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

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Propositions

1. The concurrence of motion picture's arrival and nation-state's advent in China at the turn of the twentieth century, is not to be considered as unrelated threads, but rather as a dialectical dynamism in which the imagined community of modern China has largely relied on cinema for its symbolic construction, and yet encountered constant resistance from cinematic representation.
2. The cinematic configuration of the Chinese nation-state, in particular after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, has rested upon a multifocal and intersectional vision of society, featuring characters such as children, women, ethnic minorities, and diaspora.
3. In contrast to the bourgeois cultural values integral to the original model of European Bildungsroman, the Chinese Bildungsroman has tended to cultivate revolutionary ideals, especially after the foundation of the People's Republic of China. The hegemonic ideologies inscribed in the Chinese Bildungsroman are various, encompassing the nationalist sentiments of democratic republicanism, to the ideals of communism, collectivism, and patriotism promoted by the authoritarian nation-state.
4. The discursive construction of femininity in China oscillated between a conception of woman as a political subject (*funü*) or sexual subject (*nüxing*). Initially, *funü* is taken up as a symbol of the nation, whether because women embody Confucian ethics and patriarchal tradition, or revolutionary ideologies and collective unity. Based on overlapping binaries of sex and gender, *nüxing* affirms women's biological characteristics and bodily needs. The differentiation between *funü* and *nüxing*, however, is rarely static and clear.

5. The absence of selfhood is central to the Tibetan director Pema 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.
6. Zhang Yang's ethnofictional approach to cinematic representation of China's ethnic minorities, in particular Tibetans, offers a reconciliatory, relational, and reflexive perspective, which contributes to the collective formation of a minority people. Together, Pema Tseden and Zhang Yang chart the emergence of a minor cinema in China's dominant cultural landscape.
7. By cultivating a mythic belief in *guojia*—an imagined bond between nationhood and kinship—the ideology of homeland effects personal identification by circumscribing the individual with political institutions and ethical imperatives. Whereas some Chinese films adopt ideological interpellation to produce a Chinese national identity, the collective formation of national identity can be hampered by personal testimonial and memories.
8. A fundamental antinomy is rooted in China's national formation: on one side, the symbolic whole of China in effect derives from distinctive loci of signifying practices designed to construct a cohesive Chinese identity; on the flip side, subjects who seem to be inexorably destined for frontiers of the hegemonic power, play a central role in China's political and cultural formulation.
9. There are two major fallacies in the field of cultural inquiry. The first is the indisputable prevalence of Western (read: West European and North American) theories which have extensively defined our analytical conducts. The second

conundrum, in contrast, persists in the fervor of cultural nationalism on the part of vernacular scholars.

10. The challenge ahead for film studies, or cultural studies in general, is more than offering a critique of how a cultural artifact like film serves as a profitable commodity and a propaganda instrument of nationalists, but to engage culture, particularly cinema, as a vital site of socio-political transformation where in the face of political domination and cultural homogenization, people bond over shared visions while individuals make their voices heard.
11. In considering the historical, national, and geopolitical dimensions of Chinese cinema, this dissertation claims neither that China's central frontiers are confined to one particular period of Chinese history, nor that the tension between marginal social figures and national narratives pertains to Chinese cinema alone. Rather, I seek to explore how drastic social and cultural changes translate into collective violence at a symbolic level. In a world that is increasingly divided among nations, races, and cultures, this study reminds us of how power is ever so surreptitiously exerted through images, sounds, and words.