

Spatial Research on Tibetan Film Images

--Taking the Works of Local Tibetan Directors in China Since the New Century as an Example

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Abstract: Tibetan films, as a branch of Chinese national cinema, have produced many excellent works in recent years with the focus of film creators, and have made remarkable achievements in terms of filming techniques, artistic style, aesthetic value and film language, presenting a thriving scene in creation and dissemination. This paper explains the establishment of the external image space of Tibetan films since the new century, the construction of the internal spiritual space of Tibetan films, and the aesthetic presentation of the image space of the “Tibetan New Wave”, analyses and summarizes the ethnic and cultural attributes of Tibetan-themed film creations in a specific geographic region as exemplified by director Pema Tsenden, and enriches research on the image space of Tibetan themes. The analysis summarize the national cultural attributes of Tibetan-themed film creation in a specific geographical area, enriching the study of Tibetan-themed images.

Keywords: Chinese Tibetan cinema, new wave of Tibetan cinema, image space, Chinese minority film themes

1. Introduction

In the long history of Chinese cinema, ethnic minority films have always shone among them. Since the beginning of the new century, with young Tibetan directors such as Pema Tsenden, Sonthar Gyal, and Lhapal Gyal starting to make independent feature films, there have been a number of Tibetan-themed films such as “The Silent Holy Stones”, “Tharlo”, “Ala Changso”, “Soul searching” and “Balloon”, which set off a new wave of Tibetan-language film creation. Looking back at the history of Tibetan cinema, it is easy to see that the current “New Wave of Tibetan Cinema” has made innovations and creations in the establishment of external geographic space, the construction of the spiritual world, and the aesthetics of image space. The emergence of these films showing the life and spiritual beliefs of the Tibetan people has on the one hand enriched the creative system of Chinese-language cinema, and on the other hand, provided scholars with more models different from the previous ones for the study of Chinese ethnic minority cinema.

Tibetan-themed films appeared before the founding of New China, “In 1935, Mysterious Tibet and Envoy Huang was ordered to enter Tibet to pay homage to the Dalai Lama by the Yue Ming Film Company are the earliest Tibetan-themed documentaries produced by the country in historical records

[1].” Until the beginning of the new century, films focusing on local Tibetan themes showed a rich and varied overall development trend, and a new chapter of Tibetan-themed films was opened. 2005, Pema Tseden from Qinghai Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture made a splash with his self-written and self-directed feature film “The Silent Holy Stones”, which won awards at several national and international film festivals, and Pema Tseden and Tibetan films were thus attracting attention from the academic community. As a result, “Tibetan New Wave Cinema” emerged.

The local Tibetan directors in the “New Wave of Tibet” started from the first perspective of the local “I”, put aside their imagination of the grandiose landscape of the Tibetan region, and took real life as the basis to look inward at the culture of the Tibetan region from their own true experience, creating a natural flow of the history of Tibetan life. The film creates a natural flow of Tibetan life history. At the same time, they have made extraordinary achievements in terms of filming techniques, artistic style, aesthetic value and film language, adding many colourful landscapes to Chinese film creation. However, there is less literature on the aesthetic study of Tibetan-themed films, the focus of specific directors and specific films, and there is no adequate and systematic analysis and interpretation of the study of the image space of Tibetan films. In this paper, we analyse and analyse the creation of films by local Tibetan directors, mainly Pema Tseden, in the “New Wave of Tibetan Cinema”, and summarise the structure and presentation of the image space of Tibetan films in a specific geographic area in terms of its exterior, interior and aesthetics.

2. The Establishment of the External Space of the “Tibetan New Wave” Images

“The space of image, in film, refers to the intermediary medium of space, which plays a role in perfecting the characters’ image and advancing the development of the plot in a certain space [2].” Among them, geographic space relies on the unique regional cultures of different regions to display its unique charms, and the display of regional environment and culture plays an important role in the expression of images. In the “Tibetan New Wave” video works represented by Pema Tseden’s works, the countryside and highway have become an indispensable part of the film’s narrative process to establish the geographical space outside.

2.1. Rural Spatial Narratives

Unlike past Tibetan-themed films, local Tibetan directors in the new century have made more comprehensive and intuitive changes in their choice of narrative space. In the new Tibetan films, directors such as Pema Tseden, Sonthar Gyal, and Lhapal Gyal have coincidentally skipped the narrative of Tibetan cities and towns, and instead settled their entire narrative space in the countryside. Pema Tseden’s works “The Silent Holy Stones”, “Soul searching”, “Old Dog”, “Tharlo”, “The Sacred Arrow”, “Balloon” and other films focus on rural life, Sonthar Gyal’s work “River”, and Lhapal Gyal’s “Wangdark’s Rain Boots” similarly place the eye of observation in the Tibetan farming areas.

Lhasa, as a holy place of faith in Tibetan culture and the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region, has frequently appeared in Tibetan films directed by non-Tibetan directors in the past with its unique and exotic intuition. On the contrary, it has rarely appeared in the works of local Tibetan directors. In Pema Tseden’s work “The Silent Holy Stones”, the event of the young lama’s master preparing for a pilgrimage to Lhasa at the beginning of the year has been mentioned many times in the film, but Pema Tseden does not present Lhasa specifically in his images, but treats this holy place as a spiritual symbol in the hearts of the Tibetans, which in turn links up a series of themes such as the characters’ thoughts about faith, life and death, and redemption in the film. In “Tharlo”, Yangtso, the symbol of the new world, also promises Tharlo to go to Lhasa, the capital city, and when Yangtso escapes with the money from the sale of Tharlo’s goats, Lhasa, the holy land, also becomes a phantom that is hard to reach in Tharlo’s heart. Sonthar Gyal’s film “Sun Beaten Path” tells the story of a young Tibetan

man's journey of self-redemption and repentance. The protagonist, Nyima, accidentally crushes his mother to death in a traffic accident, and since then he is burdened with infinite grief and remorse. Afterwards, Nyima chooses to hold up a handful of soil with his mother's blood stains, and starts a pilgrimage of kowtowing to Lhasa by himself. In this film, Sonthar Gyal chooses to place the main narrative time and space on Nyima's journey to and from Lhasa, and in the "going back and forth", the spatial symbol of the holy land of Lhasa is absent from the image, leaving behind the main character, Nyima's endless devotion to Lhasa. In another film by Sonthar Gyal, "Ala Changso", the terminally ill Omar insisted on going to Lhasa to make a pilgrimage, and her husband and son insisted on completing the pilgrimage for her after she fell ill halfway. The film is finally set outside the city of Lhasa, Sonthar Gyal does not render the hard road of pilgrimage, does not focus on the holiness of Lhasa, the city of souls, but focuses on the individual pilgrims' emotions and destinies on a secular level, and frames the Tibetan people's reflections on life and death, love and morality, and responsibility and kinship in the midst of the ups and downs of the film. It can be seen that the "Lhasa" that appears in the images of the "Tibetan New Wave" seems to be a holy and inaccessible faraway place in the hearts of Tibetans.

In recent years, the creation of new Tibetan cinema has become more orientated towards realist narratives of the Tibetan countryside, as can be seen in the narratives of local Tibetan rural cinema. The rural space cinema that emerged in the "Tibetan New Wave" is more like a pure and simple stage. On top of that, humans and animals, families and villages are all connected in a very sincere relationship, and this extremely simple narrative of the rural space simplifies and purifies the relationships and motives of the characters in the images as much as possible, so as to highlight the director's narrative theme.

2.2. Spatial Narratives of Roads

In addition to the countryside, the space of the road also has multiple meanings in the video creations of young Tibetan directors. The construction of this space not only contains the Tibetan people's expectation of access to the outside world, but also opens up the inner exploration of the Tibetan people in various ways. "As a conventional genre film, the road film generally needs to follow the logical integrity and fluidity of the film narrative, as well as the relative unity of image time and space [3]." However, in Pema Tsenden's works, he often uses the narrative structure of the road film and the special geographical space of the road to tell fables of an absurd nature.

In "Jinpa", the film uses a two-minute fixed long shot of the main character, Kimba, driving his truck along a winding road, presenting a hazy and grainy sandy yellow tone in the motionless shot, adding a dreamlike unreality to the film's realist tone, and ultimately pointing to Kimba's dream world. In the dream, Kimba likes to chase the sun, but always wears sunglasses and refuses to take them off, and in a moment of trance, he brakes suddenly and crushes a goat in a blunder. This is a contradictory and amusing set-up that is neither accurate nor common sense. The highland road where Jinpa is located is sparsely populated, and the sudden appearance of a sheep underneath the car deepens the film's anti-genre and absurd narrative style. At the same time, for the other killer Jinpa who appears in the story in addition to the driver Jinpa, Pema Tsenden chooses a dichotomous symmetrical composition, the traditional Kham Tibetan driver Jinpa wears a leather jacket and sunglasses sitting on the right side of the screen, while the modern role of the avenger Jinpa is wearing a traditional dress on the left side, the two of them in the design of the film as a mirror image of each other's references, whether they are choosing to be good or choosing to go on a journey of materialistic desires in the mundane sense, this is a contradiction and entanglement between the traditional Tibetans and modern Tibetans. Whether to choose the good or the secular journey of materialism, this is the contradiction and entanglement between the traditional Tibetans and the modern Tibetans, and it is also the inevitable impact of the development of modernity on the Tibetan

culture. Looking for “Soul searching” also opens on a highway, with the director getting into a car and starting the journey of “looking” as the beginning of the story. In the highway space of the film, the camera focuses on the space inside the car for a while, while at the same time displaying the landscape along the highway from the first point of view, accompanied by the conversations of a few people inside the car and the countryside scenery speeding by. The film jumps back and forth in a limited and open space, constructing a multicultural juxtaposition of image space on the highway. In these films, the special geographic space of the highway invariably breaks the assumed reality and unity of time and space narratives in genre cinema, and opens up a more open-ended space of meaning for cinema creation under the “New Wave of Tibetan Cinema”.

3. The Construction of Spiritual Space in “Tibetan New Wave” Images

3.1. A Calm and Open Mind about Life and Death

“According to Buddhism, all living individuals, based on their own karma, flow through the six paths of heaven, asura, human beings, animals, hungry ghosts, and geographic regions as if they were wheels in the cycle of birth and death [4].” “The qualities of the Buddha’s teachings are expressed in the wisdom to understand the oneness of birth and death and to liberate oneself from the suffering of the cycle of rebirth, and even more so in the sadness of wishing for sentient beings to be free from suffering and not to seek peace and happiness for oneself [5].” Influenced by traditional Tibetan Buddhist teachings, ordinary Tibetans living in traditional Tibetan areas pay great attention to the afterlife of human beings in their concept of life and death. They believe that animals are as psychic as human beings, and that if they do not accumulate virtues and do good deeds while living in the world, they will be reincarnated as animals after they pass away. For this reason, Tibetans live a simple and kind life, hoping that they can exchange this way for a good reincarnation in the next life. It is also under the influence of this concept of reincarnation that the Tibetans have a very clear idea about death. They believe that death is not the end of life, but rather the beginning of the next cycle, and that life continues in this cycle of reincarnation. For this reason, the theme of death is usually discussed calmly and openly in the works of local Tibetan directors such as Pema Tsenden and Sonthar Gyal.

“The Silent Holy Stones” of Mani, the young lama’s grandfather is a very religious old man, and his attitude towards the impermanence of life is evident throughout the film. When the little lama returns home, he finds that his grandfather is always repeating the phrase “he doesn’t have much time left”. When the family stops him from saying this, the old man responds to the family by saying “it’s only natural”, which shows the old man’s understanding of the impermanence of life and death. When the old man was with the little lama and the animals, Grandpa taught the lama that “these animals are just like human beings, only that they have different karmas in their past lives.” Although the old man’s everyday words are simple, they are permeated with the Tibetan Buddhist concept of life and death. The old man who carved the lama stone, Sopa, insisted on carving the lama stone all his life. However, when the young lama came home the day before, Sopa promised to carve a piece of the Six Character Truth for him, and on the next day, when the young lama returned to the temple, he learnt that the old man had passed away peacefully in the night. Life is so impermanent, pious Tibetans sincerely adhere to the belief that the souls of those who do good deeds will be reborn in the heavenly realm.

Unlike Pema Tsenden’s preference for death as the end, death in Sonthar Gyal’s works often serves as the beginning, and Sonthar Gyal’s intuitive interpretation of death pervades both “Sun Beaten Path” and “Ala Changso”. In “Sun Beaten Path” the protagonist Nima, unable to forgive himself for unintentionally crushing his mother to death, wants to atone for his sin by ending his own life, but is stopped by his brother from embarking on a pilgrimage of self-redemption. The impermanence of life

leads him to meet a similarly lost old man, who believes that Nima has already atoned for his mother's sins by making a long pilgrimage to the holy land, and even speaks the motto of "the dead are dead, the living are like this". Death occurs twice in "Ala Changso", the first time when Roma's ex-husband dies of illness, and the second time when Roma passes away on the pilgrimage. Through Roma's death, the gap between her current husband, Rorkee, and Roma's son, Norgo, who was born to Rorkee's ex-husband, is dissolved. An originally unrelated family re-establishes their emotional ties during the pilgrimage, and because of Omar's death, the two, who were originally estranged from each other, become companions in each other's lives. Following the vein of daily life, director Sonthar Gyal depicts the simple and pure vitality of the Tibetan land with warm and realistic strokes.

3.2. Constructing Universal Values Beyond Ethnicity

In recent years, with the video creation and interpretation of local Tibetan directors, and the continuous development and opening up of the perspective of modern civilisation, the narrative strategy of spectacle can no longer be the only way to configure the cultural landscape of ethnic minorities. The narrative strategy of spectacle can no longer be the only way to configure the cultural landscape of ethnic minorities. Like the Han Chinese, the ethnic minorities living on the vast land of China have gradually got rid of the status of objects to be curiously peeped at, and at the same time, more and more ethnic artists have begun to explore the richness of human nature in the reality of each ethnic group in their promotions without discrimination. In the films focusing on Tibetan life, if constructing the image of ethnic minorities from the inside out is their first aim, then exploring the broader reality of human beings from the perspective of the way of life of their own compatriots is the ultimate topic of Tibetan directors' thinking and expression. "To a certain extent, all the expressions of ethnic symbols in films are only releasing their meaning at the level of expression, but behind them, they are often more obsessed with touching and understanding human emotions as a whole [6]."

In Sonthar Gyal's video work "Sun Beaten Path", the protagonist Nyima goes on a pilgrimage with a guilty conscience, but contrary to common sense, the key action of "kowtowing the equidistant head" does not appear in the film, and even "the pilgrimage path", which has been a favourite theme of Tibetan films, does not appear in the film at all. Even the "pilgrimage road", which has been a favourite feature of Tibetan films in the past, does not appear in the film at all. To a certain extent, this unconventional avoidance can be seen as director Sonthar Gyal's intentional weakening of the performance of the specific Tibetan way of salvation through "kowtowing to the pilgrimage to Lhasa", as this way of obtaining spiritual salvation does not have a universal value. The film begins with Nyima's return journey to Lhasa, where he meets an old man who becomes a key figure in unravelling the knot in his heart. The old man is wise and open-minded, and the two of them smoke, talk, eat, make milk tea, and interact with each other in different spatial locations, such as on the highway, in hotels, and at the station, in the vast Gobi Desert. Nima also gradually gains the courage to face himself again in the deep conversation with the old man, wandering forward in the constant bashful but philosophical discourse, and ultimately obtaining his own spiritual redemption. "According to us, life is impermanent, but no matter how impermanent it is, we will continue to live, we will be born, we will grow up, we will fall in love, we will get married, we will have children, and then we will die. Death is bound to come, and although that's a bit pessimistic, I think that's enough." The old man's plain attitude towards life and death as normal as sunrise and sunset is also the Tibetan view of life that director Matsutaiga wants to convey to the off-screen audience, which not only redeems Nyima and expresses the value of a specific Tibetan ideology, but also opens up countless viewers to the obsession of life in a universal sense.

As part of director Sonthar Gyal's "Family Trilogy", "The River" tells the story of a family of three generations who are emotionally disconnected from each other. Through the hidden trauma of

a young girl, Yangjin Ram, who is not noticed by her elders, the film tells the story of three generations of a Tibetan family who love each other deeply, but are blocked by a lack of communication and expression. The film ends unnoticed as each person grows and changes with life, and each person achieves self-relief and redemption in the quiet flow of time. This is the philosophy of life that director Sonthar Gyal presents to the audience from another angle: the pains of life and the cracks in family relationships are inevitably left to time, and will be healed by life.

“Ala Changso” puts its focus on a restructured family, telling the story of a young mother, Roma, who is ill, and her husband and son, who accompany her on a journey to Lhasa to fulfil her ex-husband’s last wish. Throughout the story, the current husband, Rorkee, and Roma’s son, Norgo, continue to dissolve their differences through the companionship of each other during the pilgrimage, and ultimately come to accept each other as family members. The whole film is about pilgrimage, but it is not written for “pilgrimage” which is a specific way of salvation for Tibetans. What really makes Rorkee and Norgo, a pair of father and son who are not related by blood, reconcile with each other is not the religious significance of pilgrimage, but the understanding and love that arise from their companionship in the journey they shared together after the death of Roma. and love. They try to let go of the past and accept each other, and in this process of letting go, they build a genuine father-son relationship. “Learning to let go” is another central theme that director Sonthar Gyalconveys to the world. The pilgrimage may not be a simple road, but the path of every sincere pilgrim’s heart.

The “Family Trilogy” directed by Sonthar Gyal breaks away from the stereotypical regional labels of previous Tibetan-themed video works by broadly constructing the basic emotions of human nature and the values shared by the human community, and delicately tells a universal and warm story based on the common emotions, values, and beliefs of all human beings. These Tibetan films do not focus on the differences of national identity, but always focus on the thinking of “human beings” themselves, “transcending national boundaries, possessing the connotation of universal values, and presenting the care of the community of human destiny [7].” In an interview with Du Qingsong, the producer of “Ala Changso”, Sonthar Gyal once said, “I’m only interested in people, regardless of whether they are Tibetan or any other ethnicity”. It can be seen that, in addition to displaying the unique ethnic perspective and cultural experience of Tibetan life based on their own internal perspective, local Tibetan film directors also aim to build a broader and more diversified human spiritual civilisation. “The construction and expression of the universal meaning of Tibetan cinema breaks through the limitations of time, space and geography, and has the significance and value of referring to the community of human destiny [8].”

4. The Aesthetics of Tibetan New Wave’s Video Space

4.1. Plain and Simple Camera Language

Since the birth of cinema, films have been able to bring a sense of real life to the audience by restoring the reality of images. Over the past hundred years, countless directors at home and abroad have been deeply influenced by the long shot theory of the Lumière Brothers, Italian neorealism and André Bazin, the father of the French New Wave, and have restored the ordinary daily life of the little people in their lives through real images. Similarly, in the “Tibetan New Wave”, most of the local Tibetan directors’ video creations are written and expressed in life-like, documentary-style images, discovering the realities of Tibetan life in the gentle and simple language of the camera.

Long shots, wide-angle shots, and fixed lenses are central to the Tibetan director’s approach to video expression, and André Bazin, the father of the New Wave of French cinema, once mentioned in his book “What is the Cinema?” mentioned, “The emergence of cinema has perfected the objectivity of photography in terms of time [9].” In order to reproduce the life of monks to a greater extent in Pema Tseden’s film, almost the whole film is composed of long shots, fixed shots and

panoramic shots, presenting the real life of the small lamas in the temple in a calm and quiet image atmosphere. In the clip where the little lama cleans the house for the little living Buddha, the little lama finishes wiping the kettle, discovers the TV with surprise, and talks with the teacher in one go, and the fixed camera acts as a “bystander” to objectively record the little lama’s novelty of the TV, which is a very modern novelty. The fixed camera acts as a “bystander” to objectively record the young lama’s sense of novelty towards “television”, a very modern novelty. In the clip of the little lama seeing off his father and returning to the temple to participate in the praying ceremony, the fixed wide-angle panoramic shots of the little lama running back and forth, in the vast yellow winter Tibetan land, quietly tell the conflict and contradiction between modern civilisation and traditional civilisation in the heart of the little lama. “Soul searching”, Pema Tseden also uses a large number of long shots with a documentary nature, the film consists of a total of 102 long shots, in which the audience explores the roads, villages, villagers’ houses, and schools of the Tibetan area together with the images in the real shaky camera, searching for the lost “Jigme Gauteng” together. In the opening long shot, the director and his team come to the village of Nimu to ask the Tibetans questions. A simple panoramic shot contains conversations and discussions, as well as a wealth of information about the houses and landscapes of the Tibetan villages, thus preserving the integrity of time and space in the image.

4.2. Local Actors and the Use of Tibetan Dialogue

Like the two famous film movements in the history of cinema, Italian Neo-Realism and French New Wave, another major documentary feature of the “New Wave of Tibetan Cinema” is the use of non-professional actors in the film. The little lama, the scribe, the monks, and even the lama’s family member, Sopa, who is the lone carver of the Manganese stone in “The Silent Holy Stones” are all original, vegetarian actors, and the activities of the monks rubbing lamps, chanting sutras, and the Tibetans eating and watching plays in the movie are all the same things that the characters would have been doing in their real life time. Pema Tseden and these primitive and simple Tibetan actors use the most familiar things in the life of the Tibetan area to tell the audience about a de-mystified and de-symbolised Tibet. The main character Nyima in “Sun Beaten Path” is also played by Yixilan Zhou, a “natural actor” that director Sonthar Gyal inadvertently found when he was looking for actors. Yixilan Zhou’s pure Ando Tibetan language and the influence of his long life in no-man’s-land on him give him a natural and unadorned temperament, which endows Nyima with a complex but real and vibrant temperament. The character of Nyima is complex and real. The little girl who plays the role of Yangjin Ram in “The River” is also an ordinary Tibetan girl that director Sonthar Gyal accidentally discovered in his life. The aura of Yangjin directly inspired Sonthar Gyal to create a tailor-made film for her, which records the emotional entanglements between three generations of an ordinary Tibetan herder’s family, and thus “The River” was created.

The Tibetan language is an important branch of Tibetan culture, and the use of simultaneous Tibetan voice recordings in image creation also largely adds to and strengthens the external sense of reality and space of the new Tibetan film. “Although the early “Yixi Zhuoma” directed by Xie Fei already used Tibetan dialogue in its dialogue, the Mandarin dubbed version was still chosen for its eventual public release, making the film much less authentic in terms of restoring life in Tibetan areas.” However, since Pema Tseden started, all the local Tibetan directors after him have used “original” Tibetan dialogue, which has restored the real state of life of Tibetans in an original way. The use of original Tibetan simultaneous sound makes the actors’ performances more spontaneous and natural, and also creates a sense of reality for the entire narrative space, enhancing the overall documentary nature. Whether it’s the use of long shots, wide-angle lenses, non-professional actors and Tibetan dialogue, “the Tibetan local director has completed the director’s outward interpretation

of his own culture from an “inward perspective” by adopting a self-contained cultural stance on top of these external techniques [10].”

5. Conclusion

Looking at the creations of Chinese Tibetan directors under the “New Wave of Tibetan Cinema” in the new century, Pema Tsenden, Sonthar Gyal and other local Tibetan directors have made innovations in traditional Tibetan-themed films, breaking away from the mysterious veneer of Tibetan customs woven by other ethnic groups or Western directors in the past, and documenting the individual emotions and changes in the lives of ordinary people in the Tibetan region. In the unique narrative of rural space, it links up a pure and simple Tibetan individual and family, and shows the open-minded and universal meaning of life in the calm and soothing documentary images. After more than ten years of development, New Tibetan Cinema has gradually formed its own unique film and television style and cultural characteristics, and has played an important role in spreading Chinese Tibetan culture. At the same time, the rise of the “New Wave of Tibetan Cinema” has highlighted the cultural self-confidence of China’s ethnic minority films and their growing influence in international cultural communication. It is believed that in the near future, this snowy pearl of Chinese cinema will unleash a brilliant lustre.

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