China redux: The central frontiers of the modern nation in Chinese cinema

Zhang, J.

Chapter 3

Speaking of Us:

Borderlands, Soundscapes, and Ethnic Minorities

Story-telling is not an impersonal myth, but neither is it a personal fiction: it is a word in act, a speech-act through which the character continually crosses the boundary which would separate his private business from politics, and which itself *produces collective utterances*.

—Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*

The systematic looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties for menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge.

The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie.

—Toni Morrison, Noble lecture

The most difficult questions surrounding the demarcation of boundaries implied by "seeing" have to do not with positivistic taxonomic juxtaposition of self-contained identities and traditions in the manner of " this is you" and "that is us," but rather, who is "seeing" whom, and how? What are the power relationships between the "subject" and "object" of the culturally overdetermined "eye"?

—Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*

One Nation, One Voice

In the Xinhai Revolution of October 1911, nationalist revolutionaries toppled the Qing dynasty. This brought an end to not only three centuries of Manchu rule, but also the two millennia of China's Imperial Era. Despite their success in overthrowing China's last empire, the founders of the Republic confronted an acute political situation. The previous regime had incurred numerous military defeats, ceding territories and owing war indemnities to the Western powers. Immediately after the republican takeover, what remained of China's sovereignty came under immediate threat of ethnic disintegration. Now that the unifying force of Qing rule had evaporated, the intra-ethnic unity of diverse non-Han peoples (mostly the Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans, and Uyghurs) stumbled.

In fact, as the revolution gathered momentum in imperial China, much of the nationalist sentiments were directed against the Manchu ethnicity to which the Qing dynasty belonged. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), the architect of the republican China and leader of the KMT, fanned the flames of this ethnic hostility to popularize his anti-feudal revolution (Zhao 2004, 64; Zheng 1999, 68). Exploiting the grudge that the Han people had long harbored against their Manchu overlords, the revolutionaries exacerbated ethnic tensions among Han and Manchu people. Moreover, they disturbed the equilibrium established by the imperial monarchy, which continually mediated between their Han subjects and ethnic minorities (Schneider 2017, 7; Zheng 1999, 68).

The major predicament facing Sun Yat-sen's nationalist movement in striving to subvert the Qing dynasty, was that their anti-Manchu rhetoric gave rise to an ideology of Han ethnocentrism. This burgeoning ideology, they soon realized, would hinder national cohesion among a population comprised of diverse ethnic groups (Schneider 2017, 9). Although non-Han ethnicities accounted for only a small proportion of the population, they occupied swaths of China's borderlands. If the fledgling Republic identified itself exclusively with the Han, it would exclude non-Han regions from the nascent nation. This approach would alienate potential allies, discouraging them from joining hands with Han nationalists in the greater cause of eliminating feudal oppression and repelling colonial aggression (Zhao 2004, 22). For the founders of the Republic of China, then, the process of nation building eventually boiled down to an assimilative program, in which the Han Chinese subsumed all non-Han communities (Schneider 2017, 49). To secure his political and territorial control over the former empire, and consolidate the unity of the Chinese nation, Sun

withdrew the provocative slogan "Expel the Tatars, Revive China" (*quzhu dalu, huifu zhonghua*).[35] Instead, he disseminated the more inclusive rubric of the "Republic of Five Peoples" (*wuzu gonghe*), in a bid to restore connections among the Han with other ethnicities (Leibold 2007, 31; He 2013, 229; Duara 2002, xv; Schneider 2017, 8; Mullaney 2011, 25). While tuning down their rhetoric to mitigate the discrepancy between the Han majority and ethnic minorities, it occurred to the revolutionaries that, there had been no consistent collective identity for the peoples of imperial China, despite its long dynastic history (Elliot 2011, 178).

The task of formulating a national identity, therefore, was at the center of China's modern revolution. This new identity would have to encompass multiple ethnic communities regardless of their geographical, cultural, economic, linguistic, and religious differences (Schneider 2017, 38). Although a fraction of radical Han nationalists wanted to renounce the imperial legacy by excluding non-Han territories and populations from the new nation altogether, this policy was not pursued after all.[36] Rather, the nationalist revolutionaries averted an unfortunate potential scenario in which the new republic, still in its infancy, would have to wrestle with foreign invaders while being undermined from within by ethnic regimes (Schneider 2017, 9). The revolutionaries envisioned that a new collective identity had to be imagined, an identity that would incorporate the Han and the state's other disparate peoples under republican rule. At this juncture, the concept of "the Chinese people" (*zhonghua minzu*) functioned as a collective term that would weld all ethnic groups into a cohesive entity (Wu 2002, 169).

The notion of the Chinese people, an integrative identifier, was not the brainchild of the revolutionaries alone. In fact, it had also been conceived by their political rivals, the Chinese reformists, who argued that the new nation-state should be a constitutional monarchy rather than a constitutional republic. Although the reformists' campaign against colonialism and imperialism ultimately failed, their contribution survived. At the forefront of the reformists was Liang Qichao (1873-1929), a leading political thinker who determined to solve the dilemma of Chinese national identity (Leibold 2007, 10; 32). It was Liang, who, in addressing the fragmentary cultural identities that characterize Chinese history, first contrived the term of *zhonghua minzu* (the Chinese people), a composite moniker subsumes an array of ethnicities under the unified community of China (Zheng 1999, 2; Wu 2002, 169).

In line with this concept, Liang fostered a new approach to Chinese history. His distinctly Sinocentric approach to history downplayed the discontinuities marked

by the various dynasties of ancient China. Instead, Liang produced a linear narrative of how non-Han peoples have been gradually integrated into the Han sphere of influence—whether through conquering China or being conquered themselves (Schneider 2017, 8-9; Duara 1995, 33). Liang's historiography acknowledged that in invading and ruling China, the Mongol Yuan and Manchu Qing brought with them distinctive traditions of cultural practice and social organization. Nevertheless, he argued, these non-Han nomadic groups consolidated their power over "China proper" (by which he means the Central Plains, populated by the Han) essentially because their forms of governance came to be deeply informed and nourished by Han culture. Far from imposing new norms on their Han subjects, these "alien tribes" adopted the Han's customs and values to such an extent that their original ways of life eventually faded into oblivion. This polemical history of imperial China gave birth to a myth of civilizational continuity, which took hold in the collective imagination. Such a myth underwrote ethnocentric ideas about China's enduring superiority. Despite the fact that Chinese history is clustered with conquests and collisions between Han and other ethnicities, the nationalist intelligentsia refurbished history around the mythical centrality of the Han people and culture. In repeatedly adopting Han customs and thought through processes of Sinicization, marginal peoples only underlined the priority of the Han ethnicity (Duara 2002, xiii-iv).

The myth of the cultural primacy of the Han Chinese was not new; it had precedents in premodern China. What distinguishes Liang Qichao's vision of Chinese history, though, is his account of how the Han Chinese maintained a centripetal hold on bordering ethnic groups. He referred to this as "China's assimilative power" (*zhong guo tong hua li*) (Leibold 2007, 11; Schein 2000, 69; Schneider2017, 62). In Liang's view, the Han Chinese did not operate with a hierarchical dichotomy of self and other. Conversely, their assimilative power allowed them to integrate formerly external peoples. On the one hand, Liang's assertion of China's historical evolution coincides with the nation-building project promulgated by revolutionaries in the late Qing period. Both political camps sought to inaugurate a national identity that could mobilize all members of the state and produce a single unit of history. On the other hand, Liang developed his theory by strategically appropriating Western knowledge. As such, it is bound up with an epistemic shift in China during this period. As much as social Darwinism emboldened Chinese politicians and intellectuals to consider the global system of nation-states as a game of survival for living species, Liang applied

national rhetorics to justifying the subjugation of diverse ethnicities under the Chinese nation-state.

In envisioning the future of China, Liang worked extensively with the political theories of modern nation-state formulated by the Swiss jurist Johann Kaspar Bluntschli (1808-1881) (Schneider 2017, 81). Based on Bluntschli's enumerated types of nation-states with regard to ethnicity, Liang identified three possible scenarios in which the Chinese nation-state would appear: 1) a nation-state inhabited by a single ethnicity; 2) a nation-state consisting of several different tribes belonging to the same ethnicity; and 3) a nation-state comprising of multiple ethnicities (Schneider 2017, 84). Given that there were five major ethnic groups under Qing rule, Liang favored Bluntschli's multi-ethnic model, among others, for China's nation-building project. In particular, Liang's decision was informed by Bluntschli's emphasis on how "the unity of the state is better secured, when the nation can primarily rely on One People as its main component" (Bluntschli 1874, 41-43; Schneider 2017, 84). Evidently, the multi-ethnic model corresponded to the realities of late-imperial China in Liang's vision. While acknowledging the multitude of ethnic communities, he concluded that "one mighty powerful ethnicity must be made the center, which unifies and leads all other ethnicities" (Liang [1903, 1]1983, 73; Schneider 2017, 86).

Needless to say, the "one mighty powerful ethnicity" that Liang had in mind was none other than the Han. Liang's proposal for a unified Chinese people promoted two major claims. First, he objected to the idea prevalent among some Chinese revolutionaries, the idea that a nation should be established by, for, and of the Han Chinese alone. As I have mentioned earlier, this discriminatory policy was ultimately abandoned by Sun Yat-sen and his cohort. In excluding the Manchu and other ethnic groups from republican China, and aggravating inter-ethnic conflicts, it would ultimately have compromised the security of new nation-state. Second, by introducing a new category, Liang initiated a process of identity formation in the emerging Chinese nation-state. Ostensibly at least, this identity would be inclusive. In this way, Han Chinese elites hoped to replace one political order with another, in which all ethnic communities—even the Han themselves—would be inseparable components of one ethnic nation. The nation was not to be monopolized by any one ethnic group. Still, there is obviously something deeply problematic here, insofar as in reality national unity would be predicated not on equality among ethnicities, but quite the opposite: an asymmetry of power whereby the Han majority dominated the minorities. By cementing the Han's dominance in this way, the notion of the Chinese people, for

better or for worse, allowed reformists and revolutionaries alike to institute political legitimacy in a period of national crisis.

At a time in which global geopolitical order was realigning, and the cohesion of ethnic groups in China faltering, Han Chinese elites were swift to establish themselves as the backbone of the nation. Their disavowal of ethnic equality and diversity, however, sowed the seeds of discontent and resentment among those who found themselves relegated to the margins (Duara 1995, 15). On the face of things, Chinese nationalism was once well poised to salvage the country from foreign intrusion and domestic partition by forming a new collective community. In reality, however, the new state produced a stalemate in ethnic politics, which had been inherited by ensuing administrations. The tension between two conceptions of the nation—as being either homogeneously Han Chinese or heterogeneously multi-ethnic—has perpetually hindered political cohesion and territorial integrity in both the Republic and People's Republic of China. Today, China's ethnic minorities still account for a smattering of the overall population, take up fractions of territory, and living in modest economic conditions. Nevertheless, as I have pinpointed, they are at the front and center of political discourse in China.

Taking into account differing social, geographical, and political circumstances, in what follows I explore how the tension between the Sinocentric nation-state and ethnic minorities has played out in visual and aural representations, above all, cinema. Tracing the dialectical interplay between the center and its peripheries in Chinese culture, I reflect on how cinematic representation constitutes a means of political mobilization. Cinema promoted a national ethos among minority communities, inscribing a shared belief in Chinese nationhood into subjects, especially those of the minorities. Attending to a variety of representational approaches, this chapter interrogates how ethnic minorities have been portrayed as parts of a greater nation—often at the expense of veracity and diversity.

Two films featuring Tibetan people in contemporary China, Pema Tseden's *Tharlo* (2015) and Zhang Yang's *Paths of the Soul* (2015), offer a prism through which we can examine these problematics. In comparing and contrasting these films, this chapter unfolds with three analytical dyads—subject versus object, fiction versus reality, and image versus sound. Triangulating the two films in relation to these binary concepts, I locate the ways in which they represent the lived experience of Tibetan people in contemporary China. Furthermore, by tracing dominant paradigms of cinematic representation of Tibet in both Chinese and Western cultural imaginaries,

this chapter also situates cinematic embodiments of ethnic minorities in their historical contexts. Finally, in analyzing these case studies, I aim to examine how the films' respective directors—Pema Tseden and Zhang Yang—have each reworked and resisted stereotypical representations of Tibet in their own distinct way. In so doing, this chapter probes into their different ethnic identities, narrative approaches, and relative positions against the backdrop of modern China.

Cacophonies of a Nation

Ethnic minority cinema did not gather momentum until the founding of the People's Republic.[37] Whereas the Nationalist regime had struggled with plutocrats, warlords, and ethnic insurgencies in the borderlands, the communists brought China under the yoke of a powerful central government. To fortify its ideological legitimacy, the communist government implemented an extensive regulatory bureaucracy and concentrated power in the party leaders. Two substantial changes must factor into ethnic politics in China during the Socialist Era. First, in attempting to restore political stability in the aftermath of the Civil War, the central government tightened its grip on non-Han ethnic minorities, in particular those at the fringes of the national territory. Second, whereas private motion picture companies had thrived under the Republic, state-owned film studios became central to China's film industry. The New China not only entrenched its control over ethnic minority areas, but indistinctly, even arbitrarily, identified diverse ethnic groups with the newborn nation.[38] In large part, the regime relied on cinema to produce this cohesive cultural identity. Ethnic minority films thus emerged as a distinct genre in the early decades of communist China, which served to constitute national unity.

As a key part of the communist government's ideological state apparatus, ethnic minority films were disseminated far and wide in the formative years of socialist China. In addition to administrative organizations, several film studios were set up in ethnic minority regions, whose sole task was to produce ethnic minority films. The three peripheral provinces of Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Guangxi, for instance, each established a film studio with a political mandate for integrating ethnic minorities (the Mongols, Uyghurs, and Zhuangs respectively) into a unified Chinese nation (Clark 1987, 60). As a result, the burgeoning category of ethnic minority films accounted for a stable proportion of Chinese cinema in the subsequent decades following the inception of socialist China (Berry and Mary Farquhar 2006, 181). On a related note, during the "Seventeen Years Period" between 1949 and 1966, an amount

of 47 ethnic minority films were produced, which covered as many as 18 ethnic groups (Chen and Hao, 2014, 13).

The storm of political violence that swept the country over the ensuing years, however, meant that few films made it to the screen. Only when the ruling party halted at the precipice of political collapse, and shifted from class struggle to economic development, did regular film production and release resume. As a recent survey has shown, a total of 135 ethnic minority films appeared between 2000 and 2016 (Lei 2018, 168). Unlike earlier productions, nearly half of ethnic minority films have directors being ethnic minorities themselves (Lei 2018, 169). If the end of the Cultural Revolution marks the ideological downfall of socialist China, the growing presence of ethnic minority directors signifies a deepening crisis of the post-socialist authoritarian state. Across a diverse array of ethnicities, the imagined community of the Chinese nation finds it a challenging task to redeem its lost ideals. With both political unity and national identity in jeopardy, it comes as no surprise that individual ethnicities should seek to resist their coerced incorporation into the collective community, and assert greater autonomy.

The Tibetan director Pema Tseden, who started out as a writer, was born in Amdo, a traditional Tibetan region in Qinghai province. Over the years, his consistent literary efforts have earned him first a local and then a national fame. Alongside his stable output of novellas and proses, Tseden has also nurtured a vital interest in cinema. This led to his admission to the Beijing Film Academy, the cradle of China's cinema maestros. As the institution's first Tibetan student, Tseden extended his self-reflexive storytelling from literature to cinema. *The Silent Holy Stones* (*Jingjing de Mannishi*, 2005), the first Tibetan-language film by a Tibetan director in China, launched Pema Tseden into wide recognition among domestic and foreign film critics. More importantly, this film established him as the leading figure of an emergent Tibetan cinema.[39] Tseden's first feature length film, *The Silent Holy Stones,* revolves around a young monk who becomes enamored with a popular television series based on the Chinese legend *Journey to the West* (*Xi you ji*). Contrary to what many might have expected, it does not play into the dilapidated condition of Tibetan religion and culture enforced by the Chinese state. Instead, the film depicts modern China's hinterlands as bucolic, emphasizing how the local people have cultivated a harmony between local traditions and modern inventions in the texture of their daily lives. Rather than staging an outright confrontation with overwhelming external interferences, *The Silent Holy Stones* affords a modest portrayal of contemporary Tibet.

At the same time, Tseden does not comply with romantic imaginations of Tibet in Western films, which often portray Tibet as an unsullied (and thus vulnerable) realm of purity, naiveté, and transcendence, amounting to nothing more than Orientalist obsession and ideological preference (Lo 2015, 46).[40] The protagonist, a young lama, persists in religious disciplines while navigating an increased exposure to secular lifestyles.

Setting the film in the pastoral village in which he grew up, Tseden neither renders the film's protagonist and plot at the service of the resistance to national unity, nor reiterates romantic imaginations of Tibet, which have long circulated in Chinese and Western delineations. Deliberately avoiding political resentments and exotic spectacles, Tseden stated that his cinematic endeavors stem from a genuine interest in seeing "someone who has lived and experienced that culture himself make a movie representing that real experience" (Trace Foundation). To explore the lived experience embodied in *The Silent Holy Stones,* and how Tseden's representational approach deviates from previous films, I will analyze the film in relation to some definitive moments in the development of ethnic minority cinema in socialist China, as well as a range of Western films. In this way, I show how Tseden seeks to move beyond current paradigms of representation of Tibet in both China and the West. Focusing on the politics of representation, in particular the cinematic construction of subjectivity, my interpretation attends to the individual's subjective experience. In Tseden's film, this is illustrated first and foremost by a dynamic of sight and sound. Through this formal dynamic, Tseden articulates the self-consciousness of a viewing/speaking subject. Furthermore, I draw attention to an ambiguity inherent in Tseden's realistic portrait of the Tibetan landscape, the ideological implications of which cannot be easily reduced to a simple denunciation of inter-ethnic unity or yearning for ethnic autonomy. His realistic aesthetics invite us to rather consider the existential condition of the ethnic subject from a broader universal and humanistic perspective.

During the early days of China's Socialist Era, the all-encompassing mission of class struggle, through which the proletariat should eliminate the bourgeoisie and establish its dictatorship, displaced a range of complex socio-political conflicts and tensions. Cross-ethnic issues, in particular, were either downplayed or neglected. Accordingly, in this period ethnic minority films aimed to instill collective class consciousness among ethnic communities.[41] This, in turn, justified the cause of the ruling regime. This genre is characterized, above all, by the fact that most productions

were in Mandarin and that the cast and crew were normally comprised of Han Chinese. True, ethnic-minority performers participated in film projects every now and then. Nevertheless, either the dialogue or the folk songs (which often captivated audiences with catchy melodies) were rarely presented in ethnic languages. In short, early ethnic minority films almost invariably present an advanced, civilized, and emancipatory CCP bringing enlightenment to downtrodden, primitive, and subdued indigenous peoples. Governed by this recurring leitmotif, the wide range of stories about China's "ethnic minorities" demonstrated in these films, fed into the idea that they were each an integral part of the communist revolution and the new state (Lo 2009, 233).

A well-known instance is *The Serf* (*Nongnu*, dir. Li Jun, 1963). The film centers on Jampa, a young Tibetan who lost his parents to a brutal landlord and grew up as an embittered laborer. He is doomed to suffer the same fate as his parents did until the arrival of the People's Liberation Army, who expels the monarchs and monks, and frees the protagonist from his oppression. Having previously been aphasic due to his abusive master, the protagonist now regains his speech. The first word that he utters after all the years of torture he has endured, is nothing other than "Chairman Mao" (Powers 2004, 124). At this moment, he gives voice to the film's central theme. Being lost and found, Jampa's voice serves as a dramatic device that spells out Tibet's radical transition from an old to a new society. The trope of muteness alludes to the protagonist's humiliating subjugation: verbal ability, it appears, stands as a trope for whether or not a subject can speak for themselves politically. Focusing intensely on embattled class dynamics, the film's rendition of Tibetan society foregrounds its hierarchal structure at the cost of any sense of the central character's selfhood. The representational approach leaves little room for individual identity formation and characterization. This absence of selfhood, I argue, is also central to Tseden's cinematic intervention, which gravitates toward an alternative mode of addressing Tibetan identity in modern China and globalizing culture. Tseden's film breaks new ground in developing a distinct audiovisual approach that cuts against dominant modes of representing ethnic minorities.

The Emergence of a Minor Cinema

Based on his own eponymous novella, Pema Tseden's film *Tharlo* is emblematic of recent innovations in the cinematic representation of Tibet. A grown orphan, the protagonist is a shepherd named Tharlo (played by Shide Nyima), who lives by tending sheep on the desolate steppe. A sanguine, middle-aged bachelor, Tharlo takes pride in

guarding his flock day and night, and never bothers to escape from his tough circumstances. One day, however, Tharlo is asked to visit the local police station, where he is told to acquire a national identity card. The task bewilders him. To get an identity card, he must first have his photograph taken in the nearest town. Upon his arrival in town, because Tharlo's appearance has been roughened by a harsh life, the photographer persuades Tharlo to smooth his look at the hair salon across the street. Yangtso (played by Yangchuk Tso), the hairdresser, while adeptly scrubbing Tharlo's ruffled hair, finds out that Tharlo's sheep are worth a fortune. Following their brief, chance encounter, Tharlo is already smitten with Yangtso, who has navigated him through tantalizing occasions of worldly desire and urban pleasure. Tempted and thrilled, Tharlo cashes out all of his livestock, planning on a future shared with the girl he just met. However, after spending their first night, Tharlo wakes up to an empty room; Yangtso has disappeared with his money. The spark that has just been kindled within Tharlo is now stamped out. After riding back toward the mountains, he runs out not only of gas, but also of faith and hope. The film ends by showing Tharlo lighting up a firecracker in dead silence. Right before the closing credits start rolling, we hear a muffled sound, indicating a detonation in his hand.

During the Socialist Era, Chinese films narrated ethnic peoples' trials and tribulations by foregrounding a collective struggle to rescue China from vernacular feudalism and foreign imperialism. Tseden's *Tharlo*, by contrast, emphasizes an urgent need to redeem one's cultural and ethnic identity (Yu 2014, 130). Rather than the ambivalence of his earlier works on this theme, *Tharlo*'s melancholy derives from the tension between Tibet's decaying cultural heritage and the modernization brought in by both China and, by extension, globalization. In Tseden's second feature *The Search* (*Xunzhao zhimei gengdeng*, 2009), for instance, the protagonist is a filmmaker who, accompanied by a skeleton camera crew, searches for talented actors with whom to reenact a classic Tibetan opera. Reminiscent of Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami's poetic realism (especially in *Through the Olive Trees*), *The Search* is less invested in surveying Tibet's rural landscape and traditional customs, than in examining "this fragmentation, the missing collective consciousness, the delusion of a homogeneous and unified Tibet, and the absence of a pre-existing people" (Frangville 2016, 111).[42] In following this meditative yet inconclusive journey, the film captures a sense of loss in Tibetan society, which is caught in between a repressed past and a compromised present. In his next film, *Old Dog* (*Lao gou*, 2011), Tseden only intensifies this feeling of loss by depicting the generational conflict between a father and son. The son, Gonpo,

secretly sells his father's Tibetan mastiff, a symbol of the natives' nomadic way of life. His father Dorje eventually strangles the dog rather than see it sold into the booming urban pet market. The old dog's uncalled-for demise, the result of Dorje's cruel repudiation of consumerist intrusion, implies that the values and beliefs purportedly preserved by Tibetan people have been withering away. Whereas in *Old Dog* the collision between tradition and modernity is signified by the father's and son's irreconcilable attitudes toward their dog, in *Tharlo* it assumes the form of Yangtso's allure to which Tharlo surrendered once he set foot in the outside world.

The antagonistic relations among these characters, who are bound together by kinship or intimacy, suggest that today Tibet's collective identity is divided. Whereas some remain loyal to their historical roots, others turn their back on local conventions. The identity of Tibetan people, in other words, has fundamentally ruptured. Pema Tseden's narratives, then, chart a dialectical relationship between the Tibetan ethnic minority and the Chinese nation-state. On the one hand, with its overwhelming power, the state apparatus aims to integrate minority other(s) in the frontier regions into the national identity. This estranges indigenous peoples from their distinctive traditions. On the other hand, ethnic societies and cultures are by no means stagnant and impervious to change, indicating that ethnic subjects are autonomous agents in the first place. Ethnic subjects must be situated in their engagements with surrounding circumstances. Both of these scenarios delineate a Tibetan identity that is fractured, though in different ways. Whereas the former suggests that the ethnic subject's autonomy has been violated from without, the latter acknowledges the ways in which ethnic subjects and societies are in a constant process of internal change. Dwelling on this bifurcated understanding of Tibet's identity conundrum, Tseden seeks to establish "new spaces of meaning and resistant polyphony" in the domain of ethnic minority films, an approach that gives rise to a "minor cinema" (Frangville 2016, 107). Building on Deleuze's concept of minor cinema, Vanessa Frangville asserts that Tseden's films signify a "minor movement", which is "a result of a process of becoming minor within the major," namely, a process "by which one crosses the boundaries of an existing territory and disrupts traditional structures of expression" (2016, 107). Therefore, by weaving allegories, ironies, and symbols in his filmic narratives, Tseden counters hegemonic narratives of Tibet's political and cultural position in modern China.

In this light, *Tharlo* marks a radical departure from Pema Tseden's visual style. Unlike his earlier works, which were filled with tender colors and gregarious people,

this story unfolds in black-and-white images at a slow pace. The whole film consists of mere eighty-four shots organized into ten sequences (Tseden 2017, 48). The dichromatic contrasts that distinguish the cinematography, as the director revealed in an interview, allude to the innocence of the protagonist who has lived a hermetic life (Tseden 48). In fact, the film's contestation of cinematic representation is more palpable in Tseden's use of sound. The instant that the narrative opens, Tharlo's voice reaches the audience's ears. Shortly after a static shot showing a tiny lamb in a cloth bag, the frame cuts to an even longer stationary shot, with Tharlo facing the camera. The backdrop is a wall on which five poster-size Chinese characters have been painted. They spell out "*Wei ren min fu wu*" (Serve the People)—a catchphrase from Mao's landmark speech in memory of Zhang Side, a devotional revolutionary soldier. Aurally, Tharlo recites Mao's text verbatim, in its entirety. The camera stays still for over three minutes, confining our vision to the speaking figure. Aside from registering the character's modest appearance and stillness, the viewer is, as it were, listening to the image. With its central statement literally writ large, Tharlo's husky and accented recitation of Mao's famous address performatively recasts communist ideals such as altruism, universalism, and egalitarianism on which the New China was built. Repeating Mao's epochal slogan in another time, space, and speech, this sequence compels the audience to ponder the gap between the actual conditions in which ethnic minorities live and the ideological dogmas by which they are governed. A laborious feat in its own right, Tharlo's long recital not only hints ironically at the miserable fate in store for the character. It also, more personally, insinuates the director's compassion for his innocent protagonist, whose failed attempt to convert from a traditional to a modern way of life encapsulates the common dilemma that has befallen the Tibetan populace. The film is more than a story about a cheerful Tibetan shepherd who falls prey to China's expansive urban growth; it stands as a poignant testimony to an embattled identity when tradition is in danger.

The Paradox of Ethnofiction

Compared to ethnic minority films that aimed to establish national unity, Zhang Yang's *Paths of the Soul* concerns little with the sublime notion of Chinese nation. Instead, it touches on how people adhere to time-honored religious traditions in the modern age. The film follows a group of eleven Tibetan villagers for much of a year, depicting their pilgrimage to the Mount Kailash, a sacred mountain known as Gang Rinpoche among local folks. The pilgrims, including a senile peasant, regretful butcher,

little girl, disabled young man, and pregnant woman, must prostrate themselves every few steps for the entire journey. Having lived through moments of life and death, they eventually reach their destination. Despite its critical acclaim and commercial success, the film arose controversy. Whilst most critics in the West applauded the film's ingenious combination of documentary and fictive modes, a number of viewers in China railed against its alleged exploitation Tibetan practices and beliefs.[43]

For skeptical commentators of the film, the director should have neither dramatized a journey of faith nor fed into Han Chinese people's utopian perception of Tibet as an idyllic retreat from their daily grinds. In essence, these critiques accuse Zhang Yang of orientalist exoticism and commodity fetishism. Historically, Han Chinese urbanites have fetishized subaltern ethnic minorities in both of these ways. Although the cast of non-professional performers was made up of ordinary Tibetans villagers, the very fact that the crew—including Zhang Yang himself—was all Han Chinese seems to contradict the filmmaker's claim to have approached the indigenous community in a nuanced manner. The heated debate over whether the film appropriates ethnic practices, or even exploits people from ethnic minorities, boils down to the question of *who is representing whom* (Lo 2009, 231). To determine whether Zhang Yang's film should be justified or dismissed, then, we must interrogate the relation between the subject and the object of representation. In the context of modern Chinese cinema, tackling this tension has become a principal way in which film analysis can ascertain the power dynamics among the Han majority and non-Han minorities.

An echo of nation-building rhetorics from the beginning of the twentieth century, the rationale behind this line of critique, once again, pits Han ethnocentrism against Chinese nationalism. Ethnocentric cinema consolidates a dichotomy between self and other, constructed through spectacles of primitive, exotic, and mystic ethnic minorities inhabiting remote frontiers. What should concern us the most, here, is the way in which the Han majority foists its system of values and beliefs onto other ethnicities under the umbrella of China. "When these portrayals are crafted by those possessing higher social ranking and more access to means of dissemination than those imaged," cultural anthropologist Louisa Schein asserts, "the term 'representation' denotes the discursive authority of the representers, their power to shape subjectivity and to legitimate domination" (2016, 267). Bearing in mind what Schein terms "internal orientalism", I will dissect Zhang Yang's film (see Schein 2000; 2015; 2016). In so doing, it is imperative that I reflect on how asymmetries power

among ethnic groups is perpetuated through cultural representation and on how the mechanisms through which ethnic minorities are cinematically represented have varied over time. This variation of representational modes indicates more than just a top-down hierarchy of knowledge and power, in which the Han majority controls the image and sound of film narratives. It also hints at myriad bottom-up formations of identity and subjectivity articulated by ethnic minorities themselves (Fan 2016, 2092). Differentiating between the relative positions of the representer and the represented, I show how the film's treatment of Tibetan people confers a sense of actuality. This is achieved through the director's blend of documentary and fictive modes into the hybrid genre of "ethnofiction."[44]

On the one hand, ethnofiction draws on the legacy of Western scientific disciplines such as anthropology and ethnology, and postwar documentary movements in European and American societies. As such, it affords a means of presentation by which the lived experience of traditional peoples can be intimately observed and recounted. On the other hand, the fly-on-the-wall perspective furnished by ethnofiction runs the risk of recapitulating patterns of knowledge production through which the West has long gazed upon others. At this point, Zhang Yang's depiction of Tibetan villagers seems to be complicit with the hierarchies of Western orientalism. But even if Zhang Yang's film is culpable for internal orientalism, is there nothing of merit to the story, such as how it addresses viewers? After all, the genre of ethnofiction is far from equivalent to ethnography, in that it also "employs the use of creative writing and poetic language" to engage people affectively while collecting and displaying empirical data (VanSlyke-Briggs 2009, 336). Together, the cinematic techniques used in this film (its distinctive imaging, pacing, sequencing, and casting) work to "invent a story that sums up the truth of a group experience" (Picornell-Belenguer 2013, 34; Bogue 2003, 152). Through a two-thronged approach, I will elaborate on how Zhang Yang's ethnofiction is both an audiovisual repertoire of indigenous lived experience, and a narrative act through which a new ethnic subject is constructed. In parallel, my analysis delves into the emergence of ethnofiction in the West, and the transformation of ethnic minority films in modern China. In this way, I provide a situated understanding of these narratives.

Zhang Yang has long aspired to make a film about Tibet. His second feature length film, *Shower* (*Xi zao*, 1999), paints a plaintive picture of the effects of China's cutthroat modernization on ordinary people. Against the backdrop of massive urban infrastructural development, the story focuses on the owner of a public bath who lives

in one of Beijing's old neighborhoods. Having once been the beating heart of the community, the public bath now faces demolition. More and more local residents have relocated to high-rise buildings, in which each apartment has its own home shower system. Alongside the story of the elderly man's staunch commitment to his dwindling business and faltering family life, the film also embeds two subplots. These additional stories both tell of how the practice of cleaning oneself has become integral to regional cultures, not least that of Tibet.[45] Despite this desire, it was only fourteen years later that Zhang Yang could dedicate an entire title to Tibetan culture and people.

According to the director's memoir, the cast and crew spent almost a whole year journeying from a landlocked town in Mangkang (formerly Markam) county, which neighbors Sichuan and Yunnan provinces in western China, to Mount Kailash by way of Lhasa, the provincial capital. The route zigzags across the Himalayan Plateau for more than 2000 kilometers, stretching from the east to the west of Tibet. For a good part of a year, the eleven villagers went on their pilgrimage to Kang Rinpoche, with Zhang Yang and his personnel tagging along (Zhang 2017). In the Tibetan calendar, the Year of the Horse (2014) is Mount Kailash's zodiac year. For believers, the potency of every prayer and blessing will increase twelvefold if a *kora* (circumambulation around a sacred object) is performed around the holy mountain over the course of a year. Given the sacred merit of this endeavor, Zhang Yang cast a local farmer named Nyima Zadui, who is well into his forties, and ten other villagers as characters in the film. For the record, their real names were used in the narrative. In spite of the benefit of a commercial contract, the film project was a collaborative effort: if he or she agreed to join the cast, each member of the pilgrimage would receive a wage. In return, they would allow themselves to be filmed along the way and enact some slightly scripted episodes for the purposes of the narrative. After assembling a variety of individuals—selected on account of their age, gender, physical and psychological conditions—Zhang's documentary film eventually kicked off in March 2014 (Zhang 2017).

In its fictive-cum-documentary mode, the film depicts rural people moving across the natural landscape of Tibet. Doing without a typical screenplay, the story shows how faithful Tibetans submit their minds and bodies to their rite of passage. Only occasionally did the pilgrims have to comply with a prearranged scenario. In one scene, for example, a landslide interrupts the pilgrims' progress, with a fallen rock scraping a man's leg. In another, the tractor towing supplies driven by Nyima Zadui collides with an oncoming jeep. Physical injuries aside, the engine damage was so

severe that the pilgrims had to ditch the tractor. After this incident, they hauled the supplies themselves using straps thrown over their shoulders. Toward the end of the film, the eldest member of the group, Yang Pei, passed away at the foot of Kang Rinpoche. Although none of these incidents befell the cast, Zhang Yang's memoir reveals that some episodes in the film were inspired by real events that they witnessed on the road (Zhang 2017). Still, these scenes remind the audience of the dangers faced by the cast on their long and difficult journey. Fortunately, they were spared major accidents. By way of these fictional elements, then, the film has raised awareness of the real perilousness appeared in Tibet every day. Intertwining *what has happened* with *what could have happened* into a cohesive narrative, Zhang Yang's transgressive approach unsettles the binary opposition of documentary and fiction.

The Virtue of Fabulation

At this point, *Paths of the Soul* recalls experiments in documentary filmmaking and dramatic storytelling undertaken by the French ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch (1917-2004). An innovative ethnographic filmmaker from the beginning of his career in the late 1940s, Rouch focused on particular ethnicities in postcolonial Africa, especially Niger. Hailed as a pioneer who invented the genre of ethnofiction, Rouch introduced elements of narrative cinema into the raw footage of ethnographic documentary filmmaking. His well-known film, *Jaguar* (1957-1967), encapsulates his creative practice. Rouch's first ethnofiction film recounts the seasonal migration of three Nigerians, played by Damoré Zika (Rouch's friend and longtime collaborator), Lam Ibrahim Dia, and Illo Goudel'ize. It is built around the actors' improvisatory performances along the course of their voyage (Bogue 2003, 151; Sjöberg 2008, 230).

By "incorporating into the story the chance encounters they experienced on the road," film theorist Ronald Bogue writes, Rouch not just blended performative elements into ethnographic recording of sounds and images, but also proposed that such a mixture of performance and documentation be recognized as a site of general knowledge about local society and people (2003, 151). Similarly, anthropologist Steven Feld maintains that Rouch's ethnofiction be construed as an attempt to "get beyond observational passivity", as he argues:

> Rouch indicates that ethnographic cinema can be exciting and liberating (as cinema and as ethnography) precisely because of the capacity to intimately project the richness of local sensibilities. One can go beyond

> descriptive inventories; one can grasp and show and reveal significances, some of which are only emergent in the actual process of filmmaking and editing. (Feld 2003, 16)

This creative process not only allowed Rouch to organize ethnological information in a continuous narrative. More importantly, it also compensates for what that information might otherwise have lacked: namely, a wide range of situations that was as-yet captured. An ethnofiction, in this sense, is a composite of the factual and fictional. The blurred distinction between fact and fiction, for Rouch, transformed cinema and ethnography. In an interview with Italian film director Enrico Fulchignoni, Rouch mused on the dialectical relationship between the two:

> For me, as an ethnographer and filmmaker, there is almost no boundary between documentary film and films of fiction. The cinema, the art of the double, is already the transition from the real world to the imaginary world, and ethnography, the science of the thought systems of others, is a permanent crossing point from one conceptual universe to another. (Rouch 2003, 185)

To Rouch, ethnofiction is a paradoxical and yet reciprocal exchange between "the staging of reality" and "the documentary point of view of the imaginary" (Rouch 2003, 185). Grasped in these terms, *Paths of the Soul* is Zhang Yang's response to the ambiguous conflict between the real and the imaginary at play in ethnofiction. This should not be understood as, however, that Zhang's foray into the genre tallies seamlessly with Rouch's practice of ethnofiction. Unlike *Jaguar*, Zhang's film features neither a voiceover nor extra-diegetic sound. It contains only synchronous sounds, in stark contrast to the dubbed dialogues of Rouch's protagonists. True, Rouch was able to apply synchronous sounds to his later films thanks to the development of audiovisual recording equipment. Nevertheless, he shifted the emphasis of ethnographic filmmaking from an observational stance toward a participatory one. As such, his filmmaking marks a significant stylistic transition. For some, this methodological turn implies a decisive change from direct cinema to cinéma vérité. This latter movement was crystallized in the groundbreaking documentary film named *Chronicle of a Summer* (*Chronique d'un été*, 1961) made by Rouch, with his collaborator Edgar Morin, and unknown Parisians that they encountered in the streets (Henley 2009, 160).

Zhang Yang's ethnofiction, in contrast, does without the techniques characteristic of Rouch's cinéma vérité. In *Paths of the Soul* Zhang Yang has neither added voices and sounds in post-production, nor staged encounters between filmmaker and subject in front of the camera. Resolutely adhering to an observational perspective by hiding behind the lens, Zhang Yang preferred not to stress the presence of cinematic apparatus, much less himself and the crew. Departing from Rouch's aggressive interference with the filmmaking process, their involvement is at most implicated in the use of panning shots, long takes, and of course, the chronological arrangement of all sequences—all of which veers from Rouch's ubiquitous hand-held shooting and discreet editing. Zhang's seemingly conservative attitude toward ethnofiction, actually, is fueled less by a reluctance to transcend what Feld dubs "observational passivity" on the part of filmmaker, than by the practical fact that it was almost impossible for the director to speak to his subjects in their language (Feld 2003, 16). Whereas Jean Rouch and his Nigerian actors all spoke French (the "mother tongue" imposed on Nigeria during its colonization), Zhang Yang could only communicate his ideas to the Tibetan villagers with the help of a native speaker. Inevitably, this ruled out an unmediated exchange between Zhang and the Tibetan actors involved in the film. However, at the same time, I argue, it enables an observational distance. This distance figures first and foremost aurally, in the linguistic difference between the Han filmmaker and the Tibetan pilgrims.

With Zhang's at the helm, this documentary film puts forward a representation of Tibet that is inhabited solely by people of the Tibetan ethnicity. On the one hand, this representation of Tibet may well reflect the villagers' actual condition. Their knowledge of Mandarin, China's official language is scarce. On the other hand, this portrayal is romanticized in that it downplays the pilgrims' access to modern inventions and conditions, such as vehicles, technologies, and urban life. In fact, it is more than halfway through the film, for instance, that the pilgrims are shown using cellphones, and then it is only to call their relatives back home (Kenny 2016). A more patent example of the travelers' contact with modernity is their two-month stint in Lhasa, in which we briefly glimpse into how they navigate a modern (and yet still pious) society. Working part-time at a car wash or on a construction site, the men manage to earn some quick money with which to supplement their budget for the upcoming trip. Once they have stashed enough money away, the pilgrims set off on the road to the sacred mountain once again. Overall, Zhang's cinematic depiction emphasizes the spiritual purity of the Tibetan people. With the film steeped in native

speech and landscapes, Zhang's preference for a distanced viewing position (as opposed to actively participating in the scene) reduces his subjective interventions to a minimum. As such, it constructs an objective perspective on another people and culture.

Imposing neither his presence within the frame nor his judgement on the soundtrack, in *Paths of the Soul* Zhang intends to tell the story of Tibet truthfully, as if the storyteller were never there. Narratively speaking, this observational distance between the ethnographic filmmaker and filmed subjects allows a third-person perspective within which fictions can be constructed. It opens up a diegetic space in which the filmmaker assumes a vantage point from which he or she can structure audiovisual materials at their discretion, using narrative techniques such as sequential ordering, rhythm, characterization, and focalization (Verstraten 2009, 32). By means of external focalization, Zhang establishes himself as what Gérard Genette calls a "heterodiegetic narrator," that is, a narrator who is hidden from the narrative (1980, 248). The combination of fact and fiction therefore amounts to a broader scope of lived experiences of the local community, overcoming a limited amount of random moments culled from an unscripted process of ethnographic filmmaking. At this point, Zhang distinguishes that his methodology stimulates the film's subjects' creative agency:

> *Paths of the Soul* is a documentary-style feature film. A feature film usually consists of fictive components, and actors are needed to carry out those imaginative moments with their performances … Once fictional elements prevail in the story, actors must distinguish between reality and cinema, so they could transform from who they are in life to those who they have *become* in the film—a process that amounts to dramatic characterization. (Zhang 2017, 81; my emphasis)

> The actors had to make an effort to constantly adjust to this particular filmmaking pattern. I would immediately show them the clip of each scene once it was wrapped, so to let them know what they were doing, instead of making them feel sidelined all the time. As soon as they got the gist of what you asked from them for the film, they became the *creative subjects* of this project too, rather than being mere objects at the director's command. (Zhang 2017, 60; my emphases)

Zhang Yang's cooperative approach, by which he worked closely with actors during the production process, resonates with Jean Rouch's methodological insistence on what he referred to as "shared anthropology" (*anthropologie partagée*), a process of equal and reflexive dialogue between the director and protagonists (Feld 2003, 18; Rouch 2003, 44). For Rouch, the practice of shared anthropology rests on tactics such as the practice of "screen back" and "informant feedback," which involves "screening rough-cuts of the films to the informants to receive feedback and sometimes having the protagonists improvising a narration to the film rushes during the final stage of production process" (Sjöberg 2008, 232). In fostering similar techniques, Zhang has tacitly conformed his filmmaking practice to that of Rouch—although Zhang does not refer to the influential French filmmaker.

After all, *Paths of the Soul* can be viewed as a prime example of how Rouch's shared anthropology has reverberated in Chinese cinema. Zhang's approach not only relinquished full directorial authority so as to make way for "a new type of relationship between the anthropologist and the group he observes" (Rouch 2003, 44). Furthermore, it also "allows the ethnographer-filmmaker to meditate openly and self-critically on his or her own role" (Feld 2003, 19). In spite of that Zhang's hidden position from the camera is in contrast to Rouch's active involvement in ethnofiction, they share a common ambition to subvert the filmmaker's dominance over the ethnographical representation of indigenous people. On the one hand, an interdependent collaboration between the representer and the represented is integral to this pursuit. There must be an "audiovisual reciprocity" (*contredon audiovisuel*) that contributes to a process of mutual learning, not partial and biased projection (Feld 2003, 18; Rouch 2003, 44). On the other hand, this urge to overcome the hierarchies embedded in the cultural representation of people from ethnic minorities, prompts both the ethnographic filmmaker and filmed subjects to "enact and narrate a fictional story, but one that combines historical experiences in the formation of a new collectivity that emerges through the process of making the film" (Bogue 2003, 152).

In both sharing representational authority among the subject and the object, as well as blurring the distinction between fact and fiction, ethnofiction traverses boundaries and conjoins genres as a means of articulating the collective experience of an ethnic group. In this light, what Zhang Yang and his Tibetan collaborators demonstrate in this film is not so much what the real characters experienced on their journey. Instead, the story sets out to "convey something fundamental about the real lives" of Tibetan people, a fundamental truth about how ethnic minorities go about

their daily routines and ceremonial rites in contemporary China (Loizos 1993, 50; Sjöberg 2008, 234). According to film theorist David Rodowick, this revelation of truth through a cinematic assemblage of documentary realism and fictive composition, is congruent with what Gilles Deleuze terms *fabulation*. This creative mode of storytelling points to "a becoming-other appropriate to the invention of a people who are 'not yet' but who may find a means of collective enunciation as a line of variation in the dominant cinematic discourse" (Rodowick 1997, 83). In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989), Deleuze reflects on Rouch's ethnographic films in suggesting that the value of ethnofiction lies not in its challenge to the divide between fiction and reality. Rather, it stems from ethnofiction's defiance of hegemonic mechanisms of narrative and representation that perpetually relegate people to the margins, and the status of minority or subalterneity (1989, 150-51).

For Deleuze, "what is opposed to fiction is not the real," nor "the truth" (which, he adds, is "always that of the masters or colonizers") (1989, 150). On the other side of fiction, rather, "is the *story-telling function* of the poor, insofar as it gives the false the power which makes it into a memory, a legend, a monster" (1989, 150; my emphasis). By invoking the storytelling function of fabulation, which oscillates between reality and fiction, the hybrid concept of ethnofiction provides a means of collective enunciation of memory, history, and culture for minorized peoples. In this way, they can "raise this creative process to a serialism capable of formulating a collective identity in time" (Rodowick 1997, 156; 161). The creative approach of fabulation disturbs the boundaries between description and narration, subjective and objective, true and false. It is a transformative process, which entails concurrent metamorphoses of the ethnographic filmmaker and filmed subject. In Rouch's *Jaguar*, for instance, the Nigerian protagonists' improvised performances are somehow staged. There is an underlying purpose to this, which is not that of documenting their seasonal migration per se. The ultimate goal is rather to give shape and voice to shared experiences of the ethnic community by fictionally elaborating upon actual events. It is precisely because of their concerted effort at improvisation and emplotment that the real characters become more than figures playing themselves. Apparently, in contributing to the narrative, they enter into an ambivalent state of embodying the individual and collective simultaneously. In this state, "[t]he character is continually *becoming another*, and is no longer separable from this becoming which merges with a people" (Deleuze 1989, 152; my emphases).

According to Deleuze, the filmmaker undergoes a parallel transition into someone other than him- or herself, "in so far as he takes real characters as intercessors and replaces his fictions by their own story-telling"'(1989, 152). In assessing this transformation, it is particularly important to consider that Rouch is, after all, a French director conducting ethnographic filmmaking in a former French colony. Under these colonial circumstances, it is not only sensible but also ethical that the representer should forsake both of his presumptions and prerogatives in approaching local realities. Accordingly, the filmmaker ought to shift his frame of reference from the West to the vernacular, so as to be epistemologically and methodologically evenhanded when he works with the indigenous people. Only through immersive experience and situational awareness, I propose, can the filmmaker reign in the inherent inequality of cross-cultural representation—a hegemonic form of narration that condescends to people of ethnic minorities. The virtue of fabulation, therefore, lies in a metaphoric passage through which a minority formulates an identity. In Deleuze's words: "where the film-maker and his characters become others and the one through the other, a collectivity which gradually wins from place to place, from person to person, from intercessor to intercessor" (1989, 153).

Of course, Zhang Yang and his non-professional actors come from different ethnic backgrounds. Ostensibly, the filmmaker's detachment from narration seems to reiterate the Western voyeuristic gaze of the long ethnographical tradition. Following this logic, Zhang, a member of the Han Chinese cultural elite, has usurped the viewer's superior position so as to pry into the lives of the exotic, mysterious, and pristine Tibetan other. True that a number of critics charge the film with internal Orientalism and Han nationalism, what they have failed to appreciate, however, are the reciprocal dynamics between the filmmaker and real characters, both on- and offscreen. In taking the story of a Tibetan pilgrimage at face value, these commentators miss the mark. In Zhang's audiovisual tableaux, they see a blatant appropriation of a minority culture and a vivid demonstration of the Han majority's cultural, political, and economic supremacy. This strain of criticism would stand to reason if *Paths of the Soul* consisted of nothing more than clichéd tropes of innocence and piety. These accusations that the director's presentation of Tibet is stereotypical, however, ignore the way which he collaborated with his subjects. Moreover, they overlook the political potential that can be derived from this film.

Not surprisingly, the film does not provide closure. Instead, it shows the pilgrims continuing their prostration rituals around the snow-clad Mount Kailash. Far

from giving the impression that the Han Chinese have penetrated the Tibetan regions, for much of the story that are no signs of Han Chinese to be found. Similar to the seemingly intact Tibet in Pema Tseden's filmic rendition, the paucity of the Han conjures up a world inhabited by Tibetans themselves, an audiovisual domain saturated with their ethnic language and culture (Berry 2016, 96). Together, the constant chanting of Buddhist scriptures by Tibetan pilgrims, the folk songs they sing along the road, and the conversations occur between them every now and then, all serve to "displace dialogically a Western visual narrative tradition with an oral one, creating a hybrid form where orality invades and transforms the visual, and where the visual then transforms the oral as a medium of social cohesion" (Rodowick 1997, 161). The film's representation of the Tibetan soundscape functions as the sensory and mnemonic foundation upon which the narrative image builds a new form of subjectivity and collective enunciation in response to Chinese rule (Rodowick 1997, 160-161). The construction of this diegetic dimension evokes a sense of minority autonomy. Everything the viewer witnesses, whether visually or aurally, "expresses an affirmative force that inaugurates a cinematographic discourse of minorities," which stands against the majority's normative authority (Rodowick 1997, 153). Transposed into the Chinese context, such a discourse of minorities makes possible an alternative mode of cultural representations of ethnic minorities—in this case, Tibetans—within mainstream cultural production. Rather than fall prey to a Han nationalist perspective, by melding fact and fiction, Zhang Yang has brought forward a perceptibly extant and intact Tibetan way of life.

By dismantling the boundary between reality and fiction, Zhang Yang's cinematic approach contributes to the collective formation of a minority people. I argue that Zhang Yang's ethnofiction sheds light on the complexities of representing ethnic minorities in Chinese cinema. Precisely because of its venture into the paradoxes of fabulation, Zhang's film heralds a new approach to cinematically representing ethnic minorities. It marks a new era in which narratives of ethnic minorities in contemporary China gradually disintegrate, decentralize, and diversify. In contesting implicitly hierarchical dichotomies such as that between documentary and film, *Paths of the Soul* also suggests that the filmmaker's own ethnic and cultural identity may be caught between Han ethnocentrism and Chinese nationalism. This comes out especially clearly in the discrepant reactions to the film at home and abroad. Pundits in the West, who have been near-unanimous in their praise of the film, have evaded the cross-ethnic issue entirely. In China, however, the film has been

condemned by some critics, who have sought to discredit its intentions on the grounds that it reinforces Han chauvinism. Neither of these perspectives is productive in that the one risks neglecting China's inter-ethnic conflicts while the other perpetuates the binarism of dominant and dominated. This is where Zhang Yang's film proves most valuable, it seems to me. *Paths of the Soul* offers a reconciliatory, relational, and reflexive perspective, which has the potential to diffuse the tension between the majority and minorities. All in all, the film vouchsafes the heterogeneity and multitude of ethnic identities and cultures in modern China.