

# ***A Brief Discussion on the Important Turn of Narrative Expression in Contemporary Tibetan Cinema -The Example of Pema Tseden's Film***

Wencai Yao<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department Of Directing, Beijing Film Academy, Beijing, China, 100088*

*a. wencaiyao\_mail@126.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Tibetan cinema, as an important part of national cinema in the new century, presents a distinct and unique development process. From the initial Jin Yin Tan and Serf to the present day's Jinpa and Balloon, Tibetan cinema has continued to shed its function of educational enlightenment and ideological propaganda and gradually formed a new content and form with unique Tibetan characteristics. Tibetan films have thus become a medium for telling the world about the rich human connotation and cultural history of the Tibetans. Taking the works of Tibetan director Pema Tseden as an example, this paper summarizes the important turns in the narrative expression of contemporary Tibetan cinema from different directions of breadth and depth.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Tibetan Cinema, Pema Tseden, New Wave of Tibetan Cinema, Humanistic Care

## **1. Introduction**

The Tibetan Plateau is located in the southwest of China and has become the "Roof of the World" with its unique humanistic style, religious beliefs and geographical features. As a cultural and artistic medium with high popularity and strong communication effects, Tibetan films have the important responsibility of showing the audience the magnificent natural scenery and the real and vivid living environment of Tibetan areas. Over the past half century, Tibet has undergone radical changes, and Tibetan cinema has also taken an obvious narrative turn. Therefore, the development of Tibetan film is analyzed by searching, collecting and organizing the literature, as well as combined with the latest information collected during field visits and research. This paper will take the "Tibetan New Wave" represented by director Pema Tseden as an example, and analyze his high degree of subjective consciousness and cultural self-awareness to get rid of the subject matter and images full of spectacle in Tibetan cinema. This thematic and stylistic transition does not appear to be an indication of Pema Tseden's intent to disengage his cinematography from the Buddhist ethos and material culture among Tibetans. Instead it is apparent that he simply wants to go deeper and wider into the many social realities of his people [1]. In this study, it will look at the Tibetan cinema that truly examines the real situation of Tibetans in modern life. This study will explore in depth the common destiny based on the essence of human beings from the perspective of minority groups, which will have a positive effect on deepening the theories related to minority films and guiding the practice of minority film

creation.

## **2. New Thinking about National Cultural Communication in the Contemporary Perspective**

### **2.1. From Scenic Wonders to a New Audiovisual Style**

In the past, Tibetan theme films often showed the typical plateau landscape, such as blue sky, white clouds, snow-capped mountains and lakes. In addition, the sutra streamers and temples all over the Tibetan area are also common image wonders in the film [2]. From the visual effect, these images are strongly different from the color style of the Chinese mainland, mostly showing higher brightness and saturation. For example, in the film "The Horse Thief", there are a lot of natural landscapes of snowy mountains and lakes. In the film "Song of Tibet", the director uses an elevated perspective to render the sacred majesty of the majestic snow-capped mountains. These unique presentations give the film the nature of a "Tibetan propaganda film", showing the natural space of the Tibetan region in a straightforward manner.

In contemporary films, creators have abandoned the spectacle of natural scenery and replaced it with documentary video recordings that delve into Tibetan life [3]. The series of "Tibetan New Wave" films represented by Pema Tsenden have completed the transformation of the nature of Tibetan film propaganda in the new era, that is, they no longer deliberately show the natural scenery and religious beliefs of Tibetan areas, but return to the focus on the people themselves.

In Pema Tsenden's films, natural landscapes are often presented in a low-saturation, high-contrast style. The traditional full-bodied and sweet style of Tibetan films is abandoned, thus creating a sense of desolation and solitude. In the films "Tharlo" and "Jinpa", the director even directly adopts black and white processing, dissolving the visual impact brought by color, so as to purify the picture and make the audience's attention focus on the core of the story. The Tibetan landscape is no longer a composite of the Buddhist worldview and its practices. Modernization and its material consequences are seeping into the Tibetan Buddhist landscape and changing its appearance with a different set of spatial and psychological orders.

At the same time, as a Tibetan director, Pema Tsenden has a deep understanding of Tibetan religion and culture, and thus can more intuitively demonstrate the compatibility of Tibetan culture and film language. This cultural compatibility breaks the outside world's solid imagination of "peculiarity" and "originality" and eliminates the need to deliberately create an atmosphere. For example, in "Jinpa", the director focuses on a steady long shot and a flat perspective to create a documentary visual experience, and the original cultural metaphors and sacredness of the Tibetan landscape are deconstructed. As the camera moves, the characters walk among the softly rolling mountains. The landscape and the characters form a relationship that blends with each other, and the composition is as harmonious as a classical landscape painting [4]. This new audiovisual expression breaks away from the paradigm of sacred landscapes and constructs a "Tibetan reality" that is distinct from the works of its predecessors.

### **2.2. From External Perspective to Deep Cultural Connotation**

Pema Tsenden once talked in an interview about his original intention of creation, which was dissatisfaction with the lack of "authenticity" of Tibetan images in the past [5]. He suggested that in the past, some Tibetan films, whether domestic or foreign, did not reflect Tibetan life in a realistic way for himself and many people around him. Although the Tibetan films in the past could present the local style through film images, their inner national spirit often could not be deeply explored. Tibetan subjectivity is missing in the film, and Tibetan elements, as external visual expressions, only serve as the surface dynamics of the narrative plot, carrying the functions of rendering the narrative space and setting up the characters' images, while the real internal dynamics is the "other" hidden under the

narrative surface [6].

Taking Red River Valley as an example, the core creators of the film, such as the director Feng Xiaoning, the lead actor Jing and Shao, are not Tibetans, and the film also uses Mandarin Chinese and English as the main dialogue languages. This construction of Han Chinese actors and the Chinese language in Tibetan subjects makes the film lose the expression of Tibetan native language ontology. The language of non-character identity will greatly weaken the power of the characters, divorce them from their cultural background, and create an invisible sense of interstitial separation when viewed by Tibetan audiences.

As Pema Tseden's first Tibetan-language film, *The Silent Holy Rock* is the first minority film in the history of cinema to use dialogue in the Tibetan dialect of Amdo with Chinese subtitles. Moreover, its scriptwriter, director, actors, cinematographer, art director, sound recorder, music producer, and other creators are all Tibetan in identity. Using the native language as the dialogue of the film is the most direct identification with the culture of the ethnic group and is closer to the real form of Tibetan people's life and Tibetan culture in the real sense. The creators use their own personal life experiences to express the collective spiritual space of the Tibetan people, and the ethnic language makes the characters in the film and the theme of Tibetan culture truly fuse together [7].

Under the influence of a group of Tibetan filmmakers represented by Pema Tseden, contemporary Tibetan cinema has weakened the narrative core of mainstream ideology and ensured narrative authenticity with the intrinsic perspective of localness. These have reasserted the coordinates of the Tibetan people in the refractory and diverse world cultural field. For example, the cultural phenomena of Tibetan culture, such as sky burial and reincarnation, are no longer exposed from an external perspective, but actually enter the narrative and influence all the actions of the characters on a philosophical level. These original Tibetan cultures are expressed in images without the "other", and Tibetan films gradually become the primary means of cultural transmission by images.

Pema Tseden's realism in the current phase of his filmmaking leans toward modern elements that are destabilizing to traditional practices of Buddhism among Tibetans. He invites his audience to see and touch the landscape of his homeland as if it were a changing body: its surface is undergoing an entire transformation. Buddhism in the midst of the changes becomes an object of a human search for the lost 'soul' of Tibet and is brought to Pema Tseden's cinematic foreground as a subject of moral contention on and off the screen, between his characters and among his audience. All happenings, and the feeling tone that fully saturates the characters' inner and outer worlds, are enveloped in the forceful advancement of modern practices and values [8].

### 2.3. From Macro Narrative to Secular Life

In the past, Tibetan films were often macro narratives, and the creators often focused on family sentiments, love, and ethnic identity in the context of the general environment. Contemporary Tibetan cinema is based on the social reality of the present and focuses on the more concrete personal situations of the people living in Tibet, even women and the marginalized groups in the gap between modernity and tradition. The characters are no longer sacralized, but reflect the humanistic concern of the creators.

Pema Tseden desires to live up to the original cinematic goal he had when he came to Beijing—to narrate stories of common Tibetans in contemporary Tibet [9]. *The Balloon* indeed live up to what he has promised to his audience with his own style of realism. *Balloon* tells the story of a herding family on the shores of Qinghai Lake. Dajie and Drolgar are husband and wife, raising their three children. After the death of their father, the guru tells Dajie that his father's spirit will be reincarnated back into the family, when Drolgar finds out she is pregnant. Dajie believes that his father's spirit has already entered in Drolgar's womb and asks her to give birth to the child. However, overwhelmed with the

burden of childbirth, Drolgar is determined to go to the hospital to have an abortion. Although conventional markers of Tibetan Buddhism such as monks, monasteries, and prayer flags do not take centre positions in *Balloon*, Pema Tseden's lens does not discontinue its touch on villages and towns [10]. The film tells the story of the changing feminine consciousness of the social role of mothers, and also reflects the multiple constraints of religious beliefs, same-sex communities, and patriarchal ideologies that women need to face in breaking through the dilemma of childbirth. The film shows the reality of Tibetan women's existence in the gap between modernity and tradition. The themes of the film are thus expanded to include women and ethnicity, female bodily dominance, and family relations in modern society. For the first time, the previously marginalized and functional role of women is finally given a subjective expression.

The film "*Tharlo*" tells the simple story of Tharlo, a shepherd, in order to apply for a second-generation ID card at the village police station, he encounters a girl, Yang Tso, in a barber store, and becomes emotionally involved with Yang Tso, and was deceived by her. The process of getting an ID card is actually the process of building a personal identity, a process that includes his recognition of his family, his name, and his sense of control over his future [11]. Although he makes several attempts, they all end in failure, and he eventually loses his identity in modern civilization. The film ostensibly tells the story of Tharlo's construction of identity, but in fact, it tells the story of the construction of a Tibetan identity.

The current Tibetan society is in the process of modernization, with more advanced production methods and colorful modern civilization colliding violently with traditional Tibetan culture. Pema Tseden's film does not simply present the dichotomy between modernity and tradition, but rather seeks a state of reality from the universal Tibetan culture. Through the characters in the film, he expresses the problems of contemporary Tibetan society and the plight of Tibetans. This is especially true for the "marginalized" and "small people" who are caught in the gap between modernity and tradition, which are difficult to see in previous Tibetan films.

### 3. Discussion

After discussing and summarizing, we can see that Tibetan films are undergoing many changes from content to form. Pema Tseden often remarks that the pre-condition of his filmmaking is to build a Tibetan-language cinema—not to advocate self-enclosure of Tibet and Tibetans in the twenty-first century but rather to narrate Tibetan experiences of the changing world in the entangled web of China's modernization, the globalization of social issues in Tibet, and the growing fascination Tibet holds in the global public arena. While he scripts his stories, casts his characters, directs his productions, and breathes life into them in Tibetan language, he also encourages his Tibetan peers and filmmakers-to-be to do the same. The way he makes his films has widely been accepted among Tibetan artists who are situated in urban China and yet are globally connected [12]. The reasons for this are, first of all, inseparable from the rapid development of domestic film education. For example, director Pema Tseden studied at the Beijing Film Academy and received professional film education, with a high level of film art cultivation. The second reason is that the current threshold of film broadcasting and viewing has been lowered, and audiences can watch excellent films from home and abroad in a larger and more convenient way. This has stimulated the desire of film lovers to create, and thus devote themselves to more creative works.

### 4. Conclusion

With the continuous development of economy, Tibetan films are facing the great impact of new ideas. It can be seen that Tibetan directors represented by Pema Tseden, Songtaiga, and Lahuagar are shunning the ideological discourse community and shaping a more pure image of Tibetan culture and

religion by virtue of the subjectivity of their own Tibetan identity. Due to the limitation of space, more Tibetan directors are not covered in this paper.

The turn in the narrative expression of Tibetan cinema not only makes cinema a medium for Tibetans to express themselves and realize their lives, but also allows audiences of other ethnic groups to truly understand Tibetan culture, which has a profound impact on the dissemination of contemporary Tibetan culture.

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