reverse by Han people, who assume the ethnic minorities cannot comprehend Putonghua). While they quickly discover the agenda of

the swindling Chinese businessman and start fleeing from everyone trying to chase the money back, the three eventually find themselves stranded in the Taklamakan desert as they endeavor to cross the sandy landscape to get to the freeway. Under the scorching sun of the desert and suffering from a (computer-generated-image-made) sandstorm that almost kills them, Kerim, Selim, and Alim realize the meaninglessness of pursuing material wealth. Following the generic conventions, the comedy finishes with a happy ending: all three are rescued by the helicopter and truck team sent by the government, and they finally return the paper money, for which they are rewarded with government housing so Selim can get married.

The slapstick comedy inserted with animations to enhance its hilarious effects reveals how rural Uyghurs who are not satisfied with village life run into the rapidly transforming Chinese world in the vortex of economic development. The male lead, Abdukerim, who is a popular icon of “sketch comedy” in the Uyghur community, always has something serious to say through his quick-witted language and humorous satire (Byler 2013; Cabras 2017). He plays a relatively mean and selfish character in the film to remind Uyghur audiences how consumer culture, lucrative business, and materialist values have eroded the moral lives of his compatriots. The movie’s message in line with the government’s ethnic policy endorses such a moral lesson. While there have been radical fluxes in China’s Xinjiang policies throughout PRC history, the regime usually pursues both “soft” and “hard” measures at the same time to undermine Uyghur nationalist resistance. The acculturation message from the cinematic apparatus is an implementation of the “soft” policy, although it could be met with nonviolent defiance from Uyghur intellectuals who remain distrustful of the Chinese rule and Islamic conservatives in the Uyghur community (Rudelson and Jankowiak 2004).

Animation is part of the twenty-first-century mechanism of digital simulation and computer-generated images, and the animatic apparatus is also an integral component of the associated development of biopolitics (Levitt 2018). The rise of digital animation and simulation has produced a significant dimension in shifting the concept of life in how we define, conceive, experience, produce, reproduce, make, and engineer forms of vitality. In the comic ambiance, the Uyghur form of life and their modes of experience are literally and metaphorically animated by the contemporary dispositif in the service of state-led development and control. In the early reform periods when Guang Chunlan was active in producing ethnic films, Uyghurs and other ethnic groups in Xinjiang were encouraged to migrate to the cities and become urbanized, whereas in the second decade of the twenty-

first century, through *Money on the Road*, the Uyghurs were told to stay in their villages and be grateful for their rural life. The city adventure of the three characters in *Money on the Road* is a manifestation of montage in the sense that they are “keyed” to the metropolitan scenes or *mise-en-scène* while their rural nature is supposed to be kept intact under the turbulences of modernization.

Biopolitical engineering intends to mold ethnic people into malleable entities subjected and adaptable to the state's changing policies. This is precisely what the “political montage” is all about: transforming the static sign into some dynamic element that can exert measurable pressure on the consciousness of the people. Under biopolitics and the digital animatic apparatus, the state transforms the ethnic groups from their alien realm into a biopolitical object that reflects the being of the transforming agent. The biopolitical project aims to transform the ethnic nature into something it originally was not by endowing it with new characteristics or “qualities” (*suzhi* 素質 in the official language). The state has the power to animate, vivify, or give new life to the governed ethnic, simultaneously implying that it is also capable of revamping it and taking it away in the face of a situation where life is no longer a given but a site of intervention or production.

### Possibility of Non-State Uyghur Filmmaking

While most of the Xinjiang-related films discussed so far, whether Uyghur made or not, are produced within the sphere of state influence, I now look at an exception by Saipulla Mutalip, who has worked as a photographer and a lighting assistant for many Chinese-language films produced by Tianshan Studio. He finished his editing work for his independent feature *Qarangghu Tagh: The Village Afar* (*Heishan: yaoyuan de cunzhuang* 黑山: 遙遠的村莊, 2014) primarily in Hong Kong and participated in the Chinese Documentary Festival held there as a Hong Kong entry since he had already obtained resident status after living in the city for more than seven years. Qarangghu Tagh (literally, “dark mountain” in Uyghur) is a remote village of about nine hundred people located on a steep mountain (above 3,000 meters in altitude) to the south of Khotan in southwestern Xinjiang. The only access to Qarangghu Tagh even today is a long, narrow, rugged, winding, hilly, and dusty path that takes three to four hours by motorcycle to pass. Mutalip visited the place several times between 2009 and 2012 to make a film about a massacre that happened there in the 1930s. At first, Mutalip presented the story in some private screenings as a docudrama



Fig. 4.2. The opening credits in animation. Screenshot from *Money on the Road*.

with an actor playing a teacher character who visited the isolated village. It was only in 2014, when the feature film was publicly screened as part of the Chinese Documentary Festival, that Mutalip decided the message could be delivered better in documentary form.

The villagers called the massacre the “Tungan Incident”; it has never appeared in any historical record. The early part of the film discloses how the memories of the event were conveyed mainly through a song by an old man strumming a *dutar*—a long-necked two-stringed lute in Uyghur folk music. “Tungan” (or Dungan) refers to the Hui, another Muslim group, as they are named as such in Xinjiang. By around 1934–36, the Hui warlord Ma Hushan (馬虎山) had been defeated by Sheng Shicai’s army in Xinjiang and had fled farther south to Khotan, where he had set up a small state, “Tunganistan.” From the loose memories of the villagers (most witnesses were too young at the time to recall the incident accurately), Ma Hushan’s troops suddenly arrived in the village to drag all men out from their mosque and executed around ninety of them on the spot. From the film’s interviews, a 119-year-old male survivor said the Tungans simply came to kill and loot, while others believed the GMD-backed soldiers accompanied by local informants wanted to eradicate those who wished to make themselves king there. No apparent reason could be provided for such brutality, even though the filmmaker repeatedly asked the same question. David Brophy suggests that the special locality of Qarangghu Tagh may offer an answer: since the nineteenth century, the village has been a

center of jade production and a refuge for fugitives. Apart from jade, there is also gold in Qarangghu Tagh's vicinity. The leaders of Tunganistan in the 1930s would have been interested in securing such resources. Given that the steep mountains provided refuge for the Uyghur rebels who fled from the Tungan's rule, it was no surprise that the Hui army targeted the village to commit atrocities there (Brophy 2016a).

While more vivid details of the massacre unfolded gradually through the interviews with different villagers, the story also tells about the current ordinary life of the community, such as praying and social gatherings, and the experiences of some young inhabitants studying in the village school and even having the chance to go to college in Urumqi. An eighteen-year-old female student whose father has allowed her to study in a college in Urumqi also talks about the possibility of gender equality in the village. The film director is also a product of the state-led modernity brought by the PRC, through which he has been educated in the modern Chinese system. In a broad sense, Mutalip's film is a montage of the village's past and its present, without constituting a particularly coherent narrative. It does not aim to construct a chronological history of the village under the principle of linear progress. Instead, the past-present conjuncture is marked by repetition and stoppages.<sup>25</sup> While memories are endowed with a restorative and transformative function through the film's resort to repetition, the use of stoppage pulls images out of the flow of the narrative to exhibit them as such. The purpose of doing justice to the village massacre in the 1930s is never strongly uttered in the film, although Mutalip may assert the principle that what isn't seen must be shown. What audiences learn, without any archival or ready-made images, are merely fragments of the past event reiterated through the memories or verbal descriptions of the old villagers that the film may use to invest the present with new potential.

The testimonies of the witnesses are rather incomplete because they were too young in the 1930s to remember any details; no true witness with firsthand experience could possibly have survived the killings. The impossibility of bearing witness, however, has been rendered somewhat possible by a song that describes the event. The song, which is not unlike the film itself, is by no means a neutral medium conveying human experiences and histories. Indeed, like Mutalip's film, the song from the village operates as a potential for resistance against the colonization of the unconscious and the dominant mnemotechnics that make people think and remember in accordance with the governing dispositif. No matter how shattered and deficient are the memories expressed in the song, the testimonies of the



Fig. 4.3. The old singer plays his dutar to describe the “Tungan Incident.” Screenshot from *Qarangghu Tagh: The Village Afar*.

villagers, and the narrative of the film, they attempt to seek an alternative to the archival memory or historical record that simply wipes out all of this.

Through juxtaposition and connections, the filmmaker puts together the images of the village landscapes with the sites of massacre, burial, and witnesses’ testimonies. However, there is still no image of atrocities, as no montage can make them visible. It is a montage that cannot connect to constitute history because there is always a rupture in history, a caesura that eludes visibility. In this sense, montage remains an unrealized potential that cinema can never reach, even if cinema is endowed with specific qualities for producing the past through its montage and projections. While the rupture in history is unable to be captured visually, such a moment can only be approached, encircled, and elaborated as a montage configuration that is ephemeral, transient, and always in motion. Agamben argues that Godard’s notion of montage is capable of handling the ruptures through repetitions and stops:

[Godard’s images] are no longer images of something about which one must immediately recount a meaning, narrative or otherwise. They exhibit themselves as such. The true messianic power is this power to give the image to this “imagelessness,” which, as Benjamin said, is the refuge of every image. (2014, 26)

If the Uyghurs can no longer seek refuge in such a remote mountainous place under the governance of the PRC, the montage in Mutalip's film may attempt to get close to a different form of refuge, or a vanishing point of all images, in order to render the moments of historical rupture thinkable or sayable, if not visible, thus testifying to the suffering of the Uyghurs. Mutalip's montage, from the point of reception, highlights a compositional principle that negates facile synthesis. Such a lack of narrative synthesis substitutes the search for steady meaning with a focus on the constructiveness of the conjoined events, past and present. It is a project of assembling historical relations through montage—that is, through combing fragments and scavenging things rather than representing histories as they happened.

*Qarangghu Tagh: The Village Afar* was made before the “reeducation camps” in Xinjiang had attracted wide international attention. But its epistemological production of the past through montage could also be used to address the anachronistic dimension of the present by simultaneously juxtaposing the two temporalities. That the film brings out the past violence of the Hui may serve as an indirect indictment against the malfunction of the intermediary position the Hui usually play between the Han and the Uyghurs and the political agenda behind it. Since the Qing era, the Chinese government has utilized Hui troops to dominate the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, while the Hui's cultural intermediate status is also appropriated by the Chinese authorities to ease the tensions with the Uyghurs since the Hui, from the perspective of the Chinese rulers, share the Islam religion with the Uyghurs and the Chinese language with the Han. Mutalip's film deactivates such a political function of the Hui by evoking the memory of what could have been but was not and endeavors to stop the flow of narrative by arresting the movement of the image at a standstill. By repeating the interrogating query concerning a singular moment that transpired in front of the camera, *Qarangghu Tagh* recontextualizes the village's history as a way of retrieving and redeeming the dynamic potential of the past as well as interrupting the smooth circulation of information and propaganda within the linear time of so-called social progress. Resonating with Agamben's argument in “Notes on Gestures” (2000a), Saipulla Mutalip's film wrests images from the sphere of ends by realizing cinema's capacity to repeat and stop time and movement. In its redemptive moment, the film attempts, with the use of montage and stoppage, to wrench potentiality from actuality and to retrieve a past as a vital terrain for a political struggle to fight the violent logic of official history.

### All Solidarities Melt into Thin Air: The Epistemology of Not Seeing the Hui

As I have discussed, there is another enigmatic Muslim Other, the Hui—the Sino-Muslims “who occupied a marginal position in discussion of Chineseness (they are and are not) and in discussions of non-Chinese peoples (they are and are not)” (Lipman 2006, 83). Compared with other non-Han ethnic groups categorized by the PRC, the Hui is one of the oddest of the officially endorsed fifty-five minority nationalities since they cannot be defined by Stalin’s four criteria, the paradigm used by the Chinese communist ethnic classification project: the Hui have “no common territory, being scattered throughout China; no common language, since they almost all speak Chinese; and no common economy or culture either” (Harrell 1996, 33). As Jonathan Lipman elaborates further, “Sino-Muslims had become a ubiquitous, anomalous part of the Chinese landscape. Normal but different, Sinophone but incomprehensible, local but outsiders, they challenged some fundamental Chinese conceptions of Self and Other and denied the totally transforming power of Chinese civilization” (1997, 56). While Chinese-speaking Sino-Muslims are dominant in numbers, some Hui only speak Tibetan, Mongolian, Bai, Tai, or another Southeast Asian language. The term “Sino-Muslim” is thus misleading, since certain numbers of Muslims living in China do not primarily speak the Chinese language even though their citizenship is Chinese. Many of them—especially those in the southeast, who may not actively practice Islam—when nationality status is conferred, have to give up pork, Chinese temple worship, and other non-Islamic cultures. The diffuse and elusive Hui identity dictated by local culture and geography leads some Sino-Muslims to reflect that their commonalities are just three things: white skullcaps, deep-fried sweetened dough, and consciousness of common Middle Eastern blood (Lipman 2004). In short, the Hui is an “ex-timate,” an external insider resisting incorporation not only in the Chinese national frame but also in its own self-definition.

The Hui are the “only nationality for whom a religion (Islam) is the only unifying category of identity” (Gladney 2009, 155). They are categorized as a single *minzu* mainly for historical reasons. Islam arrived in China as early as the seventh century of the Tang dynasty. Muslims continued to come in numbers among the Chinese people through immigration and China’s expansion into Central Asia from the Mongol Yuan dynasty in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. They grew in numbers also by absorbing native Chinese through intermarriage and conversion. They

were named “Huihui,” “Huizi,” or “Hui” before the Qing. Their long history in China is accompanied by the forgetting of their places of origin and the loss of their mother tongues. Although maintaining Islamic dietary rules (such as the pork prohibition and abstinence from alcohol), Hui Muslims have undergone extensive Sinicization by taking common Chinese surnames (e.g., Ma or Mu from Mohammed) and speaking the Chinese language while preserving their religious Arabic. While avoiding complete assimilation, the Hui intellectuals have actively adopted Confucian values into their cultures to render Islam teaching familiar and civilized (Wang 2017; Lipman 2016).

The Sino-Muslims are no less violent than the Uyghurs from the viewpoint of the Chinese state authority, and their histories of uprisings from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries are well documented (Lipman 2004; Gladney 1991; Chu 1975). From the Qing era to Republican China, Muslims constituted a strange impetus to Chinese society by eliciting its submerged aggressive, or even evil, characteristics, which are by no means foreign and external. If violence is contagious and runs like an infectious disease, the violence of the Hui perhaps only exposes the violent character of the state governance, although the state always has strong justification for its abuse of force and brutality. The ambiguous notion about Sino-Muslims should be understood as that which is not fully articulated or not fully remaining in silence, even though Islam has never been very silent throughout Chinese history.

The Han Chinese found the Sino-Muslims' insider speech strange and felt alienated by their foreign customs and the exclusive nature of their communities. Such kind of prevailing anti-Muslim prejudices gradually eroded the imperial stand on governing mixed communities of Muslims and non-Muslims. In the times when the Manchu court was becoming more and more sinicized, Muslim criminals began to be treated more harshly than Chinese criminals because of their Muslim background, creating a significant inequality in the imperial juridical system. The legal measures increasingly reinforced the prevalent social stereotype that Sino-Muslims were naturally more dangerous and fierce than non-Muslim Chinese. In almost all the Muslim rebellions in the Qing era, Sino-Muslims fought on both sides, reinforcing the stereotype of being violent without a cause and also demonstrating that there were conflicts within Muslim communities and that the religious imperative for unity was not effective.<sup>26</sup>

For apparent political reasons, contemporary mainland Chinese historians likewise deemphasized the role of Islam in these uprisings. Instead, they named these Sino-Muslim rebellions anti-feudal, anti-Manchu *qiyi*

(起義)—the righteous forces fighting for the independence of all the diverse *minzu* of China. The Hui rebellions were reinterpreted from Han-Hui feuds to mass movements organized by the joint forces of Hui, Han, and other ethnic peasants against the Manchu feudal class and Han landlords. Sino-Muslim rebels were portrayed as one of the very first groups to fight against the oppressive, feudalist Manchu Empire and foreign imperialism. In the nationalist historiography, the Sino-Muslim rebels became a progressive model for the later Han Chinese revolutionaries, although the Hui may only have played the role of a vanishing force in the insurrection that led to the subsequent establishment of a new nation.

Such political glorification of the Hui precisely because of their fierceness and combativeness has become a determining factor in their cinematic representation. As the second largest ethnic minority group, the Hui identity has rarely been presented in the PRC's ethnic cinema. Fewer than a dozen films related to Hui ethnicity have been produced over the last seventy years. They are *Sunshine Over the Red-stone Gully* (*Taiyang zhaoliang liao hongshigou* 太陽照亮了紅石溝, dir. Lu Ren 魯軻, 1953), *The Detachment of the Hui People* (*Hui min zhidui* 回民支隊, dir. Feng Yifu 馮一夫 and Li Jun 李俊, 1959), *Liupan Mountain* (*Liupan shan* 六盤山, dir. Guo Yangting 郭陽庭 and Liu Bin 劉斌, 1978), *Blood Oath* (*Xieshi* 血誓, dir. Gao Tianhong 高天紅, 1990), *The Jade King: History of a Chinese Muslim Family* (*Yueluo yu changhe* 月落玉長河, aka *Muslim Funeral* [*Musilin de zangli* 穆斯林的葬禮], dir. Xie Tieli 謝鐵驪 and Zhao Yuan 趙元, 1993), *A Unique Schooling* (*Shangxuelushang* 上學路上, dir. Fang Gangliang 方剛亮, 2004), *Heart to Heart* (*Tongxin* 同心, dir. He Xiaojiang 和小江, 2009), *Song That Travels a Thousand Miles* (*Gexingqianli* 歌行千里, dir. Sha Liqiong 沙麗琼, 2011), *The Battle of Qianqingwa* (*Xuezhban Qianqingwa* 血戰千頃窪, dir. Nie Jun 聶軍, 2012), *Never Look Back* (*Yilibe* 伊犁河, dir. Wang Jingguang 王景光, 2013), *Knife in the Clear Water* (*Qingshui li de daozi* 清水裡的刀子, dir. Wang Xuebo 王學博, 2016), *Red Flowers and Green Leaves* (*Honghualuye* 紅花綠葉, dir. Liu Miaomiao 劉苗苗 and Hu Weijie 胡維捷, 2018), and *Leaving the Heart in Hezbou* (*Qing ding Hezbou* 情定河州, dir. Yin Zhe 尹哲, not yet released).

Most of the early Hui ethnic films portrayed the Sino-Muslim characters as revolutionary heroes who supported the CCP to fight against the enemies, while others are romances with a deemphasis on the religious dimension in the Hui community. *The Detachment of the Hui People*, which was probably the most popular of these films, was adapted into a TV series in the 1990s. The film developed from the legend of a Hui military leader, Ma Benzai (馬本齋), who organized a Hui army of volunteers to fight

against the Japanese in the 1930s. Like other Hui militarists, Ma Benzhai worked for the GMD government; however, this historical fact is omitted from *The Detachment of the Hui People*. What is highlighted in the 1959 feature is how Ma Benzhai, a hot-tempered Hui with all the stereotypical features, has been under the influence of a kind-hearted, self-effacing, and self-sacrificing Han communist official, Political Commissar Guo, to become a CCP member. The Muslim religion is superficially represented by the mosque setting and the white Muslim skull caps worn by the characters but never seriously dealt with in the film. There is no apparent message of a civilizing mission as seen in many of the ethnic genres. The conventional Han Chinese assimilation strategy does not work on the Muslim ethnic minorities, especially when a strong religion like Islam plays an extremely significant role in the process of their identification.

What is highlighted is the political edge of the Hui that could be guided by the Chinese authority for progressive, revolutionary purposes. The progressive nature of the CCP in the film is symbolized by its land reform policy, which calls for tax reductions for the peasants. The policy helps Ma Benzhai to remobilize and regroup his discontented Hui soldiers. In the end, they united with the CCP to defeat the Japanese enemy. While the film emphasizes the common sociopolitical cause between the Hui and the communists, the cultural factor continues to play a significant role in the Han-Hui relationship—albeit implicitly. It is the Han benevolence and self-restraint that affect and convert the “brutal and fierce” Hui protagonist, and it is also the Han sacrifice (Guo suffers a fatal injury while saving Ma in the battle) that makes the Hui feel obligated to the CCP leadership. Political Commissar Guo is the lived embodiment of the twin poles of Chinese civilization—the kind-hearted gentleman (*wen*) and the brave warrior (*wu*), overshadowing the fierce Hui and offering an ideal model to the ethnic group.

The other Hui ethnic films produced in the 1970s and the early twenty-first century only repeated this revolution-themed formula by emphasizing the common political interest between Han China led by the CCP and the Hui community. As Chinese cinema generally accentuates themes of nationalism and patriotism through depictions of the Second Sino-Japanese War, representing the Hui in such a politically correct version is always a safe endeavor. Intended as an attempt to totalize the conceptualization of Hui's revolutionary image, these films turn out to be the repetition not of the same but of the difference, designating the moment or montage of contiguity and conjunction. Such cinematic montage contradictorily releases the Hui image from its frozen state by revealing its

transformative potential. It is a repetition that restitutes a dimension of possibility to the static image.

The marketization of the film industry in the PRC has induced some discussion about the future development of the Hui cinema and entertainment business in the context of enhancing a state's creative economy. The major issue discussed is how to construct a Hui cinema rather than an Islamist cinema—that is, how to present Hui unique culture without propagating Muslim values (Ying 2017; Wang 2010). Some critics call for learning from the model of Iranian cinema, which in their understanding is a remarkable presence around the globe from a Muslim country without particularly promoting Islam. But what can other Muslim cinemas tell us about Sino-Muslim films in China? The postwar Arab cinema in Egypt, for example, may have colluded with the postcolonial state to advance the nationalist modernizing project while attempting to negotiate its delicate representation of the traditional religious faith. In the biggest Muslim country in the world, Indonesia, the Islamic film genre, built within the framework of commercial considerations, tends to be a big-budget enterprise targeted at mainstream, mostly Muslim audiences, serving as a medium for both Islamic teaching and entertainment under consumer trends. Other than the Islamic film genre, hallmarks of Indonesian Islamic popular culture include Islamic pop and rock music, Muslim women's magazines, Islamic comic books, and religious television dramas, which are replete with images of idealized Muslim women and men (Izharuddin 2017). In comparison, China's Muslim cinema is still very conservative and reluctant to change, rigidly restricting Islam—if not entirely screening it out—within the narrowly defined boundaries allowed by the political authorities.

### Excessive Sentimentality and Unassimilable Otherness

Based on a widely circulated 1988 novel of the same title about Muslims in Beijing by a Hui woman writer, Huo Da (霍達, whose Muslim name is Fatima), the 1993 film *Muslim Funeral* cautiously adopts a conventional melodramatic mode to depict the entangled relationships of three generations of a Hui Muslim family engaging in jade craftsmanship from the turmoil of the Japanese invasion and World War II through the Cultural Revolution upheaval to contemporary China of the early reform era. The Hui patriarch Liang Yiqing, who is a jade carving master, has accepted Han Ziqi, a disciple of a pilgrim passing by the family, as his protégé and later marries him to his elder daughter, Liang Junbi. The patriarch dies because

of overwork and relentless exploitation by the Chinese merchant. Han Ziqi succeeds his father-in-law to continue the family's jade arts. However, the Sino-Japanese War has made it necessary for him and his sister-in-law, Liang Biyu, to take their jade collections to London for safekeeping. During their hard times in London, Han and Biyu fall in love, and Biyu gives birth to an illegitimate daughter, Xinyue. After the war, they all go back to China, but Biyu, in the face of her sister's wrath, returns to London but leaves her daughter behind. Xinyue is then raised by Junbi with her son.

Huo Da's novel was not written in chronological order, so the story begins with Xinyue coming home after her university entrance exam to face her hostile "mother," who she does not know is actually her aunt. Junbi plays the role of an unkind parent whose mission is to preserve the patriarchal order in the family by forbidding Xinyue to marry her non-Muslim university professor. The novel keeps the reader in suspense and only reveals the secret at the last moment, in keeping with the generic conventions of melodrama. The secret history of the love affairs in the Hui family saga may parallel the delicate fabric of the mysterious Hui Muslim identity in Chinese society. It is not only that the Chinese Muslims have their own "secret means" to communicate among themselves through their religious languages, rituals, and texts, which are undecipherable to outsiders; in addition, their deviant and discordant communities have been rendered "invisible" throughout Chinese histories because of their uneasy cohabitation with the dominant society. The "invisibility" has something to do with the Hui's fear of exposing their Muslim faith to the discriminatory world, while the "indiscernibility" is attributed to the tensions within the formation of Hui identity, which is torn between the preservation of a pure version of Islam and deeper integration into mainstream Han Chinese society.

Selectively reworking the details and largely emphasizing the melodramatic excesses from the original novel, the film adaptation renders the Muslim religion and identity as something almost invisible or negligible with the overwhelmingly sentimental love entanglements among the characters. Lurking beneath Huo Da's melodic novel is the self-questioning existential angst of the Chinese Muslim identity and its position in Chinese history. Unlike another well-known but militant Chinese Muslim novelist, Zhang Chengzhi, who manifests anger and revengeful spirit in his fiction *A History of the Soul* (*Xinling shi* 心靈史, 1991), Huo Da is far more introverted and reserved in her presentation of Muslim culture and religious values.<sup>27</sup> Yet the novel foregrounds the Islamic funeral rituals as a distinct identity marker for the Hui, and the text is showered with "Huihui language" (Chinese transliteration of Arabic or Persian words about Islamic

cultures)<sup>28</sup> that Xie's film has almost completely deleted. The film adaptation is greatly restrained and economical in expressing anything Islamic. The Muslim funerals only appear in the last three minutes of the film, while the religious identity of the characters is only revealed by the Arabic scripts hung on the walls of the house.

The director Xie Tieli was well known for his earlier works such as *Early Spring in February* (*Zaochun eryue* 早春二月, 1963) and *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhiqu weibushan* 智取威虎山, 1970). While *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* was a successful model opera film (*yangbanxi* 样板戲) massively screened to millions of people during the Cultural Revolution, the controversial *Early Spring in February*, based on a novel written in 1929, is famous for its sympathetic account of wavering intellectuals and its refusal to demonize the Nationalists. Xie was interested in portraying non-stereotypical characters who were neither heroic nor wicked and whose moral values were not entirely determined by their class status. His protagonists are more preoccupied with personal affairs than with any revolutionary cause and have difficulties controlling their emotions. The 1963 film does not provide any upbeat ending to the social problems or promise any possible salvation from the political force.

Such style, to a certain extent, continues in Xie Tieli's adaptation of Huo Da's novel. The emotionally excessive, overdramatic aesthetic in terms of the film's plot, voiceover narration, acting, characters' makeup, frequent use of close-ups and zoom-ins, and studio setting in Xie's *Muslim Funeral* gives the melodrama some kind of indeterminacy or even resistance to the normative forms of expression and values. With the emergence of new realist cinema by the fourth- and fifth-generation directors in the 1980s, Xie's 1993 production sounds stylistically retro, if not outmoded. But its melodramatic articulation offers a capacity to suspend the regulatory effects of social (or even ethnic) identities while opening up moments for feeling otherwise. If there is any political implication for the Hui, the film renders the world hardly inhabitable to them rather than making it morally legible. It functions as a gateway to an alternative, if impossible, aesthetic space that is as significant as the spiritual or religious for sustaining a marginalized and oppressed life. The avowed moral intent prescribed by conventional melodrama seems less significant than the pathos, sentiment, suffering, and pain manifested in the story. The film's genealogical attempt to depict different generations of the Hui family results in sentimental fragments that fail to produce any effects of balance and control but instead create only a theatrical exposition of conflicting realities and values, thus revealing an inscription of uncompromising and unassimilable other-

ness and the limits of a society that tries its utmost to contain the conflicts.

The melodramatic mode of Huo Da's novel is a means to map out and make sense of Sino-Muslims' existence and experiences in a world where the sacred morality has collapsed, as well as providing a strategy to ameliorate their suffering. Xie Tieli's film adaptation manipulates melodrama as stylistic articulation to critique the falsity of moral values generated by the fall of moral order. The clash between virtue and evil resulted from social mores, and human action stages the moral ideas for the audiences to reflect upon how they produce pain and suffering. Montage in its broad sense puts the Hui and melodrama together to tell a story through which the Sino-Muslim characters (and audiences as well) address and cope with their suffering either by obliterating it or by giving it a rational meaning. The melodramatic mode offers a spectacular scenario for the Hui to project themselves onto a hostile world in order to minimize suffering or endow it with a rational sense, and to transform themselves (rather than to fight the environment) even more in devotional mode to obey the divine master. The believers can only find refuge from the adverse empirical world by retreating into the spiritual realm.

### Muslim Short Fiction Films and *Knife in the Clear Water*

Widespread digital technologies in twenty-first-century China greatly facilitated the affordable production and circulation of videos made by ethnic minority filmmakers. The younger generation of the Hui Muslim intellectuals took advantage of the short film format (which is called *wei dianying* 微电影 in China, literally, "mini-film") to make several works and share them through the internet. Instead of hiding their Islamic culture out of fear, Sino-Muslim writer Shi Yanwei (石彦伟) appropriates such digital media to explore and assert the Hui ethno-religious identity as well as articulate vibrant Muslim everyday life in the Chinese contemporary setting to challenge the majority's prejudice against their belief and customs.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps ironically playing with the term "trilogy" to describe the shorts, Shi has completed three short fiction films with a modest budget of only ten thousand renminbi (about US\$1,570) entitled *The Xibaigu Trilogy* (*Xibaigu sanbuqu* 西海固三部曲, 2007), which are *Fujube* (*Shazao* 沙枣), *The Year of Drought* (*Hannian* 旱年), and *Knife in the Clear Water* (*Qingshui li de daozi* 青水裡的刀子). *The Year of Drought* and *Knife in the Clear Water* are adapted from the short stories of the same titles by the Hui novelist Shi Shuqing (石舒青).

Xihaigu (now renamed Guyuan 固原) is a Hui-inhabited town in southern Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, a bitter dry and barren land that outsiders would simply consider inhospitable to any livelihood (the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization described it in 1972 as one of the most unsuitable places for human habitation on Earth). It is a targeted area for China's poverty-alleviation campaign, and the Chinese officials boast that 350,000 people have successfully been relocated from such an uninhabitable region to other areas suitable for development through their ecological migration program. But Xihaigu is an ancient place with a rich history, where Han China crisscrossed and interacted with Central Asia. Zhang Chengzhi finished his novel *A History of the Soul* there. It is indeed a place that carries special meaning in the Hui culture. Shooting on location in a such harsh environment, Shi attempted to present how the poor Hui peasants hold onto the Islamic faith and moral values even though they are struggling to meet daily needs. Unlike the mainstream features that avoid representing Hui's religious culture, Shi's short films directly and repeatedly portray in a serene manner the Muslim daily routine of praying and cleansing rituals to reveal the kernel of the community's identity.

Indicating a quest for expression outside the regulatory constraints of accumulated aesthetic formulae, *Knife in the Clear Water*, Sean Wang Xuebo's feature-length debut, depicts an internal psychic journey of an old Hui peasant whose bull is to be slaughtered in an arid and barren village in Xihaigu. Wang himself is not a Hui Muslim but has codirected with Shi Yanwei in making two of the trilogy shorts. When he got a chance to make a feature film in 2016, Wang decided to develop *Knife in the Clear Water* further and remake it into a 90-minute movie. The feature won the New Currents Prize at the Busan International Film Festival and was released in theaters in China. His film was given significant assistance from Pema Tsenden and other well-known filmmakers since Wang worked for Pema Tsenden's filmmaking team as a producer for *Tbarlo* (dir. Pema Tsenden, 2015).<sup>30</sup>

Chinese audiences generally did not see Wang's film as infused with religious connotation; they tended to view it as just another story about a poverty-stricken peasant family that happened to be ethnic Muslim, with the same severe environmental challenges and financial pressures faced by many other poor people in a similar situation. Critics also praised *Knife in the Clear Water* for its universal depiction of humanity, purity, and beauty—an aesthetic attempt that goes beyond ethnic particularism. With its film frame in 4:3 aspect ratio and dark lighting to present an aesthetic of oil paintings, minimal dialogues, and the blending of human figures into

destitute but stunning landscapes, Wang's film makes full use of the artsy-craftsy toolkit to tell a story that can appeal to art-house filmgoers. However, *Knife in the Clear Water* conveys rather strong religious meanings—although not exactly in an implicit manner. The story is about how Hui villager Ma Zishan hesitates to sacrifice his only bull to mourn for his wife in the Muslim religious observance Arba'een ceremony to be held on the fortieth day after her death. The Hui's tradition holds that a grand beast like a bull can see the reflection of the slaughter knife being sharpened in clear water and hence learn of its imminent death. The old Hui peasant understands that his deceased wife deserves to be honored and the bull is already too old to plough the farm. But it is emotionally difficult for Ma to let go of the animal that has been loyally working for him for decades. He can only seek consolation from the village's iman (religious leader) to accept one's fate for the sacred dedication.

On the surface, *Knife in the Clear Water* is not drenched with religious content. The deliberate absence of music in the film is substituted with the recurring chanting of prayers, the noises of herds, and all the other natural sounds of the village. Otherwise, the film is filled with long stretches of silence and sparse dialogue. Viewers' awareness of that world is marked by a palpable presence of that which is absent—a discernible lack of music that indelibly shapes the life and identity of the inhabitants. By no means is the film silent, but the purposeful removal of a scripted musical soundtrack works on a level that is related in a significant way to reveal something essentially spiritual. The quietness not only affords the discrete images a sense of narrative and temporal unity but also offers a glimpse of meaning and commitment in the hardship of the village life and the desolate existence, generating certain spiritual and even revelatory experiences. It is a world that can be approached aurally, through which the sounds of praying, practicing religious rituals such as ablution and meditation, and the noises of other natural givens enliven the seemingly prosaic and communicate the concrete, metaphysical truth.

The inherent affectivity of intentional tranquility and the meaning making it engenders are evident in the several scenes of old Ma cleansing his body with a small amount of water as part of a religious rite. Hui Muslims believe that showing respect and submission to their God includes ritual purification through washing and wiping with water the hands, arms, head, mouth, nostrils, and feet. In rural Xihaiqu, water is the most precious natural resource because precipitation is generally low and the water-scarce region frequently suffers from prolonged drought, with evaporation loss ten times the rainfall rate. More than a few long-take scenes unobtrusively

let audiences see how the old man prudently makes use of a small amount of water from a tiny kettle to clean different parts of his skinny body and serenely relies on a dim lamp light to read his old Qu'ran. These peaceful scenes, however, are contrasted with a loud and joyous scene also related to water—a sudden downpour from the sky energizes the entire family, including their chickens and goats, and keeps all the family members both young and old busy finding every means possible to harvest the rainwater before it is gone.

The villagers' relationship with water, as a gift from the Heavens, reveals how those in the community of the faithful (*ummah*) make sense of their difficult life in the submission to the sovereignty and authority of God. Filming a story of Hui Muslims in such dismal conditions is a montage in the sense of extracting from the coarse milieu of their characters its spiritual and transformative forces. The film's elaborate oil painting-like visual montages establish an organic relationship in its shots to suture dynamics between ordinary people and nature/God. They suggest that the religious faith is immanent in the community and that no secular state-led development with a steady piped water supply and forced relocation program can substitute for it.<sup>31</sup> Citing Alexander Doblin's idea of using a pair of scissors to cut up a narrative into pieces, with these pieces remaining fully capable of life, Rey Chow points out that montage is not merely an act of camera but also a key operation in theoretical thinking of "scattering a (purported) previous continuum into fragments, which are then soldered or sutured together and distributed anew . . . producing unanticipated, unsuspected relations—oftentimes triggering a crisis and a new situation—through the very gesture of juxtaposition" (2012, 3).

### Montage of Muslims

China's two major Muslim ethnic groups, the Uyghurs and the Hui, while sharing the same God, are politically situated in radically different positions in Chinese society. The Uyghurs—who are physically and linguistically distinct from the Han Chinese—suffer more state discrimination and oppression than the Hui, who look pretty much the same as their Han brethren. Their visible differences also lead to their dissimilar representations in China's media. The essential disparity in government treatment of the two Muslim groups rests not within their religious faith but rather within the political realm. While numerous Uyghur Muslims have been under acute surveillance and have been held in internment camps in Xinji-

ang by the Chinese regime, the Hui Muslims scattered throughout China are increasingly worried that they will become the next victim of Islamophobia and the biopolitical drive for nationalized homogeneity. For instance, authorities in Beijing recently ordered halal restaurants and food stalls to remove Arabic scripts and symbols associated with Islam from their signs as part of the escalating national campaign to sinicize the Muslim population and to ensure the conformity of all religions with mainstream Chinese culture.<sup>32</sup> Almost every mosque in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region has been denuded of its dome and replaced by Chinese-style tiles, as part of China's sweeping crackdown on Muslim minorities. Xinjiang's intensification of the anti-Islamic campaign has resulted in other provinces espousing harsher policies against potential terrorists, for fear that local leaders will be accused of being lenient to the dangerous Islamic adversaries. The long-standing State Administration of Religious Affairs was dissolved in 2018, with its responsibility for religion taken over by the United Front Work Department, which exerts overt and firmer control over civil society and all religious faiths.

Under growing pressure in a distrustful internal party environment, local officials have to abandon policies of local tolerance for more heavy-handed execution of state policies over ethnic and religious groups. Meanwhile, the online radicalization of Han nationalists pushing impressionable youths to racist ideology also triumphs as it becomes one of the very few remaining forms of public political speech tolerated and even encouraged by the government. The legitimacy of the authoritarian government needs a newly aggressive and formidable Han chauvinism and ethno-nationalist line to back it up. Islam precisely serves as a perfect internal enemy as Muslims have long been seen as "familiar strangers." The progress of technologies helps to exemplify the forms of biopolitics exercised at the level of daily life in China not only through the conventional quality control of the birth and population by curtailing women's reproductive self-determination. The omnipresent regulation of biological life includes ubiquitously monitoring everyday life behavior and "reeducating" with coercive programs to reduce human capacity to generate unpredictability viewed by the state negatively as insecurity.

As the possibility of a Muslim cinema is denied in China, the representation issue of such a large population (about 20 million people) in the multiethnic nation has structurally left its national cinema in question, if not in crisis. The state authorities and other stakeholders who are permitted to film China's Muslims have been struggling in a fluctuating manner to turn such ambivalent cinema to compete as commercial rivals to Chi-

na's mainstream or even Hollywood and to perform as artistic contenders to European-modeled art films, with a danger of slipping into a kind of self-exoticism or auto-ethnography. In a narrow sense, the PRC cinema about its Muslims could be identified as a "thought experiment" testing the appeal or traction of the core political values and ideas. Such an idea of a united multiethnic China manifesting in its cinema is badly in need of renewal, although its probability of self-interrogation and probing of the limits of what it means to be Chinese are not likely to happen under the current circumstances.

"Montage of Muslims" may help to dig up and acknowledge a traumatic history in the lull of numbing, habitual, and familiar situations. The violent histories of Muslims in China mostly remain imageless. Cinema about Uyghur Xinjiang and Hui Muslims serves as an alibi to allegorically force a recognition of the regime's fear-induced acculturation and mainstream Chinese society's collaboration within the fabric of everyday life. Montage in its broad sense is a resurrecting practice to conjure up obliterated realities, to retrieve neglected materials, to awaken the potential from the intoxicating now, and to shatter modernity's ideologies of progress. As Walter Benjamin tells us, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (1982, 259). Perhaps there is still a chance, able to be retrieved from history, that China's Muslims may stand for certain latent, momentary, and newly possible consciousness that challenges and calls upon the awakening of the Chinese subject.

The historical relationship between the Han and the Muslims in China could be characterized by the notion of fear, if not the modern term "Islamophobia." Such fear of ethnic-religious otherness has always been at the heart of efforts to control radical anxiety in the Han-based Chinese regime and society. In the relentless turmoil and turbulence of modern China, anxiety, fear, and terror have occupied a key place in the processes of sociohistorical changes guided through the visions of utopian thoughts because these affects emerge in the vacuum between radically different social orders. The CCP's ideal of a socialist society based upon the Soviet model attempted to create a new archetypal model for humanity to oppose the free capitalist-individualist subject. But both were stricken by the malaise of severe national competition. It is the state terrorism and modern form of tyranny (i.e., Maoist totalitarianism), instead of consumerism, commodification, and the ideology of selfish individualism operating in the capitalist world, that generate and shape the new socialist being and instill fear as the central motivation to human action. The socialist uto-

pia, not unlike its capitalist counterpart, relies heavily on the extraction of surplus value through endless exploitation and immiseration of the vast majority of the national population.

As nation-state and socialist utopia are obsessed with borders, Others, and threats of infiltration, the psychological response to fear that is characteristic of the formation of Maoist political society is destined to identify an enemy or some other who can function as a screen to contain the unbounded feelings of anxiety. The emotion of anxiety, which is objectless, is transfigured into the condition of fear, which narrows down feelings of insecurity toward certain objects or Others. The wretchedness of the Uyghurs (and Sino-Muslims) fills the dominant Chinese society with fear. Their suffering hurts the Han Chinese and assaults their sense of existential security. But the real sense of anxiety, which is marked more by absence than by presence, is that which emanates from the subject's willful submission to the violent law. The guilt, if any, that the subject experiences does not come from breaking or violating the law but rather from obeying it. In this sense, the montage of China's Muslims goes beyond the enabling epistemology of the screen as a window to peer through (realism of offering access to the world) or as a reflective mirror (constitution of self-identity vis-à-vis the other). It converges the antagonistic binary stalemate of self and other to overwhelming body senses and affective flows, both from without and already inside.

## The Fourteenth Dalai Lama Is Not the Message

### *Depicting Life beyond Spirituality in Tibet Cinema*

As the official Chinese representations of Tibet frequently lack credibility in the international world, a public forum was organized in the early twenty-first century to discuss the new strategies the PRC should use to publicize a positive image of China's Tibet, which, in the view of the Chinese leaders, has been on an irreversible path of state-led development over the last five decades. The forum participants were academics from Beijing University and high officials from the State Council Information Office and the Central Party School, all specializing in Tibetan affairs. They criticized Westerners' "Shangri-la complex" as hampering their rational understanding of Tibet under Chinese rule, condemning also anti-China forces and those who supported the Tibetan independence movement. These Tibet specialists also rejected an ersatz "Greater Tibet" concept promoted by the Dalai Lama for the sake of separatism.<sup>1</sup> Some speakers, however, admitted that the Chinese official rhetoric, such as "Tibet is an inseparable part of China" or "Tibetan: from a serf to today's master of their society," was not appealing to Westerners, though such hyperbole is deeply believed by Chinese political authorities and the Han majority. Instead, the participants in the forum suggested that a more literary or artistic presentation based upon individual stories, with titles such as "The Legend of a Tibetan," should be used to display how life in Tibet had greatly improved, how Tibetans' social status had been elevated, and how Tibetans could freely

practice their religion (Lei 2005, 42–45). These approaches to propagating China's Tibet have been implemented in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Using artistic and literary devices to promulgate the positive messages of China's Tibet since its liberation in 1951 is nothing new in the history of the PRC. Although the significant enhancement of Tibetan economic and sociopolitical conditions by the socialist state has been extensively portrayed in many early ethnic minority films, religious life remains a challenging topic that Chinese filmmakers would rarely take the risk to espouse in their works.

This chapter begins by looking back at an exceptional film, *The Serf* (1963), among all other Tibet-themed productions toeing closely the official line. Although there have been numerous Han-made representations of Tibet and its spiritual life in the PRC, Tibetans can still have an agency in shaping the image fabrication of their culture under stringent state intervention. The main part of this chapter is on the recent emergence of indie filmmaking led by Pema Tseden and Sonthar Gyal and how their works debunk the myths of Tibetan spiritual exoticism and depict the daily challenges ordinary Tibetans encounter in the modern era.

Similar to the ways Islam is treated cinematically, representations of Tibetan religion—for example, in the images of lamas, monasteries, temples, or certain sacred practices—remain a politically sensitive issue in the history of Chinese cinema. Although Tibetan monks have played a prominent role in anti-Chinese government political dissidence in several uprisings throughout the history of the PRC (e.g., the revolt in 1959 that led to the fourteenth Dalai Lama's flight to India; the unrest in 1987–89; the pre-Olympic riot in 2008; and the self-immolation protests starting from 2009), most officially endorsed Chinese films—starting from the first Tibetan-themed *The Gold and Silver Plain* (*Jinyintan* 金銀灘, dir. Ling Zifeng 凌子風, 1953) through the most popular (among Chinese audiences) *The Serf* (*Nongnu* 農奴, dir. Li Jun 李俊, 1963) to the first Tibetan-language narrative feature, *The Silent Holy Stone* (*Jingjing de Mannishi* 靜靜的嘛呢石, dir. Pema Tseden 萬瑪才旦, 2005)—persistently present a relatively positive portrayal of the Tibetan Buddhist monks as some compassionate and even pro-CCP characters.<sup>3</sup> In reality, displaying the photographs of the exiled fourteenth Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso), the government's most conspicuous villain, has been banned in Tibetan regions in contemporary China.<sup>4</sup> As the rule of the incarnate Dalai Lama combines political and religious authorities from the Tibetan tradition, China sees such a fusion of spirituality and politics as a major threat.

The PRC is constitutionally a secular country but not necessarily in the Western sense that the state is separate from religion and religion is pushed

into the private sphere with private faith. China actively regulates religious communities with different policies for ethnic minorities, while claiming to promote secularist values in the way that all nationalities and their religions have equal status. The Chinese film industry after 1949 may pride itself on being secular, since there is usually no direct depiction of religious belief or practice, even in genres about the ethnic minorities, although ethnic dances, festivals, and other cultural activities implicitly associated with religion would be allowed on-screen. Some films may even criticize people who act in the name of religion. One striking example is *The Victory of the Inner Mongolian People* of 1950, in which a GMD agent disguises himself as a lama to instigate a Mongolian prince to rebel against the CCP. The state ethnic policy is very cautious about censoring any Chinese cultural productions that openly deal with the issue of ethno-religion. Several movie projects have failed to pass censorship processes because of explicitly religious content.<sup>5</sup>

Cinema has been used by the PRC as an agent of secularization and disenchantment to embody the modern drive to unity, system, and rationality. Yet religious belief has not been displaced by the cinematic media, although it has found itself challenged and altered in the course of the encounter. Because religious faith represents an attempt to transcend the limitation of current material existence and to pursue alternative visions of moral order, the enchanted world of the religious communities is positioned somewhat outside of and unassimilable to the modern unified temporality imposed by the state authority. However, no secular state solely aims at eradicating religion. Modern management based upon rational knowledge and scientific progress is not exclusively a process of disenchantment that thoroughly displaces or dispels wonder and marvel. The political role of religion in establishing communal identity and projecting a new world order is tempting for any authority to usurp and manipulate. Although secularization defines the state as the only sovereign and restricts religion as individual faith to sustain rulers' political authority, it fails to prevent society from perpetuating its power-addicted institution because the secular state leaves intact the power structure it topples by simply moving it from one place to another, thus doing nothing but displacing the heavenly hierarchy onto an earthly one.

The Chinese state has regarded both religion and film as dynamic media capable of actively reshaping the world and creating an order of existence projected and framed through their respective means, that is, rituals and myths in religion and cinematography and editing in film. Religious ritual and film could be parallel media of representation because both engage in

certain identification with a represented “other” through which viewers are sutured into the cinematic narrative and believers into the sacred one. Thus, they become accomplices in the respective ideological reality supported by the narrative. Hence, the distinction between content and apparatus might have collapsed in the McLuhanite slogan that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1964). The ruling regime has the belief that, as long as it has control over the media materialities and mechanisms, it can monitor and shape ideas, values, and thoughts. But in the early period, the CCP saw religion as a forbidden zone that no film was permitted to enter—and not simply because the party-state was an avowedly militant atheist and thus determined to suppress irrational superstitions. The communist regime was yet to develop an effective policy to institutionalize China’s traditional spiritual beliefs and their practicing communities, in particular the non-Han ethnic minorities, into the category of “modern religion” (differentiated from “superstition”) under the administration of the centralized state.

Although the Cultural Revolution might indicate the antagonistic dichotomy between the Chinese state and religions, as the former tried to eliminate the latter through political ideologies, the situation of religion in the PRC has never been a sheer symbol of resistance against the state power or a history of conflicts between state and religion. Rather, the relationship between the state and religion is a process of interaction, competition, negotiation, and adaptation among different groups (including state officials, religious leaders, social elites, intellectuals, and lay believers) involved in the making of modern religion and the modern state.<sup>6</sup> The positioning of religion and the project of modernizing it are closely tied to the modern state formation. It took several decades for the Chinese state to announce that religion, alongside capitalism, was a part of the necessary transition process to communism.

After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the practice of religion was allowed to continue to some degree until the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. During the decade of the Cultural Revolution, all religious practices were banned, monks were disrobed, and most religious buildings were demolished. After the death of Mao and the rise of Deng in 1978, the Chinese government started to offer more cultural and religious autonomy to its citizens. But the recent revival of religion, both in China and globally, has presented new challenges to the state authorities, even though it was the Chinese government in the early reform era of the 1980s that initiated the radical reevaluation of religion, returned their properties seized over previous years to religious organizations, and allowed them to oper-

ate legally again. But post-Mao China's craze for religions also designates the crisis of faith in the decline of Marxist ideology and the value vacuum characterized by intense commodification. The post-Mao regime usurped the resurgence of religions for legitimizing itself, rebuilding society, and instilling some kind of moral values after the political turmoil, but it also faced tremendous difficulties in reassuming its leadership to steer the spiritual vitality of the governed in the dominant flows of frenetic materialism.

With the explosion of religious beliefs and practices both on the surface and underground, it is even harder for the government during the reform era to exert total control as it wishes.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the return of religion to post-socialist China also reconstitutes religious belief as more a matter of choice than necessity and renders it more open to commodification and market demands. Many religious institutions in this era "secularized" themselves to accommodate the profound changes brought by the Chinese experience of the rapid modernization process.

#### From Re-Presenting Religion to Struggle for the Medium: The Ambiguity of *The Serf*

Religious-themed movies about ethnic minorities came into view more often in the PRC starting in the 1980s, although the state may not have allowed some to be produced or screened due to their too obvious religious contents or representations. The religious films made by Han or ethnic filmmakers also actively make use of cultural terms to deliver their spirituality and to enable their works to be more accessible to the common viewers through the appeal of universal, secular-rational ethics rather than specific religious values (Ju 2015). Flirting with Tibetan religion may have begun with *The Serf* (*Nongnu* 農奴, dir. Li Jun 李俊, 1963), where the filmmaker toyed with Buddhist images through some new aesthetic style said to be learned from the French New Wave. In the early 1960s, a period belonging to the innovative Seventeen Years in Chinese film history, filmmakers in the PRC had the opportunity to do their special private screenings as "internal references" of Italian Neorealism, French New Wave, and the Soviet thaw period films, which became sources of inspiration for changing their cinematic language, even if China's political ideological control was tight (Hong 2008, 63; Lu 2002, 352–63).

Although the PRC's ideologists adopted a utilitarian approach to baptize, if not relegate, film to the quasi-religious function of pedagogical and propagandist services, Chinese filmmakers have seen *The Serf* as an alter-

native spiritual path to possibilities beyond strict political doctrines. Following the official ideological guideline, *The Serf* aimed to dispel Tibetan religious illusions in the name of scientific socialism and the sober truth of class struggle. But there is no guarantee that the film's engagement in such a civilizing mission is without an illusion of its own. This doesn't just refer to how the film ends with the serf, Jampa (or Qiangba 強巴), regaining his voice after years of silence because he finds a new object of devotion, which is the picture of Chairman Mao hung on the wall, or to the hundreds of Tibetans on the street cheering for the arrival of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to show their support for Beijing-led liberation. The deep illusion could be that Chinese communism rejects religion as addictive as opium because it offers a false picture to human beings. But it shares a similar pattern, function, and structure as the established religion in the way both make absolute claims for the superiority of a certain being and demand followers to see this being as the object of their ultimate loyalty, with no limits and no higher loyalty. The absurdity of the film of 1963 is that it is never a genuine attempt to debunk religious belief but simply an implicit restaging of passionate adherence to some belief system that culminates in the figure of Mao. With the sacralization of the leader and the Communist Party, acts of secularization, desecularization, and resanctification turn out to be simultaneous and mutually reinforcing processes.

Under the guidance of the political propaganda mission, Chinese filmmakers enthusiastically worked on the "aesthetics of liberation." But the secular atheist's attempt to fight religion and wreck divine objects for the sake of liberation always ends up by flinging away liberty and results in a gray universe of tyranny deprived of religious reference. *The Serf* can be considered an example of untidy correspondence between film and quasi-religious communist dogma. The former carries some polysemic quality that allows a certain degree of ambiguity and fluidity of meaning, while the latter has a systematic organization of meaning characteristic of clearly defined codes. Released in 1963 during the short period of the so-called cultural thaw in the early 1960s, due to a temporary political defeat of Mao's catastrophic Great Leap Forward,<sup>8</sup> as a tribute film (*xianli pi* 獻禮片) to the fifteenth anniversary of the PRC, *The Serf* makes use of the experience of suffering (the Tibetan serf Jampa has been treated as an animal by his landlord, and his master uses him like a horse to ride) to motivate an impulsive urge to justice and happiness (Jampa has a strong personality and decides not to speak as a protest against his serf owner). Although communism, unlike religion proper, does not rely on a supernatural power to surmount the structural flaws in the human world, the PLA soldiers are portrayed in

the film as godlike saviors to the serf since Tibetans who are truly in need of transformation cannot accomplish the change by their effort alone. In this sense, communism is presented in *The Serf* as a substitute for the religion in Tibet. The film itself has become a powerful piece of propaganda, conveying China's rescue and emancipation of a hell-like Tibet. Tibetan filmmaker and writer Dorje Tsering Chenaktsang (aka Jangbu) commented in the early twenty-first century that many of the Chinese he met told him that their very first impression of Tibet came from the images of *The Serf* (Chenaktsang 2008). Ironically, even though the film has successfully imprinted a memorable stereotypical Tibet on the minds of the vast majority of Chinese viewers, Chinese audiences generally did not see the film as their favorite, according to a survey, because of its dark aesthetic style.<sup>9</sup>

Although widely seen as propaganda, *The Serf* is very different from other typical ethnic minority films that muddle the theme of class struggle and foreground song and dance. Backed up with a strong political position, the filmmaker seems to have more confidence in maneuvering the aesthetic realms. In a sense, "aesthetics of liberation" doesn't just refer to the stylistic representation of Tibetan serfs but also implies how the Han Chinese filmmakers experiment with their freedom. The first half of the film is usually understood as a dramatic portrayal of the extremely horrifying feudal Tibetan society in which the poor peasants are enslaved by their landlords until death. However, the film language used to bring the Tibetan inferno to life is far more creative, vivid, and fascinating than the formulaic narrative in the later part, when the *jinzhu mami* (金珠瑪米 Bodhisattva soldiers) arrive to rescue and "peacefully emancipate" the serfs.

Under the lama's trumpet sounds from the mountain and the laborers' chanting as background music in the opening sequence, the physical movement of the serfs with heavy bags of grain hobbling up the hill to the landlord's granary can be compared with the monotonous rhythm of the emotionless workers numbly marching to work in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). Like a rhapsody on manual labor, the film monumentalizes Tibetans' sweaty and shimmering bodies like moving statues rather than presenting them as flesh. The following close-up of the female victim, Jampa's mother, with her agonized face while falling from the stairs as she blacks out (as if she is undergoing a blackout by losing her consciousness) to the close-up fading-in shot of crying baby Jampa and another close-up of his mother holding him and lamenting, "Don't cry, Jampa. You have incarnated and become a human being" all seem to create images of sensual life affirmation and blazing fertility in contrast to the theme of gloomy suffering and even death. While the Tibetans in the film do not enjoy their suf-

fering, they don't find their miserable human life thoroughly meaningless. However, to (re)incarnate in this hell seems to be a thing to be celebrated. When the story unfolds, *The Serf* implies the pervasive influences of Buddhism in daily life. The film asserts that the primal ideological competitor to the Maoist class revolution, the Buddhist faith, renders the brutalized Tibetan people able to endure their humiliation and passively accept their fate. Ironically, though, the PLA in *The Serf* has been described as a Buddhist military force hailed to give Tibetan masses enlightenment. In the words of Rangdol (Landuo 蘭朵 in Chinese), Jampa's childhood friend:

There is a Bodhisattva who stands in the red sun of the East and can see the suffering in the highest place of the world. As he points his finger, his army of Bodhisattvas then crosses hundreds and thousands of mountains and rivers to come to alleviate our suffering. Every Bodhisattvas soldier wears a hat on his head with a five-pointed red star!

A substitution of one god with another is by no means an easy task. In the process of transition, we see the film is more drawn and lured by the old world of the Buddhist faith, even if such a universe has been painted as dark and doomed. The film depicts how Jampa's mother returns the whip used to torture her husband to the landlord's house as a submissive way to accept her death. The camera placed above shows her walking painfully across the main entrance of the lord's house, and then the camera flips to turn the scene upside down by creating an optical illusion that her shadow plunges into the mansion. In the shot-by-shot film script, the director Li Jun describes the full shot metaphorically: "The main door of Lord Wangyal's manor is like the big mouth of a cannibal that has devoured Mother" (Li 1965, 72).

With its rather innovative film language, *The Serf* explores Tibetan Buddhism in some detail, which is not very relevant to the propaganda theme. The pan and wide shot of the temple and the medium shot of the White Tara statue (aka Guan Yin 觀音 in Chinese) from young Jampa's perspective both reveal the mysterious and fascinating atmosphere of Buddhist daily life. When the grown-up Jampa has been coerced to convert to a monk as punishment for his rebellious acts, the film presents a gigantic bodhisattva statue that dwarfs all human figures. Kind-hearted lama Gendun becomes Jampa's patron to teach him how to sculpt the big Buddha figurine as a way to redeem one's sins. In Gendun's own words, "We do not live for this life but only for the next incarnation." While he crouches



Fig. 5.1. The special camera angle of Jampa's mother walking across the main entrance of the lord's house. Screenshot from *The Serf*.

on the palm of the statute and paints it, Gendun suddenly becomes blind, but then he calmly tells Jampa, "My sins have been fully redressed. The eyes of Buddha will be opened and the statute is consecrated." On the surface, the film intends to show how irrelevant and useless the Buddhist beliefs and objects of worship are to the miseries of Tibetans. But it is quite captivating how Tibetans endure and accept their humiliation and suffering through the role of Buddhism in their everyday lives. The bold and experimental style of film language is far more evident in its portrayal of the dark old Buddhist world than in the presentation of the new, bright world brought by the communist revolution. Belief is a tricky business: a seemingly theatrical or cinematic make-believe could be a place of truth while a propaganda device may backfire. It was the notions of incarnation and next life that fascinated the filmmakers as they frantically tried to embody Mao in the form of Tibetans' new Buddha.

In 2009, a year after the widespread uprising in the Tibetan regions, the Chinese government declared that an official Serf Liberation Day festival (*Xizang baiwan nongnu jiefang jinianri* 西藏百萬農奴解放紀念日) was to be celebrated in Tibet to commemorate the emancipation of Tibetans by the PLA for the events of 1959. *The Serf* pompously reappeared on the Tibetan television channel during the festival. The rerun of the film and the official celebration were meant to be a legitimation of Chinese rule in Tibet as well as an outright denial of any indigenous agency. The reshown film intended to persuade Chinese audiences to believe in the merits of the Chinese mission and to gain their support for the government crackdown on the riots in Tibet. While Tibetan audiences may think very differently of the film, the class struggle message delivered by *The Serf* has successfully rendered the idea that the Tibetan aristocracy has been effectively and permanently destroyed by the Chinese regime and the Dalai Lama has been driven out of Tibet. But since then, the Beijing government has had to deal with the only recentralized and re-empowered fourteenth Dalai Lama in exile, given that there have been tensions between different power holders in traditional Tibetan society (Knauff 2016, 175).

As mentioned earlier, the Chinese regime strongly upholds the view that, in resonance with Marshall McLuhan's famous saying that the "medium is the message," insofar as it has full control over the medium or apparatus, the state will have the advantage of maneuvering any content or message at will. From this perspective, the Dalai Lama is no longer just the message; in many cases, he has become the medium that the regime wants to control. The Beijing government publicly announced in 2007 that all incarnations of Tibetan lamas would be recognized only when they

applied through the Chinese State Council. In response to the fourteenth Dalai Lama's comment that if he was reborn, it would not be in a country run by the PRC or in any other country that was not free, the Chinese Foreign Ministry further stated that only Beijing could appoint the next Dalai Lama and that any attempt to have the reincarnation outside China would violate Chinese law. As the process of identifying the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama is very complicated, enough room is provided for political manipulation and intervention. Tenzin Gyatso has also expressed uncertainty over whether he will be reborn at all, implying that the function of the Dalai Lama may be over—although it seems likely that there will continue to be a Dalai Lama only as a religious leader, albeit not as a political one.

As medium or media has always been entangled in cycles of innovation and obsolescence, or of innovation and re-innovation, it would be no surprise to see that one day the Dalai Lama vehicle may be transformed into a different form. Indeed, the return of religion in China is not a return to what is already there; rather, new forms of media through which religious messages are communicated constitute an interruptive articulation for new political-economy configurations of nationalist sentiments, tightening authoritarian governance and moral boundaries in connection with expansive capitalist and transnational mechanisms. Despite the state-constrained production milieu, films have opened up a terrain on which religious as well as ethical issues can be dramatized in ways that escape the stereotypical discourse while deploying genre formats and cinematic conventions.

Although Chinese film about Tibet was first used as a vehicle of ethnography or as a descriptive, if not propagandist, medium to register ethnic cultural patterns under the state policy, the new generation of Tibetan filmmakers can appropriate the filmic or digital media to present the complexities of the present moment with a sense of immediacy and to render it into a space for externalizing social dramas, dilemmas, and processes so their community can see and reflect upon itself. Both philosophical questions about the construction of personal consciousness and social issues about the (re)construction of public spheres and the communal functions of film are involved here with the broadest sense of "religion," which etymologically means *to religare*, or to bind. For the new generation of Tibetan filmmakers, film is a key technology of modernity. It is an apparatus through which people learn to deal with the shock of the new, to grapple with speed, multiple sensory channels of information, nonlinear attention, scanning and sampling tactics in the face of fragmentary data, and pleasure in juxtaposing forms that shape and change perspectives or meanings, thus recon-

stituting sociocultural consciousness. They cautiously use film as a vehicle for parables to help with moral evaluations of life's dilemmas, constituting some intertextual fabric between art, ethics, and religion.

### Tibetans' Agency in Re-Mediating the State's Commodification of Their Religion

Systematic state intervention in religion is never confined to modern history. It is well known that the Qing emperors made good use of Buddhism to rule the Mongols and the Tibetans (Ujeed 2013). However, to attribute the Qing success over Mongolia and Tibet to the credit of Buddhist religious belief is way too simplistic. Such a description only focuses on the reigning techniques of the imperial state and ignores how the ethnic subjects on the periphery respond to the religious project of the political center and how the Buddhist practices could be reinterpreted and renegotiated by the governed to accommodate the political pressures. Both the Mongols and the Tibetans were by no means hapless victims of Manchu imperial rule; rather, they engaged actively in the disheveled processes of transformation and negotiation by which imperial and religious projects gave rise to new relations and new identities (Tuttle and Elverskog 2011; Elverskog 2006; Berger 2003).

In the PRC's founding years, the CCP promised with the Seventeen-Point Agreement in 1951 to restore confidence in the Tibetans that their religious culture could continue and new incarnations of lamas would officially be endorsed. Although China's position toward the Tibetan Buddhist faith has fluctuated between coercing reforms and toleration of its existence, the communist regime generally finds the undisputed central authority of the religious-cum-political leaders desirable to the interest of its governance. Hence, monitoring the reincarnation process and controlling such religious leaders on Beijing's behalf become key factors concerning the rule of Tibet. As a result, the Chinese state handles the religious issue on the ethnic borderlands as an internal component of the ethnicity question. Even if the government in the post-Mao era allows the return of religious practices, while continually asserting its authority in directing all kinds of religious affairs (such as how one may worship and which mosques, monasteries, and temples should be rebuilt, protected, and opened to Chinese believers and foreign visitors), the Chinese regime has implemented the "formulation of short-term tolerance and long-term cul-

tural transformation” concerning the “ethno-religion” question to balance the conflicting priorities by “ensuring nominal religious freedom, and at the same time civilizing the ethno-religious minorities” (Sutton and Kang 2009, 197).

To implement such long-term objectives and to make great efforts to uphold its authority in religious matters, the state has endeavored to co-opt all those faiths—not only those more tamed like Daoism and Chinese Buddhism but also those potentially threatening, such as Islam, Christianity, and Tibetan Buddhism—into its recognized narratives. One such narrative is the reconfiguration of faith as a cultural rather than a religious phenomenon; in other words, religious traditions and activities—particularly of the ethnic minorities—have been primarily “folklorized” or rephrased as folk cultures for economic tourism and intangible cultural heritage preservation. Persistently, the Chinese authorities reshape the religious faith into a folkloric cultural phenomenon; they sinicize or commodify the religious practice through the project of “museumization” or “Disneyfication” (under the principles of theming, hybrid consumption, merchandizing, and performative labor) to subdue its potential political threat and to reconfigure it into some safe but exotic attraction for the tourism industry (Tapp 2014; Bryman 2004). Such visual economies of ethnic folk cultures subject the ethnic people to biopower and to forms of emotional investment designed to mold them into pliable and willing performers of authoritarian-capitalist spectacles. It is also remediation in a broad sense by altering the religious practices into some folk cultures through the rechanneling of human affects and by creating new environments. However, old media being refashioned for different purposes may remediate newer ones within the same media economy.

There is indeed a nonnegligible role for Tibetans to play in the process of remediation—that is, essentialization and fetishization of their religion and ethnic culture. While ethnic touristization and incarceration of Tibetan Buddhism into a theme park engineered by the state aim at reducing the ethnic religion to a commodity, many monks and other Tibetans cope with the rules of the game set by the Chinese government and the market demands to maneuver for their own spaces. For example, Tibetan lamas and ordinary Tibetans are recruited to work and perform in Beijing Ethnic Park to stage authenticity in the exotic objectification of Tibetan-ness for the Han gaze, but their adaptable and flexible participation can introduce a certain sense of religious authenticity as a counterstrategy against the secularizing commodification. As Charlene Makley argues:

It was this capacity to offer both transcendent *and* immediate worldly values mediated and embodied by the incarnate lama that made Tibetan forms of tantric Buddhism so vital in the political economic transaction in late imperial *and* Republican-China [and this is also an important reason] why Tibetan forms of Buddhism have been so highly amenable to the capitalist reordering that are part and parcel of their global appeal. (2010, 142; emphasis in original)

With the escalating numbers of believers from Han-based China and all over the world, Tibetan Buddhist lamas are touting themselves as indispensable agents and expending their entrepreneurial efforts in expanding their patronage spheres to enhance their influences over the moral imperative of Greater China, even if the state ethno-religious policy aims at restricting religion to a circumscribed realm.

As successive Chinese regimes have attempted to control the narrative of Tibetan Buddhism by holding power over its storytelling and image making, the Buddhist religious groups have also sought to become an active agency in their own representation by not letting Tibetan imagery fall entirely into the control of outsiders. While filming themselves may not be a convenient job, the Tibetan Buddhist leaders, such as the thirteenth Dalai Lama and the ninth Panchen Lama in the early years of the twentieth century, began using cameras to photograph their own images and the surroundings to communicate with their followers. Other Tibetan elites also experimented with photography in this period and sharpened their skills by learning from the Europeans. Through the British introduction of the camera, the thirteenth Dalai Lama tried to use the medium to animate his religious aura for followers in the age of mechanical reproduction. While visiting Darjeeling of British-ruled India in 1912 after Lieutenant Colonel Younghusband invaded Tibet in 1903–4, he called upon a British professional photographer to take a picture of him in a Buddhist setting arranged by his retinue. In the photograph, the properly attired thirteenth Dalai Lama was in a Buddhist sitting posture with *thangka* as a backdrop and Tibetan textiles as props in tune with Tibetan Buddhist aesthetics. He further indigenized the visual product of the British imperialist by requesting a Tibetan painter to hand color the black-and-white print. Hence, “fusing the mimetic qualities of photography with the authenticating aesthetic of a Tibetan painter’s pigment, the Dalai Lama converted a *par* [copy] into a *rten* [power object] and essentially invented the Tibetan photo-icon” (Harris 2016, 128; emphasis in original).

While the visual image of the fourteenth Dalai Lama is as popular as that of Hollywood stars or heads of major nations in the contemporary era, he was also a keen cinematographer himself in his younger years. In his memoir, *Sieben Jahre in Tibet* (1953; first English translation, *Seven Years in Tibet*, 1954), Austrian explorer Heinrich Harrer reported that he had made an arduous trek across the Himalayas to Tibet, where he became a tutor and friend to the young fourteenth Dalai Lama. Harrer built a cinema for him with a projector run off a jeep engine. In Harrer's account, the young Dalai Lama was enthusiastic about all types of cameras and could operate a cine-camera with some skill (2009).

Exile Tibetan writer Jamyang Norbu has argued against the Chinese stigmatization of Tibetan backwardness by tracing the histories of Tibetan reception of photography and film technologies. According to his description, Tibetan elite class members were already quite savvy in their knowledge of photography and cinema in the early twentieth century primarily because of the consecutive British missions to Lhasa in the 1920s that used cinema as "a means of creating a friendly and informal atmosphere in their dealings with the Tibetans" (Norbu 2010).<sup>10</sup> While calling cinema *beskop* in Tibetan (an indigenized loanword from "bioscope") and having their first commercial cinema hall established in Lhasa in 1934, Tibetans were not merely passive audiences for the film reels brought to their isolated plateau by Europeans. What is revealing is how Tibetans flexibly employed different strategies to deal with strong external forces.

Media nowadays are assumed to function through their socio-technical formats and practices independently of their specific content and ends. Although there is a major shift of focus to what media do rather than what they mean, this does not necessarily lead to the assumption that representation or message is not important. While the modernist concept highlights the irreducible essence and specificity of each medium to validate it as a genuine art form, cinematic medium or film as media is impure by nature, so is more available and accessible to anyone who would read or enjoy the film in their own ways. The democratic power of cinema shares similar, if not the same, functions that have historically been accorded to religion. Undoubtedly there is a religious side to cinema; however, the cinematic medium is more than instrumental to the state in implementing its religious policy or to the religious groups in visualizing, reinforcing, and shaping their identity in front of the public gaze. All the media the religious communities want to use and change also change them in turn. Perhaps mediatized religion is already an outcome or product of the media's special nature and mechanism.

### Cinematic Obsessions with Tibetan Spirituality

While China's ethnic minority genre, in general, is an assemblage being shaped by and acting upon a wide range of forces, Tibet cinema in particular is the most intense contested territory within which different and conflicting groups coalesce in discordant manners to create, modify, and (un)make the multiple and competing dimensions of Tibet and its Buddhist religion. Image makers and narrative producers about Tibet, all carrying their specific cultural or political agendas, seem to converge on certain emotions or thinking of Tibetan religion. There is a wide spectrum of representing Tibetan Buddhism in these films of different cultural backgrounds. Religion could be an explicit theme in some works, whereas other films implicitly allude to Buddhist concepts and practices in action, dialogue, or visual sequence.

Although religion remains a sensitive and taboo issue in PRC cinema, ethnic films in the reform era—probably for the sake of marketing strategy—tend to depict ethno-religious activities as some exotic spectacle. Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Horse Thief* (1986), as one of the most outstanding representatives of fifth-generation Chinese cinema, tends to use the preliberation Tibet as an allegory to diagnose the problems of post-Mao China. The political void symbolized by the entire absence of any communist trace is filled out, as some critics argue, by the excessive exoticism of a religious Tibet. But the film's exoticization and fetishization of the ethnic Other did not appeal to the taste of the mainstream market, since its minimalist experimental narrative and documentary-like presentation without any voiceover explication only frustrate the viewing pleasures.<sup>11</sup> The fantasy of cross-ethnic identification is complicated by the exaggeration of ethnic differences. The film opens with the traditional Tibetan funerary practice, the sky burial, where the dead body is offered for vultures to consume so that the scavenging birds can take the soul to the heavens. Its spectacular feature that drew a lot of attention when it was released in the mid-1980s was its cinematic focus on Tibet's religious and cultural rituals and ceremonies. The life of the protagonist, who has to steal a horse to support his family, is torn between transgressing against the religious rules and seeking redemption for his sins. The collective belief might offer security and hope to people during hard times, but it can also suffocate and curtail individual possibilities. It could broadly be seen as a movie about religious faith, touching on the sensitive issue of what would generally have been dismissed as superstition. The blind faith portrayed in *Horse Thief* could be associated with the Mao cult and the revolutionary passions of the Cultural

Revolution. The film questions whether faith alone brings salvation, even though religious convictions may alleviate suffering.

After Tian's *Horse Thief* served as a milestone, more and more Han filmmakers have engaged in making Tibet-related or even Tibetan-language films—and not all necessarily in the mode of state propaganda. Feng Xiaoning's big-budget *Red River Valley* (*Hong begu* 紅河谷, 1996), released on the eve of the Hong Kong handover, is a “commercialized” propaganda film aimed at a larger market to champion Han Chinese–Tibetan solidarity in the face of the British imperialist incursion at the turn of the century and to depict both Tibetans and Han as the victims of oppressive religions. The film freely adapts Colonel Younghusband's memoir of the British military expedition to Lhasa in 1903–4 by deliberately adding a Han girl as the love interest of the Tibetan male lead to emphasize the intimate Chinese connection with Tibetans in their fight against foreign invaders. While Feng's film continues to exploit the stereotypical Tibet images of scenic snowy mountains, luxuriant green plains, and a colorful costumed cast, this state-message vassal attempts a twist by reversing the sex roles in the interethnic romance. It is no longer the male protagonist from the dominant culture who conquers the female character of the subjugated culture. In the film's relatively different mode of Orientalist imagination, the Han girl of the dominant culture adopts the Tibetan way of life and falls for the Tibetan male, though the consummation of their love remains implausible. Despite suppressing Tibetan religion for the cause of national unity, the film reveals that the spiritual dimension of Tibetan culture is still fascinating enough to attract the Han Chinese. *Red River Valley* won many prizes at China's major film awards, including Huabiao, Golden Rooster, and Hundred Flowers, but its reputation didn't go beyond the national borders.

The softening approach to Tibet is found in veteran filmmaker Xie Fei's *Song of Tibet* (*Yixi Zhuoma* 益西卓瑪, 2000), which tells a melodramatic love story of a Tibetan woman, Yeshe Dolma, with three different Tibetan men (a benevolent landlord, a hot-tempered herdsman, and a compassionate lama) in the stormy 1950s. While the politics are only in the misty background of the past, there is no Chinese in sight throughout the film, but only the visual evidence of a prosperous contemporary Lhasa infiltrated by cybercafes in the reform era. The warm-hearted film suggests that it is Buddhist compassion that makes all the characters come to terms with their hardships and betrayals in the love entanglement. Such romanticization of Tibetans continues in Lu Chuan's *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol* (*Kekexili* 可可西里, 2004), which is based on a real story widely reported by the Chinese media. The story is about legendary Sonam Dargye, a party

cadre of Drido County in Kekexili (or Hoh Xil), Qinghai Province, who organized the Wild Yak Brigade to protect the endangered Tibetan antelopes against illegal poachers. These volunteers, comprising both Tibetans and Han Chinese, went to the Hoh Xil plateau a dozen times in severe weather and captured several hundred poachers. But in 1994 Sonam Dargye was killed during an ambush by poachers. The cinematic adaptation of this thankless struggle of the Tibetans, with their religious-like dedication and sacrifice to save a wildlife species without any government support, invited numerous ideological interpretations nationally and abroad. The event led the Chinese government to declare Qinghai Hoh Xil a national nature reserve and to establish a forestry bureau to protect it (it is also a designated United Nations World Heritage Site). This was still the time when exoticized Tibetans were seen by mainstream Chinese society as people bequeathed with spirituality and ancient wisdom, and the land of Tibet was viewed as having an extraordinary connection to nature while the Chinese were increasingly experiencing environmental pollution and ecological devastation.

Although the Chinese negative repercussions against Tibetans resumed after the 2008 Tibet unrest and Tibet-related films have since been closely monitored to ensure they toe the official line, several productions on the Tibetan religious faith were released. Mongolian filmmaker Haas Chaolu's *Thankga* (*Tangka* 唐卡, 2012) describes how a *Thankga* master painter who will soon go blind desperately searches for his successor to continue this traditional religious art, with its 1,300 year history. In response to the rising Tibetan-language films made by Tibetan artists, Haas Chaolu emphasizes the authenticity of his understanding of Tibetan Buddhism since Mongols have practiced the Tibetan Buddhist beliefs of the Gelug and Kagyu lineages since the thirteenth century when Kublai Khan established the Yuan dynasty in China and invited Tibetan lamas to preach Buddhism throughout his empire. Using *Thankga* to present progressive development in China's Tibet as a reference, a Chinese pro-state critic disparages the Western narrow-minded and ideologically loaded attention to the trauma-stricken Tibetan-language films made by Pema Tsenden for their ignorance of the diversity of China's Tibetan-language cinemas (Hu 2013).

Another good example that illustrates China's diversified Tibet-related cinema is tulku Chakme Rinpoche's *ATA* (*Zhaojian* 照見, 2014). Shot on location in contemporary Inner Mongolia, this debut directed by the ninth Chakme Rinpoche has nothing to do with Tibet and its religion directly, although the film title is Sanskrit, meaning "illuminating." The black-and-white film tells how a sightless boy is unpleasantly pressured by his single-

parent mother to train in blind ping-pong in the hope that he will become a national champion. However, one day the boy suddenly vanishes. Most of the film is about his mother looking for the son, to no avail. She comes up with the idea of wearing an eye mask to help her experience her son's darkness firsthand. With her eyes covered, she gropes her way through the city streets, car parks, and other urban architecture, gradually discovering another capacity to see. While not directly delivering any conspicuous Buddhist message, the film is promoted as a highly crafted artwork by a reincarnated lama to convey spiritual vitality.

The popularity of Zhang Yang's *Paths of the Soul* (*Gangrenboqi* 岡仁波齊, 2015) further shows China's current craving for Tibetan spirituality. Presented in a simple, ethnographic-like documentary mode, without any music scores or voiceover, and performed by a nonprofessional cast, Zhang's film appears to be a meticulous chronicle of a group of eleven Tibetan villagers undertaking a thousand-mile pilgrimage to Lhasa by prostrating themselves on the ground every few steps to pray for the happiness of others and self-redemption. The Chinese title, *Gangrenboqi*, refers to the sacred Kangrinboqe, or Mount Kailash, which one pilgrim wants to visit to fulfill his family's lifelong wish. The camera maintains a distance, with very few close-ups of the devout pilgrims during the seven-month journey. Yet the long shot does not necessarily generate any strong sense of observational objectivity, since the film only reinforces the romanticized projection of the Tibetans as pure and serene Buddhist devotees who remain untouched and unaffected by modern values and socialist rule. But the film ignores the fact that the Tibetan actors actually speak different dialects and may not understand one another perfectly (Berry 2019). Not unlike many Han Chinese drifters in Tibet (*zangpiao* 藏漂), who invest their idealized Tibetanness with fantasies and emotional attachment, Zhang sublimates the Tibetan spiritual discipline and unbreakable faith as an enlightening path for him as an artist to find the meaning of life amid the materialist world.

### The Emergence of Tibetan-Made Cinema: Reincarnation of the New

For the young generation of ethnic minority filmmakers in Tibet, religious faith becomes a relatively mundane practice, apparently shifting from a sublime and exotic staging to an everyday life presentation. From a Buddhist perspective, passions only push individuals further to the *samsara*-like world of suffering, while peace of mind in everydayness may help

to achieve enlightenment in the process of accumulating karma. In the essential disorientation of our contemporary epoch, cinema becomes a new form of thinking for the young Tibetan filmmakers (who primarily grew up and were educated in the PRC system) as a response to the world as it is and ultimately a way of reflecting and resisting that world. For them, cinema—or, indeed, any modern art form—is both a connection to the sacred and at the same time a form of desacralization. The emergence of local Tibetan self-produced moving images appears to be a significant dimension of contemporary Tibetan cultural formation, representation, and identity. In their visual works, they generally deal with Tibet's radically restructured religious, political, economic, and social realms beneath the PRC's repressive governance and the impacts of globalization. Though religion remains pervasive in their films, it is no longer upheld by the young generation of Tibetan artists as an effective worldview to understand the structural domination of their current situation.

These changes in Tibetan areas, however, have been celebrated in the PRC as the positive outcomes brought by state-led development, whereas outside observers (including the Tibetans in exile) may see these structural transformations as detrimental to the survival and continuity of Tibet. I mentioned in the previous chapter how the Uyghurs alongside other ethnic groups do not substantially benefit from the developmental initiatives in a top-down manner from the state in Xinjiang but suffer from ethnic hierarchies and ecological devastation. Ordinary Tibetans also have been facing severe challenges brought by the policies of economic development and political control, including urbanization; resettlement; displacement; dispossession of lands, resources, and livelihoods; marginalization; and underemployment (Fischer 2014). From the state's perspective, urbanization, based upon using precarious labor and reinforcing socioecological inequalities, is a symbol of modernization but also an efficient instrument of state territorialization to secure control over the ethnic daily lives. Being dispossessed of their farmlands for urban development, Tibetan peasants have been resettled to the urban towns where they lose connection with their historically place-based identity and become financially vulnerable as they have a hard time finding jobs in the Han-dominated labor markets (Yeh 2013).

Under the drastic changes and harsh environments over which Tibetans have little determining control, outsiders are amazed at conspicuous signs of vibrant creativity, innovation, and strong adaptability in contemporary Tibetan cinematic productions. These works show how local Tibetans in

China respond and reflect on those (in)voluntary changes. The advent of digital technology has acted as an incentive for independent Tibetan film and video making, though the structural changes that define modern Tibetan culture have been taking place since the late 1980s before digital technology arrived in post-Mao China.

Since the release of his first three feature films, *The Silent Holy Stone*, *The Search* (*Xunzhaio Zhimei Gengdeng* 尋找智美更登, 2009), and *Old Dog* (*Laogou* 老狗, 2011), Pema Tsenden has taken the lead in ushering in the birth of Tibetan-language cinema in China and has been an inspiring model for China's ethnic minority cinema. As an art-house director who has managed to work within the very stern Chinese censorship system that is constantly shifting its boundaries of what is permitted while still producing films that resonate with audiences far beyond the confinements of the system, Pema Tsenden is also credited for his ability and leadership in generating a budding Tibetan-language film industry with predominantly Tibetan actors and Tibetan crew members. While the emergence of Pema Tsenden-led Tibetan-language cinema has increasingly been lauded nationally in the PRC and internationally, at the same time, a Chinese film critic, Hu Puzong, doubts whether Pema Tsenden's Amdo-based productions can accurately represent the cinema of "Tibet," since all of his films have been made only in Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of eastern Qinghai and are primarily spoken in the Amdolese Tibetan language.<sup>12</sup> Territorially speaking, Hu questions how these Amdo-based films can accurately represent the cinema of "Tibet" (Xizang) as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

While attracting the most international attention, the Pema Tsenden-centered Tibetan-language film movement starting from the first decade of the 2000s was only one among the waves of self-determined productions by Tibetan artists, intellectuals, students, and laypeople, according to Robert Barnett (2015). Other than Qinghai Province and the Tibet Autonomous Region, there is also a booming digital video industry in Kham, a Tibetan-inhabited region in today's Sichuan, Yunnan, and part of Qinghai Provinces,<sup>14</sup> where a small group of Tibetan amateurs actively experiments with popular homemade videos by adapting the Gesar epic and other modern-setting stories. They do so with financial support from the local Buddhist temples (Dourcy 2016). However, it is undoubtedly the Pema Tsenden-led Tibetan-language film movement that has been most successful.

In an interview, Sonthar Gyal, who initially served as Pema Tsenden's cinematographer and then became a director, reveals:

This group of young Tibetan cineastes [at Amdo of Qinghai] is getting close to having about 30 people, including directors, scriptwriters, and actors. Very different from the early period, where there were only Pema Tsenden and me. (*Zangde yinghua* 2016)

While the Tibetan film movement is gaining momentum and is attributed as a “new wave,” Pema Tsenden has expressed reservations when being asked how he feels about the term:

I think it's hard to form a “new wave”—it's nothing like the French New Wave [of the 1950s and 1960s] in terms of scale and thinking. Movies about Tibet used to either belong to the politically correct mainstream or come from the perspective of outsiders, be they from China or further afield. My films are told from the perspective of my own people. If everyone thinks that this is something different, then it's okay for them to use the word “new.” (Yin 2017)

Tactfully avoiding a pristine view of Buddhism as well as an open declaration of faith, Pema Tsenden's films even carry the capacity to provide certain pleasure and humor to his audiences by looking at how Buddhist religion is humanized and merged (instead of clashing) with the secular cultures. His films occasionally make fun of the characters for their lack of goals rather than affirming the religiously motivated teleology. Many of his characters are in a state of indecision about the gods. The most typical is the producer in his road movie, *The Search*, who gives up his monastic life to pursue his romantic love. The cinematic world portrayed by Pema Tsenden is not the one where salvation is ineluctably to come through painstaking faith and patient meditation. Compared with his documentaries, such as *The Last Weather-Shaman* (*Zuibou de fangbaoshi* 最後的防雹師, 2004), *Kathok Puja* (*Getuo dafahui* 噶陀大法會, 2007), and *Samye Monastery* (*Sangyesi* 桑耶寺, 2007), and his coauthored book *The Master in Tibet* (2006), Pema Tsenden's drama feature films are not directly related to religion. Taking a positive view, his narrative films play the role of exemplifying the Buddhist wisdom that enlightenment is not something extraordinary but simply an integral part of the mundane life of this world, and it manifests through earthly affairs and activities.

Transcendence and immanence are not necessarily an opposing dichotomy in his works. One apparent example is how the Tibetan filmmaker looks at reincarnation. In an interview, Pema Tsenden directly admits that this Buddhist belief exists in his family:

Children usually spend more time with their parents, but I have spent more time with my grandfather because he believed that I was the reincarnation of his grandfather. He said his grandfather was very nice to him. He owed him a lot, so he wanted me to be with him all the time. My grandfather said my previous life was as a *Dhamma* practitioner (*xiuxingzhe* 修行者). When we went home, he showed me the scriptures and the meditation place his grandfather used. As my grandfather strongly believed that I was a person of knowledge in my previous life, he continuously supported my education. In our town at that time, very few people would go to senior high school and then to college after graduating from junior high school. (360.com 2015)

While the relationship between religion and arts in Tibetan society has historically been quite intimate, the emergence of the artistic realms in the contemporary era may presumably take a relatively ambivalent, if not critical, view of the traditional practice of religious reincarnation, since the secular values of the younger generation of Tibetans may undermine the theological and political power of the religious establishment.<sup>15</sup> However, for people living in Tibetan society, reincarnation may not be as spiritual or transcendental as generally thought by the external observer. In Melvyn Goldstein's studies, the reincarnation succession in traditional Tibet was not necessarily a stable circular process, as it appeared to the casual observer. By no means was the reincarnation of lamas a sheer religious practice; instead, it was a mode of political succession, accompanied by economic changes in the ownership of lands and estates. The newly incarnate religious figures and their families could have the right to gain land and estates by confiscating them from the aristocratic class. Since traditional technology was not capable of converting marginal pasture areas into profitable farmland to grow the pie, the only source available to satisfy the recurrent mundane and material demands of the newly reincarnated lamas and their families was the estates already possessed by the aristocratic families. That means traditional Tibetan society could only keep redistributing the pie. As a result, the reincarnation process has generated an inevitable circulation of estates, which in turn has produced political competition and conflict, thus ultimately transforming the whole system if the Chinese had not arrived in 1950 (Goldstein 1973).

The transcendental construction of reincarnation is profoundly tied to the immanence of daily life. For ordinary Tibetans, reincarnation does not necessarily turn toward a higher realm, so the transcendent soul is separate

from a purely human one. Instead, reincarnation could be understood as an immanent process that brings differentiating and identifying processes together. An open and candid discussion of reincarnation in one's life also appears in the work of another Tibetan filmmaker, Dukar Tserang, who works as a sound man for Pema Tsenden's movies. In his documentary *They Are One Hundred Years Old* (work in progress, 2018), Dukar Tserang tells the story of his nephew, who has been identified by his grandmother and his family as the reincarnation of his grandfather. As a young and educated Tibetan, the protagonist, Guru, attempts unsuccessfully to establish a singing career in the entertainment industry. Although being a reincarnate of a layperson may not create too much trouble in his search for a modern identity in the new era, the "return" of the soul implies double temporalities and memories embodied in a young Tibetan living in contemporary China. The grandmother is interviewed about the life story of the grandfather compared with the young reincarnate. Tibetan society in two different historical periods is implicitly shown and compared.

As Françoise Robin argues, "The filmmaker does not take sides, only recording to indecision and ambiguity rather than assertion" (2016, 121). But simply recording under the repressive sociopolitical circumstances of Chinese rule is already a critique. The reincarnation belief, whether it has been challenged or not, has become a vehicle for Tibetan filmmakers to practice "alternative time," to reiterate memories and histories of Tibetan society that have been suppressed by the Chinese official discourse. Hence, what has been reincarnated is not necessarily the return of the old soul to the present or even the future but rather family histories, repressed identity, memories of friends and community, and social relations that are deeply rooted in the local sphere but unable to be openly articulated. In other words, (historical) truth emerges in the form of fiction (reincarnation). It may be precisely the power of falsehood that shapes reality.

### Compassion Immanent in a World without Faith

In the disenchanted world of contemporary China where belief competes with unbelief and religion is reduced to an option, the old forms of religious life and experience are fading with the emergence of new forms. The Tibetan cineastes who are educated in the modern setting would affirm the integrity of religious life without simultaneously asserting that there must be a transcendental beyond. For this generation of filmmakers, living in an immanent world does not exclude a longing for, if not belief in,

transcendence—especially when some of them have directly or indirectly experienced the antagonistic relations between militant atheists and dogmatic believers in the relatively short history of Tibet under the Chinese communist rule. Rational knowledge can always make room for religious faith and value; however, there is more than a sheer striving under the contradictions of modernity for a beyond as a recurring human condition that manifests in all spheres of life. With the specific historical context of China's Tibet, the revival of Tibetan cultural identity through the moving image is accompanied, if not haunted, by a commitment to a transcendent being even if it is open, flexible, pluralistic, and sensitive to the sociopolitical conditions of the immanent frame.

Sonthar Gyal's *The Sun Beaten Path* (*Taiyang zong zai zuobian* 太陽總在左邊, 2011) portrays how a young man makes a pilgrimage to Lhasa to overcome his guilt of accidentally causing his mother's death. In a broad sense, the film grasps redemption as a kind of rebirth: the death of a beloved person leads to the discovery of one's new life through coming to terms with grief and guilt. Growing up in a modernizing environment, the protagonist, Nyima, fails to have any strong connection with his tradition. It is the family tragedy that suddenly pulls him out of his comfort zone and plunges him into a desperate search for something that he does not know. The director combines the road movie genre and a human-versus-nature theme to portray grief-ridden Nyima in his solitary soul-searching journey in the barren landscapes of the Gobi Desert. The vastness of nature helps the young man to understand life and death from a viewpoint other than the anthropocentric one. The old man whom Nyima encounters on the road may represent the cliché of conventional human wisdom, but he also represents the immanence found in the silent nature that presents and inspires a non-transcendental connection and continuity of life and death.

To highlight the relationship between people and the environment, the director uses a short focal-length lens to get close to the character while not pushing the background too wide and far. While the protagonist is obsessed with his guilt, shown by his aimless wandering along the highway, the inhospitable, windswept, and indifferent mountain plateaus in their grays and yellows under the harsh, burning sun affirm their disjunctive relations. Rather than offering a simple correlation between the human psyche and the natural environment, *The Sun Beaten Path* dwarfs the centrality of human existence and suffering with the stunningly bleak and unforgiving natural environment. The natural landscape shot rising above does not assert its transcendent presence to generate extraordinary and inexplicable breaks to lead the character to a decisive action that overcomes

his tensions and difficulties. Instead of steering toward a new horizon of the transcendent, the nature shots, with their splendor and magnificence, only reveal how everything is ordinary and regular and express the immanent forces of reconstitution and renewal. When it is human beings who upset the regularity of the world and the continuity of the universe, Deleuze tells us, “nature is happy to renew what man has broken [and] restores what man sees shattered” (1989, 15). The natural landscape in *The Sun Beaten Path* is “any-space-whatever” that mediates between chaos and order, functioning like a time image to place the identity of the character into crisis.

There is no absolute distinction between the immanent everydayness and the transcendent rupture in the film. An ideological and political reading of *The Sun Beaten Path* may emphasize how contemporary Tibetans are battling not only against their tragic personal life but also against the overwhelming encroachment on their collective way of life and the indiscriminate eradication of their traditional culture under the maelstrom of economic development. Those in the young generation have to rely on the help of the elderly to access their traditions. The lines of trucks endlessly passing by on the sun-beaten tarred road across the desert may be understood as a piece of strong evidence to demonstrate how pervasive the state-initiated modernization and external influences have penetrated Tibetan society. However, Sonthar Gyal's debut is not constrained by such interpretation: even if what the camera captures is not necessarily the whole or the immanent plane of nature, the film draws our attention to the multiplicity and diversity of existence and makes no attempt to unify these on any ontological level. While there may not be any perspective of the cosmos that a camera can present, its composition and visual content put humans, animals, landscapes, and machines together as an expressive site of indeterminate signs and as an immanent reconfiguration of unexpected intensities of affect.

In his second feature, *River* (*He རྩེན་པོ།*, 2015), Sonthar Gyal once again makes use of Tibetan landscapes as an epic backdrop for his intimate family drama. This is the story of a Tibetan herder family of three generations struggling with the heaviness of personal and national histories while longing to strengthen their bonds. History is not necessarily a leveler that erodes and eliminates all differences, values, and norms. From the perspective of the young daughter, the film shows how her father, Guru, wages a silent war against his father, who has become a monk and stayed in a holy hermit cave for what he considers an unforgivable deed done by the old man to Guru's mother. While the young girl is preoccupied with her

anxiety about losing the love of her mother because she is pregnant with another baby (the young girl has been forced to wean as her mother bears a new child), she also witnesses her father refusing to cross the river to visit her well-respected grandfather lama, stoically driving his motorcycle across the grassland and looking melancholy. Guru's act of filial impiety has been stigmatized by the local community. Then the story gradually reveals, through minimal dialogues, that some years earlier when Guru's mother was dying in the hospital, he begged his father to go to say farewell but was refused. Guru cannot forgive his father but later discovers that his father deemed praying for his dying mother rather than visiting her on her deathbed the right course of action in terms of his religious beliefs.

The film untangles the complex family drama little by little to disclose further that the grandfather was originally a monk but was coerced to abandon his religion during the Cultural Revolution and pushed to marry a woman.<sup>16</sup> While hospitalized, the old monk is asked for his name by the doctor, and Guru simply blurts out: "Gsarbrje Skyabs." But the old man corrects him by saying his name is "Thubtan Chosphe" (literally, "flourishing Buddha dharma"). His layman name, Gsarbrje Skyabs, literally means "refuge of revolution"; it is the name he was given during the Cultural Revolution when he was forced to leave the temple. The hidden story of Guru's father doesn't just reignite some repressed histories but also opens up a reflection on the consequences of persisting in one's beliefs and resisting the reinscription of a new political order.

There is no mention in the film about how this ex-Buddhist monk adjusted to his secular life; however, it is implied that, when Buddhism was again allowed to be practiced in Tibet, Guru's father determined to leave his family and return to his religious life. Sonthar Gyal does not make any judgment on his characters' decisions, other than providing room to think about how radically immanent and contingent this world is, as it no longer follows any established model. The meaning of life is not given from beyond the world but has to be invented in the world. While all these finite beings have no other choice but to remain immanent in this world, the film suggests that it is compassion and forgiveness that can ultimately transcend all their suffering. In this sense, the solution to historical problems can only be found within the community itself. Compassion as a major virtue in Tibetan Buddhism is grasped as a conscious and deliberate performance in these self-determined Tibetan films (Robin 2009). No one should be punished for their mistakes or even for the deeds they have done under the kindhearted and forgiving principle, as conveyed by Sonthar Gyal's movies.

### A Noir World in Modern Tibet

Such emphasis on Tibetan traditional compassion, kindness, or generosity generates an apparent twist in some of Pema Tsenden's films. As his works generally are more concerned with the immediate impacts brought by rapid social changes on the Tibetan community, the compassion expressed is not necessarily timeless and transcendental. *The Search* has already informed audiences that compassion can no longer find its proper vehicle or embodiment in contemporary Tibet, where the legendary sage Drime Kunden would have no place at all. Anyone who has ever tried to give away his wife and children as his possessions—as Drime Kunden did—in the modern era would be ridiculed and demonized. Pema Tsenden is most sensitive to the issue of media, using TV, filmmaking, and the adaptation of the story of King Drime Kunden in his first two films as a kind of remediation. The genre convention is also a channel or medium for him to articulate the meanings of his stories.

As the first Tibetan noir with a strong femme fatale character, *Tharlo* (*Taluo* 塔洛, dir. Pema Tsenden, 2015) shows us a compassionless, alien, urban world where the hero finds himself completely lost. The story tells how Tharlo, a shepherd who lives alone in the mountains, goes to town to get his first identity card photo as ordered by the police and meets a young hairdresser in a barber salon. He is completely attracted to the woman and intends to use the money he gets from selling all the sheep of another owner to run away with her. But his dream to have a new life with the woman falls apart when he wakes up the next morning to find her and the money missing. I call *Tharlo* a film noir not because of its black-and-white cinematographic style but due to its portrayal of the darkness in human hearts, bereft of religion. The bustling town where Tharlo is destined to corrupt himself is a nihilistic landscape in the absence of faith. But Pema Tsenden does not make any simple statement that the urban is evil and dangerous while the countryside is virtuous and secure. Shepherd Tharlo, alone in the mountains persistently guarding the sheep against the wolves, also seems to live like a vacuous soul, revealing his physical and emotional entrapment. The background music and sounds in the film reflect an emotional emptiness. The loud urban cacophony conveys layers of voices from multiple sources while the seemingly silent mountain is haunted by flimsy fragments of radio songs, the howls of wolves, and ghostly voices like a chorus of low moans from the wilderness. *Tharlo* addresses issues of identity and the sense of nihilism of its characters, who are struggling with the

contexts of their times, with the simple plotline that the hero is asked to apply for his first modern identity card. Yangtso, the so-called mysterious femme fatale, is as vulnerable and powerless as Tharlo, while her liberal lifestyle has driven her to find meaning in that alienated world or a society embroiled in moral crisis by forcing some kind of meaning or direction by way of deception and betrayal. She believes that she can find her freedom with the money stolen from Tharlo.

The imposed changes (including the requirement for getting an identity card that triggers the story) brought by the Chinese authorities to Tibetan people are obliquely mirrored in Tharlo, who is cut off and obliterated from his roots. The implicit depiction of repressed histories is found in the opening scene of *Tharlo*, in which the uneducated Tibetan shepherd fluently recites Chairman Mao's essay in the Chinese language. The article Tharlo chants like a prayer is "Serve the People" (*Wei renmin fuwu* 為人民服務), one of the "Three Old Articles" (*lao san pian* 老三篇, literally, "the three constantly read articles") written by Mao and fervently recited by people during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>17</sup> During that political turmoil, whether they could speak Chinese or not, Tibetans were forced to memorize and deliver these political essays aloud. The film never directly presents such political trauma but only brings forth the ridiculous situation that Tharlo can remember every word of the article but fails to understand its meaning. The way Tharlo grasps Mao's essay is somewhat similar to Buddhist scripture. However, the black-and-white moral code he vaguely learns from it can hardly address the challenges of the real world.

Pema Tsenden's films have the capacity to provide certain pleasure to viewers, which may derive from their idiosyncrasy and nonconformity to the typical representations of Tibetan spiritual inscrutability and exoticism. They are more about the banal realities Tibetans face in modern daily life. The film focuses on the everyday, on the problems and difficulties of society, and externalizes the complexities of subjectivities; religion is often not foregrounded, instead providing background or context. Indeed, his feature films reveal to us that if there is a path to enlightenment, it has to take place in a sensory world filled with desires and emotions. It is a world in which absolute methods of teaching by a master or a sage for the progressive acquisition of enlightenment are almost impossible. The "naive" cannot be enlightened through the mediation of one who counts as intelligent by virtue of the authority of an institution. In other words, at no point in his features is there a hierarchy between the enlightened one who knows and the one who does not. Pema Tsenden's diegetic world can be compara-

ble to the plane of immanence, which is a totality of becoming, a continual process that cinema of time image taps into this becoming or immanence, and leaves established truths, values, and identities into a predicament.

Unlike Pema Tsenden's previous films, which were shot on location or in a real setting, the police station, photo studio, and beauty salon in *Tharlo* were all built sets, which is ideal for all the composed frames, the carefully sectioned spaces, and the reflections of mirrors and windows. Their artificiality also carries the Buddhist notion of illusory worlds, given that the Buddhist idea of emptiness is that nothing has an intrinsic unchanging nature and that it is the illusions of our thoughts and desires that bring us miseries. Pema Tsenden appropriates Buddhist wisdom to reflect, through a noir world without faith, on Tibetans' contradictory and precarious experiences with the premises and consequences of Chinese state-led economic development. The promise of the good life has never been delivered. Their Tibetans' mundane life has simply been interrupted by materialistic spectacles. Such Tibetan film noir alternates with the use of cinematic and photographic devices. Rather than using film just as the flow of the narrative to connect images in order to provide a dynamic synthesis, *Tharlo* shows a strong interest in the photograph, using the isolated snapshot as its mise-en-scène. The monochrome cinematography comprises pristine black-and-white shots that last for minutes and deliver the flatness and stillness of the photographic. Pema Tsenden's works struggle to redefine Tibetan, seeing it not as a type, or a *minzu*, but rather as an individual who is isolated from their roots and also separated from some established narrative flow and connection or political synthesis. The isolated snapshot serves as a condition for the emergence of uniqueness and singularities. Symbolically, the noir-ness of *Tharlo* draws our attention to a truth that can only be found in the shadows, in the light that leaves nothing but darkness, luring the audience to confront what has been left behind. Perhaps, as an image standing for a photographic exposure rather than a cinematic dynamism, *Tharlo* is presented in a silent and "static" singularity, released from the inevitable flux and becoming, deprived of an already-formed sociopolitical frame, thus designating a missing history.

The sense of photographic and photogenic "flatness" or "two-dimensionality" is even stronger in *Jinpa* (*Zhuangsilie yizhiyang* 撞死了一只羊, 2018), a rather stylistic exploration of the road movie and killer genre conventions, with alternating uses of monochrome and multicolor techniques. The film was produced by famous Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai's Jet Tone Company, while its plot is based on Tsering Norbu's short story "The Slayer" (Shashou 殺手) and Pema Tsenden's own "I Ran

Over a Sheep” (Zhuangsiile yizhiyang 撞死了一只羊).<sup>18</sup> It is also the most commercially successful work of Pema Tseden so far. Framed in a 4:3 aspect ratio to highlight a dreamlike, aesthetically contrived world in the mode of an oil painting, *Jinpa* begins with a Tibetan truck driver named Jinpa, who accidentally kills a sheep with his vehicle on Hoh Xil highland plateau 5,000 meters above sea level before picking up a hitchhiker from Kham who is also named Jinpa and who admits that he is on his way to kill a man to revenge his father’s death.

Aiming to blow up the dramatic elements of the story and the caricature of the characters, the director turns Jinpa the truck driver into a wacky rock star-like icon with unkempt hair, a leather jacket, and mirrored sunglasses (perhaps modeled on Wong Kar-wai’s style) who is in love with the Italian opera song “O Sole Mio” in a Tibetan cover version, while claiming himself to be a devoted follower of a *tulku* monk, whose photo hangs on the rearview mirror. In contrast, Jinpa the avenger is a pale and melancholic countryman wearing traditional ethnic costume and carrying a sword. Within Tibetan tradition, the Khampa people are famous for their fierceness and warrior spirit, always carrying weapons and dressing in heavily decorated clothing. These appearances, with their stand-alone qualities, imply the certain detached flatness or stillness of photographs, bolstering the visual stereotypes of what ethnic Tibetans should look like. In a departure from the verité style of his previous films, Pema Tseden’s foregrounding of the photographic dimension in *Jinpa* can be interpreted as an “exposure” to snap real life away from the world of flux and becoming. While the photographic exposure may function as a vulgarization or treachery of secular life, time, or change, the film does not avoid presenting a complicated synthesis. Although Jinpa the truck driver feels guilty about running over the sheep, and even takes the corpse to the temple to ask the monk to pray for the deceased sheep and give the animal a proper sky burial ritual as a means to redeem himself, he ironically buys lamb meat on his way back to appease his mistress. He is also the one who empathizes with Jinpa the avenger and attempts to track him down to stop his act of revenge. When he has learned that Jinpa the avenger has given up his plan for revenge, he fantasizes about turning himself into the Khampa avenger to complete the mission by killing his father’s murderer in a dream as a token of spiritual redemption.

The dream scene is shot in yellowish monochrome and is audibly accompanied by the Italian version of “O Sole Mio” to highlight its absurdity and fictitiousness. Having stabbed the man to death, Jinpa looks up to the sky, where a plane has already replaced the flying vulture. The modern

icon designates the end of a cursed continuity. The Tibetan name Jinpa means “generosity,” or “almsgiving” (*shishe* 施捨), whereas the film portrays the human duality through the two characters of the same name to convey, as the director puts it in an interview, a Buddhist message of giving away one’s obsessiveness or tenacity to liberate oneself from the vicious cycle of revenge and the samsara wheel of suffering (Hu 2019). Jinpa’s dream is an expression of compassion to liberate another Jinpa from his desire for vengeance and to redeem him, as well as the murderer who has been guilt stricken for years over his sin. When the dream is over, Jinpa the truck driver resumes his trip and takes off his sunglasses as a gesture of letting go. Such giving is a snapping or release of suffering life from the already constituted judgment and the flow of history predetermined by external forces. It is Pema Tsenden’s embedded and gentle Buddhist retort to the increasing pressures of the fast-encroaching modernity led by the Chinese state.

#### Dilemma of Female Agency: Optical Situation through *Balloon*

On the spiritual and moral front, the Chinese government may have relatively little authority to navigate the narrative of Tibet; however, for Tibetans living in China, the religio-spiritual heritage is indeed a “pharmakon”—both a remedy and a poison, a blessing and a curse. As Pema Tsenden comments casually, the Buddhist faith is good for individuals, but it wears down the entire nation.<sup>19</sup> In general, the young generation of Tibetans who grew up under the PRC and received modern-day education may have uneasiness regarding religion that serves as a medium of cultural identification and partial inheritance. By no means is their conception and experience of Buddhism a single dimension but rather a complicated process of embodiment and reception, as well as negotiation delicately balanced on their accommodating courses of action with the Chinese governance and modern influences. The new generation of Tibetans who engage in film art would be well aware that everything that exists in the world of flux could be subjected to being captured in the moving or frozen image of cinematic photography or cinematography. But the exposure itself reveals how reality is never a given but an open-ended process of changes that include non-actualized possibilities. Cinema may help them understand the current world when the conventional schemes they have used to explain reality seem utterly out of sync, rendering reality into a question mark through the process of their interrogation and reflection.

In his *Balloon* (*Qiqiu* 氣球, 2019), Pema Tsenden portrays a family drama

with a certain ethnographic sense in a rural setting where a woman character goes against the grain to make a decisive choice that affects all family members. However, I would say that it is less a feminist movie than a cinematographic observation of domestic labor mostly done by women. The labor of domesticity in this context refers not only to the household chores, or even the shepherding as part of the household economy, but to the women's reproductive labor through giving birth of new bodies for continuing the nation and incarnating the returning souls. But the state intervention has been so pervasive that the realm of domesticity has no exemption under its biopolitical scrutiny. The motion picture indicates that it was an early reform era when the Chinese government began to implement family planning policies in Tibetan areas. The sheep-tending couple already has three children, but Drolkar, the wife, while planning to be sterilized, is disappointed to find out that she is pregnant again. The film begins with a comic scene in which the two young boys play with "balloons" they have blown up; yet, the "balloons" are condoms hidden under their parents' pillows. That explains why the father, Dargye, could not find the condom he needs when he has sex with his wife. The boys exchange the condom balloons for a neighbor kid's whistle, resulting in the outraged father of the neighbor kid fighting Dargye because he failed in disciplining the children for their "immoral" behavior. At a first glance, Pema Tsenden exposes how a rural Tibetan community is generally embarrassed by sexual matters and ashamed to talk about contraception in public. But the humor leads to a profound reflection on woman's agency and the dominance of oppressive systems in the transition to modernity.

Drolkar feels pressure to get an abortion not only because of the imposition of the birth-control policy on the ethnic population<sup>20</sup> but also because she is concerned that their meager pastoral livelihood cannot afford their children a proper education in a changing environment in that Tibetans hardly have any control. The family has to sell sheep now and then to pay for the eldest son's school fees. However, her husband's traditional belief dictates that he insist on having the baby since Dargye interprets the words of the religious master in the way that the soul of his recently deceased father is reincarnated in Drolkar's womb. The uneducated Drolkar is supposedly a typically passive and grateful Tibetan female subject for domestication by her husband. But she negatively learns from her younger sister but also is inspired by the progressive female doctor that a woman should assert herself, in some crucial moment, to make painful yet defiantly sovereign decisions. When she becomes determined not to have the baby, Drolkar is even pushed to challenge the custom belief of reincarnation and the

words of the religious leader, even if Buddhist precepts generally condemn killing or harming any living beings. Pema Tsenden does not dichotomize victims and predators, or internal and external pressures. Drolma, Drolkar's younger sister, has become a Buddhist nun because she has been traumatized by an extramarital affair with an implied consequence of having had an abortion. But when she learns about Drolkar's abortion decision, Drolma does not support her sister because of her religious faith. The film also casts doubt on the perception that Tibetan pastoralists live in harmony with nature: Dargye is portrayed as a person with an instrumental mentality who crossbreeds the sheep to increase productivity. When a mother sheep fails to reproduce, Dargye quickly decides to sell it to the meat dealers, thus arousing mixed feelings from Drolkar.

*Balloon* discloses the dilemma of female autonomy in the specific Tibetan milieu and contemplates how modern awakening may have undermined the traditional belief upon which the continuity of the community relies. Not to be misguided by the verité handheld cinematography, Pema Tsenden's style of filming endeavors to release more of the power of fabrication and appropriate illusion to be the truth that art asserts. The handheld camera is meant to depict not just the chaos and messiness of objective realities but the subjective truths of the characters and their fluctuating moods, such as their anxieties. In a number of scenes, cinematic vision is partially blocked or obstructed by certain objects, like columns, chimneys, window frames, or sheets on a clothesline. The special positions of the camera view intend to reveal how characters struggle to connect over obstacles and tell what they hesitate to say as well as to unveil the awkward and ambivalent relationships between them. The frequent visual references to myopia, failing or partial sights via cloudy windows, and inflated tubes of condoms suggest a world shattered by disconnection, fragility, obscurity, and a sense of fragmented experiences. In such a universe, people not only lose the capacity of taking action to change their lives to ideal ends but are reduced to passive seers without clear visions. Not launching a direct political critique (though official propagandistic signage is often captured as background in the film to imply the director's reservation), Pema Tsenden attributes people's suffering or unhappiness to the self-interest motive, the lack of empathy, inaction or carelessness toward the circumstances, or failure in looking into one's life and asking what one was running from.

Further extending *Jinpa's* fantasy scene, the narrative thread of *Balloon* has been knitted throughout with a number of surreal or dreamy sequences that may or may not directly relate to its diegetic development. For example, the eldest son's mole on his back, a sign that convinces the family that



Fig. 5.2. Drolkar talks to the female doctor. Screenshot from *Balloon*.



Fig. 5.3. Drolkar comes home to tell Dargye she is pregnant. Screenshot from *Balloon*.

he is the reincarnation of their deceased grandmother, is facilely removed by his mischievous brothers; a reflected silhouette is aimlessly wandering in the wetland; and there are blurring images of Drolkar and Drolma in their youth. They are no longer mimetic types of cinematic representation, whereas they puncture gaps or intervals in the narrative flow, implying the world is no longer derived and perceived by the integrating sensory-motor schemata. The plot at first is driven by how the female protagonist,

Drolkar, tries to resist the oppressing world of domesticity. Her endeavor cannot be simply understood as a feminist move that goes all the way to fight against the patriarchal system. Indeed, we find her becoming rather exhausted as she is torn between traditional demands, modern pressures, and her self-awakening while failing to find any possibility at her disposal. The film never ascertains if she has had the abortion, though we learn that Drolkar has eventually decided to leave with her Buddhist nun sister to go to the temple for her spiritual redemption. As the mother left home, Dargye purchased the boys two red balloons from a Han vendor in town as promised. But the boys quickly break one balloon and then engage in a fight for the remaining one. During their fight, the red balloon slips out of the boys' grab and flies into the sky. Allegorically, the things brought from the Han world, even if they look attractive and glamorous, are flimsy and capricious. *Balloon* ends in an enigmatic sequence as all characters, in their different locations, look up to the sky where they see the red balloon in flight. The ending strongly resonates with what Deleuze means by a "pure optical situation" that closely ties to his notion of the time image, which is against human orientation toward totalization and closure.

In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze describes neorealism as

a cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent [*de voyant, non plus d'actant*]. What defines neo-realism is this build-up of purely optical situations . . . which are fundamentally distinct from the sensory-motor situations of the action-image in the old realism. . . . The character has become a kind of viewer. . . . The situation he is in outstrips his motor capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or an action. . . . He is prey to a vision, pursued by it or pursuing it, rather than engaged in an action . . . suddenly to free [one]self from the laws of this [sensory-motor] schema and reveal [one]self in a visual and sound nakedness, crudeness and brutality which make [one] unbearable, giving [one] the pace of a dream or nightmare. (1989, 2–3)

Probably staging a Deleuzian "pure optical situation," Pema Tsenden's film demonstrates a new reality Tibetans are confronting that makes them incapable of taking any action to deal with the inevitable and the intolerable. It is a reality that traditional Buddhism, state-led modernity narrative, or any organic wholesome mechanism cannot fully explain. Working against many constraints as well as navigating the dynamics and tensions between traditions and modernity, the Tibetan cinema pioneered by Pema Tsenden

may not be composed of agents modifying the world but rather seers and witnesses encompassing the scope of its miseries and injustice. The global circulation of Tibet images produced by the Pema Tsenden-led film movement may foster a cosmopolitan moral concern and empower the respect of the rights of all human lives in such ethically compelling spaces of visibility. However, the representational framing of the world of others primarily concerning human suffering or exposure to various kinds of violence is much confined to a cosmopolitan subject that gives meanings to these images.

Indeed, compassion fatigue happens more than ever. Tibetan-made cinema offers different images to the representations long created and established by others, from the romanticization of its Shangri-la religion, to the primitivization of the ethnic community and demonization of its theocratic system, to the repression of their traumatic histories and memories. Attempting to speak to outsiders, Chinese audiences, and Tibetan compatriots, the alternative images crafted by the Pema Tsenden generation born under the rule of the PRC, after the Cultural Revolution in particular, express their shared visions, experiences, and memories in structural changes of the modern era. Although Buddhist imagery still prevails in their works, religion serves more as a placeholder for tradition and cultural identity than something nostalgic to be revived. The Buddhist theme stands for a form of reflection to speak about a changing Tibet in a radically different time where cultural survival is at stake and where a present perceived as cut off from the past continues to strive for authenticity. Their alternative images allow the emergence of something unthought, that is to say, the “new” as becoming “other” that the prevalent systems have not mastered in a totalistic manner and ascribed a definite meaning.



## Transnational Ethnic Filmmaking as Cultural Ecology

China's mainstream film criticism names all its ethnic minority language films "mother-tongue cinema" (*muyu dianying* 母語電影). The emergence of ethnic mother-tongue films is a cultural phenomenon that only began in the late 1990s, designating a permitted transgression from the conventional practice of Putonghua-dubbed ethnic-themed productions. Among all these ethnic mother-tongue productions, Tibetan-language cinema has drawn the widest attention both nationally and internationally. While non-Tibetan filmmakers also make Tibetan-language films, it is always Tibetan directors' mother-language works that draw the most attention and are critically acclaimed, because they are believed to be "authentic." Native language undoubtedly serves as a symbol or shibboleth of group authenticity, both for insiders and outsiders. As long as the Chinese authorities remain ambivalent toward the ethnic language policy,<sup>1</sup> non-Han minorities are active in reviving and revitalizing their native languages as the most significant medium for consciousness raising and identity authentication, in response to the dominant Han society and its standard national language. Yet the advent of Tibetan-language cinema led by the late Pema Tsenden, though broadly recognized and praised for its unvarnished depictions of the Tibetan people and culture, has been challenged in China, as mentioned in chapter 5, as to whether its Ambo-based productions can represent "Tibet" as a whole.

Such critique may have urged Pema Tsenden to develop a Tibetophone cinema in his latest productions to claim a pan-Tibetan identity with mul-

tifarious Tibetan languages and cultures. For example, professional actors from different Tibetan areas in his commercial venture *The Sacred Arrow* (*Wucai shenjian* 五彩神箭, 2014) were taught to speak the same Tibetan language, and a language instructor was also hired for *Jinpa* to coach the Amdolese cast to speak the Kham Tibetan language on-screen. Pema Tsenden endeavored to authenticate his movies as “Tibetan.” Han director Zhang Yang’s Tibetan-language *Paths of the Soul* became a huge hit—backed up by both box office records and public reaction in China—and Pema Tsenden grudgingly pointed out that Zhang’s film mixed up all different Tibetan dialects; hence, different Tibetan actors from different regions actually could not understand one another even though they were pretending to do so on-screen (Hu 2019, 54).

But is the authenticity label necessarily a blessing to Tibetans and indeed to any other ethnic minority filmmakers? Their insider’s view of their own community, presented in either documentaries or fiction films, carries the mission, if not burden, of speaking for their people and depicting the ethnic culture and their ways of life accurately, while facing the opportunities and challenges to express their aesthetic vision and world-views through their work. While authenticity is generally understood as a self-relation within one’s being (that is to say, acting on one’s own but not being acted upon by an outside authority), it can also be used as a measure that is externally imposed to scrutinize an individual’s and a community’s identity formation. The authorities may use such criteria to reinforce stereotypes and to advance colonial policy in the sense of ensuring blood kinship for the recognition of certain citizens’ rights and their sovereignty over their lands (Baker 2011; Madsen 2010).

The danger of the authenticity discourse is to privilege and romanticize a sole voice or vision (mostly of the less powerful in the system) on an issue only because the speaker occupies a specific position. However, categorizing one’s place as authentic or not is comparable to practicing apartheid. The discourse of authenticity may value only one vantage point while neglecting the existence of multiple visions or perspectives. The politics of authenticity also coincide with the politics of sovereign territory, which operates to force everyone into a particular place and to dismiss any claim from groups or individuals who appear to have no place. Holding onto the discourse of authenticity may fall into the trap of the Chinese sovereign state, whose policy is to confine ethnic communities to a particular place (politically and geographically) and to attribute their “authentic voice” as unitary and all-encompassing. In other words, one must be a Tibetan or a Uyghur to comment on the issue of the environment in that area. While

the location is crucial to ecological politics, the territorial discourses of authenticity would only silence the fact that ecopolitics as well as many other issues are not just territorially confined. To challenge the politics of authenticity, it is necessary to assert that their identities are permeated with differences, as every sovereign state territory is always already filled with differences and multiplicities. But moving away from the confinement of “authenticity,” while at the same time defending it against misunderstandings or stereotypes, remains a constant challenge.

Instead of regarding the relation of their films to reality as direct, immediate, and transparent, ethnic filmmakers endeavor to make use of the cinematic capacity to stage contestation over the real to open up new possibilities for fictional (re)invention. In bringing the separate episteme of ecology and culture together, the cultural ecology of ethnic filmmaking in China and elsewhere, if I can use such a notion, is able to achieve a level of sustainability by adapting to the changing environments and remaining productive as well as regenerative in the ecological processes of life. Their creativity and resourcefulness are bred by the environments, constituting interactive and dialectical rather than deterministic relationships between the ethnic film production cultures and the surrounding ecosystems. Fiction film indeed is not opposed to reality, but it becomes a way of constructing the contesting arena in which facts, knowledge, and history are given meaning. Ethnic filmmakers express concern about the dignity of ethnic life that seems to be lacking in the mainstream representations of China’s ethnic minorities to fight for the human esteem and respect of ethnic peoples in cinema. Cinematic images are used as a tool to draw the spectators closer to reality and allow them to reflect upon their own conditions.

For ethnic filmmakers, the problems with mainstream representations of ethnic characters and cultures lie not in their failure to reproduce the appearance of ethnic life but rather in the lack of life as represented in the photographic images. One of their concerns is whether cinematographic representation can be enhanced in such a way that both mainstream and minority audiences could be placed into a common affective world that could allow these two audiences and communities to work through their (cultural) differences and to mutually share experiences and perspectives in their daily existence. It is an issue of seeking an equalitarian approach to cinema’s politics in opposition to the hierarchy not only built in China’s ethnic minority films but also predominant in the multiethnic nation,—that is to say, how ethnic filmmakers can use cinema, the great democratic art form of the modern world, to reach equality as well as authenticity

rather than to reproduce the position of master, the logic of inequality, and the prevailing ethnic stereotypes. Rancière's notion of interrelation between politics and aesthetics may help us understand the predicament of ethnic filmmakers and their experimentation. As politics for Rancière is to contest the social appearance and to inscribe the socially excluded, silenced, or unseen of dissensus, that is, "part of those who have no part" (2010, 33), into social counting, voice, and visibility, it is art or aesthetics that functions as a redistribution of what sensibly appears by rendering the previously invisible visible, the previously unseen seen, and the previously unheard heard.

This chapter examines how China's assimilation of ethnic minority filmmakers is interacted with and negotiated by elements of globalization and transnationalism to understand the intricate cultural ecology of ethnic minority cinema from the PRC. While various situations that different non-Han filmmakers have been dealing with are discussed, I focus more on the Korean Chinese director Zhang Lü (張律, or Jang Ryool in Korean), whose border-crossing strategy offers an exemplary case of the interstitial mode of film production in between nation-states. His alternative practices demonstrate that ethnic minority cinema is not a homogenous mechanism entirely under the Chinese state's control.

### State Co-Optation and the Undercurrents beyond the Chinese System

The Han majority sense of insecurity and doubt is always agitating with the historical saying from *Zuo zhuan*, "If he is not of our kin, he is sure to have a different mind" (*feiwo zulei, qixin biyi* 非我族類，其心必異). Communist China exacerbates such fear by undertaking witch hunts against its internal enemies from time to time, while extensive incorporation and acculturation processes are carried out on its ethnic minority communities. Those ethnic minorities who have been incorporated into the system are even more vulnerable to being considered potential traitors who "double-talk" or are "two-faced" and whose loyalty is always questioned.

Although Han Chinese massively dominate the system, ethnic minorities are actively recruited to the film sector in the name of a multiethnic state based on the Soviet model. Among all the ethnic groups being absorbed by the system, Mongols are the most prominent in the PRC's film industry. Gombodorj, the first ethnic minority director since the establishment of the PRC, was a multitalented director who also acted and wrote film scripts. Beginning as an actor in *The Victory of Inner Mon-*

*golian People*, his directorial debut was a 1959 spy film, *Outpost* (*Qian shao 前哨*), which he also cowrote. Gombodorj has a rather long film career of more than thirty years in China. Until the late 1980s, seven movies had been credited to his directorial work. A married couple of Mongolian origin, Sainkhüü and Mails (they are more well known as Saifu and Mailisi in sinicized transliteration), are two film directors reputed for their works on Mongolian history. They emerged in the post-Mao reform era when minority artists began to play a greater role in the representation of their ethnic culture in the national cultural sphere, even though their productions simultaneously reflect the influences of Chinese cinema and the supervision the state exerts on filmmaking. The former is distinctively shown in many of their Chinese-style martial arts choreography, which permeates Sainkhüü and Mails's films about the Mongol Empire, while the latter displays itself in the financial backing and awards that the couple has been given by the authorities.

The younger generation of ethnic minority filmmakers is more often than not trained by China's prestigious film institutes; they become members of an established filmmaking elite, and their works enjoy the privilege of access to China's legitimate distribution channels as long as they pass the censorship test. As a result, their films studiously avoid sensitive issues, such as interethnic conflicts. For example, *Warm Spring* (*Nuan Chun 暖春*, 2003), the debut feature film of Ulaantaana, of Mongol ethnicity, is a melodrama about an elderly Chinese man taking a foster child into his rural home despite objections from his son and daughter-in-law. The small-budget production made 25 million renminbi at the box office and brought Ulaantaana several Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers awards. Mainstream market success and official recognition are a big temptation for ethnic minority artists to succumb to state co-optation and acculturation, implicitly reinforcing the prevailing hierarchy and inequality.

Many ethnic filmmakers have endeavored in their productions to go beyond the restricting realm of ethnicity in different ways in today's China. Indeed, all filmmakers at some point want to get rid of their ethnic label to reach a wider audience. The logic of commodification commingled with state-initiated assimilation has urged ethnic filmmakers to integrate their works into the mainstream film market in order to cater to the tastes and expectations of the majority audience. Mongolian film director Haas Chalu and young filmmaker Bi Gan (of Hmong/Miao ethnic origin) began their careers making ethnic minority films. Once they became famous, they were strongly encouraged to make productions with higher budgets for mainstream audiences.<sup>2</sup> They have produced some big-budget films: Haas

Chaolu's historical fantasy epic *Genghis Khan* (*Zhanshenji* 戰神紀, 2018), starring Hong Kong actor William Chan as the titular character, and Bi Gan's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (*Diqiu zuibou de yewan* 地球最後的夜晚, 2018), starring famous actresses Tang Wei and Sylvia Chang, with a combination of mainland and Taiwan cast.

Described as “style triumphs over content,” *Long Day's Journey into Night* was Bi Gan's second feature after his critically acclaimed debut *Kaili Blues* (*Lubian yecan* 路邊野餐, 2015). The stunning international success of *Kaili Blues*<sup>3</sup> has attracted Huace Pictures, one of China's biggest film production companies, to produce and promote Bi Gan's second feature with heavier investment, more significant resources, and spectacular marketing strategies. The most impressive features of *Kaili Blues* are its flamboyant cinematography craft of a 40-minute long take, its dizzying plot with non-linear temporality, and the mythic location of China's southwestern province, Guizhou. *Long Day's Journey into Night* has gone further, with a more conspicuous sense of commodification, to bring about a 59-minute unbroken, constantly moving sequence single shot filmed in 3D as its climax to present the hypnotic journey of the male protagonist delving into his pasts, dreams, and memories with incredible encounters. As Bi Gan admits to the press, he has made a “commercial film” in the sense that it models on the noir thriller genre with a detective-like lead character unearthing old puzzles, a mysterious femme fatale and her double, an old friend being murdered, and some underground crime rings in neon-lit cityscape and wrecked building accompanied by the recurrence of broken clocks and dripping water.

The story is about the return of the male protagonist to Kaili, the hometown from which he fled many years before because of some illicit business. Back for his father's funeral, the character named Luo recalls the death of an old friend, Wildcat, and the old place reminds him of his lost love (played by Tang Wei), whose mysterious reincarnation continues to haunt him. The production company made a bold publicity strategy to market the film as a couple-friendly romance by premiering its opening in China on New Year's Eve of 2018 to encourage audiences to see the film with their love interest under the slogan “New Year's Eve Kiss” (*yiwèn kuānián* 一吻跨年). The gimmick helped the film make a massive US\$37 million on its opening day but was subsequently denounced by furious viewers who felt they had been duped into watching a baffling pastiche they could hardly have a clue about. Indeed, the structure of *Long Day's Journey into Night* is a mosaic of nebulous plot, dreamy memories, and a disjointed storyline rather than a clear and linear narrative. The marketization-oriented



Fig. 6.1. Luo in the 59-minute-long take. Screenshot from *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

package that enveloped its release is a “pretense” for an art-house, highly stylistic auteur work with a unique signature targeting certain niche markets, especially international film festivals.

While Bi Gan may serve as a good example of how a minority filmmaker has been effectively incorporated by the Chinese mainstream studio to expand its influences and shares in the popular or high-end market, his productions focusing on his hometown, Kaili, have cleverly used space and transnational networks reaching across space to reproduce and transform the place. Kaili (凱里), meaning a cultivated field in the Hmong language, is the capital town in Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture of southeastern Guizhou Province. An ethnically diverse area with Hmong as the dominant population, Kaili is a major producer of rice and is known for its monsoon-influenced humid weather and ecotourism. Like many other ethnic borderlands in China, Guizhou has been introduced with state-initiated economic development since the post-Mao reform era for achieving the state's strategic purposes of tapping its natural resources and of integrating the region politically, economically, and culturally into the modern Chinese socialist society. A modernization plan of an ethnic region means the commercial integration of the local political economy with external market mechanisms, while the communist polity inherits the imperial and republican efforts in “civilizing” the Hmong tribal people to enable them to serve as a pivotal subject in the drive to modernize. Over

the last decade, the province has successfully branded itself as a leading area in sustaining its natural environment and conserving its cultural heritage to promote ethnic tourism. Kaili has been named an excellent tourist city and one of the top ten cities of ecological civilization in China.

Meanwhile, Guizhou is also becoming one of China's fastest-growing economies because Beijing is looking to develop the province as a big data hub (*Xinhuanet* 2021). Kaili also got the honor of being a national city of science and technology progress. By no means can Bi Gan's movies all alone transform the rural place, like what the musical *Five Golden Flowers* has done to Dali of Yunnan Province. But his film productions as cultural and intellectual media are bridging across complicated intersections to generate new meanings and significance leading to the reconstitution of peoples, places, and environments that are also mutually constituted. Economic development in China's ethnic regions always runs into a dilemma: in the homeland of an ethnic minority group, regional development has been characterized by the representation and reinvention of ethnic cultural traditions and the production of cultural and experience economies to cater to the tourist industry, in turn leading to the activation and magnification of ethnic identification as a stronghold against the intense competitions, if not structural discrimination, brought by the Han-dominated market economy. Bi Gan's versatile adaptation to the existing ecologies and the political economy shows a different pathway not necessarily falling into the schism between ethnicization and Sinicization but generating an engagement with the reconstitution of the people and the place through processes of globalization and transnationalism that help loosen the schism and some fixation. The mythic, nonrealistic portrayal of Kaili in a noir-ish mood in *Long Day's Journey into Night* may uplift the place from a natural site of tourist consumption to a reenergized ecology of place making while indicating how a specific place designated by the state for fulfilling certain strategic functions engages in a cultural coevolution with, and in tension to, the modernization process in the real world.

However, in the face of the encircling co-optation by the Chinese mainstream system, there are also counter-undercurrents. In 2015, Inner Mongolian director Darhad Erdenibulag released his codirected drama feature, *K* (codir. Welsh filmmaker Emyr ap Richard, 2015), inspired by Franz Kafka's unfinished novel *The Castle*. The Kafkaesque absurdity of social alienation and labyrinthine bureaucracy took place in an unknown village of modern-day Inner Mongolia rather than a snowy European mountain, as in the original story, and all characters spoke Mongol. Although the film was shot on location in Hohhot, the capital city of Inner Mongolia, there was

hardly any scene to show the spectacular landscape of the steppes (except in the dream sequence where the protagonist finds himself lost in the vast desolate plain under the scorching sun before he is awakened by the innkeeper). Faithful to the novel, Darhad Erdenibulag's adaptation visually attempts to convey a strong sense of uncertainty, frustration, and spatial disorientation to its viewers by avoiding any established shots of temporal and geographical markers and staging most dialogues in claustrophobic spaces, such as narrow corridors, dim interiors, a ramshackle lounge, and the sparsely decorated apartment filled only with natural lighting. The plot is about the titular protagonist K (played by first-time Mongolian actor Bayin), who is summoned to a village as a land surveyor, under the mythic order from the Castle, a bureaucratic but seemingly omniscient form of governance, but has to struggle to secure his position may tempt reviewers to read it as an allegory of China's rule in the ethnic borderland.

When K later finds out his surveyor appointment was a clerical mistake, he rapidly surrenders himself to the demoted position of the school janitor. The film, if it carries any political connotation, not only implies that the ethnic minority is "part of no part" in the oppressive and opaque system that governs their lives but also reveals the innate tendency and passivity of the governed, who are so ready to accept and adapt to the rules of the game on a pragmatic level. The filmmaker's political intent concerning the specific social context could be ambiguous since the Kafkaesque style delivers more universal meaning than a particular one. But his attempt to go beyond the confinement of the Chinese system and mainstream market is obvious. The authoritative mentor Jia Zhangke produced the film via Xstream Productions company, and such endorsement helped Darhad Erdenibulag's film secure its distribution in international film festivals, art-house venues, and some specialized ancillary. *K* had its world premiere at the Berlinale film festival before traveling back to Asia, where it made its entry to the Hong Kong International Film Festival's Young Cinema Competition.

Jumping on the bandwagon of China's grand strategy of "go out" policy (*zouchuqu zhanlue* 走出去戰略), many ethnic minority filmmakers persistently look for overseas opportunities. Young Uyghur director Tawfiq Nizamidin, who studied at the Beijing Film Academy, has gone to South Korea, where he attended the Bucheon Fantastic Film School to direct a Korean-language drama in collaboration with the Korean Academy of Film Arts, *Maria by the Sea* (*Maliya de baitan* 瑪麗亞的海灘, 38 mins., 2018), starring a mostly Korean cast. Currently, he has moved to Versailles, France, to start shooting his first feature film, *Faruk and Abdul-*

lab, with a Taiwanese producer. When Tawfiq Nizamidin was a film student in Beijing, he made the short *The Night of Arzu* (*Aerzu zhi ye* 阿爾祖之夜, 35 mins., 2017), which was selected as one of the five nominees for best short film at the Golden Horse Awards in Taipei. This early work is about a Uyghur student named Mustafa, who on a night out with friends in a Beijing bar meets a Uyghur girl with a headscarf. The film depicts the secular and non-Islamic manner in which the young generation of sinicized Uyghurs live their daily lives (they drink, smoke, and flirt with the opposite sex of another ethnic origin—one of them boasts that he picked up a girl from Crimea on social media by pretending to be a Russian). So when they spot a girl wearing a hijab (a significant symbol of the Muslim religious faith) and drinking alone in a bar, Mustafa and his friends find it peculiar and unbelievable. Mustafa succeeds in approaching her to strike up a conversation to find out the Uyghur girl, named Arzu, goes to college in Hong Kong and comes back to Beijing to visit her parents. She wears a hijab for her Iranian ex-boyfriend, whom she met in Hong Kong, implying she still misses the relationship.

On the surface, *The Night of Arzu* conveys the cosmopolitan orientation and secular modern lifestyle of young well-educated Uyghurs who appear to be no different from any upscale urban citizen in China's capital city. But the story discloses that Uyghurs are treated differently by the state and society. Having left the bar, Mustafa hangs out with Arzu, who suddenly feels sick. Then he takes her to a hotel for rest. The next thing viewers see from the film is not any love scene but a scene in which Mustafa leaves the door of the hotel room unlocked to allow two policemen to come in to check their identity cards and examine his mobile phone. The interrogation happens quite naturally, with the cops politely checking on them and Mustafa calmly cooperating, suggesting that such an incident has already become a routine. It is indeed a common practice that Tibetans and Muslim Uyghurs have been placed on a security blacklist when they seek hotel rooms in major Chinese cities, with staff informing local police stations when they try to check in. The mood of ennui and the desire to break free in Tawfiq Nizamidin's short about rebellious youth convey special meanings in the context of China's Uyghur everyday life.

The titular Maria in *Maria by the Sea* is a Uyghur studying in Seoul. She appears in black-and-white monochrome flashbacks when her Korean professor, Jung, talks about her to his love interest, Ms. Lee, to explain why he is late for their date in a Western restaurant. While searching for a gift he wants to buy for Ms. Lee before the meeting, the professor runs into Maria, who advises him to buy a beautiful scarf. As Maria has a few

questions for Professor Jung, they find a café to begin a casual conversation that delays the professor to his date. In the professor's description, something unpleasant happened recently in Maria's home country, and her place of origin is a hinterland located far away from the seas. The dialogues—all in Korean—carry most of the story's weight. As Professor Jung and Ms. Lee continue to talk, the conversation goes sour as Ms. Lee advances her feminist critique of the professor's patriarchal behaviors. The dating soon becomes man versus woman in a battle of ideologies, causing Ms. Lee to leave the restaurant angrily. But apparently they are still mutually attracted to each other. While she is driving home, Ms. Lee calls Professor Jung. After some exchanges over the phone, he requests that Ms. Lee give him a ride to meet Maria, who is currently at the beach. And Ms. Lee happily agrees.

The short film ends with all three together on the beach. Tawfiq Nizamidin cleverly features the intersection and collision of a Uyghur in a different cultural space, exploring the critical-creative potential of a cinematic text as a vital agency in the changing sociocultural environments. Even if Maria is entirely reduced to a symbol without her voice being heard in the short film that is seemingly about gender politics, the intersubjective communication circuits may open up more possibilities for the Uyghur landlocked in the hinterland to change their "ecology of mind," as proposed by Gregory Bateson, to a wide-open sea. Bateson compares consciousness or mind to an ecosystem in which ideas or national characters, like plants and animals in a tangible ecological milieu, are subject to evolution, extinction, or successful flourishing (1987). No ecosystem is a closed system. In an analogous manner, the mind, if exposed to different stimuli from the environment, could bring profound changes. That appears to be the orientation of Tawfiq Nizamidin's outbound filmmaking for his Uyghur community.

Throughout the decades of the PRC's governance, ethnic minority filmmakers have become versatile to adapt to the given and changing sociopolitical environments. The emergence of transnational spaces and more opportunities provided by a wider global circuit since the post-Mao reform era may even help ethnic filmmakers occasionally thrive outside the Chinese sovereign nation-state and its overwhelmingly encompassing control and interventions. While place-based resources remain significant to every ethnic production, elements of neoliberal globalization and transnationalism have to be parts of any attempt to understand the full contours of transformations in China's ethnic filmmaking livelihood, scale, network, and landscape. Far from being linear and steady, globalization and transnationality are processes that ebb and flow. The ecological dimension of



Fig. 6.2. Maria and Professor Jung. Screenshot from *Maria by the Sea*.

such adaptation to the changing environments is evinced not only on the impacts of ethnic livelihood (since China's ethnic regions have long been part of a global system of flows, exchanges, and extractions, if not exploitation), as often portrayed in many ethnic films. There is also a dialectic between ecological dynamics and livelihood possibilities in the filmmaking prospects. The violent incorporation of ethnic areas and their communities into the capitalist mechanism of production and exchange, while generating environmental degradation, dispossession, and social marginalization in its process, correspondingly produces new forms of market institution and engagement and creates alternative transnational networks as well as circulation of ideas. Zhang Lü (or Jang Ryool) and his Korean-language films may serve as an exemplary case for possible livelihood in between the tight control of the sovereign state and the relatively fluid space of transnational circuits.

### Zhang Lü's Films alongside the National Territorial Sovereignty and Avoidance of the Digital

Other than the transnational networks that can reconstitute the ethnic places, the popularity of the digital camera is said to contribute to the rise of China's ethnic filmmakers, as digital media development may carry with

it the promise of a more democratic representation. Not only can more people in the remote borderlands receive digital media, but more people in the ethnic communities can also produce using digital media. While controversies have existed over what defines a “film” in the digital age, ethnic minority filmmakers in the PRC are juggling to appropriate such a technical medium to conceive their modes of life, organize their specific experiences, and capture reality in a specific context in which the state authorities have extensive plans, policies, investment in, and control over the digital environment that are not necessarily all for authoritarian surveillance but could have significantly beneficial effects to the well-being of citizens in China.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps rather different from many independent or ethnic filmmakers, Zhang Lü as an auteur has an idiosyncratic, if not conservative, take on the digital film. He laments that he feels “no warmth” (*meiyou wendu* 沒有溫度) for the digital motion picture, even though celluloid roll film nowadays is no longer possible for indie filmmaking since it is hard to get adequate support for any affordable processing and developing technologies.<sup>5</sup> His experimental omnibus film, *Love and . . .* has a Chinese title that literally means “love in the age of celluloid,” and its Korean title simply means “film period love.” Commissioned as the opening gala of the Seoul Elderly People’s Film Festival, *Love and . . .* is composed of four short pieces presented in different styles. In one piece, Zhang presents a montage of footage featuring the performances of his South Korean casts in other films shot on celluloid: Moon So-ri in the allegory *Peppermint Candy* (1999), Park Hae-il in the noir *Memories of Murder* (2003), Ahn Sung-ki in the political thriller *May 18* (2007), and Han Ye-ri in the social drama *A Blind River* (2009). The portmanteau starts with a black-and-white segment about a daughter visiting her father in a mental asylum, then changes to color as an indicator that the first piece is a film within a film. The flow of moving images comes full circle with the final segment, in which audiences see the opening sequence again through a series of framed shots of the set without any persons while hearing the same dialogues.

Zhang’s loosely structured work can be grasped as a love letter or tribute to filmmaking for its ability to catch the transient nature of things that find their truth in aesthetic presentations, to foreground the indexical bond between images and things by not articulating meaning, and to free the film arts from moral and political projections. More than a standard modernist position to medium-bound reflexivity, Zhang’s dislike of the digital may have to do with the way digitization has been appropriated for socioeconomic management and bureaucratic governance as the intensification

and expansion of the cybernetic-capitalist logic of control. Undoubtedly, there is a clear correlation between digitization and control (of all kinds), as characterized by processes of capture, classification, instrumentalization, modeling, regulation, prediction, and exclusion.

Zhang Lü is likely the first Korean Chinese director in the history of the PRC, although there had already been Korean filmmakers working in occupied Shanghai during the Republican China of the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> Unlike his predecessors, the characters in Zhang Lü's films speak mainly Korean dialogues, although it is a Yanbian-styled Korean language. A third-generation ethnic Korean Chinese born in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture of Jilin Province in China, Zhang Lü began his filmmaking career not within the perimeters or parameters of the Chinese state (in this sense, he has far more autonomy and flexibility in his productions than any other ethnic directors nurtured and constrained by the state institutions); instead, he plunged right into a transnational exchange with the South Korean film-making circle. The post-production of his first short film, *Eleven Years Old* (*Shiyisui* 十一歲, 2001), was finished in South Korea with the help of prominent Korean director Lee Chang-dong (Kim, Jung, and Choi 2008, 209). Since then, most of his film projects have been the outcome of his cooperation with South Korea-based companies. Such Korean-Chinese cinematic collaboration is probably not because Zhang is an ethnic Korean. Korean cinema motivated by its state policy has been seeking transnational cooperation with Australian, New Zealand, and Chinese filmmakers and companies in the twenty-first century. China is central in this process of Korean cinematic transnationalization.<sup>7</sup> While productions in Greater China cast Korean stars to capitalize on the popularity of Hallyu in Asia, some Korean filmmakers who are graduates of the Beijing Film Academy endeavor to build their personal networks with the new generation of Chinese directors. Korean producers, cinematographers, and digital post-production firms have provided services and expertise to the Chinese film industry in their collaborative projects over the last decade (Yecies, Shim, and Goldsmith 2011).

Zhang Lü's collaborative experience with the South Korean film industry is particularly strong and durable. *Tang Poetry* (*Tangshi* 唐詩, 2003) and *Grain in Ear* (*Mangzhong* 芒種, 2005) were produced by Doo Entertainment Company. *Desert Dream* (*Shamo zhi meng* 沙漠之夢, 2007), *Iri* (*Lili* 里里, 2008), *Chongqing* (重慶, 2008), and *Dooman River* (*Tumenjiang* 圖門江, aka 豆滿江, 2010) were either produced by or involved significant participation from South Korean film agencies like Sponge and the Korean Film Council. *Gyeongju* (*Qingzhou* 慶州, 2014) can even be seen as an entirely

Korean film in terms of its production because Zhang Lü relocated to Seoul to take up his film teaching position at Yonsei University in 2012 (he usually spends half a year in Seoul to teach and the other half in Beijing to be with his family).

The transnational networks enable him to access the distance labor market in ways that have impacts on his sustainability and filmmaking. All his productions after the relocation, including *Love and . . .* (*Jiaopianshidai aiqing* 膠片時代愛情, 2015), *A Quiet Dream* (*Chunmeng* 春夢, 2016), *Ode to the Goose* (*Yong e* 詠鵝, 2018), *Fukuoka* (*Fugang* 福岡, 2019), and *Yanagarwa* (*Manchang de gaobai* 漫長的告白, 2021), are not (entirely) made in China, although they all carry a Chinese title.<sup>8</sup> However, it does not comfortably place Zhang's works under the label of Korean transnational cinema, because transnationality may not go far from the hegemonic notion of nation-state, and the transnational drives of Korean cinema (as well as its pop culture wave) largely remain a state-backed project and may even reveal a neo-imperialist nationalist fantasy—although it is also true that the transnational is no longer confined to the binary of global and local and can operate in national, local, or global spaces across different and multiple territories.

Zhang's films, such as *Ode to the Goose*, are looking for a nonstandard real that is not determined by algorithmic digital machines, let alone other ideological frameworks like national identity. Digitalization necessitates a fundamental distinction between zeros and ones that constitute a homogenous underlying substance from which all constructions are built. In Zhang's film world, a distinction no longer holds sway. The real pursued by his films is something that exceeds all attempts to contain, manipulate, or reconstruct it in a medium, but it can only be intuited by the repeated failures of the symbolic order of the narrative.

The title of Zhang's Korean-language film *Ode to the Goose* is derived from a famous poem by Luo Binwang (619–84 CE), a Chinese poet of the Tang dynasty. The infant name of the male protagonist, Yun-young, is “Young-ah,” which sounds like “yong e” (“ode to the goose”) in Chinese. Audiences later find out that Yun-young, a struggling unpublished poet, can speak Chinese well (since he went to a Chinese language school run by Taiwanese in South Korea); in flashback, he recites the Chinese poem in front of his date, Song-hyun, while inebriated. The film begins with a leisure trip taken by Yun-young and Song-hyun to Gunsan, a seaport 200 kilometers southwest of Seoul. Their intimacy makes a restaurant owner assume they are a couple, and she recommends that they stay in a Japanese-style inn, which is run by an amateur photographer and his autis-

tic daughter. But it is a hotel that does not welcome every guest because the owner has his own personal style of running the hospitality industry. When Yun-young and Song-hyun successfully check into their room at the inn, viewers discover that they are not as intimate as they appear to be. Their odd and unconsummated relationship is further confirmed by Song-hyun's decision to stay in another room. Leaving Yun-young alone, she becomes drawn to the inn owner, who spends the whole day teasing out lost images on film rolls in his darkroom.

We then learn that the inn owner is a Zainichi, an ethnic Korean resident in Japan, who lives in Gunsan because he married a Korean. Such background may explain why he does not always allow visitors from Japan to stay in his inn. Some time ago, his wife died in a car accident that may have triggered his daughter's autism. Song-hyun then goes out with the inn owner on a sightseeing and photographic expedition, perhaps just as an escape from romantically engaging with Yun-young. Feeling he has been dumped, Yun-young has nothing else to do but kill time in the inn while gradually developing a close connection with the autistic girl.

The slow, monotonous pace and wide shots of the film narrative keep audiences from identifying easily with the characters while sustaining their curiosity about the unfolding story. Yun-young and Song-hyun break apart and go their separate ways home after their short rendezvous with the inn owner and the autistic daughter. When Yun-young gets back to Seoul, he learns that his father may have dementia because the old man talks to a goose all day. On his way to a dental clinic, he briefly visits a pharmacy where the salesgirl has no memory of him and he attempts to stop a swindler from cheating donations on the street. Then Yun-young arrives at the dental clinic in a high-rise building and asks the dentist to let him look at the night view from its window. At this point, after the film has already run for almost 77 minutes, the film title appears on the screen in both Chinese and Korean.

All the fragmented episodes so far may have drawn the audience into a narrative maze, which reveals the futile attempts to connect and communicate. But Zhang wants to show that there is a path to communicate, perhaps in a loop. From that moment, the film begins again in flashback mode, with the scenes proceeding in reverse. Yun-young's story happened a few days ago. He went to a pharmacy because of his tooth pain, but he forgot to take his wallet. The salesgirl allowed him to get the painkiller without paying. As he left the pharmacy, Yun-young saw a gathering aimed at collecting donated money to help the Korean Chinese (Joseonjok or Chosonjok) fight for equality in South Korea. Yun-young quickly realized



Fig. 6.3. The title scene appears at the 77-minute mark of the film. Screenshot from *Ode to Goose*.

the man's accent was not right and suspected this was a fraud. He knew how Korean Chinese spoke because his domestic helper was from Yanbian in China and his father, who fought in the Korean War, always had skirmishes with her over sociopolitical issues and showed a discriminatory attitude toward the Korean Chinese.<sup>9</sup>

With the implication of ways in which Korean Chinese as guest workers are treated in South Korean society, Zhang seems to deal with the ambivalence of hospitality. Incidentally, Yun-young ran into Song-hyun in the crowd. Through their conversation, we discover that Song-hyun was the wife of Yun-young's friend. Yun-young had had a crush on Song-hyun a long time ago, but after she married his friend, they rarely met again. Yun-young found out that Song-hyun was recently divorced, and they went out drinking several times. Song-hyun led him to the dental clinic run by her cousin to deal with his toothache, where Song-hyun came up with an idea that they could see the beautiful night view from the building. Yun-young and Song-hyun hung around together, probably because Song-hyun needed a companion to get over her painful divorce while Yun-young, who was a failed poet and lived on his father's subsidies, also needed someone to relieve his inhibitions. When they got drunk, Song-hyun laughed at Yun-young for always quitting and only ever doing half of anything. In a karaoke bar, while they were singing a song about Gunsan—which was the hometown of Yun-young's deceased mother—he invited her to go to the town with him. Song-hyun accepted his invitation but was also very wary of letting another man hurt her again. They then went together on an

impromptu trip to Gunsan, which was the original beginning of the film as audiences had already seen it.

There is a certain intriguing playfulness in the storytelling of *Ode to the Goose*, which intends to disorient the audience. But does rewinding to an earlier viewpoint bring clarity? Things are certainly not as distinctive as they initially seem. The puzzling tangle of unresolved story threads fails to disentangle the characters' complicated backgrounds. Almost every character in the film has a dimension that is hidden from public scrutiny. The frequent use of the pan shot does not reveal anything that cannot be seen. In one scene in Gunsan, Yun-young—who feels so bored with the trip—climbs into an abandoned house. The camera rotates 360 degrees horizontally within the tiny, ruined house while Yun-young goes in and out to the garden just to kill time. Yet the panning fails to provide any panoramic view; it just makes the viewer feel trapped in the shadowy inside.

The reality for Zhang may only emerge outside the media narrative. The Zainichi inn owner at Gunsan may have had an unpleasant experience in Japan that made him unwilling to rent a room to a Japanese tourist. Sony-hyun has casually mentioned that her grandfather used to live in Manchuria in the 1930s and that she may have been a Korean Chinese if he had not returned to South Korea. Yun-young's domestic helper has always been discriminated against because she is a Korean Chinese who is no longer welcomed by the Korean "home." But Yun-young later discovers she is a cousin of the famous Korean poet Yun Dong-ju, whom he hugely admires. Yun has been well respected in South Korea for his resistance poetry, but he was born in Yanbian, China, later lived in Korea, was arrested in Japan for his involvement in the Korean independence movement, and then died in a prison in Fukuoka. The allusion to a historical figure reveals how the notion of home has been deconstructed. Zhang's film juggles some "ethnic materials" in the larger context of nation-state and migration about hospitality, as well as plays directly with the capacity of confusing and mixed signs to be linked or disconnected, to construct or withhold meaning. Neither does it challenge distortions and lies with solemn facts, but it only allows for new kinds of stories or histories to be told that create different worlds heterogeneous to the dominant narratives marked by hierarchy and inequality.

Frequent allusions to literary and historical references in the film are used to explore identity issues, belonging, and xenophobia. The migrating goose may be a metaphor for people who regularly run off to another country. No matter how limiting and finite humans are, the film suggests that we cannot remove the partial human perception and replace it with a

superpositional matrix in the real. The digital image turns the real world back on itself into a shape of something that can be looked at, absorbed in, and given over, but Zhang's film avoids such a pursuit. There is no objective, total look of the real as presented in the digital image; we can only approach a hard kernel of the real in repeated failures.

Through his movies, Zhang Lü exposes the experiences of migration, traveling, seeking refuge, and even nomadic wandering life beyond as well as within the borders of nations. His characters commute on two sides of the border and go through the interior and exterior of the country. In his works—particularly those produced after 2012 when he began to stay regularly in Seoul to teach in a film program—contemporary transnational and transcultural encounters deliver the material conditions for new practices of cosmopolitanism and global mobility, which take place in some cities of refuge, indicating that cultural and political agency is not entirely restricted to the sovereign nation-state. At the same time, there are more types of borders and walls today than ever before in human history. Deviating from the PRC ethnic minority cinema mode and South Korean film industry model, Zhang Lü's movies seem quite self-accommodating, if not self-absorptive, in their undertaking rather than subordinating themselves to external standards and dictates. This does not refer to a condition that is fully self-defining and self-determining, since films—including those mainly for art-house theaters and international film circuits—are made to be watched by someone external to them. A sojourner who attempts to be self-reliant also needs to adapt to and reconcile with the changing milieu and outside factors. Self-accommodation is only a mode of survival, adjusting and addressing the acts and self that treat the other and expect to be treated as equal by mutually affirming one's own free subjectivity as well as that of the other. To seek autonomy and maintain a distance from the dominant systems—whether ethnic, national, or professional—is not simply a question of enclosure, exclusion, or separation but one of circulation, bordering, or capacity to produce hybrid transition zones.

How “border-crossing” or “transnational” are Zhang Lü's films if they are no longer easily defined by national cinema or the ethnic minority genre?<sup>10</sup> By envisioning the cultivation of an ethic of hospitality, Zhang's works also depict how such hospitality is often violated by the manner in which the reception or inclusion of the other or stranger goes along with the attempt to appropriate, control, and master the other in different modalities of violence. In a transnationally interconnected world, can cultural-political solidarity emerge beyond the sovereign nation-state and the restriction of territorial borders?

## Transnational Hospitality in Place (Re)Making

As many of his film titles are the names of specific places, Zhang appears to make use of his place-based imagination to develop cinematic narratives by ascribing and creating emotional meanings to the places he comes across and in which he lives. Being an ethnic minority caught between an officially designated place and a liminal place that has no or a very marginal position in the dominant system, Zhang conceives of place not necessarily as a legacy of history or geography but more as a project that can create new contexts and traces for reimagining politics and social relations. The places his movies circumscribe are not easily defined by conventional boundaries, nor do they contrast with nationally defined places, which means they are condemned to a certain degree of ambiguity. A migrant with a hybrid background would not easily be associated with an authentic identity, as they are considered to be an outsider in the host country but also an alien to their compatriots when returning home.

Zhang has not directly coped with the issue of migrant labor of Korean Chinese in South Korea in his movies, although his documentary *Scenery* (2013) focuses on foreign workers (including some Chinese workers) in South Korea. Perhaps, for Zhang, “Korean Chinese” is still a “bound” category of identity managed by the statistical logic of governmentality. *Scenery* is more interested in situating a not so representable multitude within concrete urban structures (although farmland and greenhouse, where migrant workers provide their cheap labor, are also filmed) under state scrutiny and statistics. While the camera mostly remains still and static, as in the filming style of his other works, movements are implied in the way migrant workers narrate their dreams of returning home, hanging out with their loved ones, and going to some ideal places. Other than some nightmares, the dreams told by these “strangers” at different South Korean locations seem to be wish fulfillment or manifestation of certain unsatisfied desires, which could be dramatized for their emancipatory content.

The revelation of private dreams does not merely suggest that “deep inside us, we are all the same,” and thus strangers should not be regarded as enemies. It is more significant that migrants’ situation rests at their being not necessarily “others” but rather “others” who are not necessarily foreigners. Given that several South Asian migrants speak fluent Korean in the interviews, it is no longer surprising that many nationals could be camouflaged foreigners inside their nationality. It is already commonplace to speak of a divided or split subject, and the Other is always at the heart of the self. Even if one is in a situation of near-confinement in one’s apartment, as

in *Tang Poetry*, one's own identity or culture can be the source of conflicting demands since subjectivity is a process of negotiation and conflict that requires the exclusion of the self from its internal otherness. The camera in *Scenery* suddenly becomes handheld mobile toward the end, hastily running through streets and seemingly revealing the conditions of contingency that could not be entirely plotted by demographer and urban planner. *Scenery*, and Zhang's fiction films in general, might aim to create some topography in the world that is not necessarily divided into dichotomies like inside and outside, center and periphery, core and margin, North and South, and so on. It is a topology of borders and paths, which solidly portrays mobility and residency, migration and sojourn, displacement and settlement.

While avoiding the highly sensitive subject of inviolable state sovereignty, Zhang's films do touch on questions of the provision of hospitality and the rights of strangers. In many of his movies, there is at least one character who arrives on someone's territory expecting not to be treated with hostility and aspiring to, if not a right to a personal home, the right of a guest to await entertainment. The ethical reflection brought up in *Dooman River* is how far hospitality can go. Unconditional hospitality should be offered to North Koreans who cross borders to seek political asylum and scavenge food for their families, even though Korean Chinese are by no means affluent. But there has to be some limitation on hospitality—especially when an act of generosity is returned with violence. How do we deal with contradictory imperatives in the principle of hospitality? How do subaltern groups negotiate their daily life to make conviviality possible?

As more than a metaphor for connecting and estranging peoples, the Dooman River flows on the border separating the PRC and North Korea in its upper reaches and on the border between North Korea and Russia in its lower streams before ending at the sea, demonstrating why it has multi-lingual names (Tumangan in Korean and Tumannaya in Russian). The story of Zhang's titular film takes place in a rural border town next to the river at Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture of China's Jilin Province inhabited by villagers of Korean origin. The twelve-year-old Chang-ho, living with his grandfather and mute sister in the poor village while his mother has left home to be a migrant worker in South Korea, has frequently seen North Koreans crossing the frozen river to flee from famine and other miseries. Through playing soccer together, Chang-ho develops a friendship with another boy, Jeong-ji, who often crosses the river from North Korea to rummage for food for his starving sister. The film uses many long takes to capture the strange atmosphere of the geopolitical border where North Korean defectors repeatedly trespass and how China's Koreans

react to these uninvited visitations. Derrida (2000) understands hospitality as a kind of aporia: it is “a self-contradictory concept and experience” that is only “possible on the condition of its impossibility” (5) because “for there to be hospitality, there must be a door. But if there is a door, there is no longer hospitality. . . . It means that someone has the key . . . and consequently controls the conditions of hospitality” (14). In other words, hospitality is no longer a universal human right as Kant has stated.

Chang-ho's family has tried to be as hospitable as they could: other than helping Jeong-ji through their mutual friendship, Chang-ho's grandfather is also generous to give a defector shelter and food, even though their family is living in an impoverished condition. To quote Derrida (2007) again: “The absolute guest [*hôte*] is this *arrivant* for whom there is not even a horizon of expectation, who bursts onto my horizon of expectations when I am not even prepared to receive the one who I'll be receiving. That's hospitality. Hospitality is not merely receiving that which we are able to receive” (451). In this sense, Zhang envisions cultivating an ethics of hospitality even at the condition of its impossibility. Indeed, Koreans are not exactly native to Chinese-governed lands. It was in the late nineteenth century that Koreans began to migrate to Manchuria because of economic hardship in their own country. Korean Chinese were the guests who became hosts in the adopted country, negotiating their own complicated identities. Striving to explore the dilemma of hospitality, Zhang's *Dooman River* and his other works also depict how such hospitality is also abused in the way that the reception of the stranger is intertwined with acts of violent infringement. What makes hospitality uncomfortable, if not impossible, in *Dooman River* is that the defector who has found shelter at Chang-ho's home is driven to commit the hideous act of raping Chang-ho's sister after watching North Korean propaganda broadcasts on TV. The emotional, tragic eruption at the end of the film where Chang-ho makes a suicidal plunge from the rooftop as a protest against Jeong-Ji being taken away by the PRC border patrol speaks quietly about how the Korean Chinese as a “host” is not in control of their “home.”<sup>11</sup>

In a globalized world where mass migrations have become pervasive, is there still room for the figure of the stranger, external to any definition of citizenship and state membership, to be treated simply as a guest but not as an intruder or an enemy? In a world that is interconnected enough, can some kind of cosmopolitan consciousness and cultural-political solidarity emerge beyond a sovereign nation-state and restriction of territorial borders? Responding to these various situations, Zhang—not unlike any

dominated minorities—makes rational choices among possible trajectories of action by working the existing system to his advantage.

Zhang has explored relations between minor cultures across national boundaries in his films (e.g., the encounter between two North Korean refugees and a Mongolian man who plants trees in the desert in *Desert Dream*; the friendship between a North Korean boy and Chang-ho, a Korean Chinese kid, in Yanbian in *Dooman River*; the sojourning experiences of Mr. Kim, who comes from Iri, stays in Chongqing, and wants to go to Mongolia in *Chongqing* are all viable minor-to-minor connections). But he is even more interested in those broadly defined “minors” by their subordination to as well as exploitation by a “center” or dominant force that is mostly defined as masculine power within the structure of the nation-state. Women in Zhang’s films are always victims of sexual assault and constant exploitation. The men molest and even rape these female “minors.” Their life is a kind of unspeakable tragedy. In scenes that depict rape or assault, Zhang’s camera rarely stays on the brutal violence but moves or tilts to other things or silent objects while the struggle is being heard, as if these objects stand in place of the minors for their powerless resistance and protest. The camera also shows full frontal nudity of these powerful men (who often appear as police characters who stop being an instrument to enforce the law and become an abusive, independent ruling authority) as a way to humiliate them for revenge.

Drawing upon Hamid Nacify’s notion of “accented cinema,” Yim Choon-sung (2011) tries to identify Zhang as an exilic, diasporic, and post-colonial ethnic filmmaker. At first glance, the notion of Korean or Chinese diasporic film hardly accommodates Zhang’s borderland existence. Zhang may not fit into the category of an “accented” filmmaker either, since he is not a displaced artist who lives in the West and produces films in exile as the concept defines it, although the dialect spoken by Korean Chinese in his films may sound to Korean audiences as if it is accented. Most obviously, his movies do not carry an accent (although the “accent” is more a metaphor than an empirical fact in Nacify’s concept) different from the society in which he lives, nor are characters being pigeonholed by accent prejudices. But one characteristic of accented cinema is its interstitial mode of production, which is also found in Zhang’s filmmaking; it operates “within and astride the cracks of the system, benefiting from its contradictions, anomalies and heterogeneity” (Nacify 2001, 46). For most of his productions completed in South Korea, Zhang has managed to persuade a number of top Korean actors to volunteer for his films without

any monetary compensation.<sup>12</sup> Professional Korean actors are willing to do this because of Zhang's fame. In other words, even if Zhang Lü is not entirely integrated into the system of national cinema (including a state-sponsored or state-supervised mode of production), he is not completely excluded from it either, constituting multiple and interstitial relations with the nation-state mechanism, in the sense that he is reduced to a subject that cannot be otherwise than ambivalent, split, and interstitial in face of nation-states. His in-between position allows him to gain some unexpected advantages and to remain nonintegral to the regimes of social power.<sup>13</sup>

Recording movement on a realistic photographic basis in Zhang's films is also a registration of the experiences and consciousness of mobility, which is not only about the nature of movies but also about the global situation. His films consist not of agents capable of heroically transforming the world but of bypassing observers taking the view of its injustice, suffering, and violence. For the nomadic seer, the world is shattered and out of kilter, impervious to any transformation. The only alternative for Zhang's nomad is the aberrant, empty, and passive movement—a motion not necessarily of their choice. It could be a traumatized, endless continual passing suspended from the meanings of action and detached from ends, purpose, or satisfaction. Hence, it is not a promising world or community available for radical change.

Zhang's films portray how those living on contingency are, in their particularity and fragility, attempting to find a space for affects or love to reconnect to the world amid its miseries and ruin. While Zhang's characters have only themselves and their capacity to respond to one another, which could be understood as a manner of hospitality, it is this comfort and support that make their life possible, in the sense not of overcoming their separateness but of sharing their isolation and precariousness. It is a representation that generates a fragmented mode of existence and leads to a salient weight or status that cannot be framed by any determinate meanings or ordinary flow of the narrative. The realism of Zhang's films, if they can be named as such, is their capability to render the view of a condition for our shared but destitute dwelling that is excessive to the general absorption and digestion of the determining narrative. In such a context, the idea of home becomes something ambiguous for Zhang Lü, who may wonder whether the notion is not an illusion, a myth, or a fiction. If one clings to it too adhesively, one is reduced to being its victim. His films imply that one cannot see a displaced life from home as a replacement or a substitute life; instead, we all must accept our life in a place where we happen to be as our real life and try to live it fully because it is the space that counts.

Zhang's cinematic mobility may symbolize a search for some kind of liberation. Cinema for him expresses the purpose of deposing established boundaries and provoking a consciousness that could pierce a hole in the known world. Subalterns under the harness of the nation-state are protagonists in his narratives of repression, territory, movement, and flow. His films create spaces for interethnic subaltern cohabitation and conflictual coexistence, although transnational linkages or mixing in a place may not automatically produce the possibilities of subaltern cosmopolitanism. Different from hegemonic cosmopolitan projects sponsored by the state, subaltern cosmopolitanism concerning Zhang's works may refer to practices of frontier crossing and migrant networks as well as politics of living with diversity and sharing a common territorial space in some non-elite disenfranchised modes. Instead of using film as a vehicle to elaborate and verify aspects of prevailing cultural and political codes, Zhang attempts to redistribute power and emotions in ways that (dis)place objects, persons, or events in movements, waves, and vibrations that are no longer in seamless continuity with the governing order.

Undoubtedly, Zhang is in search of more dispersed and multiple production (and financing) situations, different from the state-sponsored film industry. But the freedom and mobility he enjoys are in interstitial spaces (un)intentionally created by the state system. In the twenty-first-century global order, the world system is still seen as an arena of contest among nation-states, which are generally collusive with developments of capitalism—although not without significant tensions.<sup>14</sup> However, capitalism as a global structure also enables transnational practices and flows to be the essential means for nation-states to survive if not thrive in this new historical era. Instead of weakening and declining, nation-states endeavor to reconfigure and restructure themselves to accommodate and regulate these transnational connections. In this historical conjuncture, ethnic minority filmmakers like Zhang Lü, though also facing tremendous difficulties, may be able to take some advantage of the liminality, heterogeneity, and incongruity generated by massive extensions and deepening of economic, cultural, financial, and demographic flows across national borders to straddle the art-cinema tradition with a “distinct identity” and to make their films be conceived and marketed as “authored” works for global viewers. Auteurism is attributed to a filmic style with a consistent and distinctive world vision, which helps global viewers, who are confronting a cinema from very different worlds, understand and accept the world with the known patterns. Auteurist cinema, circulated through international film festivals, rewards such interpretation with a certain stability and coherence.<sup>15</sup>

Persistently, Zhang has been trying to ward off various kinds of labeling on his works on different occasions:

My films are not underground films. They are just independent films. And my films are not the films of Korean director dealing mostly with the life of ethnic Koreans living abroad either. They're simply works dealing with universal human issues. (Kim, Jung, and Choi 2008, 208)

In the era of unrestrained capitalist globalization under the neoliberal logic that severely elevates competitive pressures among nation-states in Asia, different strategies—both statist and non-state—have been employed to enhance the viability of a society, which may reshape and restrengthen nationalist ideology while simultaneously intensifying and monitoring transnational cross-border circulations. Increasing transnational interaction or intercourse in the region may not be able to transform the self-other dichotomy underlying nationalism with its moral absolutism but would open up some spaces to bring about a progressive cultural, intellectual, and social connectivity, thus giving rise to a new cultural economy within which filmmakers like Zhang Lü can have more freedom to move around.

Zhang's bordering experiences and the model of his filmmaking are both constitutive of and constituted by a society built upon the nation-state since a border is required for the very existence of a sovereign state as well as a national identity, while it is also something created by the communities that divide themselves within and from one another. Zhang Lü's films embody a border that exists not only between the inside and the outside of two states or two territories but also between the inside and the inside—a divide deeply ingrained within society, particularly within a multiethnic one. The case of Zhang Lü reveals how borders that define identity, regulate experiences, and distribute sensations are by no means natural, neutral, or static but rather politically charged, historically contingent, and dynamic.

## Epilogue

### *A Global Theory of Ethnic Minority Cinema from China?*

The increasing geopolitical tensions, the great power competition, the United States–China rivalry, the possible decoupling of international supply chains, the unexpected post-pandemic aftermath, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine leading to the punitive Western economic sanctions, and the growing resentment of non-Western countries, loosely categorized as the Global South, toward Western hypocrisy over the Israel-Gaza War have endangered the global system and transnational connectivity of the last three decades. It is such a global system upon which the West has established its hegemony and dominant international rules of order. The potential decline of the global system and the new ecology of international relations enable China to gain more confidence in changing the existing world order, for example, through the Belt and Road Initiative that funds mega-infrastructures in Eurasia on a colossal scale well beyond its borders.

While there are only very few ethnic minority films that can arouse the general interest of national audiences, certain ethnic-themed productions may reveal China’s ambitions and desires. Historical dramas about the Manchu imperial court have been trendy in China since the 1990s. These “Manchu-costume dramas” (*Qing-zhuang ju* 清裝劇) are less about the historical realities of Manzu (滿族 Manchu ethnic) or Qiren (旗人 banner people) than about palace intrigue, power struggles, and martial arts. China’s craving for imperial Manchu court dramas over more than two decades may indicate how the increasingly affluent Chinese still envi-

sion their country as an “imperial nation” enshrined with the glories of empire in the contemporary era, not merely resonating with Xi’s call for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation under his China Dream slogan but also disclosing the fundamental contradiction of being an empire-nation continuum amid a world system of nation-states. The historical demise of the Qing Empire, China’s last dynasty, does not necessarily enable post-imperial China to resemble a typical ideal nation under the scrutiny of modern nationalism since its core territory and population have endured over the centuries. The PRC’s official discourse of its ethnic components as a giant family with 56 ethnic members is like a reconfiguration of an old-fashioned patrimonial kingdom: the ruler depicts himself as the Son of Heaven in a paternal role, with his duty being to look after and protect his subjects like a household master or a benevolent father. The basic orientations of ethnic policies and frontier control, although undergoing some transformative processes, are not entirely discontinuous with the imperial tradition. However, even if the spirit of modern nationalism cannot be inspired and enforced throughout the populace, the national type of ethno-racial boundary making that constitutes structural discrimination and social inequality still operates in Chinese society.

The imperial Manchu imaginary in China’s popular media embodies its exceptional status of empire-nation continuum in the modern age of nation-states, even though no Chinese political elite has ever shown any gratitude to the Manchus for leaving their empire to contemporary China. Chinese historians see the Qing dynastic expansions not as imperialist aggression but rather as a form of nation-building. However, the Manchu people were subjected to the lethal revolutionary violence and discrimination unleashed by the 1911 Revolution. To survive, many of them had to cover up their Manchu identity with Han names. This certainly reinforces the Han Chinese perception that the Manchus have for centuries assimilated almost completely into Chinese culture. But the emergence in the Anglo-American academic world of the “New Qing History,” an arbitrary label used to refer to mostly English-language studies of the Manchu Empire with new references to Manchu-language archives other than the Chinese-language ones, poses substantial challenges to the Sinicization thesis and sharply articulates Manchu self-conscious distinctiveness from the Chinese civilization and institutions.

Those new findings based upon Manchu sources argue that the Qing not only saw Han China as part of its empire but also regarded its Inner Asia subjects as much more significant; henceforth, it simultaneously appropriated multiple cultural frames and political traditions of the sev-

eral peoples it conquered while marking itself off from those it ruled. The Manchus patronized Chinese Confucianism as much as they patronized Tibetan Buddhism and the Mahakala cult. Once in China, the Manchu rulers assumed the role of the Chinese emperor in order to appeal to the Chinese elites, but in Jehol and geographical locations outside the Great Wall, they gave the impression to the Mongolian nobles that they were Mongolian Khans and faithful supporters of Tibetan Buddhism. The authenticity of the Manchus remains in question since they could adopt different ideological personae by expressing different identities to different people. No one knows what the Manchu rulers really believed or whether they did deploy various forms of rhetoric to achieve their political ends. But the success of their empire, achieved by sustaining a long and peaceful era as a conquest dynasty and claiming the allegiance of those they subjugated for centuries, depended in large part on the deeds they took seriously and the beliefs of those they ruled.

Academic debate on historical issues usually cannot come unequivocally clean from identity politics, especially when it is subjected to certain political milieus. Thus, the controversy becomes more vulnerable to manipulation for political agendas. China's nationalists have explicitly accused these Western "New Qing" historians of maliciously distorting Manchu history to promote separatism in the Chinese national unity. However, the radical reaction from China may indicate why the nation is stuck in a rather self-pitying and self-victimizing passive position toward the challenges put forth by foreigners yet fails to take a proactive role in impacting others with appealing ideas and compelling visions beyond the national borders. The Xi Jinping regime has started to exercise assertive diplomacy and global politics to advance its control and influence over the political landscapes of other countries, without learning the art of Manchu statecraft, but while untactfully imposing its autocratic values on others and turning a soft power approach into sharp power maneuvers.

Mao's China did not pay much attention to the Manchus, although they had been recognized as Manzu in 1952. It was not until the reform era that, after the first Manzu autonomous county, Xinbin, was established in Liaoning in 1985, the population of Manzu soared to become one of the largest ethnic groups in the PRC. While the physical presence of Manchu ethnic people is largely ignored because Manzu is believed to have already been thoroughly Hanized or sinicized, the media representation of the Manchus doesn't just connote a general longing for their imperial legacy but also symbolizes the modern systematic oppression of the ethnic group from the conquest dynasty. The Manchu representation may serve

as an ideal scenario for the Chinese regime: insofar as the imperial Manchu characters are glamorously portrayed and their ethnic culture is splendidly elaborated on-screen, the real Manzu people have been rendered invisible and missing. If there is any trace of their existence, they have only been reduced to a kind of “costume” as part of the inventory and state design meant to justify and legitimate China's exceptionalism.

If China's problems, in terms of the country's scale and its population size, usually spill over beyond the national territories to the extent that they may likely become planetary issues, does its ethnic minority cinema—which began only as a propagandist genre to police its people's thoughts—have any potential to be universalized as something global to inspire other cinemas of a similar kind? China's real impact is not on Western countries but on other developing nations, since Xi's China is more enthusiastic about engaging with countries that are part of the Belt and Road Initiative and engaging more regionally. Even if the Chinese nation-state ultimately emerged as the superpower in the world, the Chinese model would not and could not be copied globally. The primary audience for Beijing's narrative of ethnic governance, as always, is domestic, but it may also include foreigners, especially in developing countries where nondemocratic rule seems to be more common. China's aggressive propaganda offensive to promote its official line and progressively its fighting spirit against the perceived hostility from the West may successfully fill, in the eyes of many non-Western countries and the supporters of populist, anti-global politics, the leadership vacuum left by the United States in an increasingly chaotic world.

China is the first country to legitimate ethnic minority film as a genre or a mode of film practice with a specific institutional history and identifiable conventions that appeal to certain national cultural milieu. These films have even been exported to the socialist bloc under the banner of proletarian internationalism. From the beginning, China's ethnic minority films have been seen by the state authorities as an ideology aimed to serve the government's political agenda, although at some moments it has also fallen into the category of commodity or myth. Yet its status as a commodity or a myth can never overwhelm its being an ideology. Its deep-seated ideological coding and the accompanying logic of ideological critique do not necessarily enable it to pertain as a “political” film. Endeavors to refuse to restrict it to its ideological dimensions, but rather to regain its significance by transforming these functions, can render it “political” and produce the effects that something different is possible, as evinced in many films I have discussed in this book. Indeed, ethnic minority cinema was more than an invocation of ethnic minorities. The state used it as a *modus operandi* to

test and carry out its policies that pervasively affect the lives of Han and non-Han alike. It is also a field of the changing nexus of relations structured by the attempt to win hegemony but determined by the processes whereby hegemony is fought for, won, lost, or resisted by forms of opposition to this endeavor. Perhaps, it was an act of inventing and mobilizing a people that is still becoming, or while being formed in the changing ecosystem, rather than being conformed by the state classifications. It reveals a glimpse of being heterotopic, if not utopic, space where the distinction between the exterior and the interior is blurred to affirm its potential to inscribe a new sense of equality and to forge a new form of virtual community through the distribution of visible and sayable.

The potential of China's ethnic minority cinema does not essentially supply narrative and plot to a state-led continuous linear vector, which is crucial for the formation of national identity based on race, ethnicity, or religious heritage by means of differentiating "us" from "them." Far from having achieved their becoming, some emerging ethnic films from the PRC may speak the same genre language, yet they understand the generic conventions differently by speaking in the interstices of the language or its intervals. That is to say, they are not outside the genre but rather explore the outside of the genre by pushing it to its limits, drawing strength from the conventions it fights and creating a new language within it. If cinema, this impure media that has been considered democratic and revolutionary, still has any "political" role to assume, it is not to convert the masses into subjects or to unite different peoples into a whole—what populist movements claim as "we the people." Instead, it carries the concept of becoming people as a regulative politics by showing "a people" that is not yet.

If "a people" can ever exist, it is only as a tenuous minority, although attempts have always been made to render it in the apparent mold of oneness. Making sense of the world depends on bringing multiplicity to unity and pinning the elusive and indiscernible to a visible presence. Ethnic people are usually too clothed in the film to design for their distinction. Cinematic apparatus has the resources to concoct additional spells to their photogenic costume style. What makes ethnic minority cinema in China, as well as in the world, "political" is by no means to call forth the presence and appearance of the ethnic peoples as minority or as plurality but to disrupt our habitual modes, acknowledge a people who are still in the process of becoming, and contribute to the reinvention of "a people" in order to reconfigure new forms of collective being to come.

A people that is in the process of becoming refers to something that gets lost in the historical reality once made coherent and consistent. It

is not an issue of aestheticism but one of realism. From the outset, it is a search for realism, even if cinema remains an idealistic phenomenon. It is a realism through its impassive lens that shows all we may not want or be able to see, because of our spectatorial desire and ideological will, although its mechanical recording is now challenged by the digitization that can empty any sense of ontology. Yet technical recording allows something else to occur, something that is being recorded since the cinematic image is an index not just of visible representation of reality but also of its failure, indicating something out of the way of its visualization. Cinematic realism designates an image of the world that the creative intervention is destined to miss—or at least to miss in part. While the subjective shot of the real as a whole or matrix would include becoming others, it is through the failed indexicality that the film leads us to a new kind of ecological vision.

# Notes

## INTRODUCTION

1. It was Romanian writer Norman Manea who first used the term “etatization” to describe how the state regime subjects people to its transformative projects (Verdery 1996).

2. The term “to ecologize” comes from Bruno Latour, who sees it as an alternative to “to modernize” in the way that ecologizing is to seek possible associations between things and people without any of these entities being used as a simple means by the others (1998).

3. Robin Visser argues that using ecology as the method is to radically equalize organic and inorganic entities comprising the world and see the dynamic relations between humans, nonhuman animals, and regional ecosystems as vital to the existence of the cosmos (2019).

4. The Chinese leaders had ambitiously transformed nature in large-scale, even well-intended ways, but this resulted in catastrophic consequences for the PRC. Mao has been depicted as a cruel dictator who ruthlessly devastated the natural environment for his unscientific, single-minded blueprint of utopia building (Shapiro 2001).

5. The percentage of non-Han ethnic minorities has gradually increased from about 6 percent of the total Chinese population in the census conducted in 1953 to 6 percent in the 1982 census and 8 percent in the 1990 census (S. Wu 1995, 106). The 2012 population census showed that ethnic minorities accounted for about 10 percent of the country’s population (Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013, 147). According to the data of the Seventh National Population Census released by the State Council in 2021, the population of ethnic minorities accounts for 8.89 percent of the total population in China.

6. The aggressive process of nation building was charged with being not significantly different from colonial activity (Weber 1976). Walter Mignolo (2011)

argues that there is no modernity without coloniality. Some scholars charged the Chinese government with practicing internal colonialism (Gladney 1998) in the ethnic areas, while others refuted such accusations (Sautman 2000, 2001a).

7. Bulag argues one can write Han Chinese in English, but “it is impossible to hyphenate other nationalities with Chinese. Mongol Chinese or Tibetan Chinese are impossibilities” (2002, 18).

8. Since the mid-1950s, reeducation through coerced labor has become a punitive instrument for the government to deal with counterrevolutionary activists and dissenting intellectuals. However, it was almost phased out during the Cultural Revolution. Starting from the reform era of the 1980s, however, it was revived as the state’s strategy to serve the functions of crime prevention, drug rehabilitation, investigative detention, and political control (H. Fu 2005).

9. The concept of “ecological civilization” was officially introduced in China in 2007 during its Party Congress, representing the political leaders’ attempt to redefine the model of growth from the existing industrial civilization to search for a new mode that can address the severe environmental problems. Both the Eighteenth and the Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012 and 2017, respectively, have announced plans to build an “ecological civilization” for the Chinese nation. A strong “environmental turn” in the state policies happened in 2013 when just appointed President Xi Jinping began to vow a green, low-carbon, and sustainable development path and committed more resources to address the worsening pollution. Xi in 2018 urged that China should speed up the construction of an ecological civilization system and articulated the nation’s global ambition through sustainable green development in order to advance its global influence.

10. To the CCP, such privileges include the non-Han’s rights to have regional autonomy, use their own language, and preserve and develop their cultural traits. The government provides active help in improving production, health, and education in minority regions. Couples of minority origin are allowed to have more children under the birth control policy. Minority children are given priority in admission to schools and colleges. The rationing of beef and mutton is more favorable toward Muslim minorities.

11. The following counts are not comprehensive since there is almost no single source to provide accurate numbers of how many ethnic minority films have been released every year since 1949. These figures can only be used as reference: 27 ethnic films in 1950–59; 26 in 1960–69; 25 in 1970–79; 97 in 1980–89; 68 in 1990–99; and 117 in 2000–2009.

12. Some scholars misidentify the Han as a homogeneous ethnic group. For instance, Eric Hobsbawm claims that, while a nation is mostly a social construct rather than a given, China is among “the extremely rare examples of historic states composed of a population that is ethnically almost or entirely homogeneous” (1990, 66).

13. Qiang, among the other 55 ethnic groups, is an officially recognized nationality in today’s China. But Qiang ethnic could be different from the Qiang in ancient times.

## CHAPTER 1

1. The discourses of nationalism and race (racism) are intertwined in rather complicated ways, although nationalism does not have to develop on the basis of a latent racism and racism is not necessarily an inevitable outcome of nationalism (Balibar 1991).

2. The concept *wuzu gonghe* was sometimes translated as “Five Nations in Harmony,” “Republic of the Five Nationalities,” or “Union of Five Lineages.” The slogan may also change to *wuzu yijia* (Five Nations, One Family). Its lack of a proper English translation suggests that modern China’s “five nations” vision is an experimental notion that conveys no definitive content.

3. Since the late eighteenth century, numerous Han Chinese had migrated to Inner Mongolia, Manchuria, and Xinjiang for agricultural, commercial, and/or military reasons. In the nineteenth century, the numbers of Han migrants exceeded those of the native populations in these regions, gradually blurring the distinction between the lands within and beyond the Great Wall.

4. The “Open Up the West” program (*xibu da kaifu* 西部大開發) in the PRC beginning from the late 1990s covers six provinces (Gansu, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Yunnan), five autonomous regions (Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet, and Xinjiang), and one municipality (Chongqing).

5. In 1927, the Nanjing government allowed the Swedish adventurer Sven Hedin and his European team to launch their expedition in Xinjiang on the condition that it had to be organized as a joint Sino-Swedish venture by including Chinese archaeologist Xu Xusheng (徐旭生) and other scholars from Peking University. The archaeological mission was used as a geopolitical attempt to enforce the central authority’s command over the Xinjiang warlords who ruled the remote lands out of the Nationalist government’s reach. The Nationalist officials in Nanjing wanted to play this card by selectively sponsoring foreign expeditions to China’s northwest to assert their symbolic authority or sometimes to manipulate the excursions as a means of reinforcing their power in the faction fighting within the GMD (J. Jacobs 2014).

6. The Christian church realized that its future in China depended on aligning its efforts with Chinese nationalist aspiration for indigenizing the church with the larger participation of the Chinese leadership (Mak 2015).

7. The film, when released in Paris in 1933, provoked angry protests from the overseas Chinese community. After the negotiation of Gu Weijun (顧維鈞), the Chinese ambassador to France, with the French government, the film was reedited to eliminate the parts that humiliated China (Luo 1996; Wan 1994).

8. English novelist Rudyard Kipling was the first to call the Anglo-Russian rivalry for hegemony in Central Asia in the nineteenth century the “Great Game.” The British government had been worried that some European powers would take advantage of the political decline in Islamic Asia, and the Russian Empire’s southward advance particularly drew British attention. Although Germany had no direct interest in Central Asia, the Bismarck government seized opportunities to manipulate Anglo-Russian rivalry to achieve various foreign policy goals that would further German interests (Fromkin 1980; Stone 2015).

9. European expeditioners such as Russian-sponsored Nikolay Mikhaylovich Przhevalsky and Carl Gustaf Mannerheim and British-supported Marc Aurel Stein and George Ernest Morrison went to China's northwest to collect intelligence and make visual documentation in the late Qing period (X. Li 2014, chap. 3).

10. Wang was a photojournalist who is well known for his photograph “Bloody Saturday” (*xuexing de xingqiliu* 血腥的星期六), or “Shanghai Baby,” a glimpse he captured on black-and-white film on 28 August 1937 during the Second Sino-Japanese War. The picture depicts a crying baby amid the bombed-out ruins of Shanghai Railway Station; it soon became an icon of the war, arousing international attention.

11. The contemporaneity or coevalness of the ethnic “primitive” Other has always been denied while we, the modern people, are “here and now” in opposition to the objects of our depictions that are “there and then.” Like property, time is a symbol of significance, through which we define our relation to the Other (Fabian 1983).

12. In the PRC annual official television program celebrating the New Year (also known as the New Year's Gala [*chunwan* 春晚]), many ethnic minorities would be showcased. Benedict Anderson writes: “What is very noticeable in this long display is a sharp distinction between the Great Han people and the various minorities. The minorities are made to appear in their most colourful traditional costume. . . . The Han themselves, however, cannot appear in traditional clothing. . . . So the [Han] men, for example, appear in business suits, derived from Italian and French models. . . . The Han thus manifest themselves as the Future, and the minorities as the Past . . . [which] is also part of a Big Past through which the Chinese state's territorial stretch is legitimized” (Anderson 2001, 39).

13. The “model woman” described by issue no. 99 of *The Young Companion* in 1934 should have the characteristics of the following ten women in China: “to have Yang Xiuqiong's swimming ability, Ding Ling's literary genius, Hu Mulan's filial piety, Lin Pengxia's adventurous spirit, He Xiangning's artistic talent, Song Meiling's virtue of helping her husband, Senior Madame Song's longevity, Mrs. Haroon's wealth, Hu Die's reputation, Zheng Lixia's dancing skill” (如楊秀琼之入水能游、有丁玲之文學天才、如胡木蘭之侍父盡孝、有林鵬俠之冒險精神、有何香凝之藝術手腕、有宋美齡之相夫之德、如宋太夫人之福壽全歸、如哈同夫人之富有巨萬、如胡蝶之名聞四海、如鄭麗霞之舞藝超群)。

14. Similarly, the white American elites' effort to preserve wilderness in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries related to Euro-Americans' fear that urbanization led to the loss of wilderness through wildlife extirpation and Indian American eradication might propel their own decline (Powell 2016).

## CHAPTER 2

1. Each ethnic minority film in the PRC is promoted as a representative of one or more particular ethnic groups. However, not every officially recognized ethnic group is equally represented on the PRC cinematic screen. Mongols, Tibetans, and Uyghurs have dominated in China's ethnic minority cinema in terms of numbers. From 1950 to 2012, there are 75 or more China-made fiction films about the Mongol, 54 or more about the Tibetans, and around 52 about the Uyghurs. While other non-Han ethnic minorities (such as Miao [Hmong], Hui, Yi, Zhuang, and

Korean) generally have less than 10 feature-length films since the 1950s showcasing their ethnic culture and community, at least 19 out of the officially recognized 56 ethnic groups in China never have any fiction feature film on them.

2. Critics and scholars of the PRC from the 1990s began to call these productions about ethnic minorities *shaosbu minzu ticaí dianying* (minority nationality-themed cinema) to distinguish them from films made by ethnic minority filmmakers (Z. Wang 1997).

3. Blaming Western infections on Chinese values is indeed a common tactic not only in propaganda materials but also in scholarly work. A film critic wrote: “Chinese ethnic minority film had never been a tributary, but an indispensable organic part of the mainstream cinema . . . [which was] in direct opposition to the Hollywood-styled ethnic minority ‘spectacle.’ . . . The notion of the so-called ‘other’ did not exist in ethnic minority films before the 1980s. What existed was the ethnic minority cinema being the inherent component of new Chinese ‘people’s film’” (Lü 2015, 23).

4. The ethnic minority groups in China and foreigners from a multiracial country would find Han children dressed in ethnic minority costumes to sing and dance under the Chinese national flag in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics to be scandalous, fake, and ridiculous. But Chinese officials and probably many Chinese citizens accept it as an enveloping representation of all ethnic groups as the Chinese people, that is to say, all for one and one for all.

5. It was reported that Premier Zhou Enlai called for the production of pleasant films to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the PRC. He ordered Minister for Culture Xia Yan (夏衍), who was also a playwright and screenwriter, to make a musical comedy in color about the ethnic minorities in Dali, Yunnan. Hence came the production of *Five Golden Flowers*, one of the PRC’s earliest color films, which was finished in four months—a speed that could compete with that promoted by the Great Leap Forward (Gu 2009).

6. The highly selective national discourse could actively produce “unimagined communities” and “spatial amnesia” internal to the space of the nation-state when the presence of local communities becomes inconvenient to or disturbs national development or the extraction of environmental resources (Nixon 2011, 150–74).

7. See, e.g., Liang Yongtai 梁永泰, *The Place Nobody Has Ever Been* (從前沒有人到過的地方, 1954, woodblock print); Shi Lu 石魯, *Beyond the Ancient Great Wall* (古長城外, 1954, Chinese traditional painting); Huang Yongyu 黃永玉, *Brand New Noises* (新的聲音, 1954, woodblock print); Guan Shanyue 關山月, *The Newly Developed Highway* (新開發的公路, 1954, Chinese traditional painting); Ai Zhongxin 艾中信, *The Way to Urumqi* (通往烏魯木齊, 1954, oil painting); and Ma Changli 馬常利, *The Road of Happiness* (幸福的道路, 1960, oil painting) (Sohu 2016).

8. From the 1950s on, state-employed musicologists and specialists traveled to different parts of the country, including the ethnic areas, to record traditional music, with many of their recordings preserved in the Music Research Institute in Beijing, and local cadres collected regional folk songs to be transformed into professional performances by song and dance troupes, leading to the phenomenon that many propaganda songs in the 1950s and 1960s originated from folk songs, while many professional Western-influenced composers saw folk music as their source of inspiration (Rees 2009, 44–46).

9. For a discussion of the transnational cultural exchanges between China and

Eastern Europe in the 1950s and 1960s and how East German and Polish communists used China as an ideological symbol to build and maintain their new socialist society, see Tompkins (2016).

10. Film language policies have made voice on-screen a national acoustic project that only allows the use of Putonghua as the dominant communication means. But the authority of monolingualism in the PRC cinema was only a cover image, and the language of mainland Chinese films has always been a site of negotiations. For example, even in the 1950s and 1960s, many ethnic minority films were released in particular ethnic languages in order to cater to the needs of the non-Chinese-speaking ethnic viewers. However, they were only circulated in ethnic minority regions, while their dubbed Putonghua edition dominated the mainstream market.

11. I borrow the term “aural fold” from Vlad Dima’s essay (2012), in which he coins the term to describe Jean-Luc Godard’s special use of sound to challenge the context of cinema.

12. Clark (1987, 16) might have meant “southwest” (referring to Guangxi, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Yunnan), where many ethnic minority communities are located.

13. “Sibling nationalities” or “brother nationalities” (*xiongdì minzu* 兄弟民族) were also often used in the early official description.

14. For an analysis of how Marxism narrowed the difference between China and the West and how bourgeois virtues like hard work were upheld in communist China, see Meisner (1979).

15. The man-made famine had claimed more than 45 million lives and brought devastating effects to agriculture, industry, and trade sectors (Xun Zhou 2012; Dikötter 2010).

16. Yang was a dancer but not a singer. All her songs in the film were sung by someone else. Yang did not even speak Putonghua well. Thus, her lines in the film were dubbed. She starred in only two musicals (*Five Golden Flowers* and *Ashima*) in her entire career, and they were both dubbed. The two musicals made her (inter) nationally famous but also made her suffer persecution during the Cultural Revolution.

17. During the first Congress of Soviet Writers held in Moscow in 1934, Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin’s chief cultural commissar, claimed that socialist realism’s method was to depict life “not simply as ‘objective reality,’ but to depict reality in its revolutionary development . . . combined with the ideological remolding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism” (1992, 411).

18. “Chongfang Wuduo Jinhua” (Revisiting *Five Golden Flowers*), TV program, CCTV-10, broadcast 12 and 16 June 2006 (quoted in J. Chen 2008, 81).

19. In 1974, Mao expressed the view that the United States and the Soviet Union were bourgeois nations belonging to the First World, while Japan, Europe, and Canada belonged to the Second World. China, Asia, Africa, and Latin America were all proletarian countries constituting the Third World (Mao 1977). Although Mao’s class-implicated “Three Worlds Theory” has challenged the dichotomous Cold War rivalry between the two nuclear-based superpowers, it is always the national interest, state sovereignty, and historical character that ostensibly were far more likely to be defining factors than shared socialist and internationalist ideology for communist China to handle its international relations as well as ethnopolitics.

20. One example is the way in which Uyghur music has been recreated to construct musical stereotypes in minority representation (Wong 2012).

21. Prime Minister Zhou Enlai ordered the withdrawal of the PRC's first official ethnic minority fiction feature, *Inner Mongolian Spring Scenery* (*Neimeng chun-guang* 内蒙春光, dir. Gan Xuewei 干學偉, 1950), a month after its release. What went wrong with the film, in the eyes of the top leaders, was its primary focus on class struggle within the Mongolian community, treating the aristocratic class as the sole enemy, alienating the upper-class Mongolian elites' alliance with the communist polity, and thus failing to transcend the class and ethnic differences to construct an ideal socialist family. Under the principle of not wasting any of China's already limited resources, especially during the most straitened times in the early 1950s, the CCP leaders preferred the film to be revised and rereleased rather than shelving it. When rereleased, the film was renamed by Chairman Mao Zedong with his own calligraphy as *The Victory of the Inner Mongolian People* (*Neimengrenmin de shengli* 内蒙人民的勝利) (Lo 2009).

### CHAPTER 3

1. “National defense film” (*guofang dianying* 國防電影) was a term invented by the left-wing filmmakers in Shanghai in 1936 to refer to the films produced primarily to mobilize Chinese people against the Japanese invasion and agitate them to go to the front to contribute their efforts to the war cause.

2. According to Li, the GMD county officials spread rumors while their production crew passed by, to discourage them from continuing the trip and to damage the reputation of the CCP by hiring some bound-feet women with heavy makeup as the people living in liberated areas under communist rule. Local GMD cadres also used all possible means to stir up disputes among her crew members to impede their journey (L. Li 1980, 59).

3. The splitting up of Mongolia into Inner Mongolia and Outer Mongolia began in the Qing dynasty to facilitate its divide-and-rule policy regarding the Mongols. In 1912 the Republic of China inherited the terms as legal titles (Borjigin 2004).

4. The term “political ecology” could be understood as the study of the complex relations between nature and society through an analysis of social forms of access and control over resources and how environmental politics is contested or negotiated in different forms of contention—whether science, traditional knowledge, discourses, risk, or property rights (Watts and Peet 2004).

5. The term was first coined by German zoologist Ernst Haeckel in the nineteenth century (Schwarz and Jax 2011).

6. For a discussion of how cinema is entangled with the energy economy and resource politics, see Bozak (2012).

7. The term “Mongoloid race” was coined by the race/racist theory that divided humankind into races in eighteenth-century Europe. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach and Christoph Meiners were the first racial theorists to speak of a Mongoloid race. Under their influences, “Mongoloid” is not only a term for a human race in Asia; it is also a colloquial term for genetic defect or degeneration, which justifies the later theories of Social Darwinism that the better-formed races could dominate and rule the inferior races (Demel 2013).

8. The Altaic theory was appropriated again in the academic debate from the mid-twentieth century about how the outnumbered Manchu managed to rule Han-based China for nearly three hundred years. While some scholars with Chinese nationalist inclination used Sinicization theory to explain Qing success in empire building, the Altaic school argued that the Qing's Inner Asian origin maintained a distance between the regime and the host population in China.

9. The list of worldwide adaptations of the Chinggis Khan story into fiction films is by no means exhaustive here: *Storm over Asia* (dir. Vsevolod Pudovkin, Soviet Union, 1928), *Genghis Khan (Jingisukan)*, dir. Kiyohiko Ushihara and Sadatsugu Matsuda, Japan, 1943), *Genghis Khan* (dir. Manuel Conde, Philippines, 1950), *The Golden Horde* (dir. George Sherman, United States, 1951), *Red Plume—Genghis Khan (Kiziltug—Cengiz Han)*, dir. Aydin Arakon, Turkey, 1952), *The Conqueror* (dir. Dick Powell, United States, 1956), *Chengez Khan* (dir. Kedar Kapoor, India, 1957), *Chengez Khan* (dir. Rafiq Sarhadi, Pakistan, 1958), *Treasures of Genghis Khan (Cengiz Han'in Hazineleri)*, dir. Atif Yilmaz, Turkey, 1962), *Hercules Against the Barbarians (Maciste nell'inferno di Gengis Khan)*, dir. Domenico Paolella, Italy, 1964), *Genghis Khan* (dir. Henry Levin, United States, 1965), *Eternal Power of the Sky (Mönkh Tengeriin Khüchin Dor)*, dir. Begziin Balijinyam, Mongolia, 1992), *Genghis Khan (Chengjisiban)*, dir. Zhan Xiangchi, China, 1986), *Genghis Khan (Yidai tianjiao Chengjisiban)*, dir. Mails and Sainkhüü, China, 1998), *Mongol: The Rise of Genghis Khan* (dir. Sergei Bodrov, Russia and Kazakhstan, 2007), *Genghis Khan: To the Ends of the Earth and Sea (Aoki Okami: Chi Hate Umi Tsukuru Made)*, dir. Shinichiro Sawai, Japan and Mongolia, 2007), *No Right to Die—Chinggis Khaan* (dir. L. Erdenebulgan, Mongolia, 2008), *By the Will of Genghis Khan (Tayna Chingis Khaana)*, dir. Andrei Borissov, Russia and Mongolia, 2009), *Genghis Khan: The Story of a Lifetime* (dir. Peter Duffell and Ken Annakin, United States, 2010), *Genghis: The Legend of the Ten* (dir. Zolbaya Dorj and U. Shagdarsuren, Mongolia, 2012), *An End to Killing (Zhi Sha Ling)*, dir. Wang Ping, China, 2013), *Genghis Khan Conquers the Moon* (sci-fi short film, dir. Kerry Yang, United States, 2015), and *Genghis Khan (Zhanshenji)*, dir. Haas Chaolu, China, 2018).

10. In film historian Cheng Jihua's description, the Chinese title of Pudovkin's Mongolian film was literally *Chengjisiban de houdai* (成吉思汗的後代) or *Yazhou fengyun* (亞洲風雲), which had only been screened by a small number of audiences; however, it left a very strong impression on the Chinese viewers in Shanghai (1957, 77).

11. Zhen Zhang states that, other than the screening of Pudovkin's *The Heir to Genghis Khan*, eight other Soviet films were shown in Shanghai in the early 1930s, including Nikolai Ekk's *Road to Life*, Sergei Iutkevich's first sound film *Golden Mountains*, and Yakov Protazanov's *Marionettes* (2005, 249–50). However, these Soviet films could only be shown in Chinese areas in Shanghai since they were banned in the foreign concessions where most movie houses were located (Huang 2014, 98–99).

12. The term “actant,” from Bruno Latour, refers to anything that can “modify other actors through a series of trials” and actions (2004, 77). “Vibrant matter” is a term Jane Bennett (2010) uses to denote nonhuman things or forces that have active participation in constituting their complex interrelationships, entanglement, and propensities for change.

13. *The Secret History of the Mongols* was written for the Mongol royal family

after the 1227 death of Chinggis Khan; it is regarded as the most significant native Mongolian account of the legendary leader.

14. The appendix (Jiang Rong 2004, 364–408) is a fictional dialogue between the two main characters during their return to the grassland. The protagonist who has become a social scientist delivers a lengthy lecture on his research on the wolf totem.

15. A female with two male (sexual) partners is a recurring theme in numbers of modern Chinese fictions. It is more a moral taboo in Han Chinese culture than in non-Han ethnic communities.

#### CHAPTER 4

1. See the recent studies on the fear-driven discourses of terrorism initiated by the Chinese state to frame the Muslims, the Uyghurs in particular, as threats to political stability and national security: Byler (2022); Holdstock (2019).

2. A new aggressive anti-Muslim Han chauvinism supported by a growing popular Islamophobia has erupted online since the 2014 Kunming train station attack by the Uyghurs. While the regime of Xi Jinping has harshly cracked down on many online speeches, the abuses of Muslims are left untouched by the censors (Luqiu and Yang 2018).

3. Godard insists that montage is what made cinema unique and different from other arts. But the term “montage” for him means something much more than film editing. Eisenstein, Griffith, Welles, and other cinematic explorers have talked about montage, yet none has realized it. Godard says that is still not what montage is about: “C’est autre chose. On ne sait pas. . . . On ne sait pas” (It’s some other thing. We don’t know. . . . We don’t know) (1998, 242–48).

4. In her discussion on the feminist transnationality in the paintings of Chinese immigrant artist Hung Liu, Shu-mei Shih (2007, 62–85) distinguishes three art terms—montage, collage, and assemblage—from which she stresses that only assemblage allows us to conceptualize identity fragments as having both temporal and spatial dimensions and can express multiple antagonisms against different agents of power in different contexts. The way I understand montage in this chapter, however, is closer to what Shih conceptualizes as assemblage.

5. A veteran of the Long March (1934–35) and known for being an uncompromising hard-liner, after the Civil War in 1949, Wang Zhen was appointed political commissar of Xinjiang, where he imposed authority over the Turkic population, reclaimed land into state farms, and introduced Han Chinese settlers to the region.

6. Since *Effendi*, scripted by Wang Yuhu, was a post-Mao production at the beginning of the reform era, it was no longer a film about class struggle but rather a costume comedy set in ancient times, highlighting ethnic harmony, humor, and happiness.

7. For example, before committing suicide during the Anti-Rightist Movement, film director Shi Dongshan (史東山) attempted to popularize montage and make it a sheer technique in the 1950s. The famous film critic Xia Yan (夏衍), who was the vice minister of culture in the 1950s, wrote that Chinese filmmakers had to smash the mystery of the term “montage” precisely by rendering it into a narrative technique (Hong 2008, 113–19, 216–21).

8. The studio was at first named the Urumqi Film Production Studio but

changed its name to the Xinjiang Film Production Studio in 1959. In 1979, at the beginning of the reform era under Deng Xiaoping, it was renamed the Tianshan Film Production Studio (Tianshan Film Production Studio 1990).

9. In the early period, the PRC generally adopted a Soviet-style approach to its language policy. By that time, Russian experts were actively helping China to codify its non-Han minority languages. Uyghur dialects, which were spoken on both sides of the China–Soviet Union border, were unified into a single language based upon the Soviet standard (Janbaz, Saleh, and Duval 2006).

10. The term “Silk Road” was first used in the late nineteenth century by the German geologist and explorer Ferdinand von Richthofen.

11. In an interview, Guang highlighted that she has been “very careful about representing religion and ethnic relations among ethnic groups, and ethnic sentiments in all [her] films, and it has paid off with local people’s recognition” (Xia Zhou 2019, 102).

12. Guang remembered that Zhong Dianfei “kindly told me that ‘China should have its own Westerns like *Lawrence of Arabia*. You are the one to do it.’ His encouragement lit a fire in me. . . . I ended up writing one myself with two other friends. This was *The Mysterious Caravan*” (Xia Zhou 2019, 100).

13. Michel Foucault did not publish much about the concepts of biopower and biopolitics. Readers can consult his posthumous lecture transcriptions (2008).

14. Uyghurs (or Uighurs) were a group of nomadic tribes who spoke a Turkic language and dominated East–Central Asia during the period 744–840 CE. The Uighur Empire had developed close relations with the Tang dynasty of China, which named the people “Hu He” (回紇) or “Hu Ge” (回鶻); however, relations were often strained because the Uighurs invaded Inner China and plundered Chinese cities (Mackerras 1972). For a discussion of how the warlord Sheng Shicai endorsed the revival of this old term to recognize and rename Turkic-speaking Taranchis as a *minzu* based upon the Soviet model for his “divide-and-rule” policies in Xinjiang, see David Brophy (2016b).

15. The fear of Muslims, or the modern term “Islamophobia,” seems to have a long genealogy back from imperial China. A top Chinese official of the Qing’s Yongzhang (雍正) period in the eighteenth century, Chen Hongmou (陳宏謀 1696–1771), had described that “the Chinese fear the Muslims as if they were tigers, and the Muslims look on the Chinese with hatred. Because of their wild and intractable character, the Muslims are seen by local officials as nothing but unruly and rebellious people from the edges of civilization” (requoted from Lipman 2006, 90). Muslim rebellions against the Qing dynasty lasted for more than a decade (Chu 1975).

16. Fear and anxiety have been grasped as a pair, a twin, or a couple, mirroring each other, by Western philosophers like Kierkegaard, Heidegger, or Sartre in terms of existentialist and phenomenologist traditions, as if understanding the problem of anxiety were only possible through a primary discussion of fear (Robertson 2015).

17. The CCP has been quite successful in getting Han people to settle in Xinjiang. In the 1950s, the Han made up just 7 percent of the total population of Xinjiang; by the 1960s, the Han population had jumped to 33 percent, and then in the late 1970s of the reform era, the demographic ratio had reached 40 percent Han

and 46 percent Uyghur. The 2010 census showed that the Uyghur figure had fallen to 42 percent while the Han figure was maintained at around 40 percent (O'Brien 2016).

18. Central Asia, or Inner Asia, has been an unstable region from the perspective of Han-based China throughout history. It is not just the steppe empires and nomadic tribes that have constituted a major threat to Han-based regimes in ancient times, but the modern era has also witnessed a series of Great Game and political struggles among Western and Eastern imperialist powers over the area.

19. *Homo sacer* (literally, “sacred or accused man” or “bare life”) is an ancient Roman concept referring to those who are banished from the religious and political community and are no longer protected by the laws of Rome (Agamben 1998). For a thorough discussion of Agamben’s notion of bare life, see Norris (2005).

20. But the Bingtuan was never successful economically, and it has to rely heavily on the subsidies from the central government. To maintain the strategic control of Xinjiang, the Bingtuan has been designated as a government entity on par with the provincial government of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which has had a tense relationship with the Bingtuan (Cliff 2009). To improve its financial situation, Bingtuan since the 2010s has moved into higher-tech industries, such as the global solar supply chain, where it gained notable success (Northrop 2021).

21. The Uyghurs’ experiences of dispossession were caused by urbanization, development, and state security and territorial control projects. The first stage of dispossession occurred when many rural Uyghurs found their hometowns unlivable because of the severe restrictions on their religious practices and autonomy. When they moved to the city, Uyghurs encountered a second economic dispossession as they struggled to make ends meet among the competition from Han migrants. In 2017, the state started evicting Uyghurs from the city to coerce poor Uyghurs to return to their rural villages, where they entered the so-called reeducation camps that were apparently forced internment. This third stage of dispossession was linked to class status. The state attempted to deal with the poverty and unemployment issues of the Uyghurs through eviction and internment in fear that these poor, rural, and religious people would become extremists and criminals (Tynen 2020).

22. A former imperial garden adjacent to the Forbidden City in Beijing during the Qing dynasty, Zhongnanhai serves as the headquarters for the CCP and the central government of the PRC.

23. For the proliferation of Uncle Kurban-related arts productions in the PRC, see Y. Chen (2016).

24. In her book manuscript in preparation on Uyghur films in Xinjiang, Jessica Yeung points out that the prominent examples among these VCD films are Murat Muhemmet’s series adaptation of the contemporary leading Uyghur writer Memtimin Hoshur’s short stories and another body of work directed by different directors but all featuring actress Pasha Umer.

25. Agamben (2014) asks, “What are the conditions of possibility for montage?” His answer is “repetition and stoppage” (25). See also Agamben (2002).

26. The Sino-Muslim rebels who rose against the Manchu Qing seemed not to have any adequate separatist objectives; this was regarded as very different from the separatist Xinjiang Turkic Muslim revolt led by people like Yaqub Beg, who estab-

lished an independent Muslim state in the 1860s. Such an impression is not entirely true, however: the Panthay Rebellion (1856–73) led by Sino-Muslims in Southwest China did lead to the founding of a separate political entity, the Pingnan State (*Pingnan kuo* 平南國, or Pacified Southern State), under the Hui leader Du Wenxiu (杜文秀), although the kingdom was multiethnic, including Han Chinese, Li, Bai, Hani, and others. The most enduring and violent example was the nineteenth-century Hui rebellion, which lasted for sixteen years (1862–78), devastating several provinces and leaving millions of dead and homeless. The state oppression following these Hui upheavals only led to huge numbers of violent deaths, resulting in an escalation of uncontrollable and unstoppable violence and revenge.

27. Compared with numerous English-language studies of Zhang Chengzhi's *A History of the Soul*, there are few reviews of Huo Da's novel (Ouyang 2014).

28. They are Arabic and Persian terms plus sinicized Islamic expressions used by Muslims in China in their religious and daily life. For documentation of these terms, see J. Wang (2001).

29. Few other Sino-Muslim filmmakers are producing short fiction films. But they are yet to constitute a movement because they work separately in different places and have not formed a critical mass (Muslims Online 2014).

30. The producers listed for *Knife in the Clear Water* include Pema Tsenden, Derek Tung-Shing Yee, and Zhang Meng. In a public talk, Wang said he relied on the associate director recommended by Pema Tsenden to spend months finding appropriate amateur actors in the villages of Ningxia Province for his film, though he also stayed for ten months in the shooting location, Xihaigu.

31. The state's piped water system means more centralized control, and the climate relocation program managed by the state power results in the abandonment of old homes and origins (Clarke-Sather 2017; Shi 2015). For a Chinese view on the climate migration of the ethnic groups, see Li and Wang (2016).

32. The campaign since 2016 also involves the removal of Middle Eastern-style domes on mosques around the country in favor of Chinese-style pagodas (Aljazeera 2019).

## CHAPTER 5

1. While China recognizes *Zangqu* (Tibetan areas 藏區) that cover much larger areas than the Tibet Autonomous Region within its national boundaries, the Beijing government dismisses the notion of “Greater Tibet” fostered by the Dalai Lama's government-in-exile as a trick to advocate Tibetan independence. Based upon the cultural and political expansion of the great Tibetan Empire of the early middle ages, “Greater Tibet” (or “Cultural Tibet”) is an inclusive concept encompassing all peoples speaking languages from the Tibetan branch of the Tibeto-Burma family, sharing common origins and historically being influenced by Tibetan culture. Geographically, it covers a very wide area, including not only the Tibetans in the PRC and along its borders, and in diaspora, but also the peoples of Bhutan, Nepal, Mongolia, Myanmar, Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Sikkim, Spiti and Lahul in India, the northeast of Pakistan, Buryatia, Kalmykia, and the Tanna Tuva republics of Russia, since these peoples subscribe to Tibetan Buddhism and cultural practices (Klieger 2016).

2. The Chinese authorities have begun their weapons of disinformation in the international world by using fake Twitter accounts with false Western names and profile pictures to promote the state's propaganda on Tibet and Xinjiang aimed at Western audiences. The tweets from the bogus accounts not only depict Tibet as an idyllic and upbeat Chinese province but also post English-language articles that attack the Dalai Lama. Many of these fake accounts have genuine followers who apparently assume the accounts belong to real people. When a report came out in July 2014 from the *New York Times*, Twitter quickly suspended these pro-China bogus accounts (Jacobs 2014a, 2014b).

3. According to Robert Barnett (2008), the first Tibetan-language feature-length film in the PRC was *Longing (Kbren zhen)*, directed by the Xining-based television director and writer Phagmo Tashi. The film was shot on video and was broadcast on the Qinghai television channel in 1993 but was never released in theaters. Lamas are evil characters in *The Gold and Silver Plain* and *The Serf*, but they are also balanced with some good-natured and benevolent monks in both films.

4. The Chinese state policy of undermining the influences of the fourteenth Dalai Lama began in the early 1990s. The state media started vilifying the Dalai Lama and referring to him as “a wolf in sheep's clothing.” Bans on possessing his image or worshipping him were reported, but their legal basis was not clear and implementation of such a policy has been uneven in different regions.

5. For instance, after his first feature, *The Silent Holy Stone*, Pema Tsenden planned to make a sequel about the young monk's journey to Lhasa. But the project was banned by the state authority. Around the same period, Qinghai TV refused to broadcast some Tibetan films because they overtly promoted Tibetan Buddhism (Robin 2009, 47).

6. For a non-dichotomous framework to study the relationship between the state and religion in modern China, see Ashiwa and Wank (2009).

7. Since 2013, China under President Xi Jinping has increasingly tightened the control of religion in the name of national security (Leung 2018).

8. Paul G. Pickowicz (2012, 213) has called the 1960–65 period the “cultural thaw” of Chinese cinema, since “political control over the industry was loosened, and production was no longer discussed in military terms. . . . Filmmakers were given more artistic freedom by a government and Party that were anxious to regain the support of intellectuals.”

9. The survey reveals that the top four favorite ethnic minority films of the Chinese spectators are *Ashima*, *Five Golden Flowers*, *Third Sister Liu*, and *Visitors on the Icy Mountain* because of their pleasant romance, wonderful music, and colorful mis-en-scène. On the contrary, audiences find *The Serf* “ghastly and frightful” (*yin-sen kongbu*), while they agree that it is “deep and heavy” (*shenchen bouzhong*) and its images are striking and powerful (Xu 2002, 360).

10. Jamyang Norbu (2010) is likely the first person who published on the development of photography and cinema among Tibetans by writing on the subject online from the early twenty-first century. Clare Harris acknowledges the huge help of his online publication to her *Photography and Tibet* (2006), which deals with a similar topic.

11. *Horse Thief* sold only seven prints nationwide though it has been widely discussed by film critics (Zhang 2004, 236).

12. Amdo is one of the three traditional regions of Tibet, the other two being Ü-Tsang and Kham. Amdolese is one of the four main spoken Tibetan languages; the other three are Central Tibetan, Khams Tibetan, and Ladakhi. Sharing a common written script, these four related languages are different in their spoken pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

13. Hu commented on a film forum on Haas Chaolu's *Thangka* (*Dandai dianying* 2013, 47).

14. Some scholar argues that Kham does not only encompass today's Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunnan, but also Bhutan. Historically, the Bhutanese had fought many wars with the Lhasa-based government over the territory. Whether Bhutan can be counted as part of Kham remains controversial. But the Chinese often mistake the old province of Xikang with Kham and limit its scope to just Sichuan Province.

15. For more discussion of secularization in Tibet, see Gayley and Willock (2016).

16. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the Chinese authorities carried out many repressive acts against the Tibetan clergy, the Buddhist tradition, and the Tibetan culture as a whole. Numerous monasteries in Tibet were ransacked and destroyed, and Buddhist monks and nuns were tortured and killed during the political movement. Those monks who survived the turmoil had to become atheists (Kuzmin 2011).

17. The other two essays in *lao san pian* are “In Memory of Norman Bethune” (Jinian Baiqiuen 紀念白求恩) and “The Foolish Old Man Who Moved the Mountain” (Yugong yishan 愚公移山).

18. The internationally acclaimed director Wong Kar-wai has recently been actively supporting talented filmmakers under the banner of Jet Tone Films: his award-winning team offers significant help to them. For instance, sound master and composer Tu Duu-Chih is in charge of *Jinpa*'s sound effects, Wong's longtime collaborator William Chang serves as its film editor, renowned cinematographer Lyu Songye is director of cinematography, and famous musician Lim Giong takes care of the music; the company also provides marketing strategy to promote the film.

19. My personal interview with Pema Tsenden (2009). He spoke in Mandarin: “xiaomo yige minzu” (消磨一個民族).

20. Though the one-child policy did not apply to China's ethnic minorities, the government would heavily fine any ethnic family having more than three children.

## CHAPTER 6

1. A national standard language is generally considered the key to the unity and identity of the Chinese nation in the modern era. The Ministry of Culture of the PRC, however, also actively encourages the preservation of traditional cultural heritage, including folk operas and festivals, all of which can only be carried out in the dialects or regional varieties of the Chinese language. At the same time, efforts have been made to promote bilingualism in Chinese and the ethnic language, and bilingual education in many non-Han ethnic regions. In 2010, staff and students from teacher training colleges and ethnic schools in the Huangnan district of Qinghai Province, where there is a large population of Tibetans, openly protested the Education Reform Bill by the provincial government, which recommended the use

of Putonghua to raise education standards and to reduce ethnic language as a supplementary language. The central government sent officials to visit Huangnan and made the provincial officials apologize for formulating the Education Reform Bill, as well as reaffirm the equal status of Tibetans and Chinese in Qinghai. However, Xi Jinping's accession to power in late 2012 began to change China's language policy, even though the vested interests of the ethnic policy establishment, including huge numbers of bureaucrats, resisted any significant transformation. A Tibetan activist, Tashi Wangchuk, who campaigned for Tibetan language education, was sentenced to five years in jail for "inciting separatism" by a court in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai in 2018. A million or more Islamic Uyghur detainees in Xinjiang's "reeducation camps" are forced to learn the Chinese language as part of the new indoctrination campaign.

2. In a forum on Haas Chaolu's Tibetan-language film *Thangka* (Tangka 唐卡, 2012), the Mongolian director and other Han film scholars concur that ethnic minority cinema should go beyond the ethnic minority concerns to cater to the taste of the mainstream market. They criticize how common stylistic expressions or formality in many ethnic minority films means they appeal only to the art-house market, and the moods of these films are usually very depressing, full of anxiety, and imbricated with silent anger or deep sadness or frustrations, which means they fail to attract general audiences (*Dandai dianying* 2013).

3. The film won the Best Emerging Director Award at the 68th Festival del Film Locarno, the Montgolfière d'Or Award at the 37th Festival des 3 Continents, and the Best New Director Award at the 52nd Golden Horse Awards. It has also been invited to screen in numerous international film festivals and was sold to different countries.

4. "The 14th Five-Year Plan for National Informatization," issued by the Central Commission for Cybersecurity and Informatization in December 2021, is a lengthy document addressing a very wide range of policy and development goals in the area of digital technologies for 2021–25, the period of the 14th Five-Year Plan. For the analysis of the document, see Creemers and Triolo (2022).

5. Personal interview with Zhang Lü, Seoul, South Korea, 26 May 2019.

6. Jin Yan (金焰, Kim Yom in Korean) and Zheng Jiduo (鄭基鐸, Jeong Ji-tak in Korean) were known actors and filmmakers in Chinese cinema (Berry 2016).

7. When the Chinese film market opened to Korean filmmakers and investors in the early 2000s, the two countries started to engage in vigorous collaborations across all sectors of the film industry. Chinese policymakers and corporations seek to learn from the Korean Wave, South Korea's soft power success story, to boost the international appeal of China's media and cultural products. Over the years, many South Korean production crews and post-production staff have been hired to assist and elevate China's local productions, other than formal collaborative productions and joint ventures. China has also purchased format rights and remake rights to South Korean films and television programs to enhance the quality and popularity of its own productions as an alternative to merely importing Korean works (Soh and Yecies 2017; Yecies 2016).

8. He has also served as a producer for other films made by Korean Chinese, such as *Life Track* (*Guidao* 軌道, dir. Jin Guang-Hao 金光浩, 2007).

9. Korean Chinese are generally regarded as nationally Chinese (*jungguk-in*)

and thus viewed as foreigners in the eyes of South Koreans. The socioeconomic class division is also a great divide between Korean Chinese and South Koreans. Korean Chinese migrants are disparaging as *Chosonjok* or *Joseong-jok* (ethnic Korean). South Korean cinema also embarked on a series of negative portrayals of them. The demonization of Korean Chinese in South Korean society is also tied up with the country's lingering tensions with China. The notion of national identity strictly built upon racial purity and ethnic homogeneity in Korea may have enabled a rather narrow conceptualization of Koreanness (Shin 2013).

10. Zhang has also been described as a “translocal film auteur” because “translocal” is differentiated from the mode of transnational, commercial, and generic coproduction (Ran Ma 2018).

11. Derrida uses the ambiguity of the French word *hôte* denoting both guest and host to explicate the dual nature of hospitality as an aporetic concept.

12. Personal interview with Zhang Lü, Seoul, South Korea, 26 May 2019.

13. Unlike Zhang's ambivalent and relatively fluid position, the many Korean Chinese who went to South Korea to study film and ended up working in Korean Peninsula are mostly integrated within the South Korean film industry and domestic media networks.

14. Kojin Karatani (2008) argues that, in the modern capitalist age, the common sociopolitical formation is a combination of capital, state, and nation, which are contradictory and complementary to one another, like a Borromean ring.

15. While nomadism is about becoming, movement, and coming into being, author identity helps to stabilize a text and initiates a familiar perception of something unfamiliar.

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