NATION, ETHNICITY, AND CULTURAL STRATEGIES
THREE WAVES OF ETHNIC REPRESENTATION IN POST-1949 CHINA

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation examines three waves of ethnic minority representation in post-1949 China. Reading ethnic representation as a discursive site where historical imperatives and utopian visions converge and collide, this study explicates how the modern Chinese national identity has been constructed and reconstructed through the imagining and staging of a putative rejuvenating internal other. During three historical periods in particular, ethnic minority images were appropriated extensively by intellectuals and artists as remedial forces to alleviate national identity anxiety: the 17-year-period (1949-1966), the post-Mao decade (1979-1989), and the contemporary decade (late 1990s to 2008). In each of the three waves, this study demonstrates, the image of ethnic minorities functioned as a sign of alterity and adopted different meanings and connotations – ranging from national unity, exotic romanticism, traditional harmony, tenacity, and strength to eco-wisdom – in response to the changing content of the national identity anxiety.
Contesting various binary power models (majority/minority, state/people, repression/resistance) dominant in existing studies of ethnic representation of the PRC, this dissertation argues, through textual and contextual readings of selected cinematic, art, and literary texts, that the production of ethnic representation is a fluid and historically contingent process of identity enunciation carried out by varied intellectuals and artists, who engaged in a variety of relations with the state and the general public. Whereas this process did produce a plethora of essentialist perceptions of ethnic minorities in China, and such perceptions often fed into further intellectual and aesthetic fascination with the image of the internal other, national identity construction – rather than ethnic differentiation – was at the root of the three waves of ethnic representation. Employing an interdisciplinary approach that integrates political and intellectual history into synchronic cultural and textual analyses, this study demonstrates how the Chinese imaginary of the internal other has been contingent upon the nation’s struggle to position and “produce” itself in relation to a superior external world. In this sense, ethnic representation in China has been and continues to be performative enunciation of a modern national identity that negotiates between reconceptualizations of internal and global relationships.
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Introduction

Becoming Chinese, Being Subaltern: Minzu vs. the World

Even though 2008 has not yet come to an end, we can conclude with some confidence that the year will remain in the memory of many Chinese as a significant one. The 29th Olympics, held in Beijing in August 2008, was seen by many as a site where the nation demonstrated its newly gained prosperity and power to the outside world, and it was done with nothing short of grandeur. Shadows, however, also loomed over this brilliant pageant that many Chinese considered to be a long-overdue redemption of the nation’s humiliating modern history. Shortly after the opening ceremony shocked the world with its awe-inspiring spectacle, reports of fakery appeared in the world media. First it was the digitally constructed firework footage. Then came the story about the lip-synching child singer. Finally, the fifty-six children carrying the national flag into the stadium, representing China’s fifty-six ethnic groups, were revealed to be all of Han ethnicity.

A few months before the opening ceremony there was another accusation of fakery in the media commotion around the Olympics, but that accusation was from the other side of the media battle. On March 14th, ethnic Tibetans in Lhasa erupted in violent protest against Chinese rule in Tibet. The Chinese government, while sending military forces into Tibet to halt the violence, expelled all foreigners from the region. Without any reliable source of information, major western media responded to the event with almost uniform criticism of the Chinese government’s bloody suppression of Tibetans’ spontaneous and peaceful independence requests. This, many argued, proved the Chinese government’s failure to carry out its promise to improve its human rights record made
during its Olympics bid. Later, it was revealed on the Internet by some overseas Chinese that many pictures purportedly depicting conflicts between Tibetans and Chinese in western media coverage were actually taken in Nepal and India, with Nepalese and Indian police misrepresented as Chinese military forces. Other signs of manipulation, such as picture editing and data fabrication were also noted. Blogs and websites were set up by Chinese netizens to belie what they believed to be the western media’s collective scheme to create the image of a peace-loving and suppressed Tibet vis-à-vis a violent and repressive China.¹ Meanwhile, the global Olympic torch relay in London, Paris, and other major western cities met with protests and interferences from political activists concerned with several China-related political issues, including its rule in Tibet. When covering the torch relay events, the western media were mostly focused on the protests, giving little if any attention to the huge crowds of China-supporters at relay sites. This bias was also widely criticized by Chinese netizens in blogs and websites.

These two instances of indignation against fakery, both related to China’s ethnic minorities, are highly charged political responses. In both cases, truth or veracity by itself is immaterial unless it is scrutinized together with the political baggage carried by respective agents. The western media was interested in issues of fakery in the opening ceremony, not because of loyalty to truth in a media extravaganza,² but because, at least to a certain extent, such incidents of fakery fed into an established narrative about China’s authoritarian regime. The fact that Han Chinese children were used to represent

¹ See “The Truth of Tibet” and Anti-CNN.com for examples of accusations of the western media’s bias against China. See Kennedy and “Chinese Netizens” for examples of commentaries on the Chinese netizens’ campaign against the western media.
² One only needs to look at the scarcity of media attention given to NBC’s conspicuous manipulation in its broadcast of the opening ceremony and other programs of the Beijing Olympics for an example of selective indifference to universal “authenticity” in media broadcasting.
ethnic minorities, in addition to providing evidence of the regime’s questionable moral character, was also seen to be suggestive of the state’s poor treatment of its ethnic minority groups. An article on the incident of “fake” ethnic children in *Wall Street Journal* was quick in making the connection. After stating the basic information about the incident and relating it to the two previous incidents of fakery in the opening ceremony, the article shifted to China’s ethnic minorities and writes, “many live on the margins of the mainstream, poorer and less-educated than their Han countrymen” (“Children in Ethnic Costume”). After this statement the article pointed out that this performance might remind Americans of the fake American Indians at sports events in the USA, a controversial practice now mostly discarded.

The article also mentioned that neither Han nor minorities in China seemed to find a problem with the “inauthenticity” of the performers, as such practice had been common in national events and the Chinese viewed it as “a way to preserve cultural diversity.” It quoted a Tibetan from Lhasa as saying that he was happy to find a child wearing Tibetan clothes in the opening ceremony and was not bothered by the fact that this child was not actually Tibetan. What the article did not and could not spell out is the significance of the image of ethnic minorities at such a national moment to both Han and ethnic minority Chinese, who have been, in one way or another, affected by certain established modes of representing ethnic minorities in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In the history of ethnic representation in the PRC, at least in the sphere of cultural production, symbolic rather than actual presence of ethnic minorities has been and still is a politically sensitive issue. We should not assume, based on a single example given in the *Wall Street Journal* article, that no one from China’s ethnic minority population
found the scene problematic, but if anyone did, it was probably not because of the
performers’ “inauthenticity,” but the political message embedded in the scene: a nation of
unity out of ethnic diversity.

The political importance of ethnic representation was revealed to me in a poignant
way a few years ago, when I was speaking with a veteran dancer of Miao ethnicity, who
used to be a member of Zhongyang minzu gewu tuan [Central Nationalities Song and
Dance Troupe], an official institution established shortly after the founding of the PRC to
raise national awareness of ethnic minorities. Very proudly he told me that he was trained
to perform dances that belong to many different ethnic traditions, not limiting himself to
his own Miao repertoire. When I voiced concerns about the “authenticity” of such
practice he laughed at my political naiveté and explained to me that as a member of the
zhongyang [central or national] performance troupe he needed to be more versatile than
performers at provincial or local levels. Whereas it was fine for a performance troupe
from a Miao region to perform only Miao dances, it would be a political blunder for a
central performance troupe to focus heavily on one or two ethnic groups. His
performance troupe went to different places in the country to show the Chinese people
the nation’s different cultures. “Now,” he threw a rhetorical question back at me, “do you
expect our troupe to have singers and dancers from all 56 ethnic groups that only perform
their own ethnic songs and dances?”

His question jolted me to the realization of the political significance of ethnic
representation in China. Judging it with a western liberal perspective might be missing
the point entirely. It also reminded me of the possibility of “museumification” or non-
representation of ethnic minorities on the national stage, had “authenticity” or liberal
political correctness been the ultimate determinant in cultural production. As cultural signs that have been circulating widely and appropriated for various purposes at different historical moments, ethnic minorities hold a much more significant place in modern China’s self-image than what one would expect from their relatively small population and peripheral geographic locations. The national image rendered by the scene of ethnic children carrying the national flag at the Olympics opening ceremony – indicating unity out of diversity – is one that is expected and more or less accepted by most of the Han Chinese and ethnic minorities audience, after a half-century-long discursive practice that links ethnic minorities with national unity. Failure to deliver this image at such an important national moment would have caused a bigger stir – among both the Han and non-Han audience – than inauthenticity in performer choices.

On the other side of the ethnicity-related media battle, the Chinese netizens were indignant at the western media’s coverage of the Tibet unrest and the Olympics torch relay not simply because the media failed to adhere to truth. After all – and this was quickly pointed out by many non-Chinese reporters and commentators – many of these protesters grew up in a country where the press had been strictly controlled by the state. They were no strangers to media manipulation. The anger expressed by many Chinese, as one can see on the numerous anti-zangdu (Tibet independence) and anti-western media web posts, YouTube videos, blogs, and newly founded designated websites, was fueled by an assumption of the West’s overall hostility toward China as a nation. In other words, it was assumed that the major western media’s support for the Tibet independence movement and their less than fair coverage of the Tibet unrest and the global Olympic

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3 China’s 2000 census shows the population of the 55 minority groups to be over 106 million and 8.41 percent of the country’s total population (National Bureau of Statistics of China 43).
torch relay were motivated by a collective unwillingness to see China’s unity and rise to a
global power. What was clearly at work in the explosion of popular Chinese nationalism
following the Tibet unrest is what Peter Hays Gries calls a new “victim narrative,” which
has been dominant in the Chinese public, according to Gries, since the mid 1990s
(China’s New Nationalism 254).

When Gries mentions the “victim narrative” in his discussion of China’s current
popular nationalism, it is presented as a new rhetoric that replaced the Maoist “victor
narrative” that was dominant in the PRC’s first thirty years (254). Looked at historically,
this transition might not be as drastic as it seems at first. Both “victim narrative” and
“victor narrative” in this discussion stem from a worldview characterized by relationships
of competition and conflicts between nation-states. This worldview, a modern spatialized
power imaginary that maps the world in terms of victors and losers and differentiates
between the advanced and the backward, began to preoccupy the minds of Chinese
intellectuals at the same time that the Chinese modern national awareness was born, and
replaced a former sino-centric universalist worldview.4 Due to China’s humiliating early
modern history, this modern global spatial imaginary inevitably placed China at a weaker
end in opposition to the developed West, and this humble self-positioning has had a
significant role in the development of the Chinese national identity ever since. Even
during the period when the Maoist “victor narrative” was dominant (and this narrative
has certainly not disappeared entirely from China’s collective consciousness), it was a
victory over past repression from imperialism, i.e., a victory over victimization. In other
words, this victory was the triumph of an underdog – the victory of a repressed third-
world country rather than the dominance of a nation stronger than all others. Chinese

4 See chapter 1.
netizen’s impassioned response to the western media’s criticism of China needs to be understood in the light of this modern spatial imaginary.

Both involving China’s ethnic minorities and issues of representation, the two media incidents discussed above bring to our attention two things about contemporary China in general, and the symbolic role of ethnic minorities in particular. First, there is a perceived connection between the image of ethnic minority groups and the idea of national unity. The display of ethnic minority groups with their pronounced otherness – contrasted with the majority Han Chinese – has become a routine practice used to declare national unity rather than internal discordance. Seen as the internal other of the modern Chinese nation, the ethnic minority groups are symbolically important as an effective cohesive for the nation, precisely because of their difference. This concept of unity out of diversity is deeply engrained in the modern Chinese national awareness, so much so that any time it is questioned it would cause an explosion of collective indignation. Second, a collective anxiety over China’s national image is an intrinsic element of modern Chinese identity as well as China’s international imagination. Containing both questions of “who we are” and “how we are seen,” this national anxiety reveals the symbiotic development of the national identity and modern China’s geopolitical spatial imaginary, one that thinks of China as a nation-state among many. Because of these two separate but related threads – unity out of diversity and anxiety over national image – in modern Chinese identity, when the western media attacks China on an issue like Tibet, the threat is perceived to be double fold. Not only is China’s unity severely threatened by the suggestion of an ethnic group’s independence, the national image is also smeared by the accusation of the nation being a colonizer and suppressor.
These two fairly obvious observations have important implications for re-examining ethnic representation in the PRC, as I will show in the following pages. What unfolds in this dissertation is a brief account of ethnic minority representation in the PRC, narrated in the light of my understanding of the “subalternity” of the modern Chinese identity. China’s fifty-five officially recognized ethnic minority groups, constituting a little less than one tenth of the country’s total population and scattering over large stretches of its peripheral rural regions and a few inner city enclaves, have occupied an important position in the cultural life of the PRC. This dissertation is about their representation in films, books, paintings, and other cultural products that have made distinct marks in Chinese cultural life and have hence left traces in the development of the modern Chinese identity. I refrain from calling this identity “majority Han identity,” because such demarcation would put an essentializing label on a continuously changing and fluid identity that cannot be bounded on ethnic lines. Even though ethnicity did figure strongly in some of China’s foundational identity narratives, the modern Chinese identity has inherited in part the universalist aspect of China’s pre-modern collective consciousness, as my discussion will show later, and therefore should be understood as supra-ethnic.

In particular, three historical periods – the 17-year-period\(^5\) (1949-1966), the post-Mao decade (1980-1989) and the contemporary decade (late 1990s to now) – will be the temporal pockets from which my major texts come from, as I consider these historical periods the heights of ethnic minority representation in PRC history. I call them the three waves of ethnic representation in post-1949 China. Each of the three waves of ethnic

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\(^5\) The 17-year-period is a term frequently used in discussions of Chinese art and culture, referring to the period between 1949, when the PRC was founded and 1966, when the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution began.
representation occurred at a historical moment when, due to significant political and economic changes inside and outside the nation, the anxiety over the national image became heightened. In addressing such anxiety, different agents, ranging from the state and the intellectual elite, to common people, turned to China’s ethnic minorities, among other things, for material and inspiration to construct a distinct national identity. In other words, minority cultural production, at different moments of China’s modern history, helped to symbolically assuage collective national anxiety. In this way, the two major meanings of the word minzu in Chinese – nation and ethnicity – converge in a history of “ethnic” national identification. The history of ethnic representation is therefore a history of repeated rebirth of modern China – a history of becoming Chinese.

In this introduction, I will first elaborate on my definition of subalternity in the modern Chinese identity. China’s subaltern national identity has been both a restraint and a potent force in the history of cultural production in modern China. Other than giving a national epistemic framework to the production and consumption of cultural products, this subaltern national identity, or anxiety over the national image, has led to recurrent intellectual and popular efforts to examine and re-define the national identity in the modern period. I will then move on to explain how ethnic minorities have been appropriated in these efforts and have become versatile and “safe” materials for re-defining the Chinese identity. Over the course of this history, some connotations, such as national unity and primitiveness, remained with the image of ethnic minorities, but other new connotations were invented with each new wave of ethnic representation as antidote, so to speak, to negate an old and inadequate Chinese identity and create a new and rejuvenated one. Therefore, ethnic minorities have not always been used to form contrast
with the Han majority, with their perceived primitiveness and aberrance setting off the Han majority’s modernity and normalcy, as many scholars have argued. More important than creating the “constitutive outside” of the internal other (Derrida; Butler Bodies), ethnic minority representations, as processes of identification, have also been effective in creating the “constitutive outside” of the historical other, a dilapidated Chinese identity that is contested and cast into the past with each wave of national identity redefinition. An outline of the dissertation follows the theoretical exposition of my major argument and concludes the introduction with an overview of my choice of texts, methodology, and brief accounts of each chapter.

**Revisiting “Obsession with China”**

China’s subaltern national identity is not a new idea and has been discussed under various names. In the literary sphere, this subaltern national identity has led to what C. T. Hsia calls the Chinese writers’ “obsession with China” (533). In Hsia’s analysis of modern Chinese literature, Chinese writers – writing between 1917 and 1949 – were universally immersed in patriotic sentiments and their writing always suggested – sometimes implicitly – questions like “What is wrong with China” and “What can we do about it.” Perry Link extends Hsia’s argument to also include Chinese literature in the 1980s (11). Whereas Hsia’s discussion mainly focuses on critiquing the Chinese writers’ inability to transcend their pathological parochialism, I consider this “obsession” an expression of the subaltern Chinese national identity that emerged out of the reconfiguration of the world order in the late 19th and early 20th century. In other words, it should not be seen as a symptom of the failing of an uncontested autonomous individual subjectivity. Jing Tsu’s study of the rhetoric of failure and the making of the
modern Chinese identity gives us important insights into the germinant stage of this subaltern identity. By clinging to failure and victimization, she argues, modern Chinese intellectuals created in their writings a “modality of cultural identity” which managed to transform the nation’s failings into resilience and overcoming and thereby created a productive force for constructing a strong national identity (7). These observations about Chinese modern literature have some affinity with Fredric Jameson’s now (in)famous and controversial conclusion about all third-world literature being national allegories (69). Despite the numerous (and valid) counter-arguments that have been fired against it (see, most notably, Ahmad), I believe Jameson’s argument, in pointing out the breaking down of the neat divide between the private and the public or the poetic and the political in third-world literature, has voiced a cogent and extremely important observation of the permanent imprint that imperialism has left on third-world cultural production.

I would like to expand Hsia and Link’s conclusions – taken with a grain of salt – beyond the literary sphere and argue that the same kind of obsession exists in other forms of cultural production in modern China. Moreover, I would also argue, differing from Hsia’s differentiation between pre-1949 and post-1949 periods, that this obsession with China was also present during the early years of the PRC, when cultural production was subject to explicit ideological guidelines and was hence often politicized and formulaic. The specter of nation was virtually omnipresent in PRC cultural products, but not necessarily in the form of obtrusive questions, as Hsia’s formulation suggests. Rather it often functioned as an epistemic framework in which cultural products were conceived and consumed. Depending on the extent and the type of politicization of the cultural
product, this specter of nation could be more or less visible, but it was never really absent, and a “thick” reading could always tease it out.

The problem with Jameson’s national allegory theory, I believe, lies in the metaphoric relation that the word *allegory* entails between the narrative and its “true” meaning. Even though Jameson specifies the difference between his use of the word in the article and its general meaning, the metaphoric mode of narration that *allegory* suggests might still trouble many writers and readers. By using “national epistemic framework,” I intend to avoid such unnecessary restraints. It does not prioritize the national narrative over any personal ones in a cultural product, but simply acknowledges the persistence of the idea of nation. The presence of this national epistemic framework in modern Chinese cultural products, in my opinion, is evidence of the subalternity, or, in a nod to Rey Chow, the *ethnicity* of the modern Chinese identity (13). Just as members of any subaltern ethnic group can never afford or manage to ignore their ethnicity as their majority counterparts do, the Chinese, as a third-world nation that emerged – with the stigma of failure – out of the reconfiguration of world order in the late 19th century, has not been able to enter the realm of supranational universalism.

This subaltern self-positioning, at different historical moments, translated into different kinds of anxiety over the national image in modern Chinese history. I use the word “national image” as interchangeable with “national identity,” emphasizing however a general awareness of the external gaze, a gaze cast by the world (*shijie*), regardless of the presence or absence of such a gaze. The questions asked by the writers in Hsia’s discussion – what is wrong with China, and what can we do about it – could only be
asked in a modern world of nation-states, with an external world as a reference for utopian imagination for intellectuals inside China.

In *Nationalism*, Craig Calhoun discusses the emergence of Chinese nationalism with a theoretical paradigm of universalism vs. parochialism. Calhoun argues that the process of conceptualizing China as a nation-state reflected both the process of globalization and a modern way of conceptualizing the “local.” In Calhoun’s account, the idea of nation is “inherently international and works partly by contraposition of different nations to each other” (93). Conceptually, the change of China from an empire to a modern nation essentially meant a new paradigm (nation-state) through which to understand what it meant to be Chinese, but it was also an acceptance of the existence of an external world and the “universalism” of international rhetoric (92-98). Dovetailing with Calhoun’s approach to nationalism as a fundamentally universalist concept, I argue that the anxiety over the national image in modern China enacts the dialectical tension between universalism and parochialism, or particularism. As obvious as the dialectical relationship between nationalism and universalism seems, it is often forgotten in the field of area studies.

My choice of the phrase “national image” should not be understood as a suggestion of the duality between essence and surface, or reality and representation. Rather, it is meant to emphasize, following Butler, the performativity of the national identity in cultural production. As Stuart Hall points out, “actual identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being” (4). Borrowing Hall’s formulation, I argue that “becoming

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9 For a more detailed discussion of China’s transition from an empire to a nation, see Chapter 1. Chapter 2 contains a longer discussion on the tension between universalism and particularism.
Chinese” – although it was often understood as “being Chinese” by various historical agents – is an explicit or implicit agenda that has persisted through the history of cultural production in modern China, and the persisting anxiety over the national image, manifested often as an urge for change or progress, has furthermore heightened the fluid and contingent nature of this process.

**Nation and Ethnicity**

Once we acknowledge the instability of a subaltern national identity and the importance of cultural production as a process through which such a national identity is constructed, enunciated and modified, the questions that remain to be answered become: what resources are used in this “process of becoming,” and, following Derrida and Butler (*Bodies*), what kinds of “constitutive outside” are identified? The texts that this dissertation covers, ethnic representation in post-1949 China, are places where asking these two questions together can produce some surprising insight into the contingent nature of national identity. The resources in this case were of course ethnic minorities, but how did these people, different from the majority of Chinese, come to define what it means to be a Chinese? To ask the question in another way, if any process of identification is intrinsically also a process of exclusion, what kind of “constitutive outside” does the image of the “internal other” demarcate? The apparent paradox in constructing national identity with ethnic minorities led Paul Clark to voice his puzzle, when discussing Chinese cinema, over the fact that “one of the most effective ways to make films with ‘Chinese’ style was to go to the most ‘foreign’ cultural areas in the nation” (“Ethnic Minorities” 25).
Before we try to tackle Clark’s puzzle, it is worth pointing out that the so-called “Chinese style” (often *minzu fengge* [national style] in Chinese) has also been constructed with less “foreign” elements, such as folk stories, folk songs, and local operas from Han regions. If one thinks of “Chinese” culture as a homogeneous totality with a continuous history, however, these cultural elements from Han regions might seem just as “foreign” as the ethnic minority materials. As a matter of fact, the history of conceptualization and concretization of *minzu fengge* or *minzu xingshi* [national form] was a polyphonic history in which multiple problematics emerged. I am not able to do the topic justice here, but suffice it to say for the moment that the development of *minzu fengge* was not a simple matter of building a glorious national culture, but a result of debates over an array of topics such as nationalism and universal aspirations, tradition and modern agenda, local interest and national goals, art and the masses, and so on.7 The fact that ethnic representation came to figure quite centrally in *minzu fengge* is perhaps historically contingent. Nevertheless there are a few probable hypotheses that we can make. Usually, the raw material used to create a national style, like in the creation of nationalist rhetoric, relies heavily on the nation’s history, or, to put it more precisely, on the creation of a glorious and homogenous national past. If we look at modern Chinese cultural history, however, it becomes apparent that the nation’s tradition, especially cultural tradition, is viewed not only with pride, but also deep-rooted suspicion. As modern Chinese history is a series of self-negating moments, especially in terms of culture (think about all the important historical moments that were actually cultural ruptures: May Fourth, 1949, the Cultural Revolution, post-Mao, post-socialist), the nation’s tradition was not always

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7 Chapter 2 contains a longer discussion on *minzu fengge* and *minzu xingshi*. Wang Hui’s “Difang xingshi” is a comprehensive and thoughtful discussion of the early development of *minzu xingshi*. 
available – materially or ideologically – to the cultural producers. Ethnic minorities came into the picture with their unique culture and the relative absence of political baggage, and became versatile and safe material for creating the national style.

Moreover, the recurrent effort to renew and rejuvenate Chinese identity, a result of the anxiety over the national image, also required material significantly different from what was commonplace and familiar. Ethnic minorities, with their unique role of internal other, became an infinite reservoir of materials for redefining the Chinese identity without causing existential crisis. Seen this way, the three waves of ethnic minority representation became recurrent processes through which the Chinese identity gets rejuvenated. In other words, these processes of identification produce multiple “constitutive outsides:” the external Other of the world (shijie), the internal Other of the native ethnic minorities, and, most important to the current study, the historical Other of a contested national image. “The past is a foreign country,” this haunting line by Leslie Poles Hartley (1895-1972) has a queer resonance in modern China’s history of repeated self-negation.

This understanding of the relationship between ethnic minorities and nation in China’s cultural politics differs drastically from what has been commonly argued in western academic discussions on ethnicity in China. The past two decades have seen a steady increase in English language publications on China’s ethnic minorities. In a field that had remained relatively unexplored in the West until recently, there is now a substantial canon that consists of works by Harrell on the Yi, Gladney on the Hui, Kaup on the Zhuang, Oakes and Schein on the Miao, Litzinger on the Yao, to name just a few. With few exceptions, the bulk of this body of ethnicity work examines individual ethnic
minority groups, exploring how they – the individual ethnic group as a community, although sometimes multi-layered, as Litzinger’s study of the Yao elite shows – negotiate with their cultural heritage and internal power relationship configuration on the one hand and forces from outside, such as the nation-wide ethnic classification project, state ethnic policies, modernization, and globalization, on the other.

Mostly done in the discipline of anthropology, these ethnic studies are often concerned with power and identity negotiations in economic, political or ideological spheres and rarely take up representation as their research focus. Even when they do, the nation is still a site of domineering power with modernizing wills that are often at odds with the interest of ethnic minority groups. In other words, representation of the ethnic minorities in China is commonly seen to form a continuous repressive discourse – mostly dominated by the state – that aims at either soothing the ethnic minorities (Khan, “Who Are the Mongols” 125-159) or creating images of the internal other, which in turn contribute to the construction of a contrasting majority identity, a wild, savage, and grotesque Caliban that brings out the power, normalcy and civility in a Prospero.  

Louisa Schein, when discussing the cultural politics in representing Miao in contemporary China, proposes a mechanism of “displacing subalternity.” By this she refers to the phenomenon of a mobile otherness in ethnic representation in China through which

the nation’s status of subordinate vis-à-vis the rest of the world was assiduously displaced onto peasants, minorities, and women, consolidating a masculinized urban elite that could disavow its painful subalternity on the global scale by redirecting the focus onto internal difference. (233)

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8 This formulation is most thoroughly and systematically laid out in Dru Gladney’s “Representing Nationality in China.”
Whereas Schein’s formulation makes a major contribution to the understanding of ethnic representation in contemporary China by bringing in the historical international context, her interest in Miao representation remains confined to the positionality from inside the Miao experience. From this positionality, ethnic representation in China is understood as part of a process through which the state or the Han majority manages the ethnic minorities. Just like ethnic policies, ethnic representation is a means through which the state could marginalize, objectify or assimilate the ethnic minorities. The ethnic minorities, in turn, have to come up with strategies to negotiate with the impact of this external force.

The following study of the ethnic minority representation in the PRC employs a different approach. Rather than seeing ethnic representation texts as an intrinsic part of ethnic minority management, my study sees them primarily as products of self-negotiation of modern Chinese identity. My choice to not position this study from inside any ethnic minority group should not be taken as a sign of blindness to the existence of cultural prejudices and marginalization in ethnic representation texts in China. There have been excellent studies with such foci. These studies critique the usual Han-centered perspectives in ethnic minority representation texts in China’s majority culture and explicate how they tend to eroticize and exoticize ethnic minorities and thereby construct a “normal” majority identity by contrast (Clark, “Ethnic Minorities”; Gladney, “Representing Nationality” and “Tian Zhuangzhuang”; Yingjin Zhang, “Minority Film”). Parts of my own analysis of minority representation also participate in this critique.

Moving beyond the dyad of majority and minority, however, I want to historicize specific minority representation texts and examine the particular functions that images of
ethnic minority played to different cultural producers and at different historical moments in PRC history. It is also important, in my opinion, to differentiate between two kinds of ethnic discourses in PRC history, one concerning day-to-day administrative management in ethnic minority regions and the other presenting the ethnic minorities to the national audience. Although the two do overlap and it is impossible to discuss them separately, it is intellectually productive to see the difference between the two. My focus is on how ethnic minorities are used as cultural signs that are capable of carrying different meanings at various moments of heightened national anxiety. From this perspective it becomes apparent that the image of ethnic minority has been a lot more things other than being the primitive other that brings out the majority’s modernity. At different historical moments, ethnic minority, to the cultural producers of the PRC, signifies national unity, cultural tradition, freedom, cosmopolitan imagination, national strength, ecological harmony, and so on. The image of the ethnic minorities in modern China, as the image of the internal other, is an ultimate sign of alterity that metamorphosizes constantly. To examine whether representation of the ethnic minorities corresponds to some “natural” reality is to miss the point entirely.

**An Outline of the Study**

What I find troubling in many studies of ethnic minority representation in the West are two disconnections. First, there is often a perceived gulf between the state and individuals as agents of cultural production. This has been a common blind spot in studies of cultural production in the PRC in general. Cultural products from the PRC are interpreted to be either wholesale state propaganda and therefore do not offer anything worth analyzing other than its coercive ideological content, or expression of individual
artists’ aesthetic and political ideas that contest state discourse and therefore contain subversive potentials. This perceived divide is evident, foremost, in the marked absence – in the West – of serious and contextualized studies of cultural production during the PRC’s 17-year-period. Cultural products from this period are commonly understood to be examples of the operation of a domineering state propaganda machine that usurped a realm that should have belonged to the private or, at least, a collective reflexive space with autonomous modern individuals at both ends – production and consumption – of the work of art. As a contrast, cultural products from the so-called “new period” (xinshiqi, post-Cultural Revolution era), such as the Fifth Generation films, have been heavily studied in the West as they putatively signaled a return back to a “normal” model of cultural production.

The second kind of disconnection in studies of ethnic minority representation is between the internal cultural politics in the PRC and global geopolitics. Whereas the “obsession with China” is a 50-year-old topic in the field of China studies, it continues to be seen as evidence of the so-called “Chinese problematic” – an exceptionalist mindset on the Chinese intellectuals’ part – rather than a perfect example of the omnipresence of an international imaginary (see, for example, Edwards). Only in recent years, when the force of globalization became more than apparent, did discussions in China studies begin to engage the framework of the global vis-à-vis the local. In studies of ethnic minority

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9 The 17-year-period (shiqinian) refers to the period between 1949, when the PRC was founded, and 1966, the beginning of the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In recent years, there has been a steady increase of academic interest in mainland China in re-assessing literature from this period. Although dominant views still consider this period an aberration from China’s literary modernity (see, for example, Zhu 3), more and more scholars have shifted to view literature of this period as art in their own right as well as an alternative model to the conception of art born out of Enlightenment discourse (see, for example, Dong 45-55). In the field of China studies in English language, this period is still largely neglected.
representation, in particular, such disjunction of two intertwined sites of power negotiation has been the norm.

Globalization, as Stuart Hall points out, is “coterminal with modernity” (4), and the Chinese state has been made on no other constituencies than the intellectual elite and the general masses. Trying to avoid the two disconnections mentioned above, I combine textual analyses with contextual historical narratives in studying all three waves of ethnic representation in post-1949 China. As a student of literature, I perform close readings of selected texts from the three waves of ethnic representation. The texts selected for analysis include films, paintings, mural and novel, reflecting the wide range of media of cultural products in the history of ethnic representation. These texts are read as both aesthetic objects and social processes. Textual features such as structure, composition, technique, and trope are examined; I also study the texts as social processes, covering interaction between the state apparatus and the cultural producers, the contemporary aesthetic and political issues addressed in the texts, the social impact made by the texts, and, in the third wave, the role of the transnational market economy in cultural production. Beside analyses of selected texts, another important part of this study consists of general descriptions of the three waves of ethnic minority representation. These accounts, for each of the three periods, include domestic and international political contexts, prevailing national anxiety, and a summary of prominent ethnic representation texts.

Some of the texts, especially the ones from the second wave of ethnic representation, have been the topics of several existing literary and cultural studies. My own reflection on these texts has benefited greatly from these studies as I try to build
upon the precursors’ insights as well as form conversations with them. My historical narratives, especially of the first two waves, are mostly constructed based on existing historical and sociological studies on the two periods, in combination with a certain amount of primary research in historical archives. A considerably larger portion of my account of the third wave of ethnic representation came out of my own primary research, as scholarship on this period and the most recent wave of ethnic representation has been scarce. The research on the third wave of ethnic representation is also unique in the sense that attention is paid to both conventional media such as print, film, music, and newly emerged media such as the Internet.

In order to understand how nation and ethnicity, two primary categorical identities of the modern times (Calhoun, Nations 51), converged in modern Chinese history, one needs to first look at the inception and development of minzu, a word meaning both nation and ethnicity. The first chapter of this dissertation does exactly that. This historical excursion reveals the birth of nation as a response to the imperialist encroachment in China in the late 19th century. The earliest meaning of minzu comes from a borrowed primordialist and ethnicity-based understanding of nation in an imperfect fit with China’s pre-modern cultural universalist worldview. Minzu’s second meaning, ethnic group, bears the imprint of the Marxist heritage on modern China, but a brief look at the early connotation of minzu as “ethnic group” lays bare its symbolic connection with the nation’s sovereignty; it also shows how this connection formed out of the heritage of China’s pre-modern universalist worldview and the impact of China’s abrupt transition into a modern nation-state.
After this historical excursion, the three main chapters follow a chronological order, each devoted to one wave of ethnic minority representation in post-1949 China. Chapter Two looks at the first wave of blooming of ethnic cultural products after the founding of the PRC (1949-1966). It explores how, during a period of national isolation in the Cold War environment, the image of ethnic minorities not only contributed to the construction of a strong and unified political national identity, but also became an important element of the “national style,” an aesthetic national identity, so to speak. Zooming into the popular and prolific genre of minority films, this chapter also proffers an account of the process of cultural production in the 1950s and 1960s as a field where relations between art and ideology, ethnic minority and the nation-state, and between the state and the people were interrogated and reconfigured. The three texts examined in detail in this chapter all come from the minority film genre.

Chapter Three, on the second wave of ethnic minority representation during China’s post-Mao decade (1980-1989), delves into a period with extreme anxiety over the national identity and a dizzying array of debates on the future direction of the nation’s culture. In this period, the image of the ethnic minority, with its marked alterity, becomes material and inspiration for aesthetic innovation and cultural critique for the intellectual elite. As the internal other, ethnic minorities provide a suture between the intellectuals’ dissatisfaction with the nation’s cultural status quo and the desire for creating a unique national voice on the international stage. Though still focusing on the visual arts, this chapter’s texts are more diversified and include painting, mural and film.

A substantial portion of Chapter Four is devoted to the exposition of the third and latest wave of ethnic representation (late 1990s to now), an on-going phenomenon not yet
acknowledged or discussed. As a cultural trend that occurred during a period characterized by economic marketization, globalization, proliferation of individual desire and leisure, the third wave of ethnic representation is more multi-layered and multi-faceted than the previous two waves. The portrayal of this wave, other than covering the more conventional media, such as fiction and film, also ventures into areas that are untrodden thus far, such as music, food, and fashion. Addressing various prevailing anxieties during this period, ethnic representation became a site of negotiation between the nation’s rising power and the increasing sense of personal powerlessness, between rampant economic development and deterioration of natural and human environments, and between the vision of an ever-closer fulfillment of the promise of modernity and the emergence of a contemporary wasteland permeated with a sense of homelessness.

One major element of discontent that unsettles my framing of ethnic representation as sites of national self-negotiation is the problematic of agency. Whereas the power tension embedded in representation as an epistemological mode and a discursive practice has been a perennial topic in academic discourse, the issue is obviously complicated when representation of the national internal other constitutes a subaltern nation’s self-representation. The conclusion of my dissertation starts with an interrogation of the meaning and connotation of “representation,” reflecting on the established ways in which representation has come to be related to systems of empowerment and disempowerment, and contemplating on alternative models of thinking about representation. This interrogation of representation then facilitates a reframing of the ways in which we ask – if without satisfactory answers – questions about ethnic representation, a polyphonic narration with multiple speakers, multiple audiences,
multiple levels of signification and contingent legacies, each of which deserves our attention.
Chapter One

A Historical Excursion: Minzu and the Birth of the Internal Other

In order to understand the symbolic importance of ethnic minorities in the Chinese collective self-image, we first need to go back roughly a century in history and take a look at the inception of China’s modern national identity. This chapter, which serves as my point of departure in the current study of ethnic representation in post-1949 China by way of a historical excursion, is a brief exploration of the various forces that contributed to the formation of the multi-ethnic national identity in China during the modern era. Such an enterprise not only uncovers the diverse influences that led to the unique place held by ethnic minorities in modern Chinese thought; it also reveals the symbiotic development of the concepts of “nation” and “ethnicity,” both minzu in Chinese, and lays bare the conflation of these two categorical identities in modern China. Looked at historically, the symbolic importance of the ethnic minorities is one of the legacies of the agonizing process through which China was born as a modern nation – the entry of an old empire into a modern world of nations.

In addition to the close connection between the evolution of ethnicity and nation in China, the following excursion into the history of minzu also reveals the importance of the external – international – environment in the formation of ethnic and national identities. As the modern Chinese nation emerged directly out of – and continues to be shaped by – the nation’s response to the West’s economic and political dominance, our scrutiny of the changing Chinese national identity and its relation to ethnic representation also needs to consider the persisting presence of a domineering external Other.
One inevitable difficulty that writers on ethnicity in China would encounter is the semantic slippage of minzu, the Chinese word often used as the equivalent of “ethnic group.” The meaning of this word, in both popular and official discourses, shifts among a range of different things, depending on the purpose of the discourse. In its most prevalent usages, minzu or its short form zu refers to either one specific ethnic group within the Chinese territory, as in hanzu [ethnic Han group], 10 or the entire multi-ethnic nation, as in zhonghua minzu [the Chinese nation]. 11 The following pages examine the historical evolution of the word minzu and its varied applications in the first half of the 20th century, in the hope of highlighting the centrality of the concept of minzu – nation or ethnicity – in the emergence of modern Chinese national awareness. Understood historically, this word reflects an unresolved identity conflict in the country’s journey toward a modern nation-state, a process that occurred more or less as a response toward the intrusion of foreign powers. As a modern nation-state that covers the territory of an ex-empire, China was forced to redefine itself as a community and a polity in the process of modernization. The semantic slippage of the word minzu is one of the legacies of this process, a result of the compromise between a polity that had to interact with the world as a modern nation on the one hand, and a community haunted by the old universalist mindset of an empire on the other.

10 When the word is used in this sense as an adjective, it often simply refers to the ethnic minorities, since the majority status of the Han removes it from any issue related to “ethnic groups.” For example, minzu zhengce means “policies on ethnic minorities,” and the architectural landmark minzu gong [nationality palace] in Beijing is usually used for events related to ethnic minorities.

11 In Chinese government’s official language, the word minzu is typically translated into “nationality” instead of “ethnicity.” For example, the country’s leading academic institution on ethnography Zhongyang minzu daxue’s English title is “Central University for Nationalities.” This word choice was meant to cover both of the two meanings of minzu (Schein 80-82), but in real practice it is either misleading or incomprehensible to an English speaker. For other accounts of the multiple meanings of minzu, see Harrell “The Nationalities Question” 276-277 and Litzinger 8.
Printed on every Chinese identification card as a major category, *minzu* is understood to be an indicator of shared collective identity that comes with a common lineage, language and cultural heritage. Popularized by the government’s official discourse about China being a multi-ethnic nation-state with 56 officially recognized ethnic groups, this marker has become an indisputable part of every Chinese’s identity that can be determined via official guidelines (Zhou Chuanbin 39-42; He Baogang 67).

Very few people – especially amongst the majority Han ethnic group – are aware of the fact that the taxonomic differentiations between different ethnic groups are far from self-evident or scientific. Even fewer know that the official number of 56, now accepted as a natural fact, is the result of a long and tortuous process of ethnic classification (known in Chinese as *minzu shibie*) that started with more than 400 ethnic groups’ applications in 1953 and was not finalized as late as 1983.12 The pervasiveness of these ethnonyms, especially as little-challenged identity markers and potentially important forces in subject constitution, forms a sharp contrast with their short history, and demonstrates the effectiveness of the state’s discursive power over its citizens.

Just as the number of *minzu* in China is the result of a recent historical process, the word *minzu* itself is a very recent addition to the Chinese language, even though *zu* as meaning a group or a community has long been present in the language. Often quoted as the earliest evidence of a collective identity in China is a line from *Zuo zhuan*, a narrative history covering 722 to 468 B.C.E., “*fei wo zulei qixin bi yi*” [If he be not of our kin, he is sure to have a different mind] (qtd. in Lydia Liu, *Clash of Empires* 72).13 The ethnologist

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12 For discussions of the process of ethnic classification (*minzu shibie*) in the PRC, see Huang Guangxue, Fei, and Mullaney “Ethnic Classification.”

13 This translation is from James Legge in his 1872 English translation of *Zuo zhuan* (qtd. in Liu, *Clash of Empires* 72). Lydia Liu points out that Frank Dikötter, in his book *The Chinese Discourse of Race*,
Peng Yingming argues that the original usage of the character zu denotes two meanings, “a small descent group tied by a blood-relationship like a family or a clan; and a larger group of people inhabiting the same territory” (5, qtd. in Dikötter 28-29). Frank Dikötter argues that the character zu later evolved into the idea of lineage (29). This emphasis on blood-relationship and lineage is telling. Before the modern era, zu emphasized the connection between social relations and the logic of kinship and lineage. In other words, the concept of zu did not correspond to the camaraderie based on shared cultural imaginations in Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” until its encounter with min – the character for people – in modern history. The insertion of minzu into the Chinese consciousness brought a new model to imagine communities and power legitimatization.

Liang Qichao’s Minzu: The “Awakening” of the National Spirit

The earliest appearance of the word and concept of minzu is commonly connected with an important intellectual and political figure in modern Chinese history: Liang Qichao (1873-1929) (Wang Lei; Xu Xiaoqing). As one of the key instigators of the ill-fated Hundred Days Reform as well as one of China’s most influential and prolific modern thinkers, Liang began to use the word minzu in his search for a new type of state and power legitimatization at one of the darkest moments of the country’s modern

\[\text{misquoted Legge’s translation as “If he is not of our race, he is sure to have a different mind,” and was then able to come to the conclusion that this sentence seems to support the allegation that at least some degree of ‘racial discrimination’ existed during the early stage of Chinese civilization” (Dikötter 3).}^{14}\]

\[\text{There have also been researches that located earlier use of minzu in the late Qing period. See Han and Peng. Also, a number of scholars have pointed out that the word minzu can be found in pre-modern classical Chinese texts (see Ru and Di) and the word minzoku in Japanese, which was commonly seen as the origin of minzu in Chinese, might have originated from these texts. It is generally agreed, however, that minzu in its modern sense only became popular after Liang’s introduction.}^{15}\]

\[\text{In Jun. 11, 1898, Qing Emperor Guangxu gave an edict that started a series of policy and institutional reforms aimed at the country’s modernization. Liang Qichao, together with Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and Tan Sitong (1865-1898), were the major instigators, theoreticians and participants of the reform. Unfortunately, the conservative force in the court was fiercely against the reform and managed to terminate it on September 21 – 104 days after it began – with a coup.}\]
history. The word, a Meiji neologism, was borrowed from Japanese by Liang Qichao and other late Qing intellectuals to develop their own theory of the modern nation state (Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice* 48). It became widely known after Liang used the word to translate Johann Kasper Bluntschli (1808-1881)’s definition of a “people.” In *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao*, an exhaustive examination of Liang Qichao’s life as a thinker and political theorist, Xiaobing Tang gives a succinct account of the course that Bluntschli’s theory traveled before being adopted by Liang. According to Tang, Bluntschli, a renowned 19th century Swiss German political scientist and law professor, became an influential political theorist with his book *Die Lehre vom modernen Staat* [The Theory of the Modern State] in 1869. In 1872, Katō Hiroyuki (1836-1916), an important Japanese thinker during the Meiji period, introduced Bluntschli into Japan. It was his introductory articles on Bluntschli “New Theories on the State” and “Introduction to Constitutional Government” that Liang encountered during his exile years in Japan after the failure of the Hundred Days Reform. These two introductory essays became the source for Liang Qichao’s later writings on Bluntschli (Tang 123-124).

In Bluntschli’s discussion on modern polity, he argues that a “people” is the most important prerequisite of the establishment of a nation-state. More than a political unit founded upon a social contract, a nation obtains stability and potential for power and prosperity from a cohesive spiritual and cultural core that only a “people” can provide (*The Theory of the State* 83-85). Bluntschli’s “people” is similar to the concept of “nation” in contemporary political paradigm, especially if we consider the entitlement to political sovereignty a unique characteristic of nation. Within contemporary theoretical
framework of nationalism, Bluntschli’s understanding of nation would fall into the
category of primordialist nationalism, which argues for the inevitability and naturalness
of nations that form on the basis of common language, ethnicity and culture. This belief
is often traced back to the writings of German Romanticists such as Johann Gottlieb
Fichte (1762-1814) and Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) (Calhoun, *Nationalism*
91; Kedourie 62-73). Bluntschli’s contribution to this nationalist belief lies in his political
theories that formed *Staatwissenschaft* [political science], which emphasizes the
strengthening of the state power. It was a German political and intellectual response to
the widely felt threat of mass movements brought by the European revolution of 1848
(Tang 123). By resorting to the cultural and historical roots of a people, Bluntschli argues
for the innate legitimacy of a strong and centralized state power.

This argument became very popular with Japanese intellectuals and politicians in
the late 19th century as they were searching for their own unique form of state at a
moment when Japan was entering modernity after the Meiji restoration. Liang, who
encountered Bluntschli’s theory in Japan, adopted his theory as a potential means through
which China could rise above its tribulations. His definition of *minzu*, in his article
“Zhengzhixue dajia Bolunzhili zhi xueshuo” [Teachings of the Great
*Staatwissenschaftler* Bluntschli], goes as follows:

A *minzu* is the result of the development and evolution of customs. There are
eight primary prerequisites for a *minzu*: 1. Common original habitation. (Without
living at the same place individuals cannot form a group. Later one *minzu* might
become dispersed to different places, or different *minzu* might come to live at the
same place, but here we are talking about *minzu*’s origin.) 2. Common lineage.
(After a period of time one *minzu* might absorb and assimilate other *minzu.*
Therefore a *minzu* can have members with different lineage.) 3. Common
Common religion. 7. Common customs. 8. Common way of life. With these eight
conditions, a group of people unconsciously separate from other groups and form
a unique community, and its characters would be passed down to their
descendants. This is the origin of a “minzu.” (13:71-72,\(^{16}\) translation mine)

After this rather formulaic definition, Liang Qichao proceeds to quote Bluntschli as
saying that minzu differs from guo or guojia [country or state] in that it refers to a
community of people sharing common spirit and culture, whereas the latter is the result
of political organization. However, Liang also argues that a guojia cannot be stable
without the precondition of the existence of a minzu, a people. It is reasonable to say that
Liang Qichao’s minzu is what we would call “nation,” a natural, organic, and historically
evolved community that is believed to be the basis of a modern nation-state.

Liang’s lifelong search for remedies of China’s modern woes can give us some
insight into his purpose in introducing the concept of minzu. Early on an advocate of
Rousseau’s social contract theory, which advocates a common agreement among the
people as the political premise for a democratic, prosperous and powerful society, Liang
later became a believer in a more primordialist and essentialist – instead of
instrumentalist – version of nationalism. Strongly influenced by social Darwinism, as
many late Qing intellectuals were,\(^ {17}\) Liang turned toward nationalism or even imperialism
as a means through which China could strengthen itself and thereby escape the fate of
elimination,

Therefore today there is no strategy that can save China other than the building of
a nationalist (minzu zhuyi) state. If this largest nation (minzu) on the globe could
build a competitive state – one that would survive natural selection – then who
else will be able to compete with us for the title of the world’s No. 1 empire?
(10:35, translation mine)

\(^{16}\) The number before the colon indicates the volume (juan); the number after the colon indicates the pages.
\(^ {17}\) For the introduction and influence of social Darwinism via Yan Fu in the late Qing, see Schwartz. For a
discussion on social Darwinism and Liang Qichao, see Zarrow 60-64.
The missing nationalism – or the lack of a national spirit – is therefore seen as what is keeping this large country from achieving its survival or even dominance in a modern world of competing nation-states.

Liang Qichao introduced Bluntschli’s concept of “nation” at a moment when China was forced to transform from an empire into a modern nation by the military and economic encroachment of Western and Japanese imperialism. This change posed a serious challenge to the traditional Chinese worldview. Joseph R. Levenson made one of the earliest and arguably the most articulate arguments on the shift from “culturalism” to “nationalism” as the dominant ideology of political legitimatization in China around the turn of the 20th century. In this argument, he contends that the dominant collective consciousness in China was a cultural universalist one prior to the late 19th century. This consciousness, sustained by China’s literati class, envisioned a sino-centric universe on the basis of a “‘culturalistic’ reverence for the ‘Chinese way of life’” (95), which consisted of a set of universalizing moral goals that functioned with the assumption of the superiority of (Confucian) Chinese culture. Judging by the criteria from this cultural universalism, membership of a political community was not determined by ethnic differences or other hereditary conditions, but by willingness to accept this “Chinese way of life,” which also gave legitimatization to the ruler.

Wang Gungwu has uttered a similar view on the culturalist nature of the organizing principle of China’s pre-modern community. According to Wang, although it was possible to imagine people of superior moral behavior that were non-Chinese at one point in ancient Chinese history, such a pluralistic worldview had become extremely rare after Confucianism became the orthodox thought in China’s dynastic history. The
superior Chinese culture, revolving around a set of anchoring Confucian precepts that prescribed moral and intellectual standards as well as social relations, came to be perceived as a civilizing force that could transform the “uncivilized” both within and outside the empire. According to Wang, this civilizing process, known in Chinese as hua, was not rigorous and aggressive; nor was it operated under the principle of national competition or done out of national anxiety. In general, hua was understood to be a process to “change others for the better,” and even when it was used to draw a hard boundary, as in huawai, a word that appeared in the Tang dynasty and meant foreigners, it was still done through the logic of cultural universalism (as one can understand the word to literally mean “beyond transformation”) with a concentric spatial imaginary (145-164).\textsuperscript{18} A similar argument can be made regarding the widely quoted differentiation between “raw barbarians” (shengfan) and “cooked barbarians” (shufan) in China’s traditional narratives about “barbarians” (Diamond 100).

It is true, however, that such a concentric cultural universalism could only function securely, as Prasenjit Duara points out, when no conspicuous Other – e.g. ethnic minority – threatened to obliterate its values (Rescuing History 57). At different points in China’s pre-modern history, this sino-centric worldview had been challenged, especially when ethnic minority groups ruled the empire during the Yuan and Qing dynasties. Both periods produced large amounts of writings by members of the literati class that deplored the fall of China at the hands of foreign barbarians. In discussing intrinsic differences between the Han Chinese and the invading minority barbarians, these writings resembled

\textsuperscript{18} Stevan Harrell has also discussed the civilizing project as a manifestation of the sino-centric cultural universalism in pre-modern China, “Civilizing Projects” 17-20.
racist discourses. Most notably, Fang Xiaoru (1357-1402) from the Song Dynasty,¹⁹ Gu Yanwu (1613-82) and Wang Fuzhi (1619-92) from the Qing Dynasty penned fierce condemnation of the Mongol and Manchu “barbarians,” comparing them to animals that were no match for the human qualities of Han Chinese (Dikötter 18-30; Duara, Rescuing History 58-60; Elliot 20-26). The majority of the literati class during these periods of foreign rule, however, were absorbed into the ruling strata and performed as their major administrative forces. During the Qing Dynasty, in particular, the worldview of cultural universalism was actually strengthened via the revival of intellectual interest in the study of Gongyang zhuan [Gongyang’s Commentary], an important text that interprets the Confucian classic Chunqiu [Spring and Autumn Annuals]. Wang Hui argues that this revival was in accordance with the need of power legitimatization of the Qing court. Among all the classical texts of Confucianism, Wang argues, Gongyang zhuan contains the most fluid formulation on cultural identity constitution, especially when it comes to the difference and possible transformation between xia [Chinese] and yi [barbarian]. The study of Gongyang zhuan, therefore, offered theoretical support – on the basis of cultural universalism – to the legitimacy of the Manchu rule in the Qing dynasty (551-578).

Whereas it is highly generalizing to consider China’s entire pre-modern history a continuous manifestation of the cultural universalism discussed above, this sino-centric worldview did occupy an important place in the ways in which Chinese – the Chinese literati, at least – understood themselves and their world before the world of nation-states intruded, so to speak, in the late 19th century. The Qing Empire, with its vast expanse of territory supported by a complex governing mechanism that combined centralized rule, chieftain system and tributary network, did embody a cultural universalism that differed

¹⁹Fang, living in the Song dynasty, was writing on the rule of the Mongols after the “travesty” occurred.
radically from the modern assumption of a nation’s exclusive entitlement to political sovereignty.

This sino-centric cultural universalism was challenged by the military excellence of the Western powers in the 19th century. Starting from the First Opium war in 1840, the Qing Empire fought several consecutive wars waged by major Western powers. All of these wars ended with China’s military defeat and the signing of unequal treaties. With these treaties, the modern imperialist powers not only managed to obtain rights to mining, manufacturing and trading activities on selected Chinese territories, but also managed to disassemble the Qing Empire’s real or symbolic control over its territory. The Sino-French War between 1883 and 1885 resulted in the signing of a treaty that terminated Vietnam’s tributary status. In 1895, the Qing court signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki with Japan after being defeated in the first Sino-Japanese War. Two of the most important items in this treaty were the cession of Taiwan to Japan and the termination of Korea as a Qing tributary (Nathan; Yu; Gray 102-25). This defeat at the hands of Japan was particularly shocking to the Qing literati, since Japan, unlike the previous invaders, was an Asian country that was perceived to be one of China’s satellite states. This military and political humiliation kindled a political and existential crisis and became the last straw that led to the Hundred Days Reform, Qing literati’s collective campaign to reform the old empire’s political and cultural universe without abandoning the monarchy system entirely.

Challenging the presumed superiority of the Confucian Chinese culture, these military and political humiliations to the Qing Empire destabilized the foundation of the cultural universalist worldview of the Chinese civilization. After many painful military
humiliations, it was made clear to the Qing literati that they could no longer consider themselves the center of all under heaven. Barbarians, as it turned out, could be far superior to the Chinese. The world (or *tianxia*) was no longer this vast expanse of land with civilization and power radiating from the central plain (*zhongyuan*). Rather, it consisted of various power units called nations competing for power and resources. China was only one of such nations, and a weak one to boot. Even Japan was powerful enough to snatch a piece of land from China. The Qing literati were forced to review their sino-centric universalist worldview and accept a different geographical imaginary.²⁰

On the other hand, these humiliations imposed on China from outside the territorial issues essential to the emergence of a modern nation-state. It became apparent to the Qing literati that a modern nation, in contrast to an empire that had loosely defined and often porous borders, needed to compete for its land, which was no longer a matter of imperial pride but a matter of property ownership as well as the foundation of economic well-being. Unfortunately, for China, this territorial awareness did not spring from inside as a Capitalist need to expand and control resources, but from the loss of border areas to the Western and Japanese powers. The geographic change during this period directly influenced the territorial outline of the later nation-state, first the Republic of China, then the People’s Republic of China. More importantly, these territorial losses became the catalyst that kindled the craving for a strong and empowering national identity and had further implications on later views on ethnic minority issues in China.

²⁰I am not suggesting that the Qing literati’s imaginary of the world simply shifted from a sino-centric space to a binary opposition with China at one end and the West/Japan at the other. Many different strands of global imaginary were occurring at the same time during this transitional era. In *Staging the World*, Rebecca Karl has argued persuasively that the late Qing literati’s reconceptualization of the world was closely related to their recognition and knowledge of other non-western countries. Whereas the West/Japan encroachment of China in late 19th century remained the most important stimulus for the intellectuals’ reconceptualization of the country and the world.
Set against this background, Liang Qichao’s introduction of *minzu* in 1903 was an effort to introduce an identity that would justify the establishment of a strong state as well as mobilize the Chinese people to take personal responsibilities in the revival of the nation. To achieve this purpose this new identity had to shed the openness of the traditional cultural universalist worldview. In other words, it should not be an identity that an outsider could easily adopt. Liang turned to the ethnicity-based definition of a nation from Bluntschli. Even though this definition could not accommodate the demographic make-up of the envisioned nation that would inherit most of the traits of the Qing Empire, the incongruence between the two was on the surface ignored by intellectuals like Liang Qichao at the point of the initial introduction of *minzu*.\(^{21}\) As a member of the Qing literati, he was certainly not free from the traditional universalist worldview. Despite the semi-scientific definition that he “borrowed” from Bluntschli, his understanding of *minzu*, the influence of which remained through the later application of the word in China, bore traces of the traditional culturalist understanding of Chinese identity. Judging by Liang’s later opposition to what he called “small nationalism” apparent in some revolutionaries and intellectuals’ hostility toward the Manchu rulers of the Qing Empire, Liang himself had not taken Bluntschli’s standards – language, religion, common habitation – to be the absolute prerequisites of a *minzu*. What mattered most to Liang was the national spirit that Bluntschli concluded to be a logical result of all the other traits of a people. In this sense, Liang’s approach to *minzu* echoes Ernest Renan’s conclusion that a nation is defined by “a large-scale solidarity” that transcends the

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\(^{21}\) Later on Liang Qichao would discuss the concept of *minzu* more comprehensively. In “Zhongguo lishi shang minzu zhi yanjiu,” which Liang penned in 1922, he discussed the importance of choosing a broad nationalism, which stresses the equality of all the ethnic groups within China, rather than a narrow nationalism, which advocates Han dominance in the multi-ethnic nation.
external premises posited by nationalism theoreticians (19). To borrow Gellner’s famous formulation, this is yet another case where “it is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round” (55).

Liang’s minzu should not be seen as a major diversion from China’s traditional cultural universalist identity; rather, it is a revised version of this cultural universalism, one that is combined with the idea of a modern nation’s entitlement to political sovereignty. Used by Liang and other late Qing intellectuals as a means to “awaken” a putative pre-existing but dormant national spirit, this minzu constituted a theoretical response to the foreign encroachment that led to China’s existential crisis around the turn of the 20th century. It is a compromise between an old empire’s self-centered view of the universe and the requirement of a modern world of competing nation-states.

**Communist Nationalism: The Maze around a Stalinist Concept**

Another definition that contributed to the conceptual formation of minzu came from a different direction: Joseph Stalin. His definition of nation was widely used in the PRC: “A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture” (12). Originally a product of Stalin’s debate with the Second Internationale on the national question, this definition of “nation” was later used, in a faraway foreign land, in a different context for a drastically different purpose. Because it is the only substantive and articulate definition of “nation” in the classical writings of Marxism, this definition was used in the PRC’s ambitious project of minzu shibie [ethnic classification] as the guideline for determining the validity of a group’s claim to the title of minzu (Fei 171). The introduction of Stalin’s “nation,” in its translated form, can be considered a definitive
moment when *minzu* (as ethnic group) entered into modern China’s identity consciousness.\(^{22}\)

Unlike the popularization of Liang’s *minzu*, which was an instance of influence from the liberal West, the application of Stalin’s *minzu* in China points toward another essential influence on the modern Chinese thought on issues related to nation and ethnicity: Marxism and Soviet Union’s nationality policies. Whereas the formal application of Stalin’s definition of “nation” occurred after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s ascendancy to state power, the impact of Marxism and the Soviet model on the CCP’s minority policies had occurred long before 1949. The CCP had been engaged in negotiations on ethnicity and national questions both in theory and practice since its early years in the 1920s. This history might give us some insight into the interconnection between ethnicity and nation in contemporary China.

Walker Connor’s book *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* devotes an entire chapter to the CCP’s minority policies before 1949, and can serve as a point of departure. In this chapter, Connor presents a meticulously researched study of the history of the CCP’s varied positions on the national question and the possible reasons behind these changes. Connor argues that in orthodox Marxism, nation is not an important concept in the envisioned ideal communist society, since it is considered a remnant of the capitalist society, and the nation-state is regarded to be at the service of the bourgeoisie. The so-called national question only arose for Marxists after

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\(^{22}\) *Minzu* as “ethnic group” did exist prior to the introduction of Stalin’s concept. Sun Yat-sen’s *wuzu gonghe* was a political vision of a commonwealth of five major ethnic groups in China. The earliest division of ethnology in China was founded in 1928 by Cai Yuanpei, who named the discipline “*minzu xue*” (Guildin 30). On the whole, the concept of *minzu* as ethnic group was often intermixed with ideas of race and nation during the late Qing and Republican China. A widely circulated awareness of the multiple ethnic minority groups as integral parts of the nation did not occur until the founding of the PRC.
the October Revolution, when the USSR became the first communist country, revising Marx’s theory on the simultaneous proletarian revolution around the globe, and this new communist country, inheriting all of the Tsarist states, had to deal with the question of how to treat the ethnic minorities. In dealing with this question, the Soviet model on nationalities was developed. This model was based on the principles of national self-determination and multinational federalism, including the right to secession by national minorities.

This issue of national self-determination, Connor argues, is at the center of the national question. Based on this criterion, Connor divides the CCP’s minority policies into three stages. During the first stage, 1922-1927, the minority question did not amount to any significance in the newly founded CCP’s goals and visions. This oversight is explained to be the result of the CCP’s preoccupation with the urban proletariat in the eastern region. As the ethnic minorities were largely located in the remote inland areas of Southwest, Northwest and Northeast China, they fell outside the CCP’s strategic vision in the 1920s. The second stage began with the CCP’s 1928 rupture with the Guomindang (or the KMT), the ruling party of China at the time. During this stage the CCP began to take the nationality question into its strategic planning and policy making, and gradually adopted the policy of self-determination for ethnic minorities, including their right to secession. This change, Connor argues, is the CCP’s calculated move with the purpose of winning the favor of the ethnic minorities. Since the CCP had relocated itself in the hinterland of China during this period, it was now in constant contact with – sometimes surrounded by – ethnic minorities. Friendly relationship with these minority groups became a matter of life or death for the CCP and its army. This change of policy was
therefore interpreted as a strategy for survival. The third stage in the CCP’s minority policy, according to Connor, saw its prelude after the end of WWII in 1945 and became solidified after the founding of the People’s Republic of China. During this stage, the CCP erased all earlier promises of self-determination to the ethnic minorities, replaced self-determination with self-ruling, and adopted a strong nationality policy that tolerated no ethnic “splittist movement.”

Within Connor’s Marxist theoretical paradigm, the CCP’s inconsistency on the national question is in conflict with its overall political claims of general liberation of the people. To Connor, who does not note the interconnectedness of the communist revolution and China’s modern nation building, the CCP’s initial oversight and subsequent conflicting attitudes on the national question was inexplicable. In an otherwise precise and objective analysis, Connor repeatedly uses words like “mysterious” and “puzzling” when addressing this inconsistency.

Had Connor examined the CCP’s ethnic policies after the founding of the People’s Republic, he would have found even more puzzles in the CCP’s inconsistency regarding the national question. In this period, the CCP launched an unprecedented field project of ethnic classification, and large groups of ethnologists, anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists were dispatched into the most remote regions of the country to investigate the social and cultural conditions of the ethnic minority and perform taxonomic operations, i.e., to determine whether the 400-plus groups that filed applications for minzu qualified as such. The standard used by the whole project came from Joseph Stalin’s definition cited above and the criteria of judgment include these elements: history, economy, language, stability, territory, culture and psychological
make-up. After the first stage of classification ended, the central government sent out linguists and historians to help create minority written languages where there were none and initiate the process of cultural conservation (Fei; Gu; Mullaney, “Ethnic Classification”). However, the principle of national self-determination was never a part of the CCP’s nationality policy after 1949. Instead, a system of regional autonomy was adopted for ethnic minority regions (He Baogang 65; Li Jianhui). The encouragement and direct intervention in the maintenance or even creation of the ethnic minorities’ cultural identity seemed to be in conflict with the government’s refusal to even consider the possibility of their political independence.

To understand this baffling “mystery,” one has to again turn to the strange transformation from a traditional cultural universalist identity to the modern Chinese national identity. The former imagined a universe with the Confucian culture at its center and the emperor as the embodiment of the culture and the celestial order. The surrounding states and kingdoms paid tributes (chaogong) to this center and received political endorsement, military protection and “gifts” (huici) from the central celestial court. This relationship between the empire and the kingdoms was not a strictly imperialist one in the word’s modern sense. Though a certain level of exploitation and chauvinistic superiority did exist in the relationship, the superiority that the central imperial court held over the peripheries did not lead to the center’s total disregard of the peripheries’ cultural integrity and economic well-being (Wang Hui, Xiandai zhongguo 643-78). Rather, as Baogang He points out, the Confucian worldview contained elements that can be “employed to support minority rights” out of a sense of duty (59). When the western intrusion occurred in the 19th century, this relatively stable universe was
dismantled, first and foremost in the form of the loss of the empire’s protectorates. As the Qing literati first came to experience the concept of national sovereignty through its violation, the modern Chinese national identity, created as a response to this violation, was unlikely to regard the people living on the periphery as dispensable to the unity of the nation, even if they did not belong to the majority Han group.

The impact of Marxism and the Soviet model on the CCP’s minority policies was manifold, but a brief review would reveal the continuity of China’s traditional universalist worldview and the utter importance of national unity in the CCP’s minority policies. First and foremost, during the early PRC years, ethnic conflicts came to be perceived, through a Marxist lens, as class conflicts, which would disappear with the elimination of the exploiting classes (Yang and Wang 1-8). Second, during the ethnicity classification project, different ethnic minorities were assessed and placed in different social development stages, according to a schema that envisions human history as a linear progress that goes through five stages: primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist, the final stage that eventually leads to communist society. This social stage theory, first formulated by Lewis Henry Morgan and then absorbed into Marxist historiography by Engels, became the dominant historical consciousness in early PRC history (Ou). At the time the Han group was placed at the late-feudal stage and ethnic minority groups were assessed, through minzu shibie, to be at various less developed stages (Harrell, “Civilizing Projects” 24). Based on this social stage assessment, different kinds of democratic reform were carried out in the minority regions between 1955 and 1957 in order to bring all minority groups into the socialist stage (Lin 146). Both of these two new Marxist additions to the understanding of ethnic minority groups were in a way
modern validations of the pre-modern sino-centric worldview, and the nationality work (minzu gongzuo) that these new understandings of ethnic minority groups entailed were, as Harrell points out, in essence new civilizing projects, similar in spirit to the Confucian civilizing process of hua, even though the new civilizing process did not aim at culturally assimilating the ethnic minorities into the Han culture as the Confucian one did (24). This insight explains why the perceived superiority of the Han in the PRC manifested itself not only in ethnic chauvinism, but also in various measures of protection, aid and guidance. On the new grounds of Marxist theories on class struggle and social development, the Han group was again placed at a superior center in relation to the ethnic minority groups on the periphery, but such a superior position also imposed on the Han group the old Confucian duty toward the ethnic minority groups.

When Marxism and the Soviet model contradicted the sino-centric universalism, and especially if such disagreement was perceived to threaten the national sovereignty, as was the case with the right of self-determination, the CCP government was not willing to comply. The territorial boundary of the newly founded People’s Republic, which it inherited from the territory of the Qing Empire, adopted a highly charged symbolic importance. The ethnic minorities, whose habitation held more than half of the country’s territory and were mostly located on its bordering areas, were considered inseparable parts of the new nation-state. One of the reasons that led Mao to abandon the policy of self-determination was that Lenin’s theory of national self-determination was used by Japan to support the independence of Mongolia (Yang and Wang 1-3). Given the existential anxiety caused by encroachment of foreign powers in the late 19th century, it is
not surprising that any real or potential independence of ethnic minority region would be deemed suspect and taken as an assault to the nation’s sovereignty.

This brief review of the impact of Marxism and the Soviet model in the early PRC history helps to contextualize the strange fate of Stalin’s minzu. As mentioned earlier, because Stalin’s definition of minzu was the only explicit definition of this concept in classical Marxist writings, it became the sole guideline in minzu shibie, a project described by Guldin as “perhaps the most extensive series of fieldwork ever conducted on earth” (131). In actual practices, however, Stalin’s vague definition was found to be highly insufficient as a criterion for taxonomic assessment. Almost every existing report of the ethnic classification project in China cites Stalin’s definition as the guiding principle for this taxonomic feat, but they also always point out right away the distinct differences between the reality in China and that of modern Europe, and thereby argue for the impracticality of following the definition faithfully without modification (see, for example, Fei).

One thing we can infer from the history of the ethnic classification project, as well as the CCP’s overall ethnic policies, is that China’s contemporary views on ethnicity bear more affinity to the pre-modern universalist worldview than one would expect if s/he sees either the fall of the Qing Empire or the founding of the PRC as radical historical rupture. Although many practices and policies were reframed in Marxist discourse of equality, freedom and class struggle, many of the fundamental principles of the CCP’s ethnic policies, such as regional autonomy and preferential policies (similar to affirmative action and enforced in areas ranging from taxation, education to family planning. See, for example, Sautman) can be understood as heritage of a sino-centric universalist prototype
from China’s pre-modern dynastic times. A significant new element in the CCP’s minority policy was the insistence on the nation’s unity. This insistence demanded – from the ethnic minorities – unconditional loyalty to the nation-state. In this way, the ethnic minority groups, as the internal other of the modern China, came to be associated with the idea of national unity. This concept of national unity out of ethnic diversity, formulated by Thomas Mullaney in the equation of 55+1=1 (“Introduction”), as my later chapters will show, would play a significant role in ethnic representation in post-1949 China.

Liang Qichao’s *minzu* and Stalin’s *minzu* belong to the two major applications of the word in modern Chinese language: Liang’s *minzu* included the sum-total of the imagined community of the Chinese nation, and Stalin’s *minzu* was used as a guideline in the taxonomic feat of *minzu shibie* in the PRC. However, if we compare these two definitions in a historical vacuum, i.e., independent of their historical contexts, it is difficult to pinpoint the essential differences between them. Both consider a “nation” a historically evolved community, and both list a number of seemingly objective traits, such as language, race, custom, territory and culture, as the prerequisites of a *minzu*. Similar definitions, different applications: the different trajectories of Liang Qichao’s (or Bluntschli’s) and Stalin’s definitions of *minzu* did not derive from their different understandings of the concept of “nation”, but were results of the grafting of the primordialist ideal nation into different historical contexts. The gaps and inconsistence in both cases of “borrowing” are symptoms of the historical contingency and semantic violence that such practices of grafting usually incur. Together these two histories of the
itinerant minzu present a schematic diagram of the development of the Chinese identity in the first half of the twentieth century.

The mapping of the itinerary of these two minzu lay bare three major influences on the modern Chinese identity: China’s own pre-modern sino-centric universalist worldview, the primordialist nationalism in the tradition of German Romanticism, and the egalitarian but class-conscious principles on the national question in the Marx-Lenin-Stalinist tradition of international communism. These three influences overlapped, clashed, and negotiated with each other, and, as a result, produced contradictory and inconsistent narratives on China’s national identity and the position of the ethnic minorities within this changing identity.

More essential than these three major influences on the modern Chinese identity and inter-ethnic relations is the catalyst that caused China’s transition from a pre-modern empire to a modern nation-state: the Western economic and political dominance in the 19th and 20th century; in other words, the reconfiguration of the world’s geopolitical order during the rise of global Capitalism. This modern world order exerts continuing influences – on both real and symbolic levels – on the modern China as we know it, and hence any discussion of the latter without sufficient consideration of the international context could only be partially enlightening at the best.

The impact of the external political environment on China’s internal politics – especially regarding ethnic minorities – was evident from the earliest stage of China’s modern nation building effort. As early as 1907, Zhang Taiyan (1869-1936), an influential modern thinker, was already aware of the importance of the international world order when crafting the blueprint of zhonghua minguo (The Republic of China) in
an article titled “Zhonghua minguo jie” [The Definition of the Republic of China]. Even though Zhang was known for his unswerving Han chauvinism as well as racist critique of the Manchu rulers of the Qing Empire, and though he was modeling the visionary republic after the ideal European nation with homogenous cultural lineage, he argued that international politics was an important factor in the finalization of the new nation’s territory. Countries like Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia were closer to China in terms of culture, but the inclusion of these countries in China would infuriate their colonizers, which were Japan, France and the Great Britain, whereas the inclusion of the Northwest region, despite its cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences from central China, would not incur any military intervention from the Western powers. Zhang, an otherwise steadfast Han nationalist, was nevertheless mindful of the impact of international politics on the future of the Chinese nation-state. Wang Hui uses this example to illustrate that “the colonialist world order and the threat of its military intervention was one of the most important forces in China’s nation-building movement as well as its territorial formation in the early 20th century” (Xiandai zhongguo 81, translation mine). Any isolated examination of the internal politics in China without attention to the international world order at the time would lead to very different conclusions.

Both meanings of minzu were products of China’s modern history and continue to bear testimony to this history’s impact on China’s modern national identity. As nation, minzu was introduced to “awaken” a putatively pre-existing national spirit, which would in turn save the country from the encroachment of the western powers. Being the linguistic trace of the shift from a sino-centric universalist worldview to a modern spatial imaginary that sees the world as an aggregation of nation-states, minzu (nation) carries
this ontological legacy as it continues to be juxtaposed and contrasted with “the world”
(shijie) in China’s contemporary national discourse. As ethnicity, minzu was used in the
project of minzu shibie, a human cartographic representation of the country that produced
the image of a unified multi-ethnic nation. As China changed from an empire to a modern
nation-state, the role of the ethnic minorities also changed from mere barbarians on the
empire’s periphery to the internal other that were essential – both strategically and
symbolically – to the unity and integrity of the nation. Both meanings of minzu, with their
historical burdens and ideological connotations, were essential forces in the history of
ethnic representation in post-1949 China, a history in which the anxiety over the
subaltern national identity was addressed and assuaged through creative use of the image
of ethnic minorities.
Chapter Two

The Construction of a National Style (*Minzu fengge*):

Universalism and Particularism

--- The First Wave of Ethnic Representation (1949-1966)

The founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 marked a new era of the modern Chinese national identity. The danger of immediate national demise had receded into the dark shadow of history, but the People’s Republic led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) faced new internal and external political challenges. Within the communist nation-state, the influence of the Republican Party (*Kuomintang*, abbreviated as KMT) was still present, resisting with military forces; various local political powers were also active, striving to carve out a presence within the relative power vacuum during the transitional stage (Teiwes 70). Within the precarious unity of the new nation lived more than 400 million people with different ethnicity, languages, political loyalty, economic conditions, and religious beliefs. How to turn this immense amalgamation of different people into a unified community became an on-going project carried out in a variety of facets of life. Outside the new People’s Republic, the world’s political map was slowly developing into the two Cold War opposition blocs. The new Chinese government’s unswerving commitment to Communism automatically put it onto the opposite side from most of the developed countries. Its involvement in the Korean War, beginning in late 1950, further sealed itself off from the entire Western world. Within the Communist bloc, Mao’s relationship with Moscow was anything but smooth (Nakajima 262). This tension later developed into the total rupture of the Sino-Soviet relationship in 1960 (Whiting 478-9). Against this background of both internal and external political
challenges, constructing a reassuring and empowering national identity became a long-term political mission.

In the cultural realm, the task of making the new Chinese was not less daunting. The traditional Chinese ontological universe with its Confucian hierarchy and etiquette, first challenged by the May Fourth New Cultural Movement, was again being reformed by Mao and his followers. The sense of cultural superiority of the old Chinese empire had of course been long gone, due to repeated military defeats and political embarrassments in the previous century. The new conception about the Chinese nation (zhonghua minzu), developed in the late Qing and the republican era, had to undergo another round of revision in the socialist period. The opposition between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie became the latest layer of differentiation between China and the West. Although this new proletariat national identity was politically powerful, there existed the danger of it being culturally pale. The dominant revolutionary ideology of the period had largely denied the cultural producers access to China’s traditional culture, as the large body of literature and arts from China’s pre-modern history were now scrutinized through the lens of class struggle and were often regarded unsuitable for the contemporary needs of a socialist country.

With this marked absence of the most important reservoir of cultural materials, cultural producers in China adopted the image of ethnic minorities as one of the major sources of inspiration during the 17-year-period. Positioned mostly in the PRC’s border regions, the ethnic minorities, largely invisible in the nation’s culture during the war-

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23 Mao’s major contribution to the Chinese national identity includes, for example, the introduction of the political concept of zhongguo renmin [Chinese people], and a new version of internationalism that ascertains the unity of the repressed across national borders. See, for example, Mao’s “Zhongguo gongchandang zai minzu zhanzheng zhong de diwei” [The Role of the CCP in the National War] for a discussion on the relationship between national independence and internationalism.
ridden years of the early 20th century, now entered the consciousness and aesthetic experiences of the Chinese. This ethnic emergence on the new nation’s cultural landscape was aided by the PRC’s ethnic minority policies. As discussed in the previous chapter, after the founding of the PRC, the state’s ethnic policies were distinctly anti-assimilationist, and the development of ethnic culture was encouraged. In 1949, the Common Program issued by the First Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress included an article on ethnic minority groups’ right to their own culture,

All national minorities shall have freedom to develop their dialects and languages, to preserve or reform their traditions, customs, and religious beliefs. The People’s Government shall assist the masses of the people of all national minorities to develop their political, economic, cultural, and economic construction work. (qtd. in Yau 119)

With the state sponsoring ethnic culture development, images of ethnic minorities emerged and flourished in literature, painting, films, music, dance, and other performing arts during the 17-year-period. The Central Nationalities Song and Dance Troupe (Zhongyang minzu gewu tuan), China’s flagship minority performance troupe, was established in September 1952 to introduce ethnic minority performers and their songs and dances to the nation. Local minority performance troupes were also established in various ethnic autonomous provinces and regions. The number of ethnic minority writers increased due to practices like ethnic minority participation in writers’ training camps run by the Writers’ Association of China and increasing enrollment in the Central Nationality Institute, a school founded in 1951 to promote the involvement of ethnic minority

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24 This is not say that the ethnic minorities were entirely ignored during the Republican era. The first division of ethnology was founded in 1928 by Cai Yuanpei (Guldin 30). May Fourth scholars like Gu Jiegang, Wu Wenzao and Lin Yaohua did pioneering and foundational ethnological work on China’s ethnic minorities during this period. See, for example, Gu Jiegang’s Xibei kaocha riji. The awareness of the ethnic minorities as constituent parts of the nation in the general public, however, was in no way close to the 17-year-period, when the image of the ethnic minorities became prevalent in the mainstream culture.
population in the new nation (Ma Yin 29). Many painters went to ethnic minority regions for inspiration and materials during this period. In oil painting in particular, the 17-year-period produced a large amount of portraits and landscape paintings with minority subject (Xie 141-43).

Among the wide spectrum of cultural products with ethnic minority subject matter of this period, what ultimately brought the multi-ethnic image of the newly founded nation into the minds and hearts of the masses, more than any other media or cultural form, was film, an imported modern cultural form fully embraced by the Chinese. The magnitude of the impact of the ethnic minority films was apparent not only in their sudden emergence on the cultural scene in the country, which had seen little ethnic minority presence on the silver screen prior to 1949, but also in the sheer quantity and popularity of these films. Between 1949 and 1966, the film studios of the PRC produced 47 feature films with ethnic minority subject matter (Ying 63), including many extremely popular films that became classics of the 17-year-period cinema, such as Wuduo jinhua (Five Golden Flowers, Wang Jiayi, 1959), Bingshan shang de laike (Visitors on the Icy Mountain, Zhao Xinshui, 1963), and Ashima (Ashima, Liu Qiong, 1964).

Apart from shaping the image of the ethnic minorities in China and occupying an ineffaceable role in the Chinese collective cultural memory of the 17-year-period, the development and popularity of ethnic minority films also played an essential role in the establishment and proliferation of an aesthetic direction in the PRC, one that can be conveniently albeit reductively summarized by the term “minzu fengge” [national/ethnic

25 Despite the relative long history of Chinese cinema (the official beginning dates back to 1905) and its prosperity between 1920 and 1940, only two minority-themed features were made before 1949, Yaoshan yanshi (Romance in Tribal Mountains, Yang Xiaozhong, 1933) and Saishang fengyun (Storm on the Border, Ying Yunwei, 1940). See Zhang Yingjin Chinese National Cinema 94, 299.
26 For a list of minority films of this period, see appendix “Minority Films of the 17-year-period.”
style]. Other common variations of this term include “minzu tese” [national/ethnic characteristic] and “minzu xingshi” [national/ethnic form]. The aesthetic direction signified by these terms became one of the goals that the cultural producers strived for in the PRC, despite the ambivalent and protean nature of the “national style.” Many minority films produced during the 17-year-period were considered to represent China’s national style (minzu fengge).

The debate about the essence of the national artistic style or form in China goes back to the years before the socialist period. The 1930s, for example, saw a major debate between two groups of intellectuals regarding the essence of wenyi minzu xingshi [the national art form]. One group, represented by Xiang Linbing, argued that traditional and folk art forms, such as storytelling and folk opera, should be the most important source for developing the national artistic form. New content, which suited the contemporary needs better, could be more effectively absorbed by the people if it was contained in old art forms. This was the thought behind Xiang’s metaphor of “using old bottles for new wine.” The opposite group, led by Hu Feng, argued that the old folk art forms could not effectively contain new content, as art forms were not politically innocent containers. Their structures were very much connected to the worldviews and epistemologies of the eras that produced them. To create real national art forms that met the needs of the time, therefore, according to this group of intellectuals, artists needed to adopt the “international” art forms and content, which were perceived to be modern. In other words, this group argued that it was ultimately impossible to use old bottles for new

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27 Reader should be aware that the word “art” here corresponds to the word wenyi in Chinese. Wenyi, literally “literature and art,” refers to cultural products in general. Mao’s Yan’an Talk was titled “Zai Yan’an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua,” which translates into “Talk on Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art.” This article covers not only literature and art, but also other forms of cultural production. Wenyi, therefore, does not carry the highbrow connotation that “art” does in English.
wine; the new wine, in their eyes, had to be contained in a new bottle. This debate continued through the 1930s and ended with Mao’s conclusive *Yan’an Talk*, which established the dominance of local folk art forms in the socialist China’s cultural production.28

This aesthetic debate was only one manifestation of the nation’s deeply rooted existential dilemma born out of its encounter with the West. China’s subordinate position in this encounter created a recurrent and pestering syndrome that intellectuals, artists and the general public have not been able to shake off: the perpetual tug of war between the need to advocate and defend a putative native tradition and the urge to learn from the Western culture, which is perceived to be superior and modern. Immanuel Wallerstein calls this type of phenomenon the antinomy between universalism and particularism of the modern society (217).29 As modern history proceeds, Wallerstein argues, so spreads the “universal” beliefs of the modern West, such as progress, rationality and democracy, as well as their culture, which now become the beacon of civilizing forces. The power of these universal beliefs and culture, backed by the West’s economic and military dominance, creates a dilemma for the weaker of the encountering civilizations. Wallerstein contends that the weaker civilization is neither able to accept nor to refuse this “gift” of universalism, for doing either would be to lose. To accept the gift of universalism would mean a total surrender to foreign values and therefore lose one’s identity; to refuse entirely would mean to voluntarily take a perpetual disadvantageous

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28 For accounts of this debate, see Li Zehou; Wang Hui, “Difang xingshi”; Zheng 213-7. David Holm’s *Art and Ideology* has an account of the continuation of the debate in Yan’an in the late 1930s (51-66).
29 Craig Calhoun has also discussed the tension between “universalism and parochialism,” an intrinsic disturbance within the ideology of modern nationalism, especially in non-European countries. See *Nationalism* 92-98.
position – not only politically, but also culturally, morally, and epistemologically – in a world system controlled by its adversaries. In Wallerstein’s words,

The only plausible reaction of the weak is neither to refuse nor to accept, or both to refuse and to accept – in short, the path of the seemingly irrational zigzags (both cultural and political) of the weak that has characterized most of nineteenth and especially twentieth century history. (217)

This seemingly irrational zigzag was exactly the stance that Chinese intellectuals adopted toward Western influences: “neither to refuse nor to accept, or both to refuse and to accept.” Much of China’s twentieth century intellectual and cultural history was shaped by these conflicting pulls.

The concern with minzu fengge in China’s cultural production should be understood in the light of this antinomy between universalism and particularism. China in the Mao era was undergoing a socialist revolution aimed at eradicating social differences and achieving equality, modernization, and democracy (if only in name and if only among “the people,” as the regime’s official doctrine of “people’s democratic dictatorship” indicates), all universalist ideals imported from the West. On the other hand, within the modern world that functioned with the basic units of nation-states, most of which were hostile toward the new People’s Republic at the time, a unique national identity was necessary for mobilizing the national community to achieve the “universal” ideals. In the cultural life, which was one of the most essential fields for molding the new national identity, establishing minzu fengge [the national style] became an urgent task for the cultural producers, despite the apparent difficulties to define the style.

Beyond the tension between the universal and the national, we should also be aware of the dialectical relationship between the two seemingly contradictory poles. National attachment and universal aspiration are intrinsically intertwined. Chinese
cultural producers’ obsession with minzu fengge – an aesthetic national identity constructed out of fragments and scraps of things with distinctive local color – did not stem from any essentialist affinity to a pre-given traditional culture. The final goal that minzu fengge was meant to help realize, as the above discussion shows, was progress and modernization. As an effort to construct an aesthetic national identity, the creation of minzu fengge exemplifies Homi Bhabha’s definition of identity as performative enunciation rather than essentialist innate qualities. In this sense, the creation of minzu fengge should be understood as collective performative moments instead of expressions of pre-existing national identity.

Discussing strategies used by postcolonial countries and communities when encountering modernity, Bhabha points out the dialectical relationship between modern imaginary and contra-modern practices:

Postcoloniality, for its part, is a salutary reminder of the persistent ‘neo-colonial’ relations within the ‘new’ world order and the multinational division of labour. Such a perspective enables the authentication of histories of exploitation and the evolution of strategies of resistance. Beyond this, however, postcolonial critique bears witness to those countries and communities – in the North and the South, urban and rural – constituted, if I may coin a phrase, ‘otherwise than modernity’. Such cultures of a postcolonial contra-modernity may be contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in contention with it, resistant to its oppressive, assimilationist technologies; but they also deploy the cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to ‘translate’, and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity. (9)

This discussion is also relevant to China, which is not postcolonial in a strict sense but nevertheless emerged as a nation out of the colonial world order in the 19th century. The ongoing concern with minzu fengge among the Chinese cultural producers is an example of the strategies of Bhabha’s “countries and communities” “constituted otherwise than modernity.” In other words, to create a national style that consists of contra-modern
elements is a gesture that contrasts with the usual course of modernization. Paradoxically this gesture also originates from the nation’s modern aspirations. Therefore it can be read as the nation’s effort to “translate” and “reinscribe” its “social imaginary” of modernity by deploying “the cultural hybridity” of the nation’s subordinate conditions. Only from this perspective can we begin to see the political stake involved in the aesthetic project of *minzu fengge* construction.

The creation and the obsession with *minzu fengge* in the 17-year-period was conditioned by China’s post-colonial dilemma in the modern world. However, as Wallerstein insightfully points out, this obsession with one’s local culture (particularism) is fated to be in constant struggle with the pull toward modernity (universalism). In 17-year-period China, this struggle was manifested in the periodical political campaigns against any cultural product that were suspected to be “reactionary,” such as *Wuxun zhuan* (The Life of Wuxun, Sun Yu, 1950) and *Guan lianzhang* (Platoon Commander Guan, Shi Hui, 1951). The former was criticized for its eulogy of feudal culture, and the latter, for its negative portrayal of PLA soldiers (who speak local dialect and are comic).

To create a national style, a logical place to start would be the nation’s tradition and history. However, as China’s political and cultural revolutions in its modern history were essentially anti-tradition, traditional cultural elements were often deemed politically suspect. The campaigns against *Wuxun zhuan* and *Guan lianzhang* were examples of the prevailing suspicion against any cultural product that did not subscribe to the contemporary ideological tenor during the 17-year-period. When Chinese filmmakers “discovered” the subject of ethnic minorities and the creative freedom that the official

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30 For major arguments against *Wuxun zhuan*, see Mao “Yingdang.” Paul Clark’s *Chinese Cinema* contains an account of the campaign against *Wuxun zhuan*, 45-55.
approval of preserving ethnic culture brought, it quickly became a rich reservoir of materials for constructing minzu fengge. With ethnic minority subject, scriptwriters and directors could portray and create tradition and local culture with little risk of being branded “reactionary.”

This direction was further aided by the overlapping of the concepts of nation and ethnicity in the Chinese word minzu, a phenomenon discussed in the previous chapter. As the new Chinese national identity was officially established as a multi-ethnic one, the use of ethnic minority to construct a “national style” became a most effective and safe route in China’s vacillation between “universalism” and “particularism,” modernity and tradition. Over time, the connection between ethnic minority and minzu fengge also contributed to the popular conflation of the two different meanings of the word minzu. Thus the image of ethnic minorities became closely related to the idea of national unity and national style.

Three representative films from the first wave of minority representation in post-1949 China will be discussed in detail. The first film, Neimeng renmin de shengli (The Victory of the Inner Mongolian People, Gan Xuewei, 1951) was the first minority film produced after 1949. First released under the title Neimeng chunguang [Spring Rays in Inner Mongolia] in 1950, the film was withdrawn and had to undergo substantial revision before its second release under its current title. This history sheds light on the importance of the ethnic minorities in the emergence of a new Chinese national identity. The second film in my discussion, Wuduo jinhua (Five Golden Flowers, Wang Jiayi, 1959), was one of the most popular films in the 17-year-period. Offering the audience various types of

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31 This freedom was relative and precarious. It was often threatened during period of tighter political control. Wuduo jinhua and Ashima, for example, were both branded in the mid 1960s as “poisonous weed” that advocated “love supremacy” (an idea that was associated with bourgeois humanism).
visual pleasure, it provided compensation for the nation’s uniformly political and ascetic culture. Emphasizing beauty and emotion, it exemplified a feminized and self-Orientalist side of the national image. Using ethnic minority to show national unity, on the other hand, could leave traces of discontent. The last film in my discussion, Nongnu (The Serfs, Li Jun, 1963), a narrative of enlightenment and liberation of the ethnic Tibetans, is an example of the uneasy coexistence of cultural encounter and ideological persuasion. In contradistinction with the previous two films, Nongnu is read in this study as a dissenting voice in a history of discursive nation-building that appropriated the image of ethnic minorities to produce a unified and appealing national identity.

From Neimeng chunguang [Spring Rays in Inner Mongolia] to Neimeng renmin de shengli [The Victory of the Inner Mongolian People]:

Nation and Ideology or What Does It Mean to Be Chinese Now?

In early 1950, half a year after the founding of the PRC, a film named Neimeng chunguang was released by North East Film Studio in Beijing. The film tells a story of the struggle between Mongolian herdsmen and the coalition between Mongolian aristocrats and KMT secret agents on the eve of China’s liberation. The story begins in an inner Mongolian banner (an administrative unit) shortly after the surrender of Japan at the end of WWII and the beginning of the civil war between the CCP and the KMT forces. The newly founded Association of Inner Mongolian Autonomous Movement (AIMAM, neimeng zizhi yundong lianhehui, founded in Dec. 1945), an organization founded and sponsored by the CCP, sends two cadres, Suhe and Menghebaerte, to a local banner to organize local revolutionary activities. Dundebu, the protagonist of the film, is a poor herdsman who works as the stable boy for the Duke, the aristocrat ruler of the banner.
Due to past personal and collective memories of Han people’s ill treatment of Mongolians, Dundebu holds hostile feelings toward all Han people. Anytime Han people interfere with Mongolians, Dundebu believes, they want to take advantage of the Mongolians. Because of such beliefs, Dundebu is cold and hostile toward Suhe, who he suspects to be a Han, and also stays aloof from Menghebaerte, his childhood friend, because of his connection to Suhe. A series of events, however, gradually changes his opinion. One of these is his experience in the KMT area, where he is sent by the Duke to deliver a letter to some KMT officers. There he is bullied by Han and Mongolian officers as well as Americans, but helped by some poor Han people. From this experience, he realizes that ethnicity is not the determining factor in the ill treatment of the Mongolian people. Rather, class difference dominates people’s different attitudes and treatment of poor people. Because of this experience and others like it, when the Duke sends him on an assassination mission to kill Suhe, Dundebu surrenders his dagger to Suhe instead of killing him. From then on he works with the AIMAM, joins the PLA, and fights in the liberation of Inner Mongolia.

As the first film with an ethnic minority subject produced after the founding of the PRC, Neimeng chunguang was quite successful. The film’s exotic setting, enhanced by lyrical camera treatment and Mongolian-flavored music, charmed both the audience and critics, and its political message – inter-ethnic unity in China – won initial official approval. In Beijing, the film was greeted with audience enthusiasm as well as favorable reviews from the People’s Daily, the official news organ of the Communist government (Bu; Zhong). Less than one month after its release, however, the screening was terminated by an order from the Ministry of Culture. The creators of the film later learned
the reason for this decision: the film was deemed to contain a message contradictory to the official policy on the united front of the nation. More specifically, this view targeted the negative depiction of the Mongolian Duke as a public enemy who exploits Mongolian herdsman and helps the KMT in its anti-communist and separatist activities. Even the Duke’s eventual death under KMT guns – an ironic turn of plot which shows the despicable nature of the enemies: they are not even loyal to their friends – was not sufficient to establish the political correctness of the film. It was the decision to pitch the Duke as a public enemy beyond redemption that was deemed inappropriate by some ethnic minority viewers as well as the censors at a higher level (Gan and Zhang).

Some knowledge about the political and cultural environment around the film’s production is necessary for comprehending this perplexing order from the CCP. The plot of the film, similar to many others on the screen of the new China, reflected the political mission that cultural products carried at the time. Films, like other forms of art, were not merely products of the imagination of artists that entertained the audience, but also effective ideological tools that could and should be used to educate and mobilize the masses (Hu Jubin 4). The dramatic conflicts essential to story-driven forms of art, such as fiction and films, should not be conflicts between the fictional individuals, but concrete manifestations of class contradictions and struggles, the ultimate force that

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32 Tongyi zhanxian [United Front], or tongzhan for short, first appeared during WWII, as kangri minzu tongyi zhanxian [Anti-Japanese National United Front]: the CCP led by Mao called on the KMT to form a united front to fight the invading Japanese. In the PRC period, the united front, renmin minzhu tongyi zhanxian [People’s Democratic United Front] generally reflected the CCP’s effort to utilize the resources and influences of other parties, ethnic minorities, and non-worker/peasant classes to achieve common goals, such as national unity and socialist development. See Henry He 456-457.

33 The most representative expression of this theory can be found in Mao’s 1942 “Talk at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art” (Zai Yan’an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua). This talk influenced Chinese cultural production until the early 1980s.
propels history to move forward, according to the dominant Marxist theory of history.\textsuperscript{34}

Zhou Yang (1908-1989), a high-level cultural official, made the following statement in his speech at the First Congress of the National Writers and Artists (1949),

> Only from a correct ideological perspective can a cultural worker portray the relations and conflicts between different social classes, their [representative] behavior and thoughts, and their destinies through the depiction of the relations, behavior, thoughts and lives of [concrete] characters. (qtd. in Yin 27, translation mine)

This argument was representative of the prevalent view of art’s political-ideological mission during the 17-year-period.

Along this line of conceptualization of the world, because ordinary people are often blinded by individual gains and losses in the web of historical forces, they need to be enlightened to see class struggle as the fundamental force in historical progress and to realize their own position and mission in this process. The arts, especially mass art like film, need to be used as effective tools in helping the masses reach this enlightenment.

This was the implicit message embedded in the prescribed role of cultural workers as educators in Mao’s \textit{Yan’an Talk}. It was also a continuation of the May Fourth belief in arts’ primary mission of enlightening the masses (Liu Kang 23). Dramatic conflicts therefore usually occur between members of different classes, such as peasants and landlords, or workers and factory-owners. At a certain point in these films, a mentor figure, usually a communist soldier or cadre, would appear to explain to the workers and peasants that their suffering in the hands of landlords and factory-owners stems from the inevitable class conflicts rather than from personal differences or destiny, and their pain would not end until the ruling class is overthrown. A traditional plot of personal revenge,

\textsuperscript{34} The allegiance to class struggle narrative in 17-year-period cultural products has occasionally incurred criticism from intellectuals. The film \textit{Liu sanjie} (Third Sister Liu, Su Li, 1960), for example, was criticized for “modernizing” an ancient folkloric figure by portraying her like a progressive women (Loh 174-175).
for example, is reinterpreted as a story of class struggle and is thus transformed into a text of socialist realism, where “public welfare” and “collective interest” are the major concerns rather than “personal frustration” (Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema* 202).

After being equipped with these new ideological weapons, the workers and peasants in these socialist realist films are then able to put theory into practice, and organize themselves to change the status quo. In the end, the dramatic conflicts as well as the class struggles in these films are always resolved with the victory of the oppressed over the oppressors. Such plots served as repeated confirmation of the validity of the Communist rule. Other aesthetic devices, such as camera angles, lighting, and mise-en-scène were also adjusted to enhance the audience’s identification with the oppressed and hatred toward the oppressors.

*Neimeng chunguang* was an early but typical example of such class struggle/salvation plots. The Mongolian herdsmen are depicted as a suffering group under the exploitation of the Mongolian Duke. A long scene at the beginning of the film portrays the physical misery of poor Mongolians, who are in forced labor in the construction of a new palace in preparation for the Duke’s 60th birthday. Others are also forced into various services for the Duke, such as herding and household duties. At the beginning of the film, the Mongolians suffer in physical misery and economic deprivation without attempting changes, assuming that this is their predestined fate. Only with the arrival of the two CCP cadres do the herdsmen begin see the injustice in their life and the possibility of change. Consequently the herdsmen organize themselves to help the PLA to defeat the KMT army and overthrow their longtime oppressors and become owners of their own life and land.
One can imagine the appeal that such narrative patterns might have for the audience in China at the time. Apart from positioning them on the right side of the history, this re-conceptualization raised the individuals above the banality of daily life and helped them transcend the vulnerability and meaninglessness of individual existence. Formerly poor, suppressed and insignificant, the new masses of the new China had driven away the old oppressors and were now masters of themselves, their lives, and their future. Whether or not the reality matched this utopian vision was irrelevant; the persuasive power of such a picture was immense.

The concept of nation entered the class-struggle narrative as a second axis of difference. As China was understood to be a proletariat nation, the Chinese people’s fight toward national independence and unification was reframed in the terms of class struggle. The two lines of struggles (for national unification and class liberation) became realigned so that the justified side in one struggle was also necessarily so in the other, and vice versa. Along this line of reasoning, as those from the oppressing class were always concerned with their own vested interests (such as economic gains and political domination), and the potential arrival of the CCP threatened these interests, it was assumed that they would never hesitate to cooperate with the imperialist Americans or KMT, the Americans’ allies, and sacrifice the independence of the nation to ensure the continuation of their own power. Along the same line, as long as one person was still concerned with the integrity of his nation, and refused to “sell” the national independence in exchange for the external protection of his economic and political privilege, he was not entirely corrupted and could be redeemed.
It was this realignment of national independence and class struggle that made it possible to portray landlords, factory owners and other non-proletariat members of the society in sympathetic light, despite the dominant class struggle narrative. The problem with *Neimeng chunguang* lay in its unfavorable depiction of the Mongolian Duke. This kind of depiction, the censors feared, would antagonize the actual dukes and other aristocrats of the ethnic minority areas, many of which, in 1950, were still wavering between the People’s Republic, the KMT government, and ethnic national independence. As these aristocrats were still holding control over their territory, antagonizing them would no doubt harm the united front and harm the future of the national unity. This concern became the primary reason that led to the decision to terminate the screening of *Neimeng chunguang*.

After several meetings between the film’s creators and officials from the Ministry of Culture and the State Department, it was agreed that the film needed to be revised, and the following advice was given on the film’s revision:

1. Re-position the Duke’s evil quality onto the special agent from the KMT, and thus replace the contradictions between different nationalities with the people’s contradictions with the KMT reactionaries. For example, instead of the Duke, depict the KMT special agent as the person who gives the order to torture a herdsman, the order for Dundebu to kill Suhé, and the order to murder Menghebaerte. Tone down other scenes of violence, such as the beating of the workers and children.
2. Add a good duke, or add a good son for the Duke.
3. Or show that the Duke is originally a good person, but a prince regent who has strong control over the Duke collaborates with the KMT special agent.
4. Or add a spy who hides in the Duke’s palace, and show that all the collaborations with the KMT and the suppression of the people are committed by the spy without the Duke’s knowledge.
5. Focus more on the Duke’s environment; magnify the contradiction between the Duke and the KMT special agent; increase content that foreshadows the Duke’s eventual change. (Gan and Zhang 60, translation mine.)
With these suggestions, the film’s production team started a revision process that lasted 10 months and led to 11 new scenes and 10 revised scenes. 28 out of the original 54 scenes were kept unchanged. In the new film, the Mongolian Duke was eventually persuaded to join the people. Mao changed the film’s title into *Neimeng renmin de shengli* [The Victory of the Inner Mongolian People] (Gan and Zhang 60).

Without archival material that documents Mao’s reason for changing the film’s title, we can only speculate on his intention. The major difference between *The Spring Rays in the Inner Mongolia* and *The Victory of the Inner Mongolian People* lies in the issue of agency. Whereas the former uses the image of seasonal change as a metaphor for the arrival of a grand new period, hinting at the influence that an external source – the CCP – made in bringing life-saving changes to Inner Mongolia, the latter with no ambivalence designates the agency of change to the Inner Mongolian people. In this way, the changes that occur in the film were attributed to the Inner Mongolian people, and hence a political event that might be interpreted as colonial invasion (China invading Mongolia) was cleverly transformed to a self-initiated liberation movement.

Seen together with the film’s plot revision, the change in the title can lead to a few interesting points. First, it is obvious that when a cultural product involved ethnic minorities, especially the ones living close to national borders, national unity had precedence over any other political concerns, including class struggle. This was at least true for films produced during the early years of the PRC. Whereas other films of the period were strongly pedagogical in portraying class struggle, films with ethnic minority subjects first and foremost needed to perform the function of emotional cement in bringing the ethnic minority population into the community of the Chinese nation, rather
than antagonizing them. To achieve this purpose, the usual antagonists of films from that period, such as landlords, if they happened to be of ethnic minority origin, needed to be toned down in their evilness and be presented as redeemable.

Second, when films with salvation plots involved ethnic minority subjects, the usual messianic role of the CCP as an external liberator was also subtly neutralized by the strengthened role played by members of ethnic minority groups. In general, these films avoided presenting the CCP entirely as an outside force. Rather, this liberating force consisted of members from the ethnic group under discussion. The difference between these liberators and the liberated, therefore, is one between the ones that find the truth earlier and the ones that do so later, rather than one between Han and a minority ethnic group, or the colonizer and the colonized. The salvation of the minority ethnic group was therefore a self-salvation. The change of the title mentioned above, though aesthetically bland, was a reference to this emphasis on self-salvation.

National unity was therefore more important than class struggle in films with ethnic minority subjects in post-1949 China. Overall, the genre of minority films helped construct the image of a nation of unity out of diversity. This was also echoed by audience responses. One reviewer commented on the scenery of the Inner Mongolian grasslands in Neimeng renmin de shengli: “The grasslands sparkling with green hue, the endless desert, flocks of cows and sheep, galloping horses and camels, all these scenes reveal the vast expanse of our motherland, and this is what our people urgently need to see as well”(Yuan Yiyi 3, translation mine). The exotic scenery in this film, instead of reminding the audience of the natural difference between Inner Mongolia and the rest of China, served as a confirmation of the vast territory of the motherland. The landscape in
the film was thus seen through a national epistemic lens and interpreted as a national image.

This logic of unity out of diversity also applies to the depiction of the people in minority films. It has been often observed that much of the popular success of the ethnic minority movies can be attributed to their exotic flavor (Clark, “Ethnic Minorities”). In a period when films were dictated by ideological functions, ethnic minority films provided film artists with a safe zone where they could satisfy visual desires of the audience and address issues that would be inappropriate in other films, such as female beauty and romantic courtship. In one review of *Spring Rays in Inner Mongolia*, this film’s ethnic flavor was considered its strength, but the author also warned against the danger of colonialist othering:

The film is full of Mongolian flavor. Dundebu herding horses on the grassland at the very beginning, Wuyunbilege herding sheep with bare feet on the grassland, the embroidered tobacco pouch she gives Dundebu as an engagement gift, the butter tea that guests are treated with, and the performance at the Naadam festival, all these convey strong Inner Mongolian flavor. However, *Spring Rays in Inner Mongolia* differs fundamentally from the kind of colonialist films with voyeuristic desire for minority ethnic groups. It [the Mongolian flavor] is very well balanced and only done for the need of bringing out the film’s themes. Although the film has interludes of love scenes, they are arranged very properly, without over-emphasizing love and feelings. Overall these scenes look very natural and respectful. (Zhong, translation mine)

The reviewer’s praise for the film’s proper treatment of its content is framed in his cautionary warning against the possible pitfalls for this type of film: the over-indulgence of colonialist voyeuristic desire for the exotic and the erotic. According to this comment, this film manages to avoid these pitfalls as its treatment of these two types of content is done with moderation and propriety. Their existence in the film is justified by their
function of “bringing out the film’s themes,” rather than being the primary focus of visual desire from the audience.

This warning reveals the critic’s anxiety over the possibility of internal cultural colonization embedded in the high profile representation of the ethnic minorities in the 17-year-period. It suggests that any portrayal of the exotic local flavor needs to be balanced with the films’ themes, first and foremost national unity. The exotic portrayal of the ethnic minorities, in other words, only appears on the screen to satisfy the principle of socialist realism, to make the story believable. I contend, however, that it is exactly the satisfaction of the audience’s visual desire that was essential to the political efficacy of these texts of nationalist persuasions. Exoticness and national unity are not necessarily at opposite ends that needed to be balanced, but are closely connected to each other. The next film in my discussion, Wuduo jinhua, is a good example of this exotic national identity.

**Wuduo Jinhua [Five Golden Flowers]:**

**Feminization of the Internal Other and the To-be-looked-at-ness of the National Self**

In 1959, amidst the heat of the “Great Leap Forward” movement, a 17-year-period cinematic classic was produced with the same kind of speed that steel was produced in the country’s attempt to catch up with the steel output of the Western countries. Within half a year, *Wuduo jinhua* (Five Golden Flowers, Wang Jiayi) went from planning to shooting and post-production. The conception of the film originated from the higher political leadership of the state. In March, unsatisfied with the monotonous content of wartime and “Great Leap Forward” stories in the *xianli* (tribute) films to the PRC’s 10th anniversary, the ministry of culture ordered the nation’s film
studios to make a xianli comedy film, one that was light-hearted, entertaining and free of political slogans. By October, Wuduo jinhua was finished and ready for exhibition. The film was an instant hit. Almost overnight, Wuduo jinhua brought national fame to Yang Likun, the leading actress, and Dali, the location of the film, a beautiful and remote small town in Yunnan province inhabited mostly by the Bai people. Twenty-nine years later, when the film was re-released after the Cultural Revolution, it was still extremely successful. The film’s charm also continued well into contemporary times. In 2005, it was voted one of Chinese audience’s ten favorite Chinese films (Chongfang Wuduo jinhua). Since the mid 1990s, as China’s domestic tourism boomed, Dali drew huge crowds of tourists from all over China, who came with fond memories of the 17-year-period cinematic classic (Notar 47-79).

The film opens with an elaborate scene of songs and dances. The occasion for the festivity is the most important festival of the Bai ethnic group in Southwestern China: Sanyuejie (the third month fair). A chance encounter between Jinhua and Apeng, the two protagonists of the film, on their way to the fair, sparks love at first sight. Sealing their affection toward each other with songs next to the otherworldly beautiful Butterfly Spring, the couple makes an appointment to meet a year later. With a melodic song, Jinhua gives Apeng her name and asks him to come back to look for her at the foot of Cangshan mountain, and the couple parts in expectation of their next meeting. In the narrative frame, this seemingly unreasonable one-year-wait is suggested to be a test of the young man’s sincerity. The film then shifts to a year later, showing Apeng already on his way to search for his lover. This time he is accompanied by two artists, one folk song collector and one painter, both Han cultural workers from Changchun Film Studio, who
are on a trip to collect folk art in the Bai area. Apeng’s pilgrimage turns out to be tortuous and eventful. As Jinhua is an extremely common name for girls in the Bai area, Apeng encounters many different Jinhuas on his journey. A story of romantic quest is then turned into a comedy of errors, as one misunderstanding comes after another, and Apeng crosses path with the real Jinhua several times without much luck. Meanwhile, the film reels out portraits of five beautiful Bai women, all with the name Jinhua. All five are engaged in the heated movement of socialist progress and are model laborers in the “Great Leap Forward” movement. At the very end of the film, the two lovers finally overcome all the obstacles and misunderstandings, and join each other in a happy reunion next to the Butterfly Spring, singing cheerful songs with the other four Jinhuas and their lovers.

Corresponding to the title, the visual focus of the film rests on the five “golden flowers.” Central as the character of Apeng is in the narrative, what became most memorable in the audience’s visual impression of the film was nevertheless the beauty of the five female characters as well as the beauty of the scenery. Many viewers had pointed out that the attraction of the film came from its beautiful scenery, beautiful story, and beautiful people (See, for example, Yuan Wenshu). Such comments might seem redundant, as it is essentially saying that the film is attractive because it is beautiful. Yet one must not forget, as I have mentioned, that film was mainly an ideological tool in 17-year-period China. Hence beauty and spectacle were never high on the priority list in film production. Instead focus was always put on the creation of revelatory narrative and archetypal characters. Since erotic portrayal of women on the screen was regarded as the derogation and exploitation of the female gender in a patriarchal society and always
needed to be avoided, it was rare to see female characters portrayed on the silver screen as being significantly different from their male counterparts. Only in this context can we understand the audience’s comment about *Wuduo jinhua*’s beauty as its strength, which would seem self-evident in a film industry controlled by the market.

It has been pointed out that most exceptions to the dominant sexless portrayal of women occurred in the genre of minority films. Many argue that, with the relative creative freedom offered by the minority nationality policy, the genre of minority films provided the film artists with a space for dealing with sensitive subjects at the time (Li Ershi 306; Clark, “Ethnic Minorities” 20). Scenes that would cause sharp criticism in other films, such as women dancing in colorful clothes, or a couple kissing, were justified in minority films, as they were considered realistic portrayals of the culturally different ethnic minorities. On the other hand, the apparent power discrepancy between the Han and other ethnic groups had also led some critics to read the erotic portrayal of ethnic women politically. Dru Gladney, for example, argues that the emphasis on female characters in minority films exemplifies the Han majority’s feminization and eroticization of the ethnic minorities in both political and cultural realms (92-125).

Whereas such a reading of China’s minority film genre provides a powerful critical frame to understand the cultural politics in discursive practices, its antithetical power model could not accommodate the multiple functions that films like *Wuduo jinhua* played. Other than constructing the image of the ethnic minorities, *Wuduo jinhua* was also an example of “nation as narration,” a creation of national image for both Han and non-Han audience. More uniquely, *Wuduo jinhua*, with its wide international release (Notar 47), was also a rare example of self exposure of the PRC during the 17-year-
period. I would like to argue, in addition to the existing interpretations of ethnic representation, that the erotic representation of the ethnic minorities is also an essential part of the new Chinese national identity. It served as a compensation for the highly political and ascetic cultural milieu of the 17-year-period. Meanwhile, and this is a point that I would like to elaborate on, the eroticisation and feminization of the ethnic minorities was also a manifestation of the strategy of self-Orientalism of the new nation, a compromise between universalism and particularism, modernity and tradition, and between the nation’s collective need of individuation and its desire for recognition.

Before going into this argument, I would like first to delineate the visual politics of *Wuduo jinhua*. Ever since the publication of Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” it has become impossible to appreciate a narrative film with female figure as its visual center without reflecting on the patriarchal power hierarchy embedded in the visual pleasure offered by such a film. In that milestone article, Mulvey argues that there are two types of pleasures that the classic Hollywood cinema offers: scopophilia and narcissism. The former refers to the pleasure of looking at erotic objects, and the latter refers to the pleasure that the audience obtains from identifying with an image on the screen, a process similar to the establishment of ego ideal in Lacan’s mirror stage. Positing a male spectator as representative of the patriarchal society, Mulvey further argues that both of these pleasures contribute to the phallocentric psychological foundation of the mass success of the traditional cinema. The spectator’s scopophilic pleasure comes from the voyeuristic gaze at the female forms on the screen, facilitated by the pseudo-private atmosphere that the cinema theatres provide. On the other hand, the process of recognition and identification with the male protagonist provides the spectator
with the fantasy of gazing at the woman from inside the narrative as well (6-18).

Mulvey’s psychoanalytic approach to classic Hollywood cinema, though controversial on several levels, made a major contribution to the examination of the political and psychological roots of visual pleasure in traditional cinema.

Though different in its narrative pattern from a classic Hollywood movie, Wuduo jinhua nevertheless satisfies the audience’s visual desire with its beautiful natural scenery and five beautiful leading actresses. Produced during the “Great Leap Forward” movement, Wuduo jinhua’s female characters do not readily fit into the stereotype of vulnerable women awaiting protection and salvation by male figures in classic Hollywood cinema. Rather, they are active participants in material production and social development. There are a few incidents in which Apeng helps to solve their problems, such as the repair service that he offers to Jinhua on his way to Sanyuejie when her commune’s carriage breaks down, but overall the women in the film are technologically savvy and independent leaders with power and determination in their respective fields.35

In contrast, the men in the film are far from emblems of leadership or strength. Both the husband of Jinhua, the veterinarian, and the boyfriend of Jinhua, the prospector, are prone to fits of jealousy. The real Jinhua’s family lacks any male authority figure. The only man in her family, her grandfather, lives his life revolving around one goal: to find a husband for his granddaughter. Even the Han characters in the film, the artists from the Changchun film studio, who also happen to be men, are portrayed as awkward characters that always have good intentions but nevertheless create more problems than they solve.36

35 Their professions alone give us some hints about this point: veterinarian, tractor driver, prospector, and vice chief of the commune.
36 According to Ji Kang and Gong Pu, the scriptwriters of the film, these two Han characters are the most important comic elements in the film. In early drafts of the scripts, the musician and the painter are
On the narrative level in the film, therefore, the women are stronger than the men, who are often confused or peripheral.

Nevertheless the female faces and figures are obviously objects of visual desire. Unlike female characters in many other films of the same period, women in *Wuduo jinhua* are not portrayed as sexless members of the society; they are not female equivalents of the male soldiers, workers and peasants that abound on the silver screen in the 17-year-period. They do just as well as (or better than) the men on any job imaginable, but their gender features do not have to be sacrificed in exchange for their status improvement. Rather, the gender features are highlighted through their costume, decoration, hairstyle and behaviors. These are women that are dressed in colorful outfits, unrelated to the Changchun Film Studio. However, the two characters are so clumsy and comic that there was a general fear in the production team that the Chinese Associations of Musicians and Painters would become infuriated after the film’s release. Hence the change to a folk song collector and painter from Changchun Film Studio. See *Chongfang Wuduo jinhua*.

with carefully decorated and distinctly female hairstyles, women that make embroidery for their lovers and express longings for them under the moon. All these explicit gender-specific depictions of women, which were taboo in most films in the 17-year-period, are done here with no disguise. Further, the cinematography of the film also underscored the women character’s feminine feature with many medium and close-up shots of the women’s faces, another uncommon cinematic practice in the 17-year-period.

Within the ascetic milieu of the 17-year-period, the extreme popularity of Wuduo jinhua was certainly a result of its satisfaction of the masses’ visual pleasure. The official cultural policy in the 17-year-period virtually removed all erotic depiction of women from the silver screen. With a significant lack of materials that satisfied scopophilic pleasure in cinema theatres, films like Wuduo jinhua were welcomed and consumed with avidity. On the other hand, film artists, many of which were veterans from the pre-PRC film industry and were therefore familiar with common practices used to attract audience in the classic Hollywood cinema tradition, took full advantage of the officially sanctioned license to portray women as objects of erotic desire in minority film genre and produced a number of ethnic minority films with feminine characters and romantic love scenes, such as Wuduo jinhua, Shenmi de lüban (The Mysterious Traveling Companion, Lin Nong, Zhu Wenshun, Zhu Wenyue, 1955), and Lusheng lian’ge (The Love Song of Lusheng, Yu Yanfu, 1957). In this sense the eroticisation and feminization of the ethnic minorities functioned as a libidinal compensation for the highly political and ascetic society in the 17-year-period.

Here we are witnessing an ironic twist of visual politics. What was read as cinematic manifestation of repressive gender hierarchy in the Western consumerist
society, the eroticisation of female images, when positioned in the context of 1950s China, was adopted as resistance by artists against cultural dictatorship. When film artists focused on minority films as venues for erotic images and romantic scenes and therefore possible outlets of mass psycho-erotic energy, they were actually practicing subversive tactics in the face of dominant strategies by a powerful authority. When the CCP government’s liberating gender ideology turned repressive, Hollywood’s repressive cinematic convention of representing women could become liberating forces.

Ethnicity inserts another axis of power into this field of visual politics. Due to the isolation of most minority areas from metropolitan centers in the country, most ethnic minorities were not exposed to film and film industry before 1949. Neither did they have easy access to the training required for film production. As a result, apart from the area of acting, ethnic film productions were dominated by Han film workers. The scarcity of the minority’s presence in ethnic film production leads naturally to the question of agency. In other words, regardless of what factors contributed to the absence, the fact remained that ethnic minority was denied voices in ethnic minority films.

This pronounced absence of ethnic minorities in minority film production, together with the feminine and sensuous images in minority films in the 17-year-period, has led a few scholars to the conclusion that these cultural products demonstrate the Han majority’s cultural othering of the ethnic minorities. Discussing ethnic minority representation in the PRC, Paul Clark points out the similarity between ethnic minority films and Western representation of racial minorities (“Ethnic Minorities”). The critique

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37 It is difficult to argue, however, that the absence of ethnic minorities in minority film production was a politically calculated practice to shut the minority out of China’s cultural life. Ethnic minority participation was actively sought when possible. Films such as Neimeng renmin de shengli (The Victory of Inner Mongolian People), Nongnu (The Serfs), and Caoyuan shang de renmen (People on the Grassland), had an all-minority cast.
of the binary power relationship in ethnic cultural politics in the PRC is most extensively and systematically laid out by Dru Gladney,

Minority is to the majority as female is to male, as “Third” World is to “First,” and as subjectivized is to objectivized identity. The widespread definition and representation of the “minority” as exotic, colorful, and “primitive” homogenizes the undefined majority as united, monoethnic, and modern. (93)

This conclusion, when applied to films like *Wuduo Jinhua*, corresponds to Mulvey’s argument on the political foundation of visual pleasure of cinema. Mulvey’s male spectator is, in this case, the entire Han Chinese audience, and the female image on the screen symbolizes the imagined minority other. The scopophilic pleasure that the audience derives from watching the film parallels the pleasure of dominance and self-assurance that the Han majority obtains from their cultural othering of the ethnic minorities. Gladney’s interpretation can be thought of as a collective version of Mulvey’s explication of visual pleasure in Hollywood cinema.

There exists other evidence, however, that suggests that Gladney’s conclusion and other similar interpretations are made at the cost of neglecting many political undercurrents in cultural production in the 17-year-period. One of such political undercurrents was the need of a newly independent nation to create a national identity for both the national community and a mostly hostile international world. As mentioned above, *Wuduo jinhua* was conceived as one of the “tribute” films to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the PRC. Not only was the film’s production first initiated by the Ministry of Culture, its whole production was also closely monitored. Xia Yan, the deputy cultural minister in charge of film production in the country, oversaw every step of the film’s production, including the writing of the script, appointment of the director, actors and singers selection, composition of the songs and so on. His advice for the film
crew does not fit readily into the stereotype of politics’ heavy handed intervention in art in communist China. When talking to the film artists working on Wudo jinhua, he gave two pieces of advice, “first, you need to follow artistic rules and try to influence and move the audience with images; second, in order to have the film released in as many countries as possible, you need to try to bypass the scissors of censorship of various kinds. Only then can we reach the goal of advertising ourselves and increasing our country’s public standing in the world” (Chongfang Wudo jinhua, translation mine). This goal was later achieved successfully. Wudo jinhua played to sold-out crowds in Hong Kong and was exported to 46 countries, another 17-year-period record. It also won both Best Director and Best Leading Actress awards at the Second Asian and African Film Festival at Cairo in 1960 (Notar 47).

Xia Yan’s instruction points toward something that is not often mentioned or realized when people look at cultural products from the 17-year-period. We do not usually see Mao’s China as a nation with international imagination. Rather, the nation is often seen as an enclosed group of homogeneous multitude, which willingly or unwillingly threw itself into the turmoil of one after another political campaign. Films during this period, considered primarily an ideological tool, were nothing more than political propaganda that aimed at converting the masses. This might be not far from truth, but it is important to remember that the so-called propaganda was not churned out by a machine, but by a group of cultural producers that worked with desires at different levels and restraints that changed constantly. It is also important to remember that all propaganda was not created equal, and careful analysis of cultural propaganda can still
render surprising insights into the collective psychological make-up of the masses, who digested different propaganda with different degree of receptivity.

In the 17-year-period China, one of the most powerful ideological tools to mobilize the masses was nationalism. For the Chinese people in the early years of the PRC, whose sense of national identity emerged directly out of the nation’s subaltern position vis-à-vis the world in the previous 50 years, an appealing national image should be both powerful and recognized by the international world. That is to say, the new national identity that would bring together the PRC’s multitude into an imagined community needed to be an appealing self-representation that would be accepted by an imagined international audience. The image of a united and strong nation was often achieved, as I have already argued in the context of *Neimeng renmin de shengli*, through persuasion, i.e., through political arguments of universal liberation, class struggle and modernization, whereas the image of an appealing nation was more often achieved through aesthetic and emotional strategies. These two sides of the Chinese identity were understandably in an uneasy relationship with each other and could not always be reconciled. With the appropriation of the image of ethnic minorities the two sides find a rare meeting point in *Wuduo jinhua*: politics and emotion, ideology and aesthetics, modernization and romantic love, these contrasting realms coexist peacefully in one hour and forty minutes. This, I believe, is the reason behind the film’s phenomenal popularity both within and outside China.

Let me recapitulate my argument on *Wuduo jinhua*’s mass success and its implication on the Chinese national identity in the 17-year-period, using again Mulvey’s two-tiered analysis of the visual pleasure of the narrative cinema. As an unusually
“beautiful” film in the 17-year-period, *Wuduo jinhua* appealed to the audience’s scopophilic desire with its beautiful female images, its romantic love story, and its beautiful scenery. At the same time, one can also interpret the erotic representation of minority women on the screen as the feminization, eroticisation and subjugation of the ethnic minorities by the majority Han Chinese. In this case, the scopophilic pleasure that the spectator enjoyed became a metaphor that defined the unequal relationship between the Han Chinese and the ethnic minorities, resembling the unequal relationship between men and women, or the first world and the third world. On the other hand, what the audience saw in the film could also be an overall image of the nation. The pleasure that the audience obtain from gazing at these beautiful images could thus be narcissistic pleasure. The beauty of the characters, the scenery and the story provided an important compensation for the “harder” qualities of the nation, such as class righteousness, liberation and modernization, and constructed a “softer” feminine side of the nation.

Beyond Mulvey’s theoretical frame of visual pleasure, I contend that films like *Wuduo jinhua*, as a text from a national cinema, provided another type of pleasure: exhibitionist pleasure. The film was produced with the exerted purpose of propagating the image of the new China to the international community. The erotic and feminine representation of the ethnic minorities in *Wuduo jinhua* and other similar films was therefore also a version of self-Orientalism. In order to achieve international recognition in a politically antagonistic world, Chinese cinema presented a national image drastically different from its usual internal self-representation as a modern, proletariat and ascetic nation. The ethnic minorities, as a constituent part of the nation, were used to show a different side of the nation-state, consisting of feminine beauty, love, and laughter, a side
complementary to the usual cinematic image of the nation. The effectiveness of this to-be-looked-at-ness of the national Self in *Wuduo jinhua* is another essential reason behind its popularity. Searching a middle ground between universalism and particularism, modernity and tradition, national dignity and international recognition, Chinese cinema resorted to the ethnic minority for local flavor, exoticness and exhibitable national uniqueness. In this way, a new nation’s spontaneous resistance to the subordination of the world order resulted in the nation’s internal othering of its ethnic minorities.

**The Ritual of Differentiation and the Specter of the Other**

--- **Political Cliché and Aesthetic Innovation in *Nongnu***

If the global imagination in the production of *Wuduo jinhua* reveals a unique aspect of the PRC’s relations to the rest of the world in the Cold War era, one that was defined by the desire to be recognized, accepted, and even liked, this aspect was frequently overshadowed by an opposite stance that China displayed to the world, one that was defensive, defiant and dignified. This aspect was the better-known face of the early PRC. Understood within the context of the humiliating history of China’s transition from an empire to a nation-state, these two stances are actually two sides of the same coin. Born out of the interference of external forces, the new nation-state suffered from the vacillation between the need of individuation and the desire for recognition.

Both of these urges were reasons behind the popularity of ethnic minority films. Films like *Wuduo jinhua* and *Ashima* epitomized the development of the so-called *minzu fengge*, a self-Orientalizing national style, which often contains elements that come from “the most ‘foreign’ cultural areas in the nation” (Clark, “Ethnic Minorities” 25). The defiant side of the national identity also had abundant manifestations in ethnic minority
films, where the integrity of the national territory and the national unity – especially among the different ethnic groups – were reasserted. These films formed a large portion of the minority film genre, and better known examples include Bingshan shang de laike (Visitors on the Icy Mountains, Zhao Xinshui, 1963), Shenmi de lüban (The Mysterious Traveling Companions, Lin Nong, Zhu Wenshun, Zhu Wenyue, 1955), Bianzhai fenghuo (Flames on a Border Village, Lin Nong, 1957), and Nongnu (The Serfs, Li Jun, 1963).

This group of films, mixtures of anti-espionage thrillers and political propaganda advocating national unity, can be seen as rituals of differentiation that identified “us” in contradistinction to “them.” Such function was not unique to ethnic minority films. A majority of the 17-year-period films involved some kind of “enemy” identification, be the “enemy” the evil country landlords, Japanese invaders or the KMT government. What was unique to the ethnic minority anti-espionage films was the dominant national overtone in the ritual of differentiation and its additional gesture of inclusion. Besides revealing the otherness of the “enemies,” these films also had on their agenda the inclusion of the ethnic minorities into the national community. In these films, therefore, the inclusion of the internal other was as important as the exclusion of the external other, both contributing to the construction of the national subject.

This inclusion of the internal other, however, could lead to unintended effect. Whereas giving the internal other the spotlight did underscore the family-like unity of the nation, the specter of the Other, so to speak, also lingered, despite the best effort to exorcise it. In other words, despite the consistent effort to represent the ethnic minorities as an integral part of the nation, the image of the internal Other still managed to persist as sites of fissures in the overarching unity of the nation.
This specter of Other was most visible in an ethnic minority film called *Nongnu* (The Serfs, Li Jun, 1963), made by the PLA August First Film Studio (Bayi dianying zhipian chang). It was the first and, as it turned out, the only feature film made in the PRC that directly portrayed the historical events in Tibet in the late 1950s. The film was lauded for its overall poetic composition as well as stylistic and imagery innovation, and was later considered one of the few examples of an underdeveloped cinematic “new wave” in the early 1960s (Xu Feng 360-362). From a contemporary and professional perspective, it was, as Yomi Braester puts it, a skillful combination of “an engaging linear story line with a meticulously constructed, symbolically pregnant mise-en-scène” (130). At the time, however, it was not well received by the Chinese audience. In contrast to the kind of enthusiastic complements that the audience showered on *Wuduo jinhua*, such as “refined,” “beautiful” and “heartwarming,” a lot of people found *Nongnu* “horrifying,” “boring” and “crude” (Xu Feng 360).

Aesthetic preference aside, the cold audience reception that *Nongnu* received stemmed perhaps from the strong effect of estrangement and alienation that permeates the film. Trying to address an immediate political situation and striving for realistic representation, the film produced the unintended effect of realistically conveying the estrangement, inevitable in the early encounters between the Tibetans and Han Chinese, and thus revealing the potential fissures within the newly constructed multi-ethnic national identity.

The film touches upon a sensitive subject, which was and continues to be the most important dissenting element in the multi-ethnic unity that the Chinese government tries to maintain. In 1951, the PLA entered Tibet. Later different parties call this maneuver

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38 Paul Clark also mentions the film’s cinematic innovation, *Chinese Cinema* 96-99.
different things. The Chinese government calls it peaceful liberation; the Tibetan government-in-exile, imperialist invasion.\textsuperscript{39} In 1959, the resistance movement in Tibet climaxed with a big scale revolt, and the Dalai Lama went into exile and Beijing declared martial law in Tibet. This part of history has become the territory in which different forces continue to fight for dominance of voice, moral high ground and power of memory making. On the Chinese side of the battle, the occupation of Tibet was an internal political maneuver supported by historical evidence of territorial claim. Recent cinematic representation of Tibet in mainland China without exception avoided direct references to the history of dissent in post-1951 Tibet, and instead either concentrated on the exotic landscape and customs, or Tibetans’ similarity to the larger Chinese family in resisting various forms of oppression.\textsuperscript{40} On the other side of the battle, fought by the Tibetan government-in-exile and people in the West sympathetic to the Tibetan cause, the Chinese invasion of Tibet was an imperialist act of violence that resulted in the loss of a country’s sovereignty, cultural integrity, and the basic human rights of an entire people. Films made by this side of the battle depicted the pre-1951 Tibet as an idyllic Shangri-la, and the Chinese invasion as a deplored event that threw Tibet from heaven to hell.\textsuperscript{41} The two poles of the propaganda war remain distant from each other without any sign of reconciliation in the foreseeable future (Powers).

\textit{Nongnu}, made in 1963, was the first feature film addressing the Tibetan insurgency in 1959. The film tells the story of how a group of oppressed Tibetans were

\textsuperscript{39} The military maneuver followed the signing of the agreement between Beijing and the Dalai Lama’s delegation, which acknowledged Tibet as a part of China’s territory. However, the signing of the agreement was made under the circumstance that PLA had already defeated the Tibetan Army in Chamdu, and therefore could not be considered an act free of coercion.

\textsuperscript{40} The “major motif film” \textit{Honghe gu} (The Red River Valley, Feng Xiaoning, 1999), for example, tells a story of how the patriotic Tibetans resist imperialist invasion of the British.

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Seven Years in Tibet} (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1997) and \textit{Kundun} (Martin Scorsese, 1997) are good examples of such depiction.
liberated by the People’s Liberation Army. The protagonist Jampa (Qi\-ngba) is the orphan son of a serf family. Prior to his birth, his father is killed by the serf-owner after a failed attempt to revolt. His mother is tortured to death shortly after his birth, due to unpaid family debt to the serf-owner. Raised by his grandmother, Jampa resents the fate of being a serf and having to satisfy all the needs and whims of the serf-owners, including serving as a horse – literally – to Namchal, then the serf-owner’s son, and later, as an adult, serving as a stepping-stone for mounting horses for the grown-up Namchal. At one point, when he is forced to neigh like a horse, he makes the decision to stop talking; this is his gesture of resistance. From then on he is often addressed by the serf-owners and their lackeys by the derogatory name of “Mute” (yaba). Later Jampa goes through different forms of hardship, including a failed attempt to escape and forced labor in a Buddhist temple. This sub-human state of being only comes to an end when the PLA takes over Tibet and liberates all serfs after the 1959 insurgence. At the end of the film Jampa, after adopting silence for over a decade, miraculously resumes his speaking ability, and utters the first words in his new life “Chairman Mao!!”

This damsel-in-distress plot is paralleled by a bildungsprozess, the gradual awakening of Jampa and his fellow Tibetans to the exploitation and repression by the serf owners and the religious leaders. With fragments of knowledge about the PLA and Chairman Mao passed around by fellow Tibetans, Jampa gradually comes to realize the oppressive nature of his world. After the Tibetan uprising, Jampa publicly presents the evidences of the living Buddha’s collaboration with foreign forces: large amounts of ammunition hidden inside a Buddha statue. He also wrestles with the serf-owner Namchal when he forces Jampa to aid his escape across the border. The film ends with
Jampa’s return to human dignity and Tibetans’ collective celebration of their newly gained freedom.

The film’s political agenda is well articulated. As one of the first feature films that focused on Tibet in China’s cinematic history, Nongnu shouldered the task of representing – interpreting – the recent Tibetan uprising as well as establishing the legitimacy of the PLA presence in Tibet. To fulfill these tasks the producers of the film establish a narrative that places Tibet and its people within the imagined community of the Chinese nation. This is achieved in several ways. First, at the very beginning of the film a passage of text alien to the mode of cinematic representation is strategically inserted, and a male voice reads out the text in Mandarin Chinese as it scrolls across the screen from bottom to top. In this little “preface,” the argument that Tibet is a part of China is shown as a pre-existing fact, and the incident of the Tibetan uprising is characterized as a “splittist” action. Furthermore, this action is also described as the serf-owners’ effort to recover their lost kingdom of privilege and luxury. Unlike most textual prefaces of films that are inserted to provide necessary pre-narrative exposition, this preface offers a narrative summary and a viewing guide. The act of persuasion therefore begins before the narrative unfolds.

Second, the film’s plot adopts the class-oppression and salvation structure to present the common suffering that Tibetans share with other Chinese. The PLA’s occupation of Tibet is described as an act of liberation that rescues all serfs from the economic, physical and spiritual exploitation under the serfdom system. The serfs’ sub-human life before the liberation is presented elaborately. Not only do the serf-owners

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42 This presumption is expressed in these words: “The nationality of Tibetans is a brother nationality with long history in the great family of our country.” (Serfs, translation mine)
own the serfs’ bodies – signified by the chains on their bodies – and their labor, they also control their minds through religion, as the affiliation between the serf-owner and the living Buddha reveals.43

Third, the film performs the ritual of differentiation by calling attention to the international political environment of the Cold War. Scenes of serf-owners and lamas amidst radio-communication with unidentified allies, and of ammunition being dropped from air, which is subsequently hidden inside a Buddha statue, suggest foreign support of the Tibetan rebels. Though never specified in the film, the Chinese audience familiar with espionage elements in films produced in the 17-year-period would know that such support usually came from two separate but related sources: the Republic of China, i.e., the KMT force that moved to Taiwan after their 1949 military defeat, dreaming of an eventual return, or any forces under the general term of “Western imperialists,” usually US forces. These espionage elements are often such exaggerated caricatures that it is hard for an outside audience to grant any credibility to the plot. Nongnu, despite its overall documentary tone, falls into the same pit when it comes to the representation of the “class enemies.” For example, once the true identity of the living Buddha as a member of the “splittist” movement is revealed in the film, we immediately see him in semi-military garb, complete with gun in hand, without any realistic necessity called for by the plot.

Representational pitfalls notwithstanding, the espionage elements in Nongnu were not entirely fictional. Though not mentioned often by the parties involved in the propaganda war around Tibet, the involvement of the CIA and its predecessor OSS (Office of Strategic Services) in the Tibetan independence movement was not a secret.

43 The audience learns, upon the first appearance of the living Buddha, that he and the serf-owner are cousins.
From 1950, when the US first offered help to Tibet in the form of a possible asylum for the Dalai Lama, to 1974, when the last team of Tibetan fighters trained by the US disbanded, the US government (mainly through the CIA) nurtured the Tibetan independence movement in the forms of funding, personnel training (first in Saipan, then in Virginia and Colorado), provisions, and diplomatic maneuvering between India, Pakistan, Sikkim and Nepal to ensure the survival of the movement. The scene of ammunition being air-dropped to the Tibetan rebels in the film, though not completely accurate since such support was not actually given during the 1959 uprising, is nevertheless not far from reality if taken as a general scene of the Tibetan paramilitary independence movement’s daily operation (Conboy and Morrison 66-118).

My point in bringing up the historical evidence of the connection between the CIA and the Tibetan independence movement is not to argue for the historical accuracy of the film Nongnu per se, but to shed some light on the reasons behind the anxiety over the newly constructed national identity, shared by the state, the intellectuals (including, of course, the creators of the minority films), and the people. One can argue that the external threats were perhaps magnified by the state to achieve internal unity, but the sense of impending threat to the new nation-state was not fabricated out of thin air, and this sense of impending threat certainly fueled the masses’ collective anxiety over the fate of their new nation.

Despite the clear political message in the film narrative, the film left the audience with impressions like “horrifying” and “boring.” Judging by Mao’s aesthetic principle of “education through entertainment” from the Yan’an Talk, Nongnu failed to assure and persuade the audience of the unity between the Tibetan people and the Han Chinese.
Although there was no obscurity in the message of inter-ethnic unity in the narrative, the film unsettled the audience on the level of affective influence. The sense of estrangement in *Nongnu* was an unusual aberration from the majority of the ethnic minority films. This sense of estrangement, in my opinion, was the result of the inevitable contradiction buried within the project of using ethnic minorities to construct a national style and a national identity.

Several elements can be considered the sources of the estrangement of the film: the dominant silence, the documentary style, the portrayal of religion, and the film’s lighting and narrative innovation. An examination of each of these elements is necessary for us to understand the origin and the significance of the estrangement effect in the film.

Silence is the dominant auditory image in the film. The silence of the protagonist, Jampa, is called for by the plot, as he chooses to be mute for most of the time covered by the film. Within the narrative tradition of the 17-year-period, Jampa’s silence is also a metaphor that signifies the connection between the societal structure and the integrity of an individual. The basic logic of such stories is that the condition in the old society violates the individual human rights of any member of the oppressed class, and hence the body would exhibit signs that indicate the infringement of these human rights. A more canonical example of this connection would be *White-Haired Girl*, which shows how the old society turns a human being into a demon and the new society turns the demon back into a human being. This could also be used to summarize *Nongnu*.

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44 The white-haired girl is the protagonist of a classic revolutionary story that was adapted into several media of performance: opera (1945), film (1950), Peking Opera (1958), and ballet (1965). It tells the story of a peasant girl Xi’er, who, in order to escape from her landlord’s sexual and economic oppression, flees into wild mountains. After living in a cave for three years, Xi’er’s hair turns white, due to the lack of sunlight and salt. Her ghostly presence in the mountains thus generates local rumors about a ghost haunting the area. After the PLA liberates her village, Xi’er is rescued from the cave and returns to normal life. Her hair then resumes its original dark color.
However, when Jampa’s silence is not accompanied by the usual abundance of condemnation, revelation and education by the liberators as in other revolutionary narratives, the established formula of such narratives is violated and an estrangement effect arises. Contrary to established revolutionary narrative formula, the PLA soldiers and officers in Nongnu do not utter a single word throughout the film. As the liberator, the ideological superior and hence the owner of the discursive power, the PLA soldier’s silence is a curious aberrance from the norm in such films. There are two scenes in which this silence is too dominant to be ignored. Both of these scenes contain encounters between serfs and the PLA soldiers, or between Tibetans and Han Chinese. The first scene is an enactment of the narration of Luosang, a blacksmith friend of Jampa’s, about his first glimpse of the PLA soldiers. The shots in this sequence start as voyeuristic: The PLA soldiers are first represented from Luosang’s point of view and appear in small profile, marching amidst some stunning natural landscape. When Luosang sees them, he hastily takes flight, presumably because of the oppressed’s natural aversion to any soldiers. As he tries to run away he falls because of his cumbersome chain that all the blacksmiths are made to wear in Tibet. Alarmed by the sound, two PLA soldiers run toward the fallen serf and try to help him up. They then notice the chain between his feet and one of them lifts the chain with one powerful hand and makes the symbolic gesture of clenching it with indignation.

The major purpose of this scene has to be understood outside the framework of realistic storytelling. The representation of the PLA soldiers in this scene serve two functions: one, it is to show that they do not treat the serfs in any cruel way, as the serf imagines; second, this scene conveys that they recognize and are shocked by the physical
chain that binds the serf’s feet and the metaphorical chain of class oppression, and that they are there to break both. All these are not uncommon in this type of encounter. What is uncommon about this scene is the dominant silence. No one utters a word in this brief yet intense encounter. Everything is exchanged through eyes and gestures. The entire sequence is acted out with exaggeration as in a pantomime, complete with several close-ups of the symbolically important details, such as the fist, the chain, and the faces.

The second silent scene that I want to discuss depicts the first encounter between Jampa and the PLA soldiers. When accompanying Namchal on his trip to a meeting with the PLA officers, Jampa, now the stable boy, stumbles under the weight of Namchal while carrying him from a ferry to dry land and hurts himself. Namchal pays no attention to Jampa’s injury and is only infuriated at the inconvenience. Attended to by a PLA soldier, Jampa is put under the care of the medical squad of the army. When Jampa wakes up from unconsciousness, a point-of-view shot reveals the gradual emergence, in Jampa’s vision, of a group of angel-like army nurses smiling at him. Later, summoned by the serf-owner, Jampa comes out of the camp and sees a horse standing outside. A PLA officer beckons him to take the rein. Puzzled by such an offer, Jampa falls onto his knees after a moment of hesitation, thinking that he is asked to perform his usual function in the presence of a horse: serving as a footstool. With an expression of astonishment, the PLA officer helps Jampa up and mount the horse. Eyes brimming with tears of revelation and gratitude, Jampa rides away, leaving the smiling and waving PLA soldiers behind. This, again, is a scene of double recognition. The oppressed recognizes his own humanity, and

45 This incident is presumed to occur sometime between 1951 and 1959. Although the PLA was already in Tibet, the goal of the central Chinese government was still to integrate Tibet into the new state without overhauling its existing social structure. Hence the semi-diplomatic meeting between the aristocrat and the PLA officers.
the liberator recognizes the suffering of the oppressed. Again, the scene is word-less. Jampa is, of course, mute, but the PLA soldiers, nurses, and officers all strangely let go these premium chances to enlighten the serfs, and instead remain in their silent presence of kindness that lacks any sense of reality. As Mandarin Chinese was used in all ethnic minority films during the 17-year-period, and language barrier was never addressed in representation of Han-minority encounters in these films, the silence of the PLA soldiers in *Nongnu* is truly puzzling.

The power to speech is, of course, a symbol of political power, and hence Spivak’s now notorious conclusion: the subaltern cannot speak (308). This inability to speak also refers to the deprivation of the subaltern’s subject position and therefore their ability to make observation, judgment and self-representation. In *Nongnu*, Jampa’s silence is a symbol of the serfs’ subordinate position in the old society. Yet after the arrival of the PLA, when the power oppositions transitions from the one between the serfs and the Tibetan aristocrats to potentially between Tibetans and the Han Chinese (the PLA soldiers and officers), the silence of the Han Chinese during their encounter with the Tibetans is a challenge to our usual understanding of the linguistic manifestation of political power.

Complication comes from the perspective that the filmmakers choose for *Nongnu*. A film made largely by Han Chinese, *Nongnu* nevertheless adopts a Tibetan point of view. To make this point of view persuasive, the Han Chinese in the film are deprived the power of speech as images of comprehensible Chinese would not be truthful to the Tibetan’s first impression of these outsiders. The Tibetans speak Mandarin Chinese in the film, and therefore the Chinese have to be silent. As a result, the sense of estrangement in
the encounter between Tibetans and Hans becomes inevitable. The scriptwriter of the film Huang Zongjiang specifies this point:

In the script, I try to look at the other characters through Jampa’s eyes. In order to maintain this “point of view,” I describe all the PLA soldiers and officers that Jampa couldn’t name as “a certain soldier” or “a certain officer,” instead of making concrete connections between them and Jampa. At the time, I felt that to adopt a documentary approach without making connection between them, as long as Jampa is concerned, is probably closer to reality. (125, translation mine)

The film adopts a “documentary” style and depicts the encounter s an alienating experience for Jampa. Hence the gaze of the camera, imitating that of Jampa’s, appears observing. The silence of the PLA soldiers is likewise the result of this perspective choice. If one wants to realistically represent the confusion, shock, and cultural estrangement felt by the Tibetans upon their first encounter with the Chinese (let’s not forget that there really was a language barrier), it becomes a quite reasonable if not inevitable choice to keep the “Other” in the Tibetan eyes silent. In an ironic turn of positions, the Han Chinese become the ones that are observed and scrutinized within a minority film that was going to be watched largely by Han Chinese audience.

We can infer that it is out of concern for psychological realism that the PLA soldiers and officers are deprived of their voice in this film. Similarly, another source of estrangement in the film, the representation of religion, was also meant to achieve realist effect. The interpretation of religion proved to be a conundrum in the production of Nongnu. On the one hand, the creators wanted to incorporate the Marxist view of religion as “spiritual opium” for the oppressed still fogged by their false class-consciousness. On the other hand, they need to represent religion as a part of Tibetans’ life, an essential part of the culture of an equal fellow ethnic group, which was protected by the PRC’s minority national policy.
Huang Zongjiang was aware of this conflict and put it in explicit terms:

Religion is a very important element in Tibetan life. This is something that cannot be shunned in the script. We have to respect Tibetans’ freedom in religious belief. On the other hand, however, we are also aware that in a class society religion is always used by the dominant class to spiritually exploit the people. We have no right to hurt the Tibetan people’s religious feelings, but neither do we have the right not to raise people’s class awareness on this subject. (126, translation mine)

As the most important aspect of the Tibetans’ life, religion is part of their culture and therefore deserves a truthful depiction in a film about Tibetan life. In the artists’ mind, the depiction of religion is required by the principles of equality and mutual respect in PRC’s nationality policy. However, as the most important mass ideological propaganda tool (a belief internalized by the artists), cinema also has the responsibility to reveal the “truth” about religion, which is not a politically innocent cultural element.

The effort to resolve this conflict, translated into the aesthetic realm, results in the film’s atmospheric use of religious elements to create a sense of the Other (including an impressive shot from underneath a row of long trumpets held by a group of lamas in front of a temple, a shot that immediately follows the panning shot of the Himalayas in the film’s much-applauded spectacular opening sequences) and its explicit message of religion’s deception. This deception is most clearly revealed in Jampa’s grandma’s sudden death on her way back from a Buddhist temple and the suggestive detail of guns hidden inside a Buddha statue. Stripped of its existential assurance, religion becomes a random collection of strange images and practices, and this kind of depiction of religion in Nongnu contributes to its overall effect of estrangement.

As mentioned earlier, Nongnu contained many aesthetic innovations and was later lauded as one example of a repressed cinematic “new wave.” A clear departure from the Chinese narrative cinematic tradition characterized by linear plot, stage-like framing and
monotonous flat lighting, *Nongnu* is noted for its innovation in its narrative structure, lighting and frame construction. The narrative in *Nongnu* is not tightly woven and lacks a clear sequence of cause and effect. Many gaps are intentionally left to create the crude and non-linear feel of a documentary. In Huang Zongjiang’s words, overall it strives for the overpowering of “documentation over narrativity,” “emotion over action,” and “poetry over drama” (qtd. in Xu Feng 361). In terms of imaging, the film focuses on bringing out the materiality of objects and figures through unique lighting arrangements. The images of characters in the film are distinctly three-dimensional and resemble bronze sculptures.

Many of these aesthetic innovations resemble practices of Italian Neo-Realism and French New Wave cinema, but the reasons behind the innovations were different. Often, stylistic and narrative innovations in Italian Neo-Realism and French New Wave aimed to challenge and deconstruct the traditional narrative linearity and the authoritative stance of the storyteller (or the camera) in cinema. Embedded in these formal innovations is the awareness of the alienation of the modern man in a late Capitalist world. In China in the 17-year-period, however, alienation and reification were deemed to be incongruent with the new People’s Republic. The prevalent belief held that the laboring masses had just become the owners of their means of production. The reclamation of the subjectivity of the people was what artists were trying to convey, not the weakening or the loss thereof. The Chinese cinema at the time teemed with authoritative narratives and reassuring methods of meaning production. Within this overall political environment, it was not a coincidence that the stylistic innovations that resembled some practices in the international cinematic New Wave appeared in a minority film. What Fellini and Godard
saw in the post-WWII European society, Li Jun and Huang Zongjiang intuitively sensed when creating a film that depicts the internal other. The estrangement from reality, history, or any overarching “truth” felt by a modern man in a highly industrialized society found counterparts in the realistic portrayal of the psychological experience of the ethnic minorities upon their initial encounters with the Han Chinese. Even though the overall political message of *Nongnu* clearly points toward the unity of the new nation, the authority of the CCP, and the resumption of individual subjectivity, the aesthetic innovations hint at the haunting specter of the internal other under the appearance of the unified multi-ethnic Chinese national identity.

In the large body of ethnic representation texts of the 17-year-period, *Nongnu* was a rare exception. Most texts, such as *Neimeng renmin de shengli* and *Wuduo jinhua*, contributed to the development of an empowering multi-ethnic political national identity and *minzu fengge*, an aesthetic national identity. During the tumultuous early years of the PRC, this emerging national identity was a much-needed response to the nation’s precarious political unity and a hostile international gaze. After the 17-year-period, this connection between ethnic representation and national identity construction would return at different moments of national identity crises. In this sense, the first wave of ethnic representation in the PRC was a foundational era in a history of discursive nation-building that would continue to negotiate between local, national, and global imaginaries.
Chapter Three

Dancing Between the Nation and Modernity

The first wave of ethnic representation in the People’s Republic of China was undermined by increasing politicization of culture in the second half of the 1960s. By the time that the Great Proletarian Culture Revolution (1966-1976) began, culture in mainland China had been reduced to a handful of politically prescribed model texts and plays, leaving little room for artistic creation. Worse off were the cultural products with minority subjects, as they usually featured depictions of ethnic minority tradition and customs that might be considered remnants of feudal or capitalist worldviews. As soon as this cultural ice age came to an end in the late 1970s, however, images of China’s ethnic minorities quickly returned to painting, fiction, and films in abundance, forming a second wave of minority representation. In this renaissance of China’s “internal other,” the political implication of ethnic representation went far beyond the affirmation of national unity or partial satisfaction of the masses’ deprived psycho-erotic yearnings. In an age filled with national anxiety and cultural myths, the image of ethnic minorities was appropriated to perform multiple rebellious roles in the intellectuals’ collective effort to construct a new national identity. In this sense, the image of the internal other was used once again to facilitate the re-birth of the nation.

46 In 1979, Yuan Yunsheng’s Beijing Airport mural Water Splashing Festival became the first influential cultural product with minority subject matter after the Cultural Revolution. I choose 1989 to be the ending date of the second wave of ethnic representation, as the Tian’anmen incident in 1989 marked an abrupt end to the decade. Some influential art works with minority subject that continued the general spirit of the 1980s, such as Zhang Chengzhi’s Xinling shi (History of the Soul, 1991), were produced after 1989. However, the ten years between 1979 and 1989 did constitute a period of relative thematic continuity and cover most of the works of minority representations discussed in this chapter.

47 This statement refers only to the activity of professional art producers. Mass cultural production continued to be active during the Cultural Revolution. See Kraus “China’s Cultural ‘Liberalization’” 216-18.
Before examining these minority texts in detail, I want to first attempt an overview of the cultural environment of 1980s’ China. Given the complexity and diversity of the period, the following brief account will hopefully bring to the fore several important themes and issues in the 1980s that would shed light on Chinese intellectuals’ revived interest in the ethnic minorities during this transitional era.

In recent years the decade of the 1980s has reemerged on China’s cultural scene as a glorious subject of memory and nostalgia.\(^{48}\) This decade, following the end of the Cultural Revolution, was remembered as a time of major transitional changes. The gradual reopening of the nation to the world, the government’s shift from ideological struggle to national modernization, the introduction of market economy, and many other groundbreaking economic and political events had made the decade a formative period that shaped contemporary China. In many of the recent retrospective accounts, however, the 1980s was an era when “culture” took center stage in social life like never before in PRC history. Different from official accounts of the 1980s that remembered the period mainly for its economic reforms and political rectifications, the intellectuals’ recollections of the decade lingered nostalgically over the creative passion of writers and artists, as well as the public limelight projected toward these cultural producers.

The surge of interest in culture in the 1980s was historically anticipated. Following the intellectual and cultural devastation of the Cultural Revolution, this new period\(^{49}\) faced the colossal task of reconstructing a sustainable culture out of the

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\(^{48}\) Some better-known examples of this return were the mainland publication of *Bashi niandai wenhua yishi* [The Cultural Consciousness of the Eighties] edited by Gan Yang (first published as *Dangdai zhongguo wenhua yishi* [The Cultural Consciousness of Contemporary China] in 1990 in Hong Kong), the publication of Zha Jianying’s *Bashi niandai fangtailu* [A Collection of Interviews on the 1980s], and CCTV’s on-going multi-episode documentary *Xianxiang 1980* [Phenomena 1980].

\(^{49}\) In many accounts of cultural history, the period that followed the Cultural Revolution in the PRC was literally called “The New Period” (*xin shiqi*).
remaining debris of the society. The “Culture Fever”\textsuperscript{50} of the 1980s – an unprecedented elevation of culture in society – can be seen as an over-compensation for the scarcity of non-violent cultural experiences during the Cultural Revolution.\textsuperscript{51} But more importantly, the Cultural Fever was a manifestation of a collective anxiety over the national identity after the devastation of the Cultural Revolution. It resumed an intellectual tradition in modern China in which the nation was discussed as a community in urgent need of reform and improvement. Jiuguo [national salvation] or qiangguo [national empowerment], a theme that had persisted from the May Fourth movement, through China’s socialist revolution and construction, now reemerged, either overtly or disguised under other more universal motifs, as the ultimate goal of the Culture Fever. Amidst this renewed interest in cultural salvation of the nation, the old antinomy of China and the West, or tradition and progress, was again put at the forefront of the cultural debates that seemed to have occurred everywhere, in governmental cultural policies, in art exhibitions, on film magazines, academic monographs, literary journals, newspaper editorials, and so forth.

This nationalist cultural project, however, presented to its participants more obstacles than what their predecessors had faced during the May Fourth or Mao period.

\textsuperscript{50} The established use of the term “Culture Fever” (\textit{wenhua re}) refers to the period between 1985 and 1989, covering several widely publicized intellectual debates. This term is used more loosely in this chapter, covering the entire 1980s, since other cultural phenomena preceding 1985, such as \textit{Xingxing meizhan} [star art exhibition] (1979) and \textit{xiangtu xieshi zhuyi} [Rustic Realism] painting (1980-), popularity of \textit{shanggan wenxue} [scar literature] (1975-), already demonstrated the vibrant revival of cultural activities prior to 1985. For a detailed discussion of themes and trends in the Culture Fever of the 1980s, see Xudong Zhang’s \textit{Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms}, 35-100. Wang Jing’s \textit{High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China} also offers a perceptive account.

\textsuperscript{51} The traumatic memory that the Cultural Revolution left on people – memory about violence, chaos and degradation – has turned the name of the movement into such a stigma that one easily forgets or conveniently overlooks the original meaning of “cultural revolution.” This “revolution” was after all about culture, the invisible, unexplained and tacit syntax of individual and collective lives that contributes to identity formation, weaves social bonding and prescribes propriety. It is quite an irony that this was later widely accepted as a period with no “culture.” See Ban Wang’s \textit{The Sublime Figure of History} for an alternative reading of the Cultural Revolution, 194-228.
The major challenges came from the separate intellectual developments in China and the West during the past half-century. Though often considered a period of cultural renaissance and often compared to the May Fourth movement, the decade of the 1980s was certainly not a mere repetition of history. The issues in the heated debates all sounded uncannily familiar: the relationship between content and form of art, the value and relevance of Western thoughts, skills and technology, the value of China’s cultural tradition, the relationship between art and the masses, but the historical context was significantly different from the May Fourth or Mao period.

While China in the late 1970s came out of a period of isolation from the West, as it was confronted with the West after a long period of isolation in the late 19th century, the West in the 1980s was no longer at the peak of its imperialist era. During the time that the Chinese society engaged itself in an overhaul of its ontological and epistemological universe, the West had also undergone waves of iconoclastic negations of its own heritage. The challenges to the foundational values and morality of the Western society, which already started in the 19th century, had become the zeitgeist during and after the two catastrophic world wars. In the realm of cultural production, this iconoclastic zeitgeist was manifested as a fast succession of different and often contradictory styles and trends in different art media and forms. Many different modes of representing human beings’ internal and external experiences swept over the Western cultural horizon, challenging the supremacy of rationality and the absolute separation of the subjective and objective worlds.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the globe, in the isolated PRC, artists, who might have been exposed to some of the art movements in the West prior to the Communist
take-over, remained mostly unaware of the changes and struggles outside the country.

During the 17-year-period and the Cultural Revolution, artists had to revolve cautiously around the officially sanctioned center of Socialist Realism or Revolutionary Romanticism, trying not to venture too far away from the sanctioned safety zone so as not to be swept away by one after another political campaign. Isolated in a country of relatively slow economic growth and bombarded with class struggle propaganda, the masses and the artists were little aware of the challenges brought by extreme industrialization and commercialization in the modern West.

Because of such separate and different historical trajectories, when China came out of its isolation at the end of the 1970s in its re-encounter with the West, the conundrum it faced had more facets than during the May Fourth period. The questions that lay before the intellectuals and artists were not just choices between the West and China, tradition and progress, or past and future, although these were certainly in the usual lexicon used in the cultural debates. Underneath the surface of the old antitheses, the perennial dilemma that Chinese intellectuals faced – that of universalism versus particularism – had actually turned into a multi-faceted hall of mirrors. Tradition was no longer simply the Chinese civilization; rather it could also mean – and it often did mean – the revolutionary tradition. In a narrow sense, this tradition referred to Maoist Marxism, a system that prescribed methods to understand and shape, on a macro-level, history, social relationship, economy, culture, and politics. But in a more extended version, this revolutionary tradition was the sum total of the societal structure and daily practices in the socialist era that the new period tried to break away from.
With such a historical baggage of multiple traditions, modern imaginaries and the reconstruction of national identity could take on myriad faces. As the cultural reflection harbored strong rebellious spirit against the Cultural Revolution, any alternative to the ideology-dominant control of culture was desirable and sought after. It is not surprising, therefore, that many different voices competed during the years after the Cultural Revolution to be the correct direction for the nation. Some argued for a return to the order and wisdom of the pre-May Fourth Chinese culture, particularly Confucian culture. These so-called Chinese Culturalists or New Confucians argued for revitalizing the traditional culture to meet the new challenges of modernity. A different cultural approach, albeit also a return to tradition, was adopted by another group of cultural practitioners who directed their gaze toward everyday life, particularly the customs and lives of people in areas distant from modern influences. First in paintings, then in films and fiction, representation of remote regions and people outside the metropolitan centers became an important site for “rediscovering” Chinese culture. This cultural trend eventually received the name xungen [root-searching], as the literature branch of the trend began to draw both critical and popular attention. Grouped under the rubric of xungen writers, Zhang Chengzhi, Han Shaogong, Mo Yan, Ma Yuan and others embarked on phantasmagoric literary journeys into the lives of people living on the Mongolian prairie, in the remote mountainous areas of Hunan and Shandong, on the Tibetan plateau, and other nooks and corners that were previously little known to Chinese readers. To their contemporary readers, the mysterious and sometimes mythical folk cultures that these literary journeys

52 Major advocates of this argument came mainly from Zhongguo wenhua shuyuan [Academy of Chinese Culture], established in 1984, such as Tang Yijie, Pang Pu, and Li Zehou. See Edward Wang 206-207; Xudong Zhang 42-44.
conjured up revealed a powerful continuity in Chinese culture that had been overlooked during a century of revolution and reforms. On the other hand, influenced by the literary movement of Magical Realism from Latin America, *xungen* literature also contested, with its fascination with the “unreason,” the increasing tyranny of instrumental rationality advocated by the new technocratic CCP leadership. Meanwhile, another development of the *xungen* school, epitomized by the influential and controversial TV series *Heshang* [River Elegy], was interested in searching for China’s cultural roots so as to locate the origin of the nation’s contemporary failures. Both directions of the *xungen* school were manifestations of the prevailing spirit of cultural reflection among the intellectual elite in the 1980s.

Parallel to those who looked “inward,” artists and writers who looked westward were also aware of the past. There was an urgent sense of achieving modernity by catching up with the current West. As a result, the West’s entire intellectual and cultural history needed to be studied, digested, understood, and internalized. Classical and contemporary writers, philosophers and artists were introduced to the Chinese reading public quickly; Plato and Heidegger, Freud and Lacan, Hugo and Márquez, Michelangelo and Warhol, even the Bible – these icons of Western civilization were introduced or reintroduced to the Chinese at about the same time and were devoured with similar avidity, without much systematic consideration for their respective historical contexts and genealogy. In an urge to “catch up with history,” the real history and historicity of the intellectual development of the West was conveniently overlooked.

In sharp contrast to the large number of possibilities discussed above was the relative scarcity of information. Although “reform and open door” policy had been
officially adopted in 1978, the political reality of the Cold War separation and the xenophobic fears of the CCP state determined that the country was still largely isolated from the rest of the world, and the information that flew into China from the outside, including cultural products, was extremely limited and arrived in a haphazard fashion. The West’s long intellectual and cultural tradition, particularly the large quantity and variety of works from the eras of modernism and postmodernism, limited by the meager and highly improvised channels of transmission, entered China in fragments, with very little or no sense of historical continuity or political relevance.\(^{53}\) As a result, the West, or the outside world, in the minds of the intellectuals as well as the general public, was more or less an imagined world with which they could address local problems.\(^{54}\)

On the side of the Chinese tradition and folk culture, the severe damage to the social fiber during the previous thirty years had rendered the search for cultural roots in everyday life difficult. As a result many writers and artists went to isolated inland and remote areas for inspiration of their cultural reflection. In these areas where the influences of modernity in general and the revolutionary ideology in particular were perceived to be the weakest, the *xungen* writers and artists suggested, more culturally-rooted and time-honored styles of life had survived. The so-called cultural roots, therefore, were also illusory from the perspective of the writers’ and artists’ potential audience. Within this grand cultural renaissance, both traditional China and the West

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\(^{53}\) An example of this randomness of foreign influence can be found in the story around the creation of the famous painting *Fuqin* [Father] by Luo Zhongli. According to Luo, the first inspiration he had for the technique he used in *Fuqin* was from a description of a photorealism painting by Chuck Close with a small image on a magazine. Despite the lack of first-hand impression of the painting, Luo was yet impressed by the description of the painting’s size and its visual impact on its viewers. He then decided to paint a gigantic portrait of a peasant with meticulous details (Wang Lin 8). One can say Luo’s *Father*, arguably the most famous painting in post-Mao China, bore direct influence from photorealism, but we should also be aware of the contingency and fragmentation of this transnational cultural influence.

\(^{54}\) Xiaomei Chen’s *Occidentalism* is a thorough and insightful study of post-Mao China’s innovative use of the West and the Western culture.
were subjects of imagination, and were repeatedly constructed, manipulated and contested in a collective search for a new national cultural identity.

In an epoch teeming with stimuli, hope, anxiety and obstacles, the image of ethnic minorities again proved to be safe and versatile material for cultural producers that were aspiring to construct a “world-worthy” national culture. Within the general atmosphere of Culture Fever, the second wave of ethnic representation emerged amid China’s post-Cultural Revolution yearning to reconnect with the world and modernity. The fact that this reconnection occurred for the most part only in the minds of people within the national border of China, with little response from the rest of the world, does not render this aspiration politically unimportant. On the contrary, this largely unilateral yearning for equality or recognition is one of the keys to understanding the cultural milieu of China in the 1980s.

The previous chapter demonstrates that ethnic representation in the minority films were often used as means to cement national unity, to provide compensating visual pleasure for a psycho-sexually repressed audience, or to present a “softer” and more feminine side of the nation to a hostile international audience. Whichever function a particular film performed, one thing was certain: films, especially minority films, were by and large ideological tools in accordance with government policies and CCP ideologies during the 17-year-period. Whereas we should not disregard the individual input that cultural practitioners contributed to these cultural products, the political and cultural environment of the 17-year-period ruled out ideological and aesthetic variations that did not follow the official guidelines.
In comparison, during the second wave of ethnic representation, individual writers and artists played a more active role in cultural production. Much of this wave of ethnic representation was characterized by how the cultural producers contested both the aesthetic and cultural status quo at the time. Nationalism as exhibited in the socialist art with minority subjects was often overtly challenged in these cultural products. The focus on political ideology in the 17-year-period minority cultural products was replaced, in the second wave, by emphases on cultural negotiation, aesthetic modernity, humanistic existential problems, and other more “universal” concerns. What I aim to illustrate, however, is that this outburst of individual creativity and alternative ideology was still manifestations of a collective anxiety over the national identity. Even though Maoist nationalism was subject to criticism in the second wave of minority representation, the centrality of the nation and the national culture was re-asserted and strengthened through such critiques.

In using the internal other as the material for aesthetic innovation and cultural reflection, artists were imposing two and somewhat contradictory qualities onto the image of ethnic minorities. On the one hand, the ethnic minorities were visibly different from the Han majority (or at least so in representation). Their different appearance and experiences could be used as visual or narrative cues for aesthetic innovation. In other words, the “foreignness” of the ethnic minorities and their landscape was used to signal a complete departure from Socialist Realism, which artists in the 1980s were trying to transgress.

On the other hand, the remoteness of most ethnic minorities from the Han cultural centers was conflated with a perception of their relative cultural stability and partial
exemption from the ideological intervention of the Mao era. This quality was important to the artists and writers who used the ethnic minorities in their search for national roots (minzu de gen). Like their peers who used the settings of remote Han areas to re-imagine or construct the “roots” of the Chinese culture, these artists and writers were creating an image of an alternative national tradition in order to reveal the disruptive effect of the Mao era. To these “root-searching” writers and artists, it was the connotation of tradition and cultural roots embedded in the image of the ethnic minorities that rendered them useful in a new wave of national identity construction.

The second wave of minority representation was a cultural process that occurred on multiple levels. After 1979, the Chinese government resumed its promotion of ethnic minority cultures (Mackerras 25-28; Schein 88-91). In the 1980s the image of ethnic minorities was frequently seen in national events, on newspapers and magazines, and in television programs. This largely state sponsored promotion of ethnic minority image in China’s majority culture was along the same line as the first wave of ethnic representation and focused mostly on promoting multi-ethnic national unity. Meanwhile, local governments in minority regions were also keen on promoting ethnic representation, partly as a way to construct local identity, but also as a means to attract central funding, external investment, and tourists. Local television stations in minority regions, such as Yunnan province, began to produce programs on minority cultures (Shan, Zeng, and Zhang 29). But mostly the influence of these examples of locally oriented ethnic representation stayed regional. Ethnic tourism and commercialization of ethnic culture, though already emerging in the 1980s, did not become full-blown forces in ethnic cultural
production until a decade later. These new aspects of ethnic representation will be discussed in relation to the third wave of ethnic representation in the next chapter.

What made the second wave of ethnic representation distinctly different from the first wave was the participation of the intellectual elite working outside the state cultural production, and the following discussion will focus on this new aspect. These participants produced ethnic representation texts that spanned a large spectrum, from fiction, fine arts, to film. Better known examples include Zhang Chengzhi’s Mongolian and Hui fiction, Ma Yuan and Zhaxi Dawa’s avant-garde fiction with Tibetan settings, paintings of Tibetan theme by Chen Danqing, Ai Xuan and Jin Shangyi, paintings of southwestern ethnic minorities by Luo Zhongli, Cheng Conglin and the Yunnan school, Yuan Yunsheng’s controversial Beijing Airport mural with Dai motifs, Zhang Nuanxin’s film about Han-Dai cultural encounter Qingchun ji (Sacrificed Youth, 1985) and Tian Zhuangzhuang’s experimental films with ethnic minority subjects Liechang zhasa (On the Hunting Ground, 1984) and Dao ma zei (The Horse Thief, 1986).

I propose to call these texts from the second wave of ethnic representation a “minority” discourse because of the acute sense of anxiety over the national image in these texts. The real concerns of many minority representation texts during this period were often disguised as universal ideals. Behind lofty slogans such as freedom, harmony, nature and modernity, however, there was a collective anxiety over the national culture and national identity. A large amount of products of the Culture Fever of the 1980s were symptomatic of the obsessive yearning for international recognition typical of third-world intellectuals in the aftermath of imperialism. Ethnic representation was only one manifestation of this collective desire. Whether it was to use the minority’s exotic flavor
to construct a modern national aesthetics that could compete with the West, or to resort to
the ethnic minorities for the purportedly “national” roots of “universal” values such as
freedom and harmony, the second wave of minority representation was a minority
discourse, writings on the margin of an unequal power paradigm that nevertheless
perpetuate and reinforce it by repeating and contesting it (JanMohamed and Lloyd 1-16).
In this sense, my understanding of “minority discourse” differs from Zhang Yingjin, who
uses the same concept to describe films by Tian Zhuangzhuang and other Fifth
Generation directors. Whereas Zhang uses the term to describe the directors’ cultural
negotiation in marginal and liminal spaces in contradistinction with the center of the
state, my application of the term posits a dialectical relationship between the Chinese
artists’ national discourse and a dominant universalist rhetoric (“Minority Film”).

I will focus on fine arts and films, as visuality as a medium of art and visibility as
an ontological concept were at the very center of the second wave of ethnic
representation. Whereas the awareness of an international audience has never vanished
and was even present during the Mao era, as I have demonstrated in my study of the film
*Wuduo jinhua*, the reality of Cold War separation and the belief in self-sufficiency during
the Mao era had greatly limited the international imagination in cultural production. After
the Cultural Revolution, the desire to “be visible” and to “be seen” by the rest of the
world became a major concern shared by many intellectuals. Therefore, when we study
the cultural products of the 1980s in China, it is necessary to keep in mind the collective
yearning for “visibility” and examine how it affected aesthetic directions and shaped
narratives.
Dai Jinhua, in a short article on the aesthetic innovation in Chinese cinema, published in 1986, succinctly explained the importance of “visibility” for Chinese artists in the 1980s. Her explication of the cultural spirit of the 1980s covered many ideas and themes important to both the Culture Fever of the 1980s and the second wave of ethnic representation and is therefore worth quoting at length:

It [The 1980s] is an unprecedented opportunity in China’s history, a great epoch of collision between the eastern and the western cultures, an epoch in which China can march toward the world, the future and the modernity. After the strenuous and delayed re-opening of the long-shut rusty gates, what appeared in front of us is a lively, closely connected, and dizzying world, a globe that had shrunk abruptly due to the arrival of the information age. Amidst the post-catastrophic relief, and faced with the reference system of the entire world, the Chinese culture circle, with unprecedented self-awareness, has realized the historical mission that they shoulder at this moment. …. National (minzu) reflection, root-searching, the pursuit of the collective unconscious, “repenting with the entire nation (minzu),” rediscovery of the national character and the national soul, reconstruction of myth and rebuilding of the cultural platform – all these are not only questions for the cinema, literary and art circles, but also questions for the entire cultural and intellectual circles as well as the entire nation …. Faced with these questions, the cinema needs to – with formal innovations as its vanguard – make the Chinese people, Chinese existence, Chinese land, Chinese culture and history “visible” again. (“Dianying chuangxin” 12, translation mine)

Although a more mature Dai would reconsider this unreserved calling for embracing the world and the future, her passionate words here did articulate the spirit of the time and represent the common aspirations of the writers and artists amid the Culture Fever of the 1980s. The re-opening of China’s doors to the world created such a forward- and outward-looking national imagination that culture and art were placed on a teleological trajectory as politics and economy, and one important criterion of progress was Chinese culture’s reclaiming of visibility in the international arena.

55 A later article by Dai, “Xinzhongguo dianying: di san shijie piping de biji” [New Chinese Cinema: Notes on Third World Criticism], published in 1991, offered a much more balanced and distanced reading of the Culture Fever of the 1980s, pointing out in particular the impact that modernization and China’s imagination about modernization had on the cultural scene of 1980s’ China.
In actual practice in the 1980s, the effort to achieve visibility often followed one of two different but related directions. First, a clear departure from the dominant mode of Socialist Realism was called for. In order for “the Chinese life” to be seen, either by the masses within the country or by an international audience, artists were called to return to the “real” life of the Chinese people as the object of their artistic representation, replacing the formulaic narratives and stereotypical representation common in the Mao era. In other words, the cultural producers needed to return the “real” to “realism.” Rustic Realism, discussed below, represents this approach. Second, there was a widespread urgency to rapidly update Chinese art so that it would catch up with the international art standards, a crash course on art and art history of sorts, which would ultimately render Chinese art “visible” to a Western eye. This urgency was most well articulated in Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo’s influential article that called for the “modernization of the film language” (“Tan dianying yuyan”).

The image of ethnic minorities, with its connotation of both tradition and alterity, became popular material in Chinese intellectuals’ collective campaign to make Chinese art “visible” to an imagined international gaze. My discussion will first focus on fine arts and examine in specific Chen Danqing’s painting *Tibet Series* and Yuan Yunsheng’s *Beijing Airport mural, Water Splashing Festival: Song of Life*. In both cases, ethnic minorities embody for the artists qualities of exoticism, nature, beauty, and vitality. The artists, mostly concerned with aesthetic and ontological problems of the Chinese nation, resorted to the ethnic minorities for inspiration. Whereas these cultural products increased the minority’s “visibility,” the ultimate goal of the artists was to make the nation and its art visible to the world. Similarly, the two minority films in the second section of my
discussion, Zhang Nuanxin’s *Sacrificed Youth* and Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *On the Hunting Ground*, were also examples of Chinese artists using ethnic minorities to reflect on the national cultural crisis. Although they differed, in terms of narrative and representation modes, from the minority film tradition of the 17-year-period, the anxiety over national identity remained the ultra force behind these aesthetic innovations and experimentation with “internal other” content.

Minority Visuality: Noble Savages and Metropolitan Aesthetics

Some of the earliest signs of a renewed interest in the ethnic minorities after the Cultural Revolution appeared in the field of visual arts. Two new painting movements, *Xiangtu xieshi zhuyi* [Rustic Realism] and *Yunnan huapai* [Yunnan school], in particular, used ethnic minorities as the nominal subject of their aesthetic innovation. Rustic Realism was a prominent style in Chinese painting – especially oil painting – in the late 1970s and early 1980s.\(^5\) Painters in this movement, such as Chen Danqing, Ai Xuan, Luo Zhongli, He Duoling and Cheng Conglin, painted people living on the edge of the society in China (Gao, “Bashi niandai” 45). Many paintings from this movement depicted characters and scenes from remote rural areas of China, and ethnic minority figures and settings held a visible prominence in them. In retrospect we can say that Rustic Realism was the visual art forerunner of the *xungen* [root-searching] literature, which focused on similar subjects and began to dominate Chinese literature in the mid 1980s. In the history of visual arts of the PRC, this painting style marked a major transition from both the subject guidelines and aesthetic principles of the Mao era, especially the ones during the Cultural Revolution. Paintings since the founding of the PRC had by and large been

\(^5\) This painting style was also called *shenghuo liu* [stream of life] or *xiangtu ziran zhuyi* [Rustic Naturalism]. See Galikowski 199-207, Sullivan *The Arts of China* 295, and Gao “From Elite to Small Man” 149-166.
restricted to depicting “model” workers, peasants and soldiers, as well as revolutionary heroes amidst historical scenes. Contrary to the egalitarian claims of the socialist revolution, artworks of the People’s Republic were engaged in a continuous idol-making campaign, creating larger-than-life images of national leaders and idealized individual types that could serve as models for emulation. This trend reached its apogee during the Cultural Revolution, when dogmatic restrictions were enforced in matters both thematic and aesthetic. “Hong, guang, liang” [“red, smooth, and glowing”] was the standard for heroic figures in paintings during the Cultural Revolution (Andrews, “Victory” 235).

Rustic Realism was a powerful alternative force that emerged after the Cultural Revolution. One of the first paintings of Rustic Realism that gained national fame, Fuqin [Father], by Luo Zhongli, was a gigantic portrait of a weather-beaten peasant (216×152cm). With a size that was usually reserved for portraits of national leaders such as Mao, Father exerted powerful visual impact on viewers who were accustomed to conventional aesthetics of Socialist Realism. It was bold at that time to make a portrait of this size on a politically insignificant subject; it was also unprecedented in the art history of the PRC for a peasant – the core support of Chinese socialist revolution and the symbolic backbone of Chinese civilization – to be painted in such an ignoble manner, with super-realistic portraying of traits left by hardship and suffering. One of the prominent critical voices among the responses to the paintings questioned the overall suffering-ridden tone of the painting; shouldn’t a peasant living in the socialist PRC be

57 The san tuchu [three prominence] principle during the Cultural Revolution was a good example of such content requirement. Endorsed by Jiang Qing, one of the “Gang of Four” clique, san tuchu referred to the principle of “giving prominence to positive characters among all the characters, giving prominence to heroic characters among the positive characters, and giving major heroic characters among the heroic characters.” During the Cultural Revolution, this principle determined the choice of content as well as modes of representations for most artistic production.
happy? How could the liberated peasant look so dark, dirty, poor, and burdened? Also, is it politically responsible for a socialist artist to magnify the suffering of a peasant (Shao Yangde 56-59)? These were precisely the kind of questions that painters like Luo wanted to induce with their paintings. By producing images free of the burden of ideological persuasions, they challenged the official aesthetic principles of the previous thirty years. Socialist Realism had shunned the “real” for too long, and Rustic Realism wanted to reintroduce it into Chinese painting. With this new art movement, a period of clear departure from the dominance of the Socialist Realism had begun.

Roughly around the same time of the emergence of Rustic Realism, painters living in southwest China turned to their local geographic area and abstract imagery for rebellious artistic energy. Often referred to as Yunnan huapai [Yunnan school] or zhongcai huapai [heavy color school], this group included Jiang Tiefeng, Liu Shaohui, Ding Shaoguang, and He Neng. They limited their subject exclusively to the landscape and people of Yunnan province, a southwestern border province of China known for its exotic landscape and ethnic diversity. Paintings from this school were known for their use of thick and colorful paint as well as extensive use of curvy lines in their depiction of Yunnan’s people and landscape. Also a clear departure from Cultural Revolution painting, the Yunnan school turned away from the “real” and ventured into the abstract

58 One can certainly argue that painters of Rustic Realism were guilty of the charges they made of the tradition through their paintings. To paint a Mao size portrait of an unnamed peasant was hardly an ideology-free gesture. Under their historical circumstance, however, rebellion against Cultural Revolution aesthetics was perceived as a path toward “freedom” and “progress,” rather than an alternative ideological choice.

59 Prior to the appearance of Rustic Realism, another style of paintings named “scar paintings” had already signaled the beginning of experimentation in Chinese oil paintings. These paintings depicted scenes of violence or aftermath of violence during the Cultural Revolution, questioning the rationale behind the unnecessary and meaningless sacrifice of human lives and youth. From a formal perspective, however, these paintings maintain the same style and techniques used in Socialist Realism paintings. See Sullivan, Arts of China 295.
and the decorative. Their major contribution to the PRC painting development was, among other things, the reintroduction of the abstract image, a move which the painters attributed to influences from both West and Chinese traditions (Andrews, *Painters* 391; Cheng Zhaolin 41).

Both of these two early art movements of the PRC’s post-Mao era took a visible interest in the ethnic minorities in China. Consisting largely of Han Chinese painters, the Rustic Realism School produced a large amount of oil paintings with ethnic minority subjects, particularly Tibetans, Mongolians and other ethnic minorities that appeared visibly different from Han Chinese. Even the paintings that did not address the ethnic minorities, such as Luo Zhongli’s *Father*, exhibited clear fascination with the cultural other as aesthetic object. Yunnan school painted ethnic minorities almost exclusively. Although their non-realistic painting style – two-dimensional image, exuberant color, and abstraction – sometimes made it difficult to identify the ethnic identity of the painted characters, their routine use of ethnic minority cultural symbols – costume, festivals, folklores – constructed an exotic and fantastical visual lexicon.

Within existing studies of Chinese ethnic minorities and Chinese art, this revival of interest in the ethnic minorities in the art circle during China’s Culture Fever years has not received adequate attention. Among the small amount of literature that has addressed this new wave of minority representation in the fine arts, one dominant argument sees this new wave as the continuation of a history of the Han Chinese state and intellectuals’ eroticization and exoticization of the ethnic minorities in the PRC (Hyde 226; Gladney, “Representing Nationality” 108-111). Ethnic representation in the artwork of the 1980s,
just as the ethnic minority films of the 17-year-period, is understood as an example of internal Orientalism.

To evaluate this view we need to tackle an issue that has surfaced a few times throughout this thesis but has not yet been confronted directly, namely, the relevance and efficacy of the theory of Orientalism in the critique of ethnic representation in post-1949 China. Since Edward Said’s initial publication of *Orientalism* in 1978, it has become a paradigmatic approach in understanding the practice of cultural othering and its interdependence with political coercion and economic exploitation. “Cultural othering” here does not refer to the actual cultural policies executed in colonies aimed at assimilation or eradication of local cultures. Rather, it refers to “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3). Rather than trying to eradicate the Orient’s own culture, the institution of Orientalism functioned by creating, objectifying and essentializing the Orient as a culture and a system of knowledge. Meanwhile, the Occident “gained in strength and identity” by being the opposite of the Orient. Said’s theory shifted our attention from conventional means of control to the realm of culture and knowledge.

There have been at least three “derivative” theories of Orientalism in China studies that are relevant to the current study: internal Orientalism, self Orientalism and Occidentalism. The first came out of the transplant of the ideas of Orientalism into discussions on oppressive cultural politics within a nation-state. Said’s analysis of the role of institutionalized knowledge and culture production in the manufacturing of imperial power was used to describe strategies to establish hegemonic state power
through the marginalization and exoticization of the internal other, such as the ethnic or religious minorities. Louisa Schein uses the term “internal Orientalism” to describe the erotic gaze that Han male urbanites cast on the rural ethnic women (100-131). Dru Gladney’s overall assessment of minority representation draws explicit parallel between the first world/third world and Han/minority antithesis. Particularly relevant to the current study, Gladney concludes that Yuan Yunsheng’s Beijing Airport mural and the Yunnan school represented the epitome of the eroticization of ethnic minorities by the Chinese government and complicit Han artists. These artworks, Gladney argues, were a component of the Han Chinese’s sustained economic, political and cultural colonization of the ethnic minorities (“Representing Nationality” 108-111).

The second derivative direction of Orientalism, self-Orientalism, refers to the practice by modern nations that were formerly colonies – victims of Orientalism – to actively promote their orientalized and stereotyped images, either as a strategy to participate in the global community (particularly the market), or as a self-empowering strategy that in turn affects the course of national identity construction. Self-Orientalism is a controversial cultural practice with passionate supporters and opponents. Some, mostly from within the postcolonial nations with nationalist sentiments, criticize it as an act of betrayal of the national body in order to cater to the taste of Western audience. Many of the critics of the Fifth Generation films of China held this argument (Dai Jinhua, “Postcolonialism;” Dai Qing, “Raised Eyebrows” 336). Others see self-Orientalism as a creative means of empowerment. In Jones and Leshkowich’s words, “claiming control over representations of exoticism can appear to reverse the imbalance of power between the West and the Rest” (28).
The third and perhaps less obvious spin-off of Orientalism, Occidentalism, refers to the reverse practice of Orientalism, namely the Orient’s creation of an imagined Occident as a mirrored image in order to address its internal problems. Most extensively delineated and critiqued in Xiaomei Chen’s book *Occidentalism*, this discursive practice, happening on both the official and non-official levels in China, was used as a strategy to either eliminate domestic discordance or challenge ideological hegemony of revolutionary socialism. Occurring at a time when considerable separation and mutual ignorance was still the norm in the relationship between China and the West, this acute interest in the western other in China had more to do with the construction and negotiation of the Self rather than with any epistemic interest in the West. As a theory derived from Said’s Orientalism, Occidentalism provides an alternative model to the Eurocentric paradigm that Said set out to criticize in *Orientalism* but unwittingly reinscribed through the continuous influence of his book.

The reason that I present here the three major derivative theories of Orientalism is a pragmatic one. Out of the three, any individual theoretical approach is not sufficient in analyzing the representation of ethnic minorities in post-1949 China. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, internal Orientalism does not fully capture the complex mechanism at work in the popularity of minority films during the 17-year-period. The image of the ethnic minorities presented in these films did not primarily serve as a contrast to the Han or Chinese identity. On the contrary, the image of the ethnic minorities was often part and parcel of the national identity under construction during that period, either as a token of the national unity, or, such as in the film *Wuduo jinhua*, as a showcase of the new People’s Republic’s national image. The eroticism and
The exoticism contained in the film is more a case of self-Orientalism rather than internal-Orientalism.

After the Cultural Revolution, the reencounter of China and the West—or at least the return of a mass awareness of the West in China—meant that the national cultural reflection occurred with increasing awareness of a reference system occupied by various versions of an imagined West. The various thematic and formal innovations in paintings of ethnic minorities, including the new fascination with primitivism60 and the reintroduction of the human body, had more to do with Chinese artists’ imagination of the West rather than the exoticism and corporeality of the ethnic minorities that were depicted. The fact that the artists often chose the internal other—rather than Han Chinese—for portraying primitivism and presenting rediscovery of the body was certainly a demonstration of Han Chinese’ deep-rooted cultural prejudices against ethnic minorities, and artistic practices of this type might also contribute to further dissemination of such stereotypes and prejudices among the general public, but one should not thereby dismiss the presence of the collective imaginary about the West in these artistic creations. These cultural products with minority subjects were, if we are willing to look at the historical contexts, manifestations of internal-Orientalism, self-Orientalism and Occidentalism.61

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60 For a general discussion on primitivism in literature, paintings and films in China in the 1980s, see, for example, Jin 20-24, 101.
61 For the purpose of the present chapter, I am not yet addressing the power of the market (domestic and international) in cultural production, which became more dominant as the decade approached its end. The later development of many influential art movements in the 1980s, such as the Yunnan school and Fifth Generation films, was more strongly affected by the market than by state ideology or individual artistic aspirations. For that reason, the later development of these minority themed art movements, such as Yunnan school, characterized by intensification of erotic content, needs to be examined with full awareness of the role of the transnational market, which would then require examination of the post-colonial variation of Orientalism, the interconnection between individual erotic desire and the market, the transformation of artists’ role in the late Capitalist society, and so on.
In *Primitive Passions*, Rey Chow investigates the ways in which “visuality operates in the postcolonial politics of non-Western cultures besides the subjection to passive spectacle that critics of orientalism argue” (13). In this sense, Chow’s term of “primitive passion” is a useful tool for us to think about Chinese artists’ interest in the image of ethnic minorities in the 1980s. This primitive passion, as Chow puts it, is a way to fantasize about “an origin,” to think about “the unthinkable,” and to imagine the Chinese culture as “‘primitive’ in the meliorative sense of being an ancient culture” (22-23). In this way, Chow argues, “a strong sense of primordial, rural rootedness thus goes hand in hand with an equally compelling conviction of China’s primariness, of China’s potential primacy as a modern nation with a glorious civilization” (23). This formulation of “primitive passion” only captures one side of the implications of ethnic minority images to the painters in the 1980s. As a sign of alterity, the image of ethnic minorities provides an articulation between the “origin” and the future, so to speak. As my following discussion will show, ethnic minority images allowed the painters to use the “unthinkable” idea of origin as a way to revolt against Cultural Revolution aesthetics. Meanwhile, the image of the internal other – with its connotation of strangeness – also produced a space for the artists to pursue metropolitan aesthetics. This two-way movement produced a new aesthetic national style, which replaced the one contested at this moment of national identity crisis.

Chen Danqing’s *Tibetan Series* and Yuan Yunsheng’s *Water Splashing Festival*, two of the most influential pieces of artwork with minority subject in the 1980s, exemplify Chinese artists’ pursuit of alternative –Western or traditional – aesthetics as a means to construct a new national style. By painting the ethnic minorities in a mode that
differed from the revolutionary tradition, the painters were constructing a national aesthetic identity that they imagined to be “new” and “modern.” Meanwhile, the images of the ethnic minorities also brought up association with tradition and cultural roots, and thereby gave the artists’ modern aesthetic approach a national undertone. By using new techniques in painting ethnic minorities, these artists were staging an imagined rediscovery of an innate cultural spirit, a national cultural identity that was repressed and marginalized by the ultra-leftist revolutionary discourse during the previous 30 years.

Chen Danqing’s experience was quite typical of the large number of artists, writers and intellectuals that emerged during China’s cultural awakening in the late 1970s. Born in 1953 in an intellectual family in Shanghai, he began to study painting at a very early age, under the guidance of his father, who had high expectations for Chen Danqing to become a great painter. The political events in China’s 17-year-period, however, greatly hindered the realization of such hopes. Both of Chen’s parents were declared “rightists” in the 1950s due to their family background (both of his grandfathers were KMT military officers). The eruption of the Cultural Revolution further limited resources for his artistic pursuits, as most of the existing paintings – traditional Chinese paintings and foreign paintings – were categorized as “Four Olds” (old thoughts, old culture, old customs, old habits) and had to be destroyed. Chen Danqing, like many other art students, adopted a double life, painting Mao portraits during the day and copying Michelangelo at night. In 1970 he became one of the sent-down youths and went to a rural area in Anhui province to receive “re-education.” There he continued his double painting life and self-education. In 1976 he made his first visit to Tibet and painted *Leishui saman fengshou tian* [Tears spilled over harvest fields], which depicts Tibetan
peasants’ sorrow at hearing the news of Mao’s decease. This painting was selected by the National Art Exhibition of 1977 and brought Chen the first public acknowledgement of his talent. In 1978 Chen was one of the first to benefit from the re-opening of higher education institutions in China and entered the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing as a graduate student. In 1980, after a six-month-stay in Tibet, he finished his graduation work *Tibetan Series*. These paintings were well received at the Graduation Exhibition of the Graduate Students of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1981 (Cohen, *New Chinese Painting* 103-104).

*Tibetan Series* includes seven paintings: *Mother and Son, Going to Town I, Going to Town II, Khamba Men, Pilgrimage, Shepherd*, and *Washing Hair*. These seven paintings present a collection of random moments in ordinary Tibetans’ life, free of ideological persuasion or historical significance. Tibet in these paintings is ahistorical. All of the seven paintings in Chen’s *Tibetan Series* signal a clear departure from the Socialist Realism painting style of the Cultural Revolution. *Going to Town II* might be taken as an example.

In *Going to Town II*, a large portion of the space in the painting is occupied by the profile of a couple. Dark colors dominate their images. The background, a wall illuminated by the sun, appears warm and bright, especially in contrast to the figures in the foreground. Appearing to be on their way somewhere, the couple is yet painted in a way that suggests repose rather than movement. Both of them are dressed in traditional Tibetan clothes. The man, leading, looks ahead with dignity and resolution. His wife, lagging a step behind, holds a nursing baby in one arm. With the other hand hanging onto her husband’s clothes, she also looks straight ahead of her, undisturbed and assured. Her
composure suggests the routine nature of the scene. A tableau image with no apparent dramatic tension, the painting brings up a timeless image of life.

This painting is significantly different from the tradition of Socialist Realism in subject, space management and painting techniques. Li Xianting, an established Chinese art critic and curator, summarized the three major characteristics of Socialist Realism oil paintings in a recent interview. First, paintings, like other forms of art during the Mao era, were political discourses and ideological tools. Second, painting of Socialist Realism contains a visual narrative. In order to succeed in its ideological mission, painting, a fundamentally non-narrative art, had to compensate for its inherent disadvantage with dramatic moments that provide its viewers with narrative possibilities. Third, painting of this style had explicitly presented three-dimensional perspective and well-contrasted shades of light and darkness, producing exaggerated chiaroscuro effect. As the paintings were made for working people and peasants, not intellectual elite, visual – and hence emotional – subtlety was often regarded as a vice rather than a virtue. Light was therefore used deliberately to accentuate the three-dimensionality of the subjects, and often used to
The originality of Chen Danqing’s *Tibetan Series* can be fully appreciated only when seen within the tradition of the Socialist Realism oil paintings. The political message of *Gong to Town II* is anything but explicit. Chen does not follow the PRC tradition of portraying happy lives of the Tibetans after their “liberation.” The characters in his painting do not exhibit overt signs of joy and jubilation. Nor are they historically positioned. There are none of the usual symbols that suggest progress or modernization, which were common in paintings of ethnic minorities during the Mao era: no paved roads, tractors, or electric power lines. Everything depicted in the painting are timeless. The dramatic quotient of the painting is also minimal. The characters appear calm, the composition of the painting uneventful. As the title of the painting only provides the non-dramatic scenario of “going into town,” it is difficult for the viewer to conjure up any dramatic events out of the visual cues. One could only come to the conclusion that this is an ordinary moment out of the daily life of ordinary people. For all its Tibetan peasant or headsman features, the image does not conform to any visual conventions of portraying peasants in China’s Socialist Realism tradition, which portrays peasants as hardworking and content. With no suggestion of revolutionary or socialist projects, Chen Danqing’s Tibetan peasants are not political subjects. Their images are also quite remote from the usual idealized peasant figures. Instead of the “red, smooth and glowing” images of happy peasants of the new China, these faces are dark, rough and weather-beaten.

The focus on everyday life in these paintings is reflective of Chen’s aesthetic inspiration at this time. The “19th century French Country Landscape Painting” exhibition
in 1978, the first public show of Western paintings in PRC history, was a historical event. It was also a transitional moment in Chen’s art career. Eighty-eight French paintings, mainly of French Realism and Naturalism, including paintings by Gustave Courbet, Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, and Jean-Francois Millet were first shown in Beijing from March to May, and then moved to Shanghai (Munro 36; Meissner 188). This exhibition left tremendous impact on the art circle in China, as a large number of professional artists and amateur art lovers poured into the galleries and fervently “devoured” the paintings that Chinese had hitherto not been able to see. Although the painters on display were in no sense representative of the height of Western fine arts, to the Chinese art circle emaciated by the cultural devastation of the revolutionary years, they were life-saving manna after a long period of starvation. Fitting the general humanistic discursive turn among the intellectuals in China at the time, the style of Millet and other French Realism painters, characterized by the harmonious representation of landscape as well as warm but understated depiction of the laboring peasants of French countryside, provided the Chinese painters with a tool to “rescue” the common people from the Communist Party’s revolutionary and national discourses.

Chen Danqing, a young art student then, was attracted to the style of Jean-Francois Millet, one of the most well-known painters shown at the French Landscape Paintings exhibition. Millet’s gentle use of color and light, as well as his belief in the beauty of natural forms unconditioned by narrative meanings, provided timely aesthetic channel for Chen’s rebellious spirit. To Chen, the alternative style of Millet’s paintings stood for an imagined image of the West. Tibet, as an imaginary cultural space, gave Chen Danqing the raw material to experiment with this metropolitan aesthetics.
In a recent interview, Chen recalled the reasons behind the creation of the *Tibetan Series* and his choice of Tibet as his subject,

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, I wanted to paint like Millet, like the real French Realism, because the “French Country Landscape Exhibition” came to China. That exhibition had immense influence on me. This so-called influence is actually nothing else but the desire to imitate. ……But Mao suits and Han faces are unable to convey the idea of “Soviet Union” or “France.” Tibet gave me that possibility. I did not understand Tibet at all. During my first trip to Tibet, I thought of it as “Soviet Union;” in my second trip to Tibet, I thought of it as “France.” If I did not have the chance to go to Tibet, I don’t know what else I would have done. Meanwhile, to those who appreciated *Tibetan Series*, the appeal stems from both Tibet and an imagined Europe. It is that simple. Influence requires a juncture, and Tibet was that juncture for me. (Zhang Yingguang, translation mine)

As a cultural space, Tibet, with its unfamiliar landscape and people, provided Chen Danqing with material to visualize an imagined West. His admiration for the Western art came from his dissatisfaction with the existing aesthetic aridity in China. In this sense, his paintings of Tibet had more to do with his effort to reform the national aesthetic identity than with his interest in Tibet as an object of knowledge or aesthetic appreciation. The exoticness of Tibet allowed Chen to create an aesthetic Utopia, a substitute West during an era of scarce information and impoverished imagination. Occidentalism, rather than internal Orientalism, is a better term to describe Chen’s *Tibetan Series*.

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62 Before Chen turned to Millet, the hero of his artistic emulation was Vasily Surikov (1848-1916), a Russian painter famous for his masterful depiction of historical scenes. Chen at the time thought of Chinese Socialist Realism as a corrupted derivative of Soviet Realism and wanted to go back to the real origin of realism. Surikov, later Millet, was that origin of authentic realism for him. His painting from his first trip to Tibet, *Tears Spilled Over Harvest Fields*, was influenced by Surikov’s style. That is why he claimed to think of Tibet as “Soviet Union” in his first trip to Tibet.
Yuan Yunsheng’s *Water Splashing Festival*, the center of the so-called “airport mural incident,” was also a charged juncture of ethnic minority, national identity and visuality. In 1979, the new Beijing International Airport was completed. In addition to the historical significance of the first international airport in a previously isolated country, the opening of the airport was later remembered also for the public attention and controversy drawn by one of the murals in the airport terminal. On this mural, titled *Poshui jie – shengming de zange* [Water Splashing Festival – Song of Life], by Yuan Yunsheng, appeared two nude female bodies. The mural depicts the celebration of the annual April water splashing festival of the Dai people, an ethnic group living in Yunnan province. In one corner of the mural is a scene of a group of bathing women. Two of the bathing women on the mural are naked. These two nude figures drew large crowds of visitors after the airport’s opening. Despite the initial endorsement by Deng Xiaoping himself,\(^63\) Yuan’s

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\(^63\) According to Yuan in a recent interview in a CCTV documentary *Bihua beihou*, his plan to paint nude images was not revealed to anyone before hand. The draft that he provided to his supervisors had several lines on these two nude bodies, suggesting the presence of clothes. This trickery helped the draft obtain approval without raising any alert. Yuan then proceeded to paint the nude images during one afternoon when no one else was present. Upon the mural’s completion, the staff overseeing the mural project was uncertain of the appropriateness of nude images in a public space. This uncertainty was eventually resolved through the personal approval of Deng Xiaoping, who unexpectedly inspected the mural a few days later. Deng’s approval eventually signaled the official support to the mural, and yet this anecdote illustrates the haphazard nature of the process of decision-making within the government during this period. The later development of the airport mural incident was a further evidence of the complexity of the cultural politics...
airport mural quickly became the center of public and official debates. The attention toward Yuan’s mural – whether out of amateurish art interest, voyeuristic curiosity, or ideological critique – eventually reached such intensity that it was decided that something had to be done. Plans were first made to paint additional clothes on the naked bodies or to repaint the entire section. After many public and official discussions, it was finally determined that the naked bodies had to be covered. A white fabric curtain was first attached to the mural to cover the naked bathers. In 1982, three years after the opening of the Beijing International Airport, the bathing section with the nude bodies disappeared from public view entirely when it was boarded up with plywood sheets (Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting* 39-41).

In the post-Cultural Revolution Culture Fever, Yuan’s airport mural was not the first and the only work of art that became a public attraction because of nudity. Rather it was one out of a series of incidents and debates around nudity during China’s defrosting years. Nude images were routinely discouraged or forbidden during the Mao era. As sexuality and its representation was repressed in every aspect of social life, any use of nude images, even for artistic purposes, was deemed morally decadent and politically inappropriate. Even in art schools, painting nude, a standard training for art students, disappeared entirely in the 1960s and was only resumed in 1978, after the CCP’s call for *jiefang sixiang* [emancipation of the mind] and an official notice from the Ministry of Culture to resume the practice of nude portraits in art schools (Kraus, *Party* 75-76). Before Yuan’s airport mural, a sculpture titled *Yongshi* [warrior] had also stimulated during late 1970s, when different cultural ingredients could be interpreted and manipulated by agents involved, ranging from officials, artists and the audience.
public debates because of its use of nudity to portray a revolutionary martyr. China’s most reputed art journal *Meishu* [Fine Arts], in its 1980 April issue, launched a public debate by publishing three articles on nudity in art, written by three prestigious artists and art critics, Wu Guanzhong, Shao Dajian, and Cheng Zhide. In these three articles, the authors discussed the questions of whether to reincorporate nudity into art in China, how to appropriately use nudity in art and art training, and how to gradually educate the masses on nudity in art. They also discussed the historical development of appreciation of human nudity in art, emphasizing in particular the presence of nudity in Dunhuang murals and cave sculptures, and thereby establishing the role of human body in traditional Chinese art (Wu 14-15; Shao 15-16, 33; Cheng 33, 13). In the same issue, *Meishu* also published over 20 images of nude human bodies from the Western art, such as ancient Greek sculptures, sculptures by Michelangelo, and Eugène Delacroix’s *July 28th, 1830*. This issue of *Meishu* stimulated such an extensive debate among artists and common readers that the editors of the journal decided to publish in its June 1980 issue 16 excerpted responses from the letters they received in a collection under the title of “Zhengque duidai renti meishu wenti – guanyu zai diaosu, huihua zhong biaoxian renti wenti de taolun” [Correct Attitude Toward the Issue of Nude Art – Discussion on the Issue of Representing Human Bodies in Sculptures and Paintings]. The majority of these

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64 This sculpture, created by Tang Daxi, was in memorial of Zhang Zhixin, a CCP member who was sentenced to death during the Cultural Revolution for her candid critique of Mao and the Cultural Revolution. In 1978, her case was redressed and she was posthumously conferred as a revolutionary martyr. Tang’s sculpture, using Zhang’s case as inspiration, shows a naked woman kneeling on a prancing horse and holding a bow, ready to shoot. The face of the woman bears visible resemblance to Zhang Zhixin’s. In 1979, a picture of this sculpture appeared on the covers of *Huacheng* and *Zuoping*, two influential literature magazines in Guangzhou. Criticism and debates followed the fame of the sculpture. Controversy concerned not only the use of nudity in itself, but particularly the use of nudity in association with a revolutionary hero. This combination defied the logic of Socialist Realism. In 1987, the sculpture *Warrior* was put into the People’s Park in Guangzhou, finally entering – almost a decade after its conception – the public space.
responses expressed shock and indignation at the freedom with which *Meishu* exhibited human bodies to the general public. Even the ones that acknowledged the necessity to paint nudes in art suggested a more gradual approach to the introduction of art with nudity to the general public than the one adopted by the journal.

The image of nude bodies cannot be, therefore, regarded solely as manifestation of erotic imagination at this particular historical moment. Rather, it was a highly controversial practice that challenged existing cultural, moral, and political boundaries in 1980s’ China. The use of nude images was for the artists at the time a means to challenge the existing politicized art environment and to question the taste of the masses that had been tamed by the dominance of Socialist Realism during the Mao era. Meanwhile, the reappearance of nudity in art also signaled Chinese artists’ re-embracing of the Western art tradition. Yuan Yunsheng himself cited the ancient Greek sculpture as the heritage of the human civilization to justify his use of nudity in the mural (7). Such a gesture, other than following the common practice of resorting to history for legitimacy, also signals a major shift of mindset in the Chinese art world, as resorting to Western art tradition for validation was only possible when the class-conscious aesthetic view was abandoned, and art was no longer determined by the type of society in which it was produced or the class-background of the person that produced it.

Aesthetically, Yuan’s mural also became a site of negotiation between Western art and Chinese tradition. Similar to paintings from the Yunnan school, the mural was known for its elongation of human forms and emphatic use of lines, which created two-dimensional images different from the chiaroscuro modeling followed religiously by Soviet Socialist Realism and European academic oil painting. Julia Andrews argues that
the style shared by Yuan Yunsheng and the Yunnan school should probably be traced to
the Art Deco movement of the 1930s, which was suppressed in China after 1949
(*Painters* 391). Yuan himself, however, attributed his inspiration to Dunhuang murals
and Chen Hongshou’s *Bogu yezi*, a set of seventeenth-century woodcuts (5). He argued
that China’s own artistic tradition is the richest reservoir of materials for artistic
innovation (8).

Yuan’s announced affinity with traditional Chinese culture is not a sign of
undisrupted cultural continuity. As I have argued earlier, modernization and socialist
revolution in China had rendered tradition a culturally ambivalent symbolic capital.
Rediscovery of traditional aesthetic elements was often a strategy to contest as well as
incorporate Western metropolitan aesthetics. This was most overtly demonstrated by the
effort to “nationalize” (*minzuhua*) art, especially oil painting, an imported art form.
Around the same time of Yuan’s airport mural, heated and extensive debates on the
necessity of “oil painting nationalization” (*youhua minzuhua*) and its methods occurred in
almost all major art journals (Li Huaji 47-52; Zen 34-38; Ai 1-5). Two major arguments
were of special interest to the current study, as they both illustrated the interconnection
between the gesture of looking back into history and the yearning for “progress.” One
argument considered the “nationalistic characteristic” a necessary approach to realize
international (universal) recognition. For example, Zen Jingchu declares at the beginning
of his “*Youhua minzuhua wenti chuyi*” [A Preliminary Discussion on the Question of Oil
Painting Nationalization], “without national characteristics, art loses its soul. The
stronger its national characteristic, the more cosmopolitan it becomes” (34, translation
mine). The second type of argument uses the influence of Oriental art on the development
of modern Western art as evidence of the former’s intrinsic value. Li Huaji, in an article on the direction of decorative oil painting, declared Chinese artistic tradition to be an “inexhaustible treasure house.” He also argued that the artistic innovations in modern Europe represented by painters like Gauguin and Picasso were a consequence of the European artists “lifting a small corner of the curtain” of the “treasure house” of Oriental art (52). Such historical precedence, in Li’s opinion, proves that one of the shortest routes to the modernization and internationalization of painting is via the return to the past and Chinese art tradition.

Art from Dunhuang, which inspired Yuan, the Yunnan school and many other painters in the 1980s, played a particularly ambivalent role in the artists’ negotiation between tradition, national identity and modernization. Remnants of the ancient Silk Road that connected China with central Asia and Europe during the Sui and Tang dynasties, the scrolls and murals of Dunhuang were rediscovered in the early 20th century. The artistic styles in Dunhuang art, which were influenced by Buddhism and central and south Asian art, are drastically different from the literati ink painting style that came to dominate the late pre-modern China. After the initial discovery, Chinese exhibited lukewarm interest in these rediscovered treasures, partly because of China’s internal political turmoil, partly because of Dunhuang art’s dubious cultural lineage. The post-Mao surge of interest in Dunhuang, at a moment of national identity crisis, was probably due to the fact that, as Joan Lebold Cohen puts it, “the Dunhuang painting styles have provided China with a source that offers alternatives quite different from those of the Chinese literati tradition and Western academic formulas” (Yunnan School 20). For the post-Mao artists searching for artistic stimulation, Dunhuang provided a rather safe
but also exciting alternative. Although the foreign influence in Dunhuang art is more than obvious, Cohen argues that the Chinese artists have no apparent interest in the foreign roots of the paintings. They are considered authentic Chinese creations because they legitimize a tradition in Chinese painting that is entirely different from the dominant one of ink painting with pale washes, featuring birds, flowers, and mountain mists. (*New Chinese Painting* 15)

Yuan’s two aesthetic heritages – Western modernism and Dunhuang – were therefore not in conflict with each other but rather intimately connected. By resorting to traditional art practices he was seeking a new direction in art that is closer to metropolitan aesthetics than the Socialist Realism or Chinese literati heritage. His choice of Dai people as the subject of the mural was a return to primitivism in search of a “universal” value: freedom, as he claims that “the appreciation of the beauty of human body is an ode to freedom, and Dai women’s spirit contains this yearning for freedom” (6). The pristine scenery and the carefree life of the ethnic minorities in Yunnan province provided Yuan with material to construct an exotic utopia, same as in the paintings by many Yunnan school painters. This fascination with the “noble savage” is the artist’s way to reach certain ideals in the post-revolutionary China. These ideals, including freedom, vitality of human life, cultural tradition, harmony between nature and human, become a juncture of past and future, or Chinese tradition and “universal” values. As such, Yuan’s mural is a critique of the ideology-dominant art style during the Socialist Realism period.

Meanwhile, the use of the internal other as locus of life and hope, presumably for the nation, reiterates and revalidates the official narrative of multi-ethnic nationhood as well as the discourse of national progress and modernization.

Chen Danqing and Yuan Yunsheng appropriated the image of ethnic minorities to create a new national artistic style. For Chen, Tibet and Tibetans were suitable materials
for his pursuit of Western aesthetics because of their alterity. Chen used primitivism as a way to visualize a reality different from the one presented by Socialist Realism. For Yuan, Dai’s care-free spirit represented a repressed national spirit that needed to be revived in the new period: the pursuit of freedom. Corresponding to this repression, art had also been restrained artificially during the Mao era and should be set free in his mural. In the new national style embodied by Chen’s painting and Yuan’s mural, the image of ethnic minorities, seen as embodiments of tradition, nature, and freedom, became a juncture of past and future.

**Cinematic Utopia of Harmony and Primordial Reason:**

**Sacred Youth and On the Hunting Ground**

The Culture Fever of the 1980s continued the tension between *qimeng* [enlightenment] and *jiuguo* or *jiuwang* [national salvation] that both Li Zehou and Vera Schwarcz see as the two paramount competing themes in Chinese intellectual modernity. Whereas the two were often intertwined, since the content of enlightenment – science and democracy, for example – was often imagined to be the viable path toward national independence and empowerment, there was a fundamental difference between these two approaches toward freedom and empowerment. Enlightenment was based on confidence in individual rationality and judgment, whereas nationalism relied on unreflected loyalty to an abstract national spirit, often justified through an essentialist discourse. Because of this intrinsic difference, there was often a conflation of different modes of reasoning in both the May Fourth movement and the Culture Fever of the 1980s. Modern technology and political system needed to be learned so that China could be elevated out of economic and political backwardness, but when the legitimacy of the nation-state needed
to be reiterated or reassured, it was tradition and history – history of both past dynastic
glory and collective sufferings – that the intellectuals turned to for supporting materials.
In other words, empiricism and skepticism, two powerful tools of enlightenment, were
always tampered by unwavering loyalty to the nation. On the other hand, elements that
were used to construct this essentialist identification, tradition and history, also began to
don rational garbs and masqueraded as traditional wisdom, freedom, harmony with
nature, etc., namely, qualities that appear to be universal ideals. This conflation is what
Jing Wang means by “the paradoxes of the Chinese Enlightenment” (*High Cultural Fever*
118-136).

The complication of the meaning of tradition in the post-Mao era, discussed in the
introduction to this chapter, had made it extremely difficult for cultural producers to find
material that could bridge the epistemological gap between enlightenment and
nationalism, even with the afore-mentioned conflation of different logics. As the two
orthodox traditions – Maoist tradition and Confucian tradition – were often the direct
targets of the enlightenment campaigns that the intellectuals waged in the 1980s, the
paradoxes of the Chinese Enlightenment had led the cultural warriors to either
schizophrenic vacillation between glorifying and condemning China’s history, as Jing
Wang’s analysis of *Heshang* demonstrates, or to alternative cultural tradition within the
imagined Chinese community. The latter is the focus of the following analysis of two
1980s films with minority subjects, *Qingchun ji* (Sacrificed Youth, Zhang Nuanxin,
1985) and *Liechang zhasa* (On the Hunting Ground, Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1985).

Both films were directed by Han Chinese directors, and both resorted to the
internal other – ethnic minorities, depicted with utopian halos – as a reflecting mirror
with which the Chinese can see the absurdity and violence of modern Chinese society. In both cases, the historical specificity of such reflection activity are either blurred or eliminated, resulting in a universalizing tenor. In *Sacrificed Youth*, a sent-down youth’s rational reflection is sutured together with narrative methods suggestive of fairy tales and myths. These narrative methods turn a personal journey into a metaphor for the nation. In *On the Hunting Ground*, the filmmaker’s contemplation on the erratic human condition during the Cultural Revolution is well hidden under a narrative about Mongolian hunters, told in a detached manner that reminds one of ancient allegory. The universalizing effort in both narratives can be seen as a manifestation of the enlightenment urge during the Culture Fever. Whereas these two films present the ethnic minorities in a manner different from the state’s patronizing gesture toward the ethnic minorities, their political implication – reconstruction of the Chinese national identity for the purpose of national empowerment – was ultimately in line with the CCP’s promotion of a strong modern nation during the 1980s.

*Sacrificed Youth*, directed by Zhang Nuanxin, was one of the first cinematic narratives that used a personal perspective in portraying a Han-minority encounter. Set in the Cultural Revolution, the story follows the female protagonist Li Chun, a 17-year-old sent-down youth, through her transformation at a Dai village, the locale of her re-education program. The actual content of her re-education in this remote village in Yunnan province turns out to be entirely different from the intent of this mass-scale mobilization carried out during the Cultural Revolution, which is to purge the educated youths of any bourgeois remnant, both in their minds and their bodies, and help them stay in touch with the life of the laboring masses. What Li Chun learns from the Dai village is
instead an appreciation of feminine beauty, respect for traditional family and community culture, and an understanding of the naturalness of a society untainted by modernity or political strife. This Han-minority encounter is a reversal of the stereotype in the 17-year-period minority films, in which it is usually the Han people who bring modernity and progress to the primitive minority area and help their minority “brothers” progress. Even though the hierarchy between Han and ethnic minorities as understood through a teleological view of history does surface occasionally in *Sacrificed Youth*, the Dai people are no longer depicted as helpless victims awaiting salvation and modernization. Instead the Dai village is a traditional community that has lessons to teach the alienated Han Chinese. Li Chun’s encounter with the “primitive” produces a space where she, and the audience through her, can question Han Chinese assumptions about female body, family, communal bonding, and forms of governing (Yingjin Zhang, “Minority Film” 81-82; Zhen Zhang 144-145; Cui 185). Situated within the overall context of the Cultural Revolution, these questions have resonances beyond Li Chun’s personal experience and are bound to make the audience reconsider the Han culture and the nation’s revolutionary tradition.

The film’s opening sequence, with Li Chun traveling through the dark woods of Yunnan on her way to the Dai village, gives the film a mythical overtone. From the film’s voice-over, given by Li Chun, we learn that she is a 17-year-old who has just bidden

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65 At one point of the film, when the village is baffled by a little boy’s illness and resorts to local wizardry, Li Chun, with the little medical knowledge gained through reading a medical book, recognizes the symptom of food poisoning and rescues the little boy’s life by assigning the correct remedy. 66 In one episode of the story, the commune in the Dai village are convening to determine each individual’s work points (*gongfen*) after a day’s work, a common practice in China at the time. Yibo, the prettiest girl in the village, receives 10 points, whereas other girls only get 8. The reason for this unfair treatment, according to the narrator, is her beauty. This deviant logic is questioned by Li Chun in the film, but it also reveals to the audience the absurdity of the system itself. Is judging a person’s value by his/her labor more rational than judging it by beauty?
farewell to her parents and traveled for days, on train, on bus, and then on foot, to reach the Dai village. This exposition is accompanied by a sequence of still and tracking shots edited together to portray Li Chun’s final hike in a dark jungle. The cinematography in this sequence highlights the physical quality of the jungle by always putting several layers of foliage and other obstacles between the camera and the protagonist. To a viewer unfamiliar with recent Chinese history, this opening sequence, with its story-telling ambience and images of a threatening nature, signals a mythical quest for an undisclosed treasure. To the actual audience in 1980s’ China, this was yet another cinematic representation of a traumatic memory. To them, the physical pain, intellectual poverty and emotional violence were nothing but real. The narrative tension between a realistic portrayal of a shared traumatic experience, which begs reflection and scrutiny, and a mythical account of an individual quest to a faraway and timeless place, with its irrational mystery and fairy-tale simplicity, persists throughout the film. The former bears the mark of rational scrutiny that one sees in many works of “scar painting” and “scar literature,” whereas the latter facilitates the audience’s quasi-mythical identification with the experience and sensations that Li Chun undergoes throughout the story.

Many elements of the film’s composition help to sustain the tension between the reflective and the mythical. Li Chun’s own voice-over meanders through the film, sometimes weaving fantastic images into her mundane life in the village, sometimes scrutinizing her own thoughts and culture with the introspective penetration of a modern novel writer. When Li Chun first arrives at the Dai village, her voice-over tells us about her instinctive fear at the first sight of a banyan tree, even before she learns about the local lore of the banyan tree being the embodiment of dragons. She also imagines the old
grandmother at her host family to be a broom-riding witch, and has a vision of the absent son of the host family as an ancient hunter wearing tiger skin. These fairy tale images, totally out of place within the political milieu of the Cultural Revolution China, suggest the existence of a timeless world beyond the real and the quotidian. Such experience is simply told by the voice-over, without explication or reflection, as if it is an integral part of human experience that does not require explanation.

At other times, her voice-over becomes a critical voice that examines her existing ideals when she is confronted with alternatives in the Dai village. When witnessing Dai women and men courting each other publicly with songs, she reflects, “girls in the cities actually also want to attract others, but they dare not, whereas Dai women compete openly to see who is more attractive. Watching them, I feel tired and despondent. I am good at neither working nor living, only drenched in dullness.” Later, when she learns that the girls in the Dai village shun her at work because of her ugly clothes, and when her host chastises her for not taking interest in her own appearance, she ponders her former indifference to beauty: “it has just occurred to me that beauty is so important. From a very early age on, I have been told by people, lack of beauty is beautiful. I used to wash new clothes obsessively to make it look more worn. I have never thought that a girl should indulge in her appearance and its improvement.” Such confessional scrutiny of herself and the modern Han culture echoes the self-reflexive spirit of the enlightenment side of the Culture Fever. The overlapping of these two different modes of narrative, one imaginative and the other contemplative and rational, signals a rebellious attempt at challenging the ultra-dogmatic and mechanic rationality prevalent during the Mao era.
*Sacrificed Youth* does not present a universal national space common in the 17-year-period minority films. In 17-year-period films that depict Han-minority encounter, ethnic minorities are Chinese with a few additional cultural traits, and there are never communication barriers between Han Chinese and their minority peers. Apart from a few exchangeable cultural markers, such as their colorful clothes and insistent pursuit of romance, the ethnic minorities are like the rest of the Chinese and share the same yearning, desires and visions for their future. In *Sacrificed Youth*, a narrative told through the perspective of a Han woman, the Dai’s alterity is visible (and audible) in almost every aspect of their life. The director of the film uses mostly non-professional actors and actresses of Dai ethnicity in the film (Yau 129). Except when communicating with Li Chun, the Dai characters speak to each other either in their own language or local Chinese dialect, which are neither dubbed nor subtitled in Mandarin Chinese. Li Chun’s sense of alienation in their midst, on both intellectual and somatic levels, is experienced directly by the audience.

This sense of alienation is further intensified by the presence of a strong non-diegetic aspect of the cinematic narrative. Although the film gives enough cues for the audience to follow a clear plot, i.e., Li Chun’s gradual immersion and acceptance of Dai values, a large part of the film is apparently designed not to tell a story, but to construct an atmospheric milieu of impenetrable mystery. Examples of this non-diegetic aspect include the characters of the mute and the grandma, the immanence and visual intensity of the natural scenery, and the non-diegetic use of Dai folk music throughout the film. The mute, a seemingly eternal presence of the village, who is always herding the buffalos and does not partake of any other village activities, is one of the major sources of Li
Chun’s fear and confusion. His stern facial expression and his lack of communication scare Li from her first day in the Dai village, so much so that she is apprehensive even when the mute later offers her a lotus flower, an obvious gesture of friendliness. Her host family’s 98-year-old grandma, referred to as Ya, is another timeless fixture in the Dai landscape (Donald 92-93). Even though the role of Ya in Li Chun’s transition is clear enough in the narrative as Li’s own voice-over repeatedly refers to her as the matriarch and cultural anchor of the family, the director and the cinematographer of the film make sure that Ya’s presence in the film is felt affectively rather than understood rationally. Her words are always incomprehensible muttering, but the viewer is likely to get a strong impression of her corporeality as the camera repeatedly zooms in and lingers on her wrinkled face and lacklustre muddled eyes.

The non-diegetic depiction of the mute shepherd and Ya, together with the numerous atmospheric shots of the landscape and the persistently haunting Dai music in the background, together construct a strong sense of place, in contrast to the dominant sense of time found in China’s former cinematic depiction of Han-minority encounters. During the 17-year-period, place – as a political concern in narrative construction – was usually overwhelmed by obsession with time and history as the entire China fantasized about a teleological utopian future. In *Sacrificed Youth*, for both Li Chun and the film’s audience, the sense of alienation created through the impact of a strange place, one that cannot be incorporated into Mao’s universal and teleological history, makes it possible to question the existing ideals in the Han Chinese society at the time. The opposition between the Dai village and the world that Li Chun is familiar with is the opposition between a timeless utopian capsule and a society suffering from the violence and
repression done in the name of progress. Surrounded by the “normalcy” of the traditional Dai community, where women are encouraged to make themselves beautiful, men and women openly court each other, and where family cements the members together and tradition is passed from one generation to the next, Li Chun and her fellow sent-down youths begin to reflect on the social practices that they are brought up with and question their “naturalness” or “correctness.” As this reflection is overtly voiced by Li Chun and her Han friends, it becomes the film’s most expressed agenda.

The film’s tension between mythical intuition and rational reflection, place and time, timeless utopia and historical progress echoes the distinction that Walter Benjamin makes between storytelling and modern novels in *Illuminations*. In an essay lamenting the loss of the art of storytelling in modern times, Benjamin connects the changes of narrative art with fundamental changes in human conditions. The disappearance of universal space, wisdom and experiences leads to the transition from traditional storytelling to modern novels. The ancient art of storytelling relies upon an unreflected dependence on individual and accumulated experiences. In the world of storytelling, individual experience matters because it is an integral part of what constitutes universal truth and wisdom. This confidence in the universal relevance of the storyteller’s experience is the reason behind the scarcity of explanation in traditional storytelling. Unlike the modern world filled with information, the world of storytellers is constituted by experience. This world is also unmediated by time or progress. The experience passed on through storytelling is avidly listened to because it would stay relevant, unaffected by change. To Benjamin, the triumph of novels over traditional storytelling signals the
passing of a golden age when the light of universal truth shines evenly through every corner of the world and everyone feels at home in his/her own place.

Benjamin’s discussion on storytelling can be used to explain the dual narrative mode in *Sacrificed Youth*. At points the film unfolds like a novel: encountering a new situation, the narrator examines, analyses, and explains her situation and reaction. But other times the film portrays its world like a traditional storyteller. Impression and imaginations are presented directly to the audience without any mediation or explanation. The character’s experience is thrown directly at the viewer without any hermeneutic conditioning. At these moments time does not matter. The world in the film becomes an eternal and universal space. When this narrative mode is dominant, the film is constructing a primitive utopia, a space where the protagonist can see “truth,” learn “wisdom” and grow. On the other hand, the film’s concern is not truly universal. Nation, ethnicity, and contemporary politics remain its burdens. Therefore the “storytelling” narrative mode is constantly interrupted by the “novel” narrative mode. Just as Benjamin constructs a pre-modern utopia to contest the mechanic information-ridden modern world, the ethnic primitive utopia that *Sacrificed Youth* constructs contains contemporary political concerns.

In the end, the film is neither a total denial of the Chinese society nor an unconditional eulogy of the utopia of the ethnic minority community. As the narrative progresses, the Cultural Revolution comes to an end and Li Chun is able to leave the Dai village when she is enrolled into college after the higher education system is resumed. Unfortunately her Han friend Ren Jia is killed in a mudslide. The film ends with Li Chun’s visit to the site of the mudslide many years later. Facing a vast barren expanse of
mud, she uncontrollably bursts into tears. The domineering presence of the mud plain within the frame reduces her presence into an insignificant dot, thus echoing the depiction of China’s land as a symbolic icon associated with China’s history and tradition common in other 1980s’ films, like *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1984) and *Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1987). A film that starts with a sensitive individual perspective – also an overtly gendered one – in a Han-Dai cultural encounter eventually turns into a national allegory and a case of collective cultural reflection. The ideal depiction of the timeless Dai village is used as a foil to foreground the folly and cruelty of the modern Chinese society, which turns out to be deviations that can be corrected when a more rational path of modernization is resumed. In Sheldon Lu’s words, “the ethnic other is still needed for a critique of the self” (8). In this sense, the film’s unconventional portrayal of the encounter between Han and the ethnic minority, although contesting the patronizing attitude toward the ethnic minorities common in 17-year-period minority films, conforms to the official nationalistic discourse that dominates the political and cultural landscape of the post-Mao China. Its experimental narrative methods evoke a universal space – with the timeless wisdom of the Dai – within which a new national identity can be constructed.

Tian Zhuangzhuang, a prominent member of the so-called Fifth Generation directors, also resorts to the ethnic minorities as a surrogate world within which he could make veiled commentaries on China’s recent history. Tian’s minority films create timeless worlds. His *Liechang zhasa* and *Dao ma zei* (The Horse Thief, 1986) depict ethnic minority communities with ethnographic objectivity (Inner Mongolians in the former and Tibetans in the latter). Unlike any minority films before Tian, these two films depict minority lives free from any influences from the majority Han Chinese or
modernity (Lu Tonglin 58). The real political concern of both films, however, is not to acknowledge the ethnic minority’s unique cultural identity through ultra-realistic representation. Tian’s sole political concern, as he reiterated many times in various interviews, is to reflect on the cause and impact of the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution (Marchetti 134; Lu Tonglin 59; Zha 408; Michael Berry 61). In post-Mao China, any direct expression of such reflection was bound to be censored, as the fate of Tian’s 1993 film *Blue Kite* attested. To Tian, the ethnic minorities provide a safer terrain where he can address politically sensitive issues indirectly. Whereas direct reference to the Cultural Revolution was still impossible, the ethnic minority setting allows Tian to make veiled symbolic commentaries on the roots and impact of this national catastrophe.

In *On the Hunting Ground*, cultural reflections on the contemporary Chinese society are incorporated into an ethnographic film. Tian achieves this not only through the film’s plot, but also through the allegorical mode of storytelling carefully woven together with the film’s cinematography. By removing the historical specificity and any possibility of pedagogical or analytical persuasion from the film, the film presents an ahistorical/apolitical examination of human existence. This universalist pursuit is nevertheless a disguised nationalist narrative that aims to locate the root of the nation’s contemporary problems. A film that purportedly portrays the Mongolians objectively, *On the Hunting Ground* is a continuation of the discursive practice that constructs the modern Chinese national identity with the image of the internal other.

*On the Hunting Ground* tells a story of the violation and restoration of the hunting rules in a Mongolian nomad community. As the film opens, its title appears on the screen in Mongolian scripts. This is followed by a sequence of shots of certain ruins standing in
the middle of a vast expanse of grassland, a forlorn and lifeless landscape. This sequence, imitating the perspective of an approaching traveler or a pilgrim, ends with a closer shot at the centerpiece of the ruins, a stele with Mongolian inscription. Instead of disclosing the meaning of the inscription, the film suggests its origin and function. A line of Chinese appears on the screen, explaining that the rules established by Genghis Khan for his empire in the 13th century are called *zhasa*. At this point, the film reprints its title on the screen, this time with the Chinese title “*liechang zhasa*” [hunting law] printed over the Mongolian one. Throughout this opening sequence a forlorn and unmelodic tune plays in the soundtrack, enhancing the desolation and emptiness of the visual sequence.

By this point it is already apparent that *On the Hunting Ground* is an unconventional film, whether within the tradition of minority film genre or within the tradition of PRC cinema in general. Its choice to not only use the Mongolian language but also prioritize it over Chinese is a hidden critique of the 17-year-period minority films, which almost always present an even national geo-space in which everyone speaks standard Mandarin Chinese. This film’s slow entrance into its story perhaps irritates the audience who are used to hermeneutic guidance in films. Its evocation of a distant past within a timeless frame of present also forms a sharp contrast with minority film genre’s usual urgency to establish historical positioning. Even the music is no longer used to form an image of festive and romantic ethnic minorities, as is the norm in minority films. All these alienating elements, already apparent at the very beginning of the film, become more unsettling as the film unfolds.

67 Compare this with, for example, the textual preface in *Nongnu*, described in the previous chapter, which provides the historical background, a synopsis of the film, as well as its ideological message, all before the actual film begins.
After the opening sequence, the film moves on to a hunting scene, in which a group of horse-riding Mongolian men are listening to one man announcing the rules that are to be followed during hunting: first, any shot animal belongs to the owner of the first hunting dog that bites into the animal. No one else is allowed to claim this animal. Second, no one is allowed to hunt animals that are protected by the state. Third, the first captured animal is to be given to the childless old people in the village. These rules are announced in Mongolian, with a monotonous Chinese voice added onto the original soundtrack. The audience hence can hear two voices, one in original Mongolian and the other in Chinese, lagging about two or more seconds behind the original soundtrack.

The film’s plot is fairly uncomplicated. The violation of the first hunting rule during this hunting session becomes the propelling force that drives the plot forward, as the violation leads to publicly displayed punishment and humiliation, which is then followed by retaliation. The animosity between several male characters – initiated by the violation of the hunting rules, as far as the audience can see – escalates, until one woman’s selfless act of kindness toward an alienated family helps the men see their folly. The community then seeks reconciliation and everyone kneels down before a pole with an antelope’s head nailed to it, which, as a gesture of humiliation, is the original punishment given to the violator of the hunting rules. The order is thus restored in the community. The film ends with a revisit to the ruins that appear at the beginning of the film, giving a long close shot at the inscription on the stele. On the screen appears a quote

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68 The Chinese dubbing of this speech uses the word *guojia*. This is the only contemporary reference in the film. However, as there are no other cues to the film’s historical background, one cannot be sure which state this *guojia* is referring to.

69 This unsettling practice is actually the result of a compromise between the filmmaker and the censorship bureau. Tian made the film in Mongolian, but a rule stipulated that all films submitted to the censors must be in Mandarin Chinese. The Chinese sound track was added just to pass through the censorship process. *The Horse Thief* went through the same process as well (Michael Berry 63-64).
from Genghis Khan in Chinese, which can be translated as the following: “with the heaven above and the desert below as my witnesses, may my people be honest and law-abiding, and may they live with love and benevolence. – Genghis Khan.”

Despite On the Hunting Ground’s rather straightforward plot, the meaning of the film is obscured by Tian Zhuangzhuang’s cinematic experimentation. It is apparent that On the Hunting Ground is not made to perform ideological persuasion like its predecessors. Many of the common practices in filmmaking during the 17-year-period are outright rejected by Tian. These practices, partly the result of the tradition of what Yingjin Zhang calls “film by literature people” in Chinese cinema, partly caused by the educational function that films are made to carry, include “dramatic structure,” “coherent plot,” “abundant dialogues,” “linear editing,” “theatrical effects,” “fully developed” typical characters, etc (Chinese National Cinema 237). In contrast to such films made by “literature people,” Tian Zhuangzhuang, together with his fellow Fifth Generation directors, want to make “films by film people,” films that tell stories through images rather than words. To this new generation of directors, films should be a visual rather than narrative art.

In On the Hunting Ground, Tian Zhuangzhuang carries this cinematic subversion to the extreme. Even though the film keeps a bare bone plot, all the other aspects of the film seem to be designed to thwart any effort to produce a coherent message, especially for an audience relatively unfamiliar with visual experimentation and avant-garde cinema. The dialogues, already alienating due to the use of unfamiliar language and the ostentatiously unnatural Chinese dubbing, are scanty and scattered. Further, a large amount of footage is devoted to shots unrelated to the development of the plot. These
shots, including extended scenes depicting details from the Mongolians’ everyday life, or sweeping panoramic capturing of the grassland landscape, form the bulk of the film. The choice of actors and acting methods in *On the Hunting Ground* are also a major departure from 17-year-period practices. Tian insisted on letting Mongolians act out their own lives in the film (Qian 59). Their acting is unique in that it lacks traces of acting. Furthermore, to enhance the documentary feel, Tian’s camera gives very little priority to any single character and rarely uses close-up shots of any character. None of the characters is singled out as a potential center for audience identification.

Tian’s refusal to offer his own interpretation further rendered the film incomprehensible to the audience and film critics alike after its release. Many conjectures were made regarding the film’s political message. Some believes that it is a harsh critique of China’s “ethnic minority” film tradition in the 17-year era (Rayns 108). Others see a visual study of the balance between primitive energy and civility (Liu Shusheng 94). The lack of drama, identifiable characters or decipherable message also clearly turns the audience away, as *On the Hunting Ground* only sold two copies in its distribution (Gladney, “Tian Zhuangzhuang” 164). In a recent interview, Tian revealed that the conception of the film stemmed from his reading of historical records. When he was reading a certain history book on Genghis Khan, he found that some hunting rules issued by Genghis Khan showed consideration for both the environment and the community. To Tian, such rules, similar to the ones announced in the film, established seven hundred years ago by a “primitive” and “violent” ethnic group, formed a sharp

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70 Tian was known for his lack of concern about the comprehensibility of his films. His most arrogant response to complaints about his films’ obscurity was the claim that his films were made for the audience of the next century. See Yang Ping 4.

71 Before the privatization of the Chinese film industry began in mid 1990s, the number of copies sold, rather than box office, was the criteria for a film’s popularity.
contrast with the lack of order and humanistic care during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. This contrast, in Tian’s mind, signaled a cultural crisis that needed to be conveyed to the Chinese audience. To Tian, the Cultural Revolution was not a sudden historical rupture, as the CCP leadership was trying to convince the people in the early 1980s. Rather, it was the culmination of gradual destruction of traditional wisdom regarding interpersonal relationship and community bonding. To Tian, this disintegration of conventional wisdom did not end with the termination of the Cultural Revolution, and if left unaddressed, would continue to bestow harmful influences on the society (Zha 406-9).

Because such topics were still taboo in the 1980s, Tian resorted to the ethnic minorities for his cultural reflection. To avoid association with the minority film genre of the 17-year-period and its political connotation, Tian discarded almost all of the common practices of the genre. There are no Han people, CCP members or PLA soldiers in the film. The Mongolians do not speak Mandarin Chinese; nor do they sing or dance. There is no depiction of the ethnic minority’s happy life in new society. In contrast to the 17-year-period minority films, *On the Hunting Ground* presents a timeless space and carries a sense of allegorical universality.

In terms of cinematography the film puts together an almost metaphysical study of violence and harmony. Freed from the burden of constructing a plot, the film allocates a lot of energy to pure visual images. These images fall into two categories. One category can be called “hunting ground” (*liechang*) images. Some capture the hunters in motion, riding, aiming or shooting, but mostly this category includes images of chased, injured or dead animals. In *On the Hunting Ground* one sees an almost fetishistic visual fascination
with injured animals, as the camera over and over again zooms in and focuses on images of violence and pain. Judging from Tian’s description of the Mongolian ethnic group as “primitive” and “violent,” these images are perhaps portrayal of the raw energy of the nature and the primitiveness of the Mongolian culture.72 Another category of images, which can be called “grassland” (caochang) images, focus on the peace and harmony of the Mongolians’ family and social lives. Small kids playing and bantering in the village, women peacefully shearing sheep as the warm sun shines on their tranquil and weather-beaten faces, or Mongolian yurts sitting quietly on vast grassland with cooking smoke rising slowly into the clear sky – these images create a timeless utopia undisturbed by the violence on the hunting ground.

In their own ways, both the “hunting ground” and “grassland” images in On the Hunting Ground contribute to the construction of an imaginary primitive utopia. The brutal images of the hunting scene highlight the prevalence of violence in this society. However, such violence is carefully directed (only toward designated animals), regulated, and restrained. The hunting rules announced at the beginning of the film have made it clear that the violence that materializes on the hunting ground is an integral part of an ongoing tradition. This type of violence differs a great deal from the abrupt, irrational and detrimental violence common in the Cultural Revolution. Juxtaposed with the peaceful scenes in the nomadic settlement (the grassland images), the images of violence on the hunting ground appear to be an indispensable part of an organic totality. The story in the film, one of violation and restoration of order, can be seen as an allegory that reveals the

72 One can also of course understand these fetishistic gazes at violence and suffering as a symptom of the collective traumatic memory of the Cultural Revolution that requires repeated reenactment for the purpose of healing. This was probably at least subconsciously working during the film’s production.
violation of traditional wisdom during the Cultural Revolution and underscores the necessity of restoring order after the catastrophe.

What makes this semi-documentary study of an exotic culture problematic is Tian’s unambiguous nationalistic agenda. The bracketing of the film with shots at the zhασα stele belies the ethnographic objectivity of the film. These shots, complete with explicit verbal messages evoking the semi-mythical name of Genghis Khan, bestow on this otherwise simple and unpretentious film a nationalistic allegorical halo. Despite Genghis Khan’s non-Han identity, this Mongolian hero has long been celebrated as a part of the glorious ancient history of the Chinese nation (Khan, “Chinggis Khan” 265-69).

The final quote that appears on the screen, with its evocation of the heaven and the earth as the ontological foundation of the emperor’s power, further evokes a universalist worldview of the pre-modern China.

Tian therefore puts his film in a hermeneutic dilemma. On the one hand, Tian has a clear nationalistic political agenda. Via the depiction of the Mongolians, he wants to make an allegorical comment on the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution and the problem of the Chinese culture. On the other hand, Tian, as many other intellectuals immersed in the enlightenment spirit in the 1980s, presents the issues and questions in this allegorical comment as universal ones. He is not concerned about the repressive potential of “using” the inner Mongolians for such a nationalist purpose. The allegorical mode of the film’s narrative creates a mythical space for metaphysical contemplation on human existence. To his audience, however, such a universal contemplation is in conflict with the clarity of Tian’s nationalistic message. The film’s obscurity and its cold reception was an inevitable result of this hermeneutic dilemma.
Despite Tian’s insistence on ethnographic loyalty to the Mongolian life, he is after all not interested in the Mongolians as an ethnic group with its own identity. Even though the film’s meticulously realistic depiction of the Mongolians does distinguish the film from *Victory of the Inner Mongolian People* and other 17-year-period minority films, its ideological purpose is not that different from theirs, as it uses the image of the internal other to reflect on the national identity. Like *Sacrificed Youth* and many other ethnic cultural products in 1980s’ China, *On the Hunting Ground* creates an imagined primitive but harmonious life of a minority group so as to delineate the problems of a modern China that has lost its roots. In their yearning for modernity and a powerful national identity, the intellectuals once again turned to the ethnic minorities at a moment of national identity crisis.
Chapter Four

Dreaming about Global Power and Primordial Purity: Nation, Nature, and Natives

-- The Third Wave of Ethnic Representation

On a sultry summer day in 2007, I sat on a panel on China’s ethnic minority literature at an international academic conference on literature, media and environment in Chengdu, Sichuan province. The presenters on the panel, all Chinese, were either established ethnic minority writers or specialists on ethnic minority literature (literature by ethnic minority writers and easily recognizable as such). Their impassioned presentations and discussions covered various topics related to ethnic minority literature in China, including, among other things, the “innate international qualities” of ethnic minority literature and the danger of demise of “minzu hun” [national spirit or spirit of an ethnic group] with the decline of ethnic minority literature. At the end of the panel, the organizer, a poet of Yi ethnicity and a professor at a major nationality university, gave a performative recital of his poems. This recital turned out to be quite extraordinary, not only because he wrote and recited them in the Yi language, which only a handful out of a crowd of over 50 in the conference room understood, or because his dramatically undulating baritone voice was accompanied by a full range of body movements that resembled a dance. Perhaps most unexpected to the audience at this otherwise regular academic event was the presence of three young women standing behind the poet, all clad in colorful festive ethnic Yi clothing. At different moments of the recital, they produced choreographed echoes, retorts, or supporting chords. Murmuring, shouting, and singing, they performed as the chorus for the recital.
After the recital, the poet introduced these young women to the audience. They were members of a fledgling singing group that the poet had personally organized and masterminded. All born and raised in Yi regions in Sichuan province, the young women were selected to form a group that specialized in singing songs in Yi language. Their repertoire, still being built and extended, consisted of folk songs that had been circulating among the Yi population for centuries. These songs, the poet explained, once widely spread in Yi regions, were in danger of extinction because of the increasing encroachment of modern cultures. As the poet regarded Yi folk songs as an essential and outstanding part of Yi culture and Yi language, preservation work needed to be done, in his opinion, to prevent them from disappearance, which would be a big loss to both the Yi ethnic group and the multi-ethnic Chinese nation. More than that, such excellent examples of organic music should be heard and enjoyed by the entire country and the entire world.

After the performance of two songs, one slow and sad, singing about a new bride’s sorrow in having to leave her family, and one rhythmic and happy song often performed at traditional Yi festivals, both done without instrumental accompaniment, the audience were visibly impressed and showered enthusiastic comments on the beauty, sophistication and power of these examples of “organic art.” Then, amid floods of camera flashes and exclamations of admiration, the poet resumed his presentation of the group. The girls, he explained, were chosen for their natural beauty and naturally beautiful voices. Untainted by modern urban culture and professional training, these girls could best convey the primordial beauty of their people and their culture. Their singing, he exclaimed, demonstrated the advanced level of the native Yi culture and art. This level of
artistic quality was rarely seen in the increasingly vulgar popular culture and would not even pale in comparison with the most sophisticated music in the world. This, he concluded, demonstrated the strength of true “yuanshengtai” art.\textsuperscript{73}

Excited and beaming, the poet also talked about his future plans for the group. First, he wanted to expand the group’s repertoire. To do this, he and the group were planning to take more trips to the Yi region and record and learn folk songs. This was not only important for the group’s growth, but also essential to the preservation of Yi culture, as some of these songs, at one time ubiquitous in Yi communities, were only known and sung by a handful of old grandmas now and, if not learned soon, would disappear for good. He also wanted to promote and market the group at every possible opportunity, spreading their fame beyond the local and provincial levels. This would occur together with further rigorous training; plans to hire a professional voice coach to improve the girls’ singing were already under way. At the end of the session, the poet enthusiastically invited attendees of the panel, mostly Chinese and foreign professors in literature.

\textsuperscript{73} Yuanshengtai (原生态), a word borrowed from biological nomenclature, is the Chinese equivalent of “primordial ecosystem.” The word began to appear in public discourse as a description of folk art or cultural heritage a few years ago and became much more popular after CCTV’s (China’s Central Television) biannual National Youth Singing Competition set up a “yuanshengtai” competition category in 2006, in addition to its traditional tripartite categories: popular, folk, and bel canto. This new category aimed to present folk singing as it is done in real life with no professional alteration. By emphasizing authenticity it differed from the competition’s traditional folk category, which is an institutionalized singing method that borrows heavily from folk singing. Singers in the “yuanshengtai” category should not have had any professional training and try to reproduce the “living form” of folk songs as a part of everyday life. In actual practice, the “yuanshengtai” category was largely dominated by ethnic minority singers. The term itself, when rendered in English, was variously translated into “folk,” “ethnic,” “indigenous,” “aboriginal,” or “fundamentalist” (!). This new category, with its unfamiliar sounds and colorful ethnic costumes, was immensely popular with TV audience (which one can see from netizen’s warm responses to the new category on the competition’s official website) and, beside whole-hearted compliments, also stimulated heated discussions among ordinary audience and professionals alike regarding the legitimacy of “yuanshengtai” as a singing method, the incommensurability of the many singing traditions that are intrinsically different from each other, the judges’ grading criteria, etc. The term “yuanshengtai” is now widely used in China’s popular discourses in areas such as music, dance, cuisine, fashion, architecture, tourism, etc. Mostly it tries to convey a sense of perceived authenticity in traditional and local cultural traits unaffected by modern or foreign cultures. Often it is used when talking about ethnic minority cultures. I will continue to use the word “yuanshengtai” for lack of a satisfactory English translation.
cultural studies and anthropology, to have photos taken with the three brilliantly dressed Yi girls.

A “performance” on several different levels, this episode is an enlightening utterance of the meaning and function of minority ethnicity in contemporary China. It can also be seen as a juncture of the multiple fields that engage ethnicity in Chinese society today. On the most basic level of the word “performance,” this Yi poet’s presentation of a “native” singing group is a choreographed performance that demonstrates the poet’s vision of ethnic identity expression and ethnic cultural preservation. It is also a small-scale exhibition of “authentic” Yi culture and Chinese culture that hopefully entertains and educates the elite Chinese intellectuals as well as foreign spectators. Meanwhile it is also performative in the Butlerian sense in being a reiteration of gender, ethnic, and national relationships and can only start to make sense when seen against the history of ethnic minority representation in modern China. Beyond confirming old stereotypes and power dynamics involved in ethnic minority representation, however, this “performance” also demonstrates new complexities in what I would call the third wave of ethnic minority representation in post-1949 China, another round of intense mass interest in China’s internal ethnic others that is climaxing in the first decade of the 21st century.

Before discussing the third wave of minority representation, I would like to linger a bit longer on the episode described above, because it embodies, in my opinion, many of the central issues and themes in China’s current renewed interest in the internal others. One central theme is the reiteration of the nation’s international worthiness through rediscovery of primordial culture. The paradox of showing a civilization’s sophistication with its most “untainted” and “primitive” culture, or of proving such “primitive” culture’s
value via comparison with “advanced” Western art, as done by the Yi poet, seems to be a constant trait of rising post-colonial nations, haunted by what Benedict Anderson calls the “spectre of comparisons.” Situated in a history of linear progression, this gesture curiously flattens the gap between the past and the future. It is also a result of the negotiation between the local and the global. In itself there is nothing new about this “primitive passion” (Chow 22-23), but never before has this passion been pursued with this level of self-awareness and extensiveness. This Yi poet’s pride in the art of his native folk songs – or the public enthusiasm in the on-going “yuanshengtai” fever – is no longer the kind of epiphanic realization that some high modernists came to when confronted with the internal or external other. Nor is it an example of third world elite intellectuals’ desperate rummage for resistance material when threatened by first world invasion or assimilation. His confidence in the worthiness of his native ethnic art appeared transparent and assured, because, unlike the 1980s pioneering “root-searchers,” such confidence is boosted by market potentials. Aside from the endorsement of the state and the intellectual elite, ethnic minority cultures are now popular and superior because they sell well in the market. This new measure of artistic and cultural quality, visible and quantifiable in both domestic and international markets, brought the dream of the rise of a powerful nation from the realm of national allegory into a world of commodity and public spectacles.

Embedded in this pride is also an anxiety over the disappearance of primordial cultures. The Yi poet’s concern over the imminent disappearance of Yi folk songs is by no means exceptional. The third wave of ethnic minority representation is characterized by successive new discoveries of endangered cultural sites and ensuing preservation
efforts, sometimes in combination with concerns over endangered natural elements, landscapes, animals, etc. On the most basic level this anxiety over disappearance constitutes a response to changes in modern everyday life, which have been eroding various native traditions in China in the last two decades. But beyond that, the frequency with which the disappearance anxiety gets transferred to an intense interest in minority cultures and minority regions demonstrates the continuing influence of old stereotypes that relate ethnic minorities with nature, unchanging tradition, and imagination of authenticity. More than cultures and landscapes that are disappearing right before people’s eyes, images of “primordial” minority cultures and landscapes hold stronger symbolic power that speaks to contemporary Chinese society’s fear of losing its physical and spiritual homelands.

One detectable manifestation of the presence of “spectre of comparisons” and “primitive passion” in the third wave of minority representation is the innate contradiction in its discursive reasoning. As ideas about global power and primordial purity – the global and the local, the universal and the particular – become intertwined and mutually supportive of each other, arguments that promote minority culture often slip into self-contradictory or circular reasoning. A most common example is the contradiction between nature and culture. Whereas the relationship between the two has always been dialectical and never mutually exclusive, it has seldom been as intertwined and problematic as in the discourses used in China’s third wave ethnic representation. To use the episode described above again, the power of the Yi folk songs and the young singers is inseparable from the perception of them being natural and primordial. The choice of words in the popular concept of “yuanshengtai” [primordial ecosystem] is most
suggestive of this association. At the same time, the tendency to compare the music to Western and more “advanced” art and culture, and various agents’ inclination to reassure “yuanshengtai” cultural products’ value and quality via the endorsement of foreign audience suggests the embedded importance of culture within this new craving for nature. Whereas on the surface the “yuanshengtai” fever privileges the particular over the universal, the local over the global, the empowerment is nevertheless done through old discourses of universalism, such as aesthetic quality or power of civilization.

This entangled relationship between nature and culture can also be seen in the dilemma between preservation and contamination, a phenomenon common in the third wave of ethnic minority representation. The dilemma of any agent in the “yuanshengtai” fever comes from the self-contradiction that lies at the very root of their preservation effort. What the “yuanshengtai” proponents treasure in their new discoveries is the quality of primordial purity, authenticity, the sense of being unsullied by modernization, and the lack of artfulness, the defining quality of “yuanshengtai.” “Yuanshengtai” art, such as the Yi folk songs, is purportedly an organic part of a community’s everyday life. As such, it is fundamentally different from art as we know it, a separate realm of human existence elevated from practical everyday experiences.

Their dilemma, however, is that by the very act of announcing such qualities, they have already initiated the process of ripping the halo off the objects that they are preparing to worship. Just as the idea of authenticity only emerges when it is threatened, the concept of “yuanshengtai” only becomes meaningful and relevant when there is a widely shared awareness of its impending disappearance. To make it worse, any effort to preserve such a state of cultural existence always seems to exacerbate the situation and
risk possible contamination, by pulling the “yuanshengtai” art further away from their putative organic environment. This dilemma in part explains the Yi poet’s self-defeating measures of marketing the band or hiring a professional voice coach. Much of the public controversy over the concept of “yuanshengtai” also revolves around the troubled relationship between nature and culture, preservation and contamination, everyday life and art.\footnote{For examples of this debate in China, see Yunping Zhang, Hui Du, and Jinquan Ma.}

One also sees in the latest wave of ethnic minority representation the breakdown of the separation between different types of forces in cultural production. State and non-governmental forces, minority and Han cultural producers, intellectual elites and common people, these previously antithetical or separate agents in minority representation have gradually jointed forces. Take the separation between intellectual elites and the masses for example. Whereas the previous two waves of ethnic minority representation maintained in their own ways the hierarchy between the elite and the masses, the third wave has largely eliminated this power hierarchy without all together erasing the differences between the two. During the first wave, the intellectual elites were under pressure from the state (or their own ideological pressure) to learn from the masses in order to develop the most effective methods to educate them. Although Mao’s revolutionary cultural politics contained a distinctly populist side, the actual practice of this cultural politics had maintained the elite’s condescending posture toward the masses. The latter, although declared to be the main source of political power and legitimacy, did not have major effective means to determine the direction of cultural production. The second wave’s high culture tone determined a separation between the intellectuals’ call for national salvation via cultural reform and the nation’s general yearning for economic
improvement. In the third wave, however, marketization of culture and convergence of market and state has made cultural production a much more fluid field. In order to conserve endangered ethnic culture, the Yi poet mentioned above, an intellectual solidly established in a state-run academic institution, took it upon himself to organize a marketable popular band. Similarly, the “yuanshengtai” category in CCTV’s National Youth Singing Competition (which perhaps inspired the Yi poet’s singing group) also demonstrates the blurring of the boundaries between the intellectual elite and popular culture, between the state and the market, and between ethnic minorities’ self representation and Han Chinese representation of the internal other.75

Perhaps not as explicit as the traits discussed above, the Yi poet’s performance is at once a devalorization of national border and a reassertion of national identity. An international academic conference held in China’s deep inland region is a small example of the increasing porosity of a national border that used to be impenetrable, and yet such an occasion of international contact also seems to encourage the opposite tendency of global integration: passionate assertion of national identity and minzu jingshen [national spirit or spirit of an ethnic group]. The third wave of ethnic minority representation occurred during a period that saw both China’s increasing integration into global economic and cultural networks as well as the rise of strong popular nationalism. More

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75The government-controlled CCTV is usually considered the mouthpiece of the Chinese state. Its National Youth Singing Competition has also been more or less an official fair that draws together singers sent by provincial TV stations and performance institutions affiliated with the military. Traditionally these singers were then judged by mostly state-affiliated professionals and the winners of the competition were usually recruited into several state-affiliated performance troupes and became professional singers. The strictly official status of the TV station and the singing competition has changed somewhat in recent years as the market economy exerts its impact. CCTV, apart from broadcasting state-line ideology, is also engaged in the game of market. Over the years it developed 14 stations to cover different subjects and meet audience’s different preferences. Products and companies compete for airtime on CCTV stations as they are the most watched stations in the country. The two most recent Youth Singing Competitions have been sponsored by Longliqi, a Chinese pharmaceutical company. More and more popular stars and cultural icons have been invited to be the judges of the competition so as to increase viewing rate, and the exposure that winning singers garner from the event also attracts attentions from record companies.
than two decades of economic reform and opening up, in combination with the general advancement of globalization, has made this previously isolated communist country increasingly accessible to outsiders. The outside world has also gradually entered China’s everyday life, apparent in areas such as information flow, economic integration, and cultural hybridization. Nevertheless, the disappearance – as a tendency instead of a fact – of national borders is also accompanied by repeated explosive reassertion of national identity in China. The Chinese people, in both real and cyber spaces, erupted in protests in reaction to the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by US military in 1999, the collision of US and Chinese military planes over the South China Sea in 2001, Japan’s bid to become a permanent member of the UN’s security council in 2005, and western media coverage of the March 14th Tibet unrest in 2008. All of these events hinted at the rise of popular nationalism and the convergence of spontaneous mass sentiments with state political agenda.

The third wave of ethnic representation is related to the recent rise of nationalist sentiments in many ways. With the concept of a united multi-ethnic nation-state well established after over 50 years of nation-building effort, any celebration, revival and preservation of minority cultural elements becomes a convenient site to reassert cultural tradition and hence national identity. This tendency is further strengthened by increasing international presence at such sites, such as foreign tourists, international investments and the participation in preservation efforts by international organizations such as UNESCO. All these contacts of the country with the outside world in real space have heightened the need to strengthen and reassert China’s national identity in the collective psychological

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76 For analyses of this new wave of nationalism in post-socialist China, see Gries “Chinese Nationalism,” Hughes and Dai Jinhua “Behind Global Spectacle”.
space. The West’s interest in China’s ethnic minorities also feeds into China’s growing pride in being a rising global power. This strange mixture of self-Orientalism and strategic essentialism was certainly at work at the Yi poet’s proud presentation of his singing group to foreign professors at an international academic conference. It was also present in the 2006 Washington DC concert given by Chinese singer Song Zuying, who dressed up in full Miao costume and sang Miao folk songs during that concert. Song, a famed Chinese singer of Miao ethnicity, was trained in the style of academic folk singing, a style significantly different from traditional Miao folk singing or any other so-called “yuanshengtai” singing tradition. She rarely appears in her Miao identity or sings Miao folk songs when performing in China. To exhibit her usually hidden ethnic side when performing for a US audience is therefore a strategic performance of an ethnic national identity. A popular saying frequently quoted when ethnic minority cultural elements are celebrated can succinctly convey this spirit of “univeralist particularism:” “zhiyou minzu de, caishi shijie de” [Only that which is national (or ethnic) is global].

There might be many reasons behind the emergence of the third wave of ethnic minority representation in China, but most directly, on a material level, the renewed interest in the internal other is a result of the increasing mobility of average Chinese people. The improved transportation system, increasing household income, the state’s loosening of population control, and a state-sponsored campaign of consumption and leisure have all given powerful boosts to ethnic tourism in China since the early 1990s.

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77 Another variety of the sentence is: yue shi minzu de, yue shi shijie de [What is more national, is more global].

78 According to China Statistical Abstract 2008, China’s per household disposable income was 6,280 RMB in 2000 and 13,785.8 RMB in 2007, in comparison with 1,510 RMB in 1990. After adjustment of price increase, China’s per household disposable income has increased 93.7% in 2000 and 279.8% in 2007 over the figure in 1990. In March 1995, China’s central government issued new work time regulation that included Saturday in weekends. In September 1999, the central government announced the extension of
First ethnic theme parks that showcased minority cultures were built in Shenzhen and Beijing as tourist attractions in the early 1990s. This was followed by an ethnic tourism boom in the minority regions. These regions, located in areas far away from the metropolitan centers, quickly became hot destinations for tourists. As a result, they also became locations of lavish consumption and utopian imaginations. The launching of the central government’s Open Up the West project in 2000 further pushed these regions into the national spotlight. Blessed with spectacular natural landscapes, most ethnic minority regions exude irresistible charm for the tired city dwellers. Some of these travelers, so mesmerized by the alternative life styles and spiritual comforts that these destinations provided, became long-term residents. “Zangpiao,” for example, was a term coined to describe some of the people who migrated in reverse direction from the general migration trends – rural to urban and west to east – in the country. Literally “Tibet drifters,” zangpiao refers to those who move to Tibet for artistic inspiration, spiritual exploration, and economic opportunities.  

Given the relative isolation of the ethnic regions, it was quite understandable that ethnic tourism brought more visible and substantive changes to the ethnic regions and communities, rather than the tourists themselves. Studies have been done on the impact of ethnic tourism on minority communities in China. In these studies, scholars focus on the commodification of ethnic cultures (Schein 155-158), minority’s construction of the

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three major holidays: Chinese New Year, May 1st Labor Day, and October 1st National Day. After the extension, the Chinese had three days for each of these holidays. In 2000, this new holiday plan was further reformed to create 7-day vacation on each of these three major holidays (by moving the preceding or following weekend). These holiday reforms were considered the government’s effort to create a leisure culture and stimulate consumption. For a discussion on the state’s role on the promotion of leisure culture in post-1992 China, see Jing Wang’s “Culture as Leisure and Culture as Capital.”  

This is an example of a reversal of the dominant trend in the mass population movement in China, directing mostly from rural to urban areas. Beipiao [Beijing drifters] is a term coined to describe those who move to Beijing from other regions for various kinds of personal improvement. Zangpiao is perhaps derived from that.
sense of place and ethnic identity (Oakes, “Ethnic Tourism”), the roles played by the state and indigenous people in ethnic tourism (Swain, “Commoditizing Ethnicity” and “Ethnic Tourism”; Litzinger, Other Chinas and “Mobilization”), or the dilemma between modernity and preservation (Oakes, Tourism 186-187). In most studies, the interest exhibited by both foreign and Chinese tourists in the ethnic minorities was characterized as fascination with the erotic and the exotic, the driving force behind ethnic and cultural tourism in general. In addition to existing scholarship on ethnic tourism in China, my discussion below will focus on the gradual transformation that ethnic tourism brought to China’s mainstream popular culture and how this new fascination with the internal other is propelled by a new national identity anxiety.

As a result of ethnic tourism, an increasing number of Chinese came into contact with ethnic minorities and minority regions that they had previously seen only in picture magazines or minority films. Such contacts produced a large number of popular visual and narrative accounts of many regions that have before this point remained distant. Apart from satisfying desires for exoticism, these contacts also presented new sites of utopia for many Chinese that have lost other spiritual or ideological utopian ideals. Many place names in northwest and southwest China, mostly ethnic minority regions, appeared in popular culture with increasing frequency, forming a whole new utopian lexicon. One started to find names such as Xizang [Tibet], Lasa [Lhasa], Yunnan, Zhongdian, Lijiang, Xishuangbanna [Sipsongpanna] and others on books that mushroomed in bookstores in the mid-to-late 1990s.80 These books might differ in genre (photography, fiction, 

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80 Zhongdian is a popular tourist destination in Northwest Yunnan. In the late 1990s it claimed itself to be the basis of Shangri-La in James Hilton’s 1933 novel Lost Horizon. In 2001 it was renamed by the State government as Shangri-La. Lijiang, also in Northwest Yunnan, is another popular tourist destination with
biography, travel guide, travelogue, poetry, etc), but the focus on faraway places, often conspicuous in their titles and covers, brought these books together to form a new quasi-sacred cultural-geographic literature. Together they weaved for many city dwellers new dreams about distant places that are beautiful, pure and unchanging.

This craze for faraway dreamland cannot be separated from the image of ethnic minorities as primordial, pure and unchanging. Beyond spectacular landscapes of snow-capped mountains and pristine lakes, the new tourism boom also brought Chinese tourists into contact with ethnic minority cultures, a whole new realm of imagination and consumption. Recognizing new economic opportunities in the increasing number of tourists, many local governments and residents in ethnic minority regions sought out various methods to capitalize on the new national craving for the exotic and the primordial. Local festivals and rituals were revived and repackaged as entertainment and spectacles. Ethnic artifacts were mass-produced as tourist souvenirs. Accomplished artists – both minority and Han – became engaged in cultural productions that contributed to ethnic tourism, such as Yang Liping’s Yunnan yinxiang [Yunnan impressions] and Zhang Yimou’s Yinxiang lijiang [Lijiang impressions]. Other than impressions of postcard-perfect natural landscape, tourists to the ethnic minority regions brought back to their city dwellings images of ethnic minority cultures, some reconfirmed old stereotypes (primitive, colorful and simple) and some surprising new discoveries (spiritual, international, and open).

81 Both are multi-media spectacles that are performed in real landscape and both tried to combine natural landscape with ethnic minority cultures to create performances that became tourist attraction in themselves. Yang Liping is a well-known dancer of Bai ethnicity. Zhang Yimou is a famous Fifth Generation director that has turned to commercial filmmaking in recent years. His most recent project was the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.
This new familiarity with ethnic minority cultural symbols and icons started to become widely visible in China’s mainstream popular culture in the mid-1990s. Nimrod Baranovitch has examined the rise of ethnic cultural elements in China’s popular music, which became quite noticeable in the 1990s. Both ethnic minority singers, such as Teng Ge’er of Mongolian ethnicity and Luoluo [Lolo] of Yi ethnicity, and Han singers, such as Zhu Zheqing and Zheng Jun, contributed to this ethnic fever in popular music. On the ethnic minority singers’ part, being able to sing songs that drastically differed from the state-sponsored propaganda ethnic songs meant new agency in constructing and expressing ethnic identity, but on the Han Chinese’s part, the unfamiliar and “primitive” sounds and symbols of the ethnic minorities “helped to assert a much-needed authentic mainland identity in the context of intensified globalization” (Baranovitch 81). Perhaps more than that, these new songs were also expressions of a new utopian imagination that prized spirituality over materialism, eternity over change, purity over pollution, and creativity over stagnancy. The “authenticity” of this new national identity, conceived via the ethnic minorities, stems not only from its drastic difference from the global culture of McDonaldism, but also from its purported spirit of primordial purity which gives people imagined strength to combat the alienation and feelings of powerlessness brought by postmodern experiences. More recently, “yuanshengtai” music, as the most updated version of ethnic minority influences in China’s mainstream popular music, with its ultimate emphasis on authenticity and primordial purity, is a signal of the severity and omnipresence of this alienation and powerlessness, which could in turn be utilized for profit-making.
Other forms of media also saw increase of ethnic minority presence. After the popularity of the state-sponsored ethnic minority films in the 17-year-period and the elitist subversive ethnic films of the 1980s, ethnic minorities have again become a popular subject on the silver screen. Compared with the previous two ethnic cinematic fevers, this new wave of visual fascination with ethnic minorities appeared more diversified in form, subject matter and participation. In mass-market popular cinema, there was Lu Chuan’s *Kekexili* (Kekexili: Mountain Patrol, 2004), a popular film about a volunteer Tibetan patrol team’s fight with poachers of Tibetan antelope in one of the most desolate areas of northwestern China. Zhang Jiarui’s *Ruoma de shiqisui* (When Ruoma Was Seventeen, 2002), a film about the encounter with and disillusionment from the promise of modernity experienced by a Hani girl in Yunnan province, was also a critically and commercially acclaimed film. Other notable examples include Zhang Jiarui’s *Huaya o xinniang* (Huayao Bride in Shangri-la, 2005) about Yi life in Yunnan province, and Hu Shu’s “yuanshengtai” film *Kaishui yao tang, guniang yao zhuang* (I Want to Dance, 2006) about Miao and Dong ethnic groups in Guizhou province.

Compared with feature films, China’s new documentary movement, which started in the early 1990s, exhibited even more explicit and extensive interest in ethnic minorities and border regions. Many active members of this movement had lived in ethnic minority regions and produced documentaries that visualized their own perception of lives in far-flung ethnic minority regions. Duan Jinchuan’s *Bakuo nanjie shiliu hao* (No. 16 Barkhor South Street, 1997), Ji Dan Sha Qing’s *Gongbu de xingfu shenghuo* (Gongbu’s Happy Life, 1999) are notable examples of this subdivision of the new documentary movement. One of the most important venues for the new documentary movement, the biannual
Yunfest (Yun zi nan jilu yingxiang zhan [Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival]), bears strong connection to the rising interest in ethnic minorities both in its multi-ethnic location and in its ethnographical origin (the first and second Yunfests in 2003 and 2005 used the title Yun zi nan renleixue yingxiang zhan [Yunnan Anthropological Visual Festival]).

Ban Wang, when commenting on the extensive use of documentary style in contemporary Chinese cinema, considers it a visual strategy with a political agenda:

As the Chinese visual field is increasingly dominated by fantastic representations promulgated by the transnational industry and Hollywood’s dream factory, documentary arises as a wakeup jolt to the self-indulgence in dreamy self-denial and visual whitewashing. (“Documentary” 7)

This revolt against postmodern visual simulacrum and adherence to the real also applies to the new documentary movement. But this allegiance to the real in the new documentary movement is not always exclusively devoted to the revelation of the dark and the ugly. As a reflection of a prevailing cultural mood of contemporary China, documenting (jilu) is also a strategy that preserves what is disappearing as well as a gesture to acknowledge the strength and the dignity in everyday life. These different aspects of documentary’s “real” result in the new documentary movement’s special interest in the subaltern—prostitutes, migrant workers, peasants, AIDS patients, ethnic minorities— as their lives contain many elements that would allow the filmmakers to bring out their multi-layered understanding of the real: victimhood, vulnerability, resistance, survival and dignity. Ethnic minorities, in particular, with the usual perception of their association with primordial authenticity and spirituality, become oft-visited sites for the construction of a new national spirit characterized by resilience and strength.

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82 Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival is the official English title of Yunfest. Literally its title should translate into Yunnan Documentary Visual Festival.
Chris Berry contends that the new documentary movement’s interest in the ethnic minorities bears influence from the Fifth Generation of feature filmmakers. He also argues that the ethnic minorities’ role as “others” within China enable the filmmakers to “express the sense of alienation and distance from their own culture felt by many educated Chinese amid the disillusion of the post-Mao era” (121). The influence from the Fifth Generation is certainly there. Tian Zhuangzhuang, a veteran director from the Fifth Generation of feature films, who made *Dao ma zei* [Horse Thief] and *Liechang zhasa* [On the Hunting Ground], shifted to documentary making in his most recent work *Delamu* (2004), a work that explores an ancient route used to transport tea, salt and horses in Yunnan province and records stories of people living along the route, mostly ethnic minorities. But in *Delamu*, one can also sense a distinct shift in Tian’s perception of the ethnic minorities and their relationship to the “Chinese culture.” His early ethnic minority films use ethnic minority spirituality as allegorical foil highlighting a perceived void and weakness of the modern Chinese culture. In those films the ethnic minorities appear ahistorical and almost mythical. *Delamu*, on the other hand, devotes itself to recording life and history of a place and a group of people as an acknowledgement of their existence and as a tribute to the strength and integrity in the quotidian and the trivial. Similarly, the new documentary filmmakers differ from the Fifth Generation in their personal perspectives on the contemporary experiences. Whereas it is true that the ethnic minorities were frequently used to express the sense of “alienation and distance” from Chinese culture, the new documentary filmmakers are also in search of a sense of collective belonging and presence of strength in the subaltern. This effort forms an alternative to the nation’s dominant developmentalist discourses. I would argue, together
with Lü Xinyu, an important Chinese documentary scholar, that the new documentary movement contains a critical “reflection on China’s utopian idealism that looked toward the West in the 1980s” and finds “new reflexive perspectives” in far-away places and marginalized people (12, translation mine).

In literature, the presence of images of ethnic minorities is more visible than ever in PRC history. Tibetan writer A Lai’s bestseller *Chen’ai luoding* [When the Dust Settles or Red Poppies, its official English title] won the fifth Mao Dun Literary Award, arguably the most authoritative literary award in China, in 2000. The story, a Tibetan *Tusi*’s simpleton son witnessing the boom and fall of his family and the *Tusi* system, was later turned into a TV series in 2004.83 *Lang tuteng* [Wolf Totem], a novel about Mongolians’ worship of wolves, written by Lü Jiaming under the penname of Jiang Rong and published in 2004, was another big hit in China’s book market that is often dominated by translated foreign bestsellers. Four years after its original release, the novel is still going strong on the book market and has purportedly beaten *The Da Vinci Code*, its chief competitor on the bestsellers’ list (Ren).

Outside of art proper, a revival of ethnic culture is also occurring in everyday life, most noticeably in food and fashion. In many metropolitan centers like Beijing and Shanghai, where restaurants were formerly dominated by Han Chinese cuisine, ethnic food venues became popular destinations for new gastronomic explorations. Korean and Uighur/Xinjiang food, already present in major cities in the 1980s, have greatly expanded

83 *Tusi* is a title given by Chinese emperors to local chieftains in ethnic minorities areas. During China’s Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties the Tusi system was the dominant administrative system used by the imperial court to control ethnic minority areas. This system started to be reformed during late Ming dynasty and was entirely eliminated when the PRC was founded.
in recent years, sometimes outside their former ethnic enclaves. The newcomers in ethnic cuisine, most notably Yunnan and Guizhou food, have largely managed to stay away from the primitive and earthy stereotypes of ethnic food often held by ethnic tourists, and entered the rosy and lucrative realm of world cuisine. Many popular Yunnan and Guizhou restaurants established branches in Beijing and Shanghai’s busy business and fashion districts, attracting China’s new cosmopolitan-minded white-collar middle class that go by names like xiaozī [petit bourgeois] or bobo [bourgeois bohemian]. With sleek and eclectic interior design (with ethnic highlights) and international/ethnic ambience, these restaurants seem to cater more toward a yearning for globalized multiculturalism rather than sheer exotic exploration.

This flattening between influences from the internal and external others is also evident in the recent popularity of ethnic elements in clothing fashion in China. Outside China, ethnic influences, as Valerie Steele puts it, whereas always a part of western fashion, “has become both more intense and more eclectic” over the past few decades (152). In recent years, this trend has moved to China with a few variations. Often referred to as “minzu fēng” (which literally translates into “ethnic wind” or “national wind”), clothing with influences from Miao, Zang, and other ethnic minority groups started to pop up in the numerous clothing stores that seemed to be a permanent fixture of China’s contemporary city- and townscape. Yet right next to this ethnic clothing one can also find clothes with influences from India, Nepal, Africa, or Han, Tang and Qing dynasties from China’s ancient past. “Minzu fēng” is therefore a cover term for fashion with any pre-modern, indigenous and non-western embellishment. This new interest in traditional and ethnic style fashion can be interpreted as the yearning for difference, change and

84 For an introduction to the history of Xinjing food in Beijing, see Zhuang.
authenticity that is common in the highly commoditized fashion industry anywhere in the world, but within the specific environment of China’s consumer market, it could also be seen as an effort to be cosmopolitan, to be synchronized with the tempo of the international world, and to become, in the end, a global cosmopolitan citizen.

The third wave of ethnic minority representation in mainland China is therefore much more widely spread, penetrating and multi-faceted than the previous two waves; it also entertains a wide range of desires and yearnings that can coexist despite being different from or contradictory to each other. The presence of ethnic minority can be noticed not only in literature, film, and state-controlled media, which were the more conventional territories of ethnic minority representation, but also in much more “quotidian” and mass-based realms of popular culture, such as popular music, food and fashion. At the production end, the third wave is also different from the previous two in that more forces and factors are involved in this revival of collective interest in China’s internal others. Economic growth and the state’s loosening control of population movement increase general population mobility and facilitate movement between metropolitan centers and ethnic minority regions. Investors’ need to maximize their profit drive them to search for every possible niche of the market, thereby gradually transforming China’s relatively uniform cultural life into diversified multi-cultural hodge-podge, creating enticing profitable spaces for ethnic minority cultures. Many members of ethnic minorities, with their new geographic and economic mobility, also use these opportunities to gain economic advantage and assert or remold their ethnic identities. Ethnic elites, such as the Yi poet mentioned above, consider marketization of ethnic culture a promising opportunity to preserve and promote ethnic traditions, whereas
other less well-positioned ethnic minority people see in the new consumption-friendly ethnic fever rare opportunities to rise above poverty and realize personal goals.

Meanwhile, the new international craze for exotic ethnic flavor has also exerted tremendous impact on the direction of China’s popular culture. Not only has it attracted foreigners to tour to ethnic minority regions and consume ethnic cultural products, it has also subtly complicated the cultural connotations of minority-related commodities. To the Chinese middle class consumers, this new ethnic trend can satisfy their desire for the exotic and the authentic, as is the case in the West, but it can also satisfy the desire to be cosmopolitan and keep up with the global trends.

Amid all the flourishing of personal desire, economic democratization and cultural globalization that created an encouraging climate for the third wave of ethnic minority representation, the ghost of the nation lingers on. The double meaning of the word “minzu” (nation/ethnicity) continues to maintain an invisible link between the interest in ethnic minority groups and the desire for a national identity that is recognized by the outside world. In other words, as China continues to position itself as subaltern in the global community, the general interest in the country’s own subaltern – ethnic minorities in this case – continues to be an integral part of the national identity construction. To lay bare the contemporary meaning of this invisible link, the following discussion will revolve around two images that I consider central to the third wave of ethnic minorities: power and purity. Both of these images are essential in the perception of the ethnic minorities in contemporary China. They also constitute two important aspects in Chinese’s perception of and response to the nation’s position in the world. These two images are certainly not sufficient in summarizing the third wave of ethnic
minority representation, but they are important links between the recent revival of interest in ethnic minorities and China’s new national identity anxiety as it rises to be a new global power in the 21st century.

What I mean by power here has two layers of meaning. One refers to the rise of the nation as a global power. Power therefore is a proud and triumphant side of China’s new national identity. The other kind of power is less grandiose. It refers to the power to survive and subsist despite difficult circumstances. More often connected to individuals and small communities rather than the nation in contemporary China, this perception of resilience as power can nevertheless be extended to the nation. Jing Tsu’s analysis of modern Chinese literature has shown that modern Chinese identity has been defined by failure since its inception. This failure-centered interpretation of China’s modernity continues in contemporary times and always renders any rise of China’s national power a solemn demonstration of the nation’s infinite resilience. Conversely, the nation’s rising power can also be read as a collective manifestation of a strong and resilient national spirit that can be discerned in individual members of an imagined national community. Both of these two kinds of power, one of triumphant pride and the other of tragic tenacity, exist in China’s new national identity, and both find powerful expressions in ethnic minority representation, as my following discussion will show.

Purity, the second important image in my discussion of the third wave of minority representation, is an illusory idea. At different occasions it can be replaced by words such as tradition, nature, authenticity, or innocence, a whole string of nice sounding but intangible concepts. On the one hand it is the creation of modern people’s nostalgic sentiments over what is lost as the cost of modernization. These sentiments can be
particularly strong in contemporary China where changes occur with rocket speed and on colossal scale. On the other hand this concept of primordial purity is also often summoned as the source of the power of the nation and its people, which is the force behind the nation’s seemingly inevitable progress and development. This image, often constructed through nature and native minorities, is also essential to the portrayal of the new national identity in the third wave of ethnic minority representation. Although such associations (between nature, ethnic minorities and purity) are old stereotypes in Chinese ethnic representation in general (Blum 72; Schein 121-123), China’s contemporary condition gives them a new sense of relevance and urgency.

Two texts in the third wave of ethnic minority representation can best exemplify the link between nation and representation of ethnic minorities and will be the subjects of my discussion: Wolf Totem and Kekexili. The former, a novel that reflects critically on China’s national character by way of meticulously recording and discussing Mongolians’ wolf worship, is an on-going sales miracle in China’s book market ever since its initial publication in April 2004. The latter, a successful internationally funded film that portrays a Tibetan mountain patrol team’s protection of Tibetan antelopes, helped to initiate a new environmentalist movement. Both texts depict strong ethnic minority characters against the backdrop of a receding pristine nature. In both narratives, the worship of primal power and strength is accompanied by anxiety over disappearance of primordial purity. Both texts are also situated in a clear national framework, with the former trying to make yet another diagnosis of China’s national disease and the latter adopting a “natural” national space. The images of power and purity are not only essential to the contemporary perception of the ethnic minorities; they are also the
projection of a new national identity under construction. While echoing some themes and associations already evident in the previous two waves of ethnic minority representation, the latest demonstration of the connection between nation, ethnic “natives” and nature contains new responses to the nation’s changing self-positioning in the world.

**Wolf Totem: Lupine Power as the National Spirit**

On 10 November 2007, the Man Asian Literary Prize, an award established to promote Asian literature in the world literary community, announced its inaugural winner: Chinese writer Jiang Rong was given the award for his extremely popular debut novel *Wolf Totem (Lang tuteng)*. In its official announcement, the Man Asian Literary Prize quotes Adrienne Clarkson, former Canadian Governor General and chair of the Man Asian Literary Prize judges, as saying the following about *Wolf Totem*: “A panoramic novel of life on the Mongolian grasslands during the Cultural Revolution, this masterly work is also a passionate argument about the complex interrelationship between nomads and settlers, animals and human beings, nature and culture.”

What one does not see from the Man Asian Literary Prize announcement is that *Wolf Totem*’s “passionate argument about complex interrelationship between nomads and settlers” is for the most part a vehement critique of the Han Chinese settlers. It is also unclear that the “Mongolian grasslands” in Clarkson’s comment sit within the border of the People’s Republic of China. In other words, they would usually be referred to as “Inner Mongolian grasslands” by Chinese. Jiang Rong’s “passionate argument” therefore is much less universal than the announcement made it out to be. The story in the novel, set during the Cultural Revolution and told through the perspective of a sent-down educated youth, is critical of almost every aspect of Han Chinese culture and the changes
that the Han Chinese settlers have brought to the Inner Mongolian grasslands during Mao and post-Mao periods.

Given the novel’s ruthless criticism of Han Chinese “sheepish” weak character and exaltation of the strong “wolf spirit” of the nomadic Inner Mongolians, it was quite a mystery that the novel quickly became the nation’s No. 1 bestseller after its publication, and continued to soar on various book sales ranking lists four years after its initial release. Rumor has it that the book has already sold 4 million copies in China by March 2008, not counting all the pirated copies (Le Guin). The book made another record when Penguin paid 100,000 US dollars for the book’s world English-language rights, the biggest amount paid by a foreign publisher for a mainland Chinese book. According to Penguin, the book has earned “the distinction of being the second most read book after Mao's little red book” in China (“Wolf Totem: A Novel”).

The book’s impact has far surpassed impressive sales numbers and hyperbolic media coverage. With the rise of the book’s fame, “wolf” as a cultural symbol began to enter the public imagination and discourses. Traditionally an animal associated with cruelty, malignance and lack of morality in China, the wolf has all of sudden become an icon for emulation in a “post-Wolf Totem” age. Athletes talk about adopting wolf spirit in order to excel in sports games. Entrepreneurs advocate wolf spirit as a treasured character in fierce market competitions. Military generals are reportedly ordering copies of the book for their soldiers so that they can become more “wolfish” through reading the book. Even romance writers started to create wolf-like male protagonists that are considered the

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85 The book’s sales number varies from article to article. Donald Morrison, for example, claims in his review of the book that it has sold 20 million copies in China.
86 This claim, widely quoted in English language reviews and articles about the novel, is unlikely to be true and impossible to confirm, as no reliable figures exist of the sales of Mao’s little red book.
new ideal Chinese men. It is not an exaggeration to say that *Wolf Totem* has literally launched a “wolf culture” in mainstream Chinese popular culture.\(^{87}\)

What are the driving forces behind this publishing phenomenon, and what could we learn from the *Wolf Totem* fever about the changes in average Chinese’s imagination of the nation and its internal others? Millions of copies of *Wolf Totem* were sold, not simply because everyone is looking into the exotic in search of some casual pastime, as numerous other exotic or foreign materials exist in the cultural market. Neither can one resort entirely to successful manipulation of market, as any critical-theory-minded cultural critic might do, since *Wolf Totem*’s marketing strategy, though elaborate and effective,\(^{88}\) was by no means exceptional in China’s publishing business.\(^{89}\) Pankaj Mishra argues that the book “captures a widespread Chinese anxiety about their country’s growing physical and moral squalor as millions abandon the countryside in search of a middle-class lifestyle that cannot be environmentally sustained.” Nichol Barnes argues that the novel is successful because it provides “a symbolic reversal of the woes produced by internal colonization,” a comforting thought that the Chinese readers obtain from this book, because, after all, “wolves don’t lose to sheep.”

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\(^{87}\)For accounts of the imprint left by images of wolf in China’s popular discourse, see, for example, Sun, or Wu et al.

\(^{88}\)The major marketing strategy used by the book’s publisher during its initial release is celebrities’ endorsement printed on the book’s back cover. These celebrities include Zhang Ruimin, CEO of the Haier Group, Teng Ge’er, famous singer of Mongolian ethnicity, and Zhao Zhongxiang, famous CCTV host of “Ren yu ziran” [Man and nature], a popular nature show.

\(^{89}\)The author Jiang Rong refused to reveal his true identity during the early stage of the book’s sales, due to concerns over possible official intervention because of his participation in the 1989 pro-democracy movement (the real identity of the author is Lü Jiaming). As a result, no large-scale marketing events were held for the novel’s release. See “Zhongguo changxiaoshu shichang zhuangkuang de diaocha yu fenxi” [Market research and analysis of Bestsellers in China], written by Zhou Baiyi, the president of Changjiang wenyi chubanshe [Changjiang literary and art press], lang tuteng’s publisher.
Anxiety over the nation’s deterioration alone could not launch a popular aggressive “wolf culture.” Nor could inter-ethnic guilt.\(^9\) Whereas the novel met with enthusiastic welcome from readers and critics within China, its reception outside the country, after the release of its English translation in March 2008, was more mixed. The big difference between the domestic and international receptions can provide some insight into the book’s appeal to the Chinese audience. What is troubling in *Wolf Totem* to many readers outside China, especially in the book-reviewing circle dominated by liberal-minded intellectuals, is the uneasy coexistence of power supremacy rhetoric and environmental concerns. Whereas the former dominates through much of the novel’s polemic arguments and might worry anyone who still remembers the woes of imperialism and fascism, the latter also constantly makes the novel a cautionary tale about the possible dangers of uncurbed modern developments. Proponents of the book see the two as perfectly compatible, as the former proves again that humans can always learn from nature and the latter advocates harmony between human and nature (Mirsky). Opponents of the book, however, see the two as strangely at odds with each other and, while criticizing the former with unrelenting vigor, embrace the latter as the only saving grace of an otherwise morally corrupted book (Jaivin; Mishra).

Instead of trying to solve the contradiction of ruthless power lust and environmental respect, development and preservation in *Wolf Totem*, I would like to propose an entirely different approach. The popular success of *Wolf Totem* demonstrates, among other things, the inner contradiction of nationalism in contemporary China. Modern China’s self-identification and historical positioning has always been a strange

\(^9\)One only needs to look at the reaction of the Chinese to the Tibetan unrest in March 2008 to see the non-existence of this guilt.
mixture of inward and outward, forward and backward gazes. The desire to become an advanced modern nation – recognized by the international community – is always intertwined with nostalgia for its ancient glory and assertion of its innate superior quality. *Wolf Totem* is only a somewhat grotesque expression of such a national imagination, more exaggerated because contemporary China’s quickening tempo of development and destruction is fanning the yearning for power – both individual and national – as well as the yearning for a reversal of the destructive side effect of modernization. In this sense, the ethnic minority that is mythically revered in the book becomes the ideal natives that hold the key to the nation’s modern success while embodying the primordial purity that the modern man pines for in a postmodern wasteland.

This inner contradiction will be the key in my analysis of *Wolf Totem*, both as a literary text and as a socio-cultural phenomenon. We can regard this extremely successful novel as an important link between a long cultural tradition in which images of ethnic minorities play an important role in shaping China’s national identity and the specific historical moment of contemporary China, characterized by rapid economic growth, abrupt cultural and spatial transformation, as well as escalating international integration.

As an intellectual project, *Wolf Totem* unfolds on two separate but interconnected levels. On its narrative level, it follows a Beijing educated youth named Chen Zhen as he grapples with life at Olonbulag on the Inner Mongolian grasslands during the mass mobilization “shangshan xiaxiang” [up to the mountains and down to the villages] movement in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In this “alien” environment he and his fellow students learn to become real herdsmen and gradually adopt Mongolian culture, which often disagrees with or even contradicts Han Chinese culture. Most highlighted in
the Mongolian culture in this book, as the title suggests, is Mongolians’ relationship with and worship of wolves. *Wolf Totem* sets out to document, often with an anthropologist’s attention and acumen, the role that wolves play in Mongolians’ real and spiritual life. The Han educated youths, formerly saturated in negative stereotypes of wolves in their own culture, face their largest cultural shock on the Mongolian steppes when it comes to wolves, but most of them are quickly converted into the local Mongolian wolf worship. Chen Zhen, in particular, becomes so fascinated with Mongolians’ myriad wolf myths, legends and stories, to the point that he personally adopts a pet wolf cub to better understand this mysterious animal. As the Han Chinese intellectuals become acquainted with and attached to the Mongolian worldviews and ways of life, they also witness, increasingly to their grief and resentment, the destruction that Han Chinese and sinicized Mongolians bring to the pristine grassland through their agricultural developmental activities. At the end of the novel, we see Chen Zhen and one of his fellow sent-down youths returning to the Inner Mongolian grasslands after some twenty years of absence, only to see the near completion of the dreaded destruction of the grasslands. Over-herding, over-farming and elimination of wolves have destroyed the grasslands’ natural equilibrium, leading to desertification and decline of usable pastures. On this narrative level, the novel ends on a desolate note, as the Mongolian’s pristine grasslands, together with the Mongolian nomadic life and their worshiped wolves, disappear under the impact of modernization.

Aside from this narrative level, the novel also develops on an argumentative level. In the novel, Chen is presented as a person avidly interested in history and culture. The account of his sojourn on the Mongolian steppes consists largely of his observation of the
Mongolian life and his thoughts about these findings, not unlike the field notes and diary of an anthropologist observing an unfamiliar tribal culture. A large portion of these “field notes” is devoted to Chen Zhen’s intellectual excursions that look into Mongolians’ wolf worship. Sometimes these excursions take the form of Chen Zhen’s own contemplation, often after hearing some new stories about wolves or reading history books that bring out the importance of wolves in human history. Other times these wolf excursions occur as conversations on wolves, among Chen Zhen, his fellow educated youths, and his Mongolian mentor Bilgee and other Mongolian herdsmen, or through debates between the Mongolian herdsmen and like-minded intellectual youths on one side and a few outnumbered yet influential cadres and supervisors saturated in developmentalist logic on the other side.

These wolf excursions cover a large spectrum of topics, ranging from military history, economic development, ecological equilibrium to spiritual harmony between man, nature and heaven. But most prominent among all these, presented to the reader with utter clarity from the very beginning of the book, is a question of power, a mystery surrounding a case of unexpected and unprecedented emergence of military power in history, namely, the sudden rise and dominance of the Mongolian empire on the Euro-Asian continent. This question is voiced many times throughout the novel, making it the chief research question of Chen the “anthropologist.” Here is an example of this question, appearing early in the book:

To Chen, these hours of exemplary combat tactics had proven more enlightening than years of reading Sun-tzu or Clausewitz. He had been smitten by the study of history at a very young age, obsessed over solving one of the great mysteries of world history: Where had the tiny race of people who had swept across Asia and
Europe and created the Great Mongol Empire, the largest landholding in the history of the world, learned their military secrets? To Chen, and I would argue also to Jiang Rong the novelist, as nowhere in the novel is Chen depicted with any critical distance, the answer to this great mystery of world history must lie with certain innate qualities of the Mongolian people, and observing the life of the modern Mongolians would lead him to this answer.

Intriguingly Jiang does not make this mystery the suspense that sustains the momentum of the novel. Rather he has it solved early in the book, telling the reader quite directly that the key to this superpower is the wolf. The harsh environment of the Mongolian steppes has eliminated other less suitable animals, leaving man and wolf the only remaining dominant species that control the grasslands. Mongolian wolves, which are described in the book as smart, vigorous, communal, selfless, and full of tricks and guiles, become the Mongolians’ best teachers and practice partners in warfare. Wolves help, through countless battles, to train and select the best fighters and military leaders. Meanwhile, the permanent wolf threat to the livestock of the nomadic Mongolians also expedites the natural selection of the Mongolian horses, an essential element in the Mongolians’ military dominance in their empire’s heyday. This answer, revealed as early as the second chapter of the novel (35 chapters in total, with an additional coda and another theoretical discussion as appendix), continues to surface and develop throughout the rest of the book, being repeated, reiterated, extended, enriched and perfected, resulting in a book that resembles a polemic thesis more than a fictional novel.92

91 All quotes of Wolf Totem come from Goldblatt’s English translation of the novel, and the page numbers also refer to the English version.
92 The novel ends with a long (over 40 pages) appendix under the title “Lixing tansuo – guanyu lang tuteng de jiangzuo yu duihua” [rational exploration – a lecture and conversation on wolf totem], which covers a conversation between Chen Zhen and Yang Ke during the two’s return to the grasslands. Chen, speaking as
It also quickly becomes apparent that Chen’s interest in the success of the Mongolian Empire is not purely academic. As a Han Chinese, his view of history remains sino-centric, despite his unreserved celebration of the nomadic people’s apparent military superiority:

Now he understood how the great, unlettered military genius Genghis Khan, as well as the illiterate or semiliterate military leaders of peoples such as the Qumrong, the Huns, the Tungus, the Turks, the Mongols, and the Jurchens, were able to bring the Chinese (whose great military sage Sun-tzu had produced his universally acclaimed treatise *The Art of War*) to their knees, to run roughshod over their territory, and to interrupt their dynastic cycles. They had the greatest of all teachers in military strategy; they had an excellent and remarkably clear model of actual combat; and they had a long history of struggle with crack lupine troops. (27)

Chen’s patronizing attitude toward the non-Han people is unmistakable. His fascination and worship of the Mongolian culture and wolf totem comes from his bafflement over ancient China’s military failures in the hands of many less developed nomadic groups; ultimately it is a fascination with power and might.

Power remains at the center of the picture as Chen extends his wolf supremacy theory to the success of people that do not have any real or spiritual connection with wolves. The rise of the modern West is attributed to the fact that their nomadic ancestor bequeathed to them aggressive “wolf spirit.” This national character (*minzu xingge*) is the root of economic growth, technological advancement and territorial expansion. Furthermore, freedom and democracy are also purportedly the fruit of this “wolf spirit,” as individual integrity and independence, indestructible traits of wolves, lies at the root of the modern democratic political system, whereas the obedience and lack of individuality in sheep, an animal to which the sedentary agricultural Chinese are compared to, would

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*a social scientist, delivers a lengthy lecture on wolf totem as the fruit of his lifetime research. In this discussion, Chen presents the wolf totem as an essential progressive force in human history, both within and outside China. In the novel’s English translation, this section is left out.*
only lead to authoritarian regimes. Even Japan, an island country with no recent nomadic history, becomes the land of “hailang” [sea wolves], producing an outward-looking people with aggressive character and insatiable desire for growth and expansion. The protagonist and the author therefore slide into a deductive circle, confusing the premise (wolf spirit leads to powerful nations) with the conclusion (powerful nations all have wolf spirit).

As a contrast, the Chinese nation’s lack of wolf spirit (sometimes referred to as lack of wolf blood) leads to its repeated military failure in history. To avoid future failures, Chen argues, the Han Chinese must heal their national disease, which can be summarized as “sheepness” or “domestication.” As a civilization developed through agriculture that is therefore sedentary and obedient, the Chinese lack the “brutality” or “wolfness” of the nomadic people. This national character, according to Chen, is the root of Chinese people’s repeated failure in ancient and modern history. It has also led to the economic stagnancy and technological backwardness, because the sheep blood in the Chinese veins reconciles them with the status quo and renders them unwilling to seek change or expansion. Further, this weak and obedient national character also directly causes authoritarian political system, as the obedient people can be easily turned into subjects of oppressive rule, whereas democracy comes out of negotiation between strong and “wolfish” people with its government.

After examining the battlefield where a pack of wolves brutally massacred a herd of prime horses prepared for military use, Chen again meditates on his “primal” question, How could a nomadic, uncivilized, backward race of people with no writing system, one that used arrows tipped with bone, not steel, be in possession of such advanced military capabilities and wisdom? That was one of the great unanswered questions of history. (98)
The answer to this question, once again, is the wolf. More than that, to be a nomadic herding people or to be a sedentary agrarian people, or in other words, to live with wolves or to live without wolves, becomes the ultimate difference between the strong and the weak, the victor and the defeated. Jiang’s book, again, is not subtle about this finding:

Chen felt himself to be standing at the mouth of a tunnel to five thousand years of Chinese history. …In the history of China – from the Zhou dynasty, through the Warring States, and on to the Qin, Han, Tang, and Song dynasties – all those great agrarian societies, with their large populations and superior strength, were often crushed in combat with minor nomadic tribes, suffering catastrophic and humiliating defeat….The Han race, with its ties to the land, has gone without the superior military teachings of a wolf drillmaster and has been deprived of constant rigorous training exercises…

Millions of Chinese died at the hands of invasions by peoples of the North over thousands of years, and Chen felt as if he’d found the source of that sad history. (99)

This account of China’s history depicts the nation as one inflicted with violation and invasion by foreign forces. It also hints at the nation’s perpetual inability to stand up to such bullying. It constructs a version of Chinese history characterized by violations and failures.

In China’s modern history, such pessimistic outlook on the nation’s fate has not been uncommon. Ever since the trauma-ridden modern history of China embarked on disastrous notes sounded by foreign invasions in the 19th century, theories on diseased national character as the root of the nation’s travesty had been invented and reinvented many times by intellectuals. This was most famously voiced by Lu Xun in his preface to Call to Arms. After seeing a lantern slide in which a crowd of Chinese spectators enjoy the spectacle of a Chinese’s decapitation by Japanese soldiers, Lu Xun changed his early aspiration to save the nation with medicine,
The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made examples of, or to witness such futile spectacles; and it doesn’t really matter how many of them die of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit, and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I determined to promote a literary movement. (22)

Lu Xun’s diagnosis of modern China had many followers and comrades throughout the 20th century, so much so that C.T. Hsia argues that the most distinctive feature of the modern phase of Chinese literature is a “moral burden of contemplation,” an “obsessive concern with China as a nation afflicted with a spiritual disease and therefore unable to strengthen itself or change its set ways of inhumanity” (533-534). In the late 1980s, after almost ten years of self-reflection and self-criticism in the intellectual circle, national character once again grasped public attention in China, as the widely watched and controversial TV series River Elegy made the over-sweeping argument that China’s development and march into modernity has been smothered by its agrarian earth-bound civilization. Only by embracing the mentality of the West’s ocean civilization, River Elegy argues, can China overcome this national shortcoming and catch up with the modern West.

It is in this tradition of national character critique that Wolf Totem develops its lupine philosophy. It is a 21st century echo of Lu Xun’s 20th century call for a reform of China’s “national character” as the ultimate path toward national salvation. This is apparent from the novel itself, which mentions Lu Xun’s discussion of national character several times (173, 319,513), and also observed by reviewers like Pankaj Mishra.

This is not to say, however, that Jiang’s novel is simply repeating Chinese intellectual’s century-long obsession with national character. Most importantly, in Jiang’s theoretical paradigm, the national disease that inflicts the Chinese is not the plague that
haunts all Chinese, but earth-bound agrarian Han Chinese. In Chen’s account, the development of the Chinese civilization is the history of conflict and balance between China’s nomadic groups and agrarian groups. It also argues, along a line distinctly different from Lu Xun and *River Elegy*, that the decline of China in modern history is not a symptom of the fall of agrarian culture in a linear human history. Instead, it is a repetition of moments of imbalance between “wolfness” and “sheepness” that has been enacted repeatedly in a cyclical national history. These arguments, only touched upon sporadically throughout the novel’s main body, is thoroughly elaborated in the novel’s polemic appendix, in which a matured Chen Zhen gives Yang Ke a long lecture on his studies about the importance of the wolf in Chinese and world history, as the two revisit the Mongolian grasslands. The absence of this theoretical treaty in the novel’s English translation is telling, indicative of the obtrusiveness of this appendix, both as an incompatible part of a novel and as a highly controversial argument, especially to a non-Chinese reader.

In a certain sense, this modification of Chinese history is consistent with the multi-origin and highly complex formation of the modern Chinese nation. Many studies have shown that the concept of a homogeneous Han Chinese is very far from the historical reality. Given the frequent historical and logical distortion in the argumentative part of the novel, however, it is highly unlikely that historical objectivity is the driving force behind this modification. At one point of the appendix’s lengthy discussion, Chen indicates that wolf might be the origin of the dragon, the ultimate mythical animal in Chinese culture that symbolizes power and dominance. In this argument we can sense the tremor of a revisionist logic. Although the bulk of the novel suggests the superiority of
the Mongolian ethnic group over the Han Chinese, this final section establishes the interconnection between the nomadic and agrarian groups in China through the demonstration of a long history of wartime conquering and peaceful inter-mingling. More importantly it establishes the “wolf spirit” or “wolf blood” as a dormant quality of the Chinese civilization, and argues that China’s dragon totem might actually be a mutation of the wolf totem.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis and also beside the point to evaluate the soundness of this cultural-archeological discovery. After all this statement comes out of a character in a fictional work and should not be judged as a scientific discovery, no matter how much it tries to look like one. What is more important to the current discussion is this new “discovery’s” role in the large pool of texts and discourses regarding the internal others in China and its effect on the adjustment of the Chinese national identity at the particular historical moment of early 21st century. *Wolf Totem’s* overarching historical narrative about the “wolf spirit” reiterates the integral roles played by both agrarian and nomadic ethnic groups – especially the Mongolians – in China’s history. By doing this it reconfirms “unity out of diversity,” a concept established during the first wave of ethnic minority representation in post-1949 China. The novel mainly focuses on the difference between the Han Chinese and the inner Mongolians – an ethnic minority group – to search for a remedy for what the author perceives to be a national disease. Echoing the intellectuals and artists during the 1980s who looked toward the internal others for lost cultural roots of an ancient civilization that has been deeply weakened in contemporary times, *Wolf Totem* expresses a deep fascination with an ethnic group that constructed what is perceived to be the height of the Chinese civilization, the Mongolian Empire, and
suggests that a good understanding of the secret behind this glorious moment will help to revive the nation.\(^{93}\)

What distinguishes \textit{Wolf Totem} from the previous two waves of ethnic minority representation – I believe this also holds the key to the popular success of the novel – is its fascination with power and dominance. In the world created by \textit{Wolf Totem}, the ultimate criterion of success or even dignity is brutal force and dominance. At various points throughout the novel, the protagonist sings eulogy to the winners in history, such as the Mongolian empire, modern Japan and the modern West, underlining their exploratory and aggressive spirit and comparing it to the spirit of wolves. Although nominally condemning the cruelty of fascism and other cruel regimes, calling them the result of excess of “wolf spirit” or imbalance between “wolf spirit” and “sheep spirit,” for the most part the novel makes no mention of all the killing and exploitation that occurred in the process of the rise and dominance of all the “wolf-spirited” empires and nations.

This worship of power and dominance corresponds to the rise of ultra-nationalism in China in recent years. As China grows to be a major economic power in the world, the Chinese nation’s self-perception has also in part shifted from a global victim to a global power, although such a shift is never a clear-cut process and can often have interesting permutations and reversals. Overall, there is a widely spread awareness that China’s ascent to a major global economic and political force has at least begun, if not already completed. Although the official discourse tried to use phrases like “peaceful rise” or “peaceful development” to avoid the international antagonism that a perception of a

\(^{93}\)To include the Mongolian Empire in China’s glorious ancient history and list Genghis Khan as an ancient national icon, a stance unquestioned in China’s history writing, is in itself a case of highly manipulative interpretation of history in service of the modern nation-state. See Khan “Chinggis Khan” 265-69.
global threat might bring,\textsuperscript{94} there is no doubt that many Chinese’s perception of the country has changed from a backward third-world developing country to a rising daguo [great power] (Yan), to borrow from the title of a popular documentary TV series "daguo jueqi [the rise of great powers], which examines nine foreign nations’ historical rise to power. "Wolf Totem’s” call on the revival of the nation’s “wolf spirit” in order to achieve great power is no doubt along the same line as the general public confidence in the rise of the nation. On the other hand, the new religion of power as promoted by "Wolf Totem" is not limited to the aspiration of the nation. It is also a manifestation of the logic of the market, a contemporary “rule of the jungle,” that has steadily gained strength in China’s transition from socialism to capitalism. It is no surprise that "Wolf Totem” has been popular with entrepreneurs and was used to cultivate employees’ aggressiveness in business transactions.

"Wolf Totem”’s eulogy for the Mongolians’ “wolf spirit” is not separate from another primordial quality touted in the book: their respect for equilibrium in nature. Like its major “wolf spirit” theme, the theme of natural harmony is also developed along the contrast between the nomadic Mongolian group and the agrarian Han Chinese, or between wolf and sheep. The Mongolians, exemplified by the ever sagacious Bilgee, understand the inner mechanism of the grasslands, and maintain it with the help of wolves (!). The wolves, in Bilgee’s description, are an innate part of the natural equilibrium and hold tacit understanding with Tengger, the god of heaven, of the importance of protecting the “big life” of the grasslands and the necessity to kill some “small lives,” such as rabbits and marmots. The Han Chinese and sinicized Mongolians,

\textsuperscript{94} “Peaceful rise” was first mentioned by Chinese president Hu Jintao in late 2003, but in 2004 Hu changed his phrasing to “peaceful development.” See Hu’s “Speech” and “China’s Development.”
on the other hand, do not understand this natural equilibrium and therefore impose excessive herding and farming on the grasslands. Neither do they understand the importance of wolves in the ecological balance of the grasslands. Their ruthless massacre of the wolves in order to reduce the threat to the livestock is said to contribute to the destruction of the grasslands’ ecosystem.

The Mongolians thus hold two functions for the writer and his Chinese readers: they hold the key to the nation’s past glory and future success (wolf spirit); they are also the guardians of the natural harmony that is disappearing from the nation’s geo-body. These connections create an updated version of the “noble savage,” and as this “noble savage” is understood to be a constituent part of the multi-ethnic Chinese nation, the author uses it glibly to construct a new national identity that combines the past with the future, the local with the global, and culture with nature. Yet just as “noble savage” from the 18th century Europe should be seen as a rhetorical construct rather than a “substantive object” (Ellingson 374), the perception of Mongolians’ tie to nature should be scrutinized as the image of their power has been above. This affinity to nature and adherence to equilibrium between man and nature, applauded by the book’s supporters and critics alike (who wouldn’t?), might well be a construct to which the Chinese project their anxiety over the changes that are occurring in their own environment. The connection between the natives and eco-wisdom is a new addition to the old association between ethnic minorities and nature. The following discussion of Kekexili will focus mainly on the role of this new connection in the construction of a new Chinese identity.

*Kekexili: Why Should the Chinese Care about Tibetan Antelopes?*
The crossover of ethnicity, nature and discourse of national power is the deep structure of another minority cultural text *Kekexili, or Mountain Patrol* (2004, hereafter as *Kekexili*), a film directed by Lu Chuan, one of China’s so-called New Generation directors. A film based on real events, *Kekexili* is often noted for its environmentalist consciousness and documentary realism. I will argue, however, that neither of the two observations is well-founded. *Kekexili*’s concern with human-inflicted deterioration of nature should not be taken at face value, because nature in *Kekexili* holds allegorical significance. My discussion will start with the role of nature in the overall narrative structure in *Kekexili*. I contend that nature in this film is not represented as a separate entity that is better left alone by human beings. Instead it is mostly important as the natural and spiritual homeland to the Tibetans. Furthermore, the harshness of the particular nature in Kekexili is an ideal backdrop that brings out the strength and resilience of the Tibetans that fight the Tibetan antelope poachers. Meanwhile, the image of the destruction of this primordial nature is also a visually powerful manifestation of the widely spread sense of homelessness – physical and spiritual – in contemporary China. In order to make this contrast – between the cruel destruction of the land and the Tibetans’ unconditional devotion to their homeland – resonate more strongly among the audience, real life events are deliberately manipulated and simplified in this film. From there my discussion will move to ethnicity representation and nation in the film. I argue that in order to make sense of the film, one needs to understand it intertextually, i.e., within the whole body of ethnic minority representation in post-1949 China. Only by doing so can we fully comprehend that nature in *Kekexili* exists in a national space, and the strength and resilience of the Tibetans is meant to be a reflection of a powerful national spirit. In
the end, what Lu Chuan aims to portray is a powerful national spirit (*minzu jingshen*) embodied in the minority Tibetans defending the integrity of their homeland.

*Kekexili* is named after the location where its story unfolds, a vast stretch of no-man’s land in southwestern Qinghai province, a particularly harsh section of Tibetan Plateau. Although its natural environment is not suitable for human settlement, it is the natural habitat of several endangered animal species, including Tibetan antelopes, an animal ruthlessly poached in recent decades because of the popularity and high price of *shahtoosh* – a kind of fine shawl woven from the Tibetan antelope’s down fur – in the international market. Lu Chuan’s film follows a reporter Ga Yu from Beijing to a small town next to Kekexili to investigate a volunteer mountain patrol team comprising mostly Tibetans. This team was organized with the goal of stopping antelope poaching and protecting the region’s ecological environment. Ga Yu becomes an embedded reporter in the team and follows it as the team patrols the area and pursues a group of poachers. During this patrol, Ga Yu witnesses the physical hardship and moral predicaments that the patrol team has to confront in their hopeless and thankless mission.

As a site of natural resource conflicts and ecological predicaments, Kekexili’s significance goes beyond a mere setting of a story. To the members of the mountain patrol team, it is the embodiment of the force that provides them with meaning and strength through their struggle. At the beginning of the film, when Ga Yu asks to interview Ri Tai, an ex-soldier who heads the patrol team, the latter declines the request with the excuse of lack of time. Only after Ga Yu mentions his interest in writing about the Kekexili Natural Reserve that Ri Tai is planning to establish, does he change his attitude and accepts this stranger with hospitality. It is as if by mentioning the place Ga
Yu reveals his understanding of the team’s secret code of honor and is therefore instantly accepted as an insider. At another point of the film, on a temporary campsite in Kekexili, Ga Yu is standing with two patrolmen outside their tents and appreciating the breathtaking beauty of the glimmering starry night sky. One of the patrolmen admits to the mysterious charm Kekexili has on him. Although he yearns for the outside world at the end of every patrol mission, he says, he would always want to get back after a mere three-day-absence. Throughout the film these are the only explicit suggestions of the patrol team’s emotional attachment to Kekexili, but they are clues to the patrolmen’s otherwise inexplicable obsession with the integrity of the land. In order to protect Kekexili, these patrolmen are willing to give up everything in their lives. This type of close connection between nature and man, immaterial and non-utilitarian, is a subtle critique of the “man conquering nature” principle regarding man and nature during China’s Mao era. It also forms a sharp contrast with the widely spread sense of homelessness in contemporary China’s rapid development and modernization.

The close connection between man and nature does not necessarily mean that this relationship is always easy and harmonious in Kekexili. Neither does nature form a “spatial, ecological and tranquil” realm that contrasts with the “linear, anthropocentric and tragic” human realm, as Chia-ju Chang argues in her analysis of the film. Nature can be human beings’ spiritual homeland, but its relationship with humans can also be extremely uneasy. At times nature in Kekexili is fragile, often at the mercy of human beings’ whim and greed. On the other hand nature can also be ruthless, ready to strike and destroy with no discrimination. In the film, we see the fragile side of nature most clearly in the depiction of the hunted Tibetan antelopes. The film invests a considerable
amount of emotional energy in its visual depiction of the violence that the poachers impose on the innocent animals. From snapshots of the hunting and skinning of Tibetan antelopes to a scene of deadly silent desert covered with hundreds of antelope carcasses after a massacre to the image of piled up antelope furs, image after image of violence is forced upon the audience so that they have to stare at the fragility of nature and the disaster human beings have wrought on it. This fragility of nature is also suggested when the poachers discuss the desertification of their homeland and when the audience sees the thin vegetation on the plateau of Kekexili. From this perspective of nature, the mountain patrolmen become its protectors and the poachers become its violators, and the film tells a simple story about good and evil as the nature’s protectors pursue its violators for revenge.

Yet more frequently nature appears in this film as a cruel, fickle and menacing presence that looms large over the human drama. Kekexili is not a welcoming environment for human beings. Dangers seem to be waiting for its human intruders at every inch of its desolate expanse. This aspect of nature is magnified for the audience in the film on both narrative and cinematographic levels. The conflict between human beings and nature often goes beyond the tension between the mountain patrol team and the poachers and becomes the film’s primary dramatic conflict. Whereas the ultimate goal for the patrol team is to capture the poachers, their most visible adversaries on the screen are usually various natural elements or lack thereof: the freezing river, horizontal snowstorms, engulfing quicksand, scarcity of oxygen, or food shortage. In a threatening environment like this, even a traditional chase with Hollywood thriller potential can become an absurd farce. At one point of the film, toward the end of a chase between a
patrolman and a poacher, both sides of the chase slow down to nothing more than a crawl due to the scarcity of oxygen on the plateau and wait for each other to succumb to the force of nature. Moments like this remind one of the standoff between man and wolf in a hostile nature in Jack London’s Naturalistic short story “Love of Life,” and prioritize the will to survive over issues of good and evil.95

The film’s cinematography also contributes to the creation of an image of a domineering nature and equally resilient human beings. *Kekexili* resembles most other visual representations of the Tibetan Plateau in its abundant sweeping pans and stationary long shots that aim to highlight the sheer size and physical magnitude of the landscape. But unlike stereotypical Shangrilaesque images of the Tibetan Plateau that are characterized by snow peaks and pristinely green pastures against the background of a deep blue sky and fluffy floating clouds, the sweeping pans and long shots in *Kekexili* often use a darker hue and present a hostile world with deserts and blizzards that call up associations with American westerns rather than tourism commercials. More tellingly these panorama depictions of nature usually contain human activities and therefore emphasize human persistence in the face of hostile environment. Pea-sized jeeps meandering on a vast and dark plain that takes up the entire screen, or small and semi-visible human shadows struggling to move forward in a blizzard-inflicted no-man’s land, the edge of which lies somewhere off the screen, images like these suggest the filmmaker’s interest in the strenuous relationship between human and nature as well as the former’s infinite capacity for survival. The fact that the film depicts the patrolmen and poachers with almost identical visual arrangement as they struggle to move forward

95Jack London is also mentioned frequently in *Wolf Totem*, mainly for his fascination with wolves, but also for human resilience in a hostile nature.
in a blizzard further proves that the filmmaker’s interest lies not simply in environmental protection, but also in human strength and tenacity.

The cruelty of nature does not seem to deter the Tibetans’ devotion to the protection of this land. In the film, the members of the mountain patrol team give up their careers, families, lovers and risk losing their own lives in order to protect the indigenous animals of Kekexili. In the real life events on which the film is based, the picture of good and evil did not appear so self-evident. Neither is nature regarded only as the embodiment of primordial purity that needs to be guarded at all cost. In one of the earliest reports on “xibu gongwei” [the Western Work Committee, hereafter as the WWC] of Kekexili, which was the real life model of the mountain patrol team in the film, we find that environmental protection is not the primary purpose of its existence. In this article title “xueran de xiwang” [The Blood Stained Hope], written by Wang Weiqun and published on China’s Youth Daily in 1995, the primary reason for Suonan Dajie – the local CCP leader and the real life model of Ri Tai – to organize the WWC was economic development rather than environmental protection. The inception of the WWC started with a disastrous blizzard that destroyed the majority of the local livestock in the Kekexili region, which made Suonan Dajie realize the vulnerability of an economy that solely relied on nomadic herding. This realization led Suonan Dajie to request higher-level government for authorization to carry out measures that would help to develop and protect Kekexili at the same time. At the time (1993) the region was already suffering from severe environmental destruction due to the massive influx of gold miners since the discovery of gold in Kekexili in 1985. Apart from destroying the land surface through mining, the gold miners also posed a severe threat to the wildlife population of the region
as they killed wild animals for food. The Tibetan antelope poaching posed another serious threat to the wildlife in Kekexili region. Yet the WWC’s mission was not limited to the protection of the natural environment of the region. It also included detection of natural resources, such as minerals and hydropower sites. Overall the WWC was a state-sponsored organization that was devoted to explore means of sustainable development for the Kekexili region.96

It is not surprising that a film based on the real life events of Suonan Dajie would focus on the fight with Tibetan antelope poachers, as he was killed when fighting poachers and was remembered as a courageous protector of the endangered animal. Yet in a film that claims faithfulness to reality, to not include any of the other economic developmental aspects of the WWC’s mission cannot be anything but an act of deliberate redefinition. The problems in Kekexili, just like in many other underdeveloped regions of the world, are complex and include conflicts between development and sustainability, disadvantaged access to resources and an unequal economic system that distributes profit and destruction to different regions and different social classes, to name a few. In other words, it is never a simple conflict between Tibetans that cherish their land and non-Tibetans that do not. The film Kekexili transforms the messy reality of an underdeveloped region into a simple story about man’s destruction and protection of a pure and powerful nature. To include any of the WWC’s developmental activities would destroy the illusion of a spiritually powerful people’s unconditioned devotion to their land.

This is not to say that Kekexili’s agenda stops at idealizing Tibetans and their relationship with nature. In the film, both Tibetans and their Kekexili exist in a national

96Similar accounts about Suonan Dajie and Kekexili can also be found in Qin Pei’s “Suonan dajie: shouwang kekexili” [Suonan Dajie: Watching over Kekexili] and Li Xiaowei’s “Huangjin chang” [Gold Field].
space. To understand this, we need to examine the ways in which ethnicity and nation surface in this film. In a film with broad strokes that portray natural forces and human strength, ethnicity and nation come into the picture in subtle and intertextual ways. Ethnicity never comes into the foreground to become the focus of the film. Yet to the Chinese audience who are no strangers to the visual representation of Tibetans, there are enough visual, auditory and narrative cues to keep ethnicity in the back of their mind while watching the film. The sky burial ritual performed at the beginning of the film and indicated at the end, the sound of Tibetan spoken throughout the film, the Tibetan-style singing and dancing by the patrolmen on campsites, the prayer ritual that the patrol team perform at the site of antelope carcasses, these cues keep minority ethnicity present in the film’s overall frame without causing conflict with the filmmaker’s primary universal theme. Underneath the surface of universalism that eulogizes human strength in general, the suggestion of an innate connection between ethnic minority and nature remains unchallenged. The Tibetans’ spirituality, which is perceived to be their major difference from Han Chinese, permeates the film, offering explanation to the patrol team’s unswerving loyalty to their land and their almost otherworldly willpower and strength.

Similarly nation also exists in this film in understated ways. Here one no longer encounters the kind of nationalist propaganda that was common in 17-year-period minority films: no minority policy is used to ensure hesitant minority people, and no

97 Older Chinese audience would be familiar with stereotypical representations of Tibet through singers like Caidan zhuoma and films like Nongnu, which was discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation. This official heritage of minority representation of Tibet continues to contemporary times with major-motif films like Honghe gu (A Tale of the Sacred Mountain, 1999). The images of Tibet and Tibetans become more widely familiar to the Chinese audience in the late 1990s through what Baranovitch calls “an officially encouraged Tibet fever” (104).
nationalist revolutionary theory is explained to enlighten suppressed peasants and serfs. Yet nation is present in the film as an assumed ideological framework that fits comfortably into its Chinese audience’s nationalist spatial imagination. The film’s presumed perspective comes from an outsider to Kekexili, a reporter from Beijing who is sent to Qinghai to cover the story of the mountain patrol. His voiceover at the beginning of the film, in Mandarin Chinese, is what leads the audience into the history of the mountain patrol team. In particular he announces that Kekexili is the world’s third largest no-man’s land and China’s largest. It is also, Ga Yu explains, China’s last primordial land. This setup of the national space and its position in the world, assured and unequivocal, is produced by a Chinese voice with an illusion of reality (Ga Yu’s profession as a reporter is certainly suggestive here).

Later we learn that this reporter is half Tibetan and can speak Tibetan, and yet communication between him and the patrol team remains in Mandarin Chinese. Meanwhile Chinese is also the lingua franca for all the characters in the film, as everyone is relatively fluent in Chinese, no matter what ethnicity they have and what their native language is. This is different from 17-year-period minority films, which usually construct an even national linguistic space in which everyone miraculously speaks standard Chinese when in reality there were many language barriers. Different from those predecessors Kekexili strives to sustain the illusion of documentary realism and has its characters speak different languages and dialects that would correspond to reality. Under such circumstances the ability of every character to speak Chinese is a subtle indication of the fact that nation reaches into every inch of its geographic territory.

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98This perspective is not entirely consistent throughout the film. Several critical scenes, such as Liu Dong’s three-day drive to seek medical help for his teammate and his immersion in the quicksand, are done without Ga Yu’s presence.
The pervasiveness of nation is also evident in the random mentioning of Beijing in the film. At the beginning it is mentioned that the reporter Ga Yu is sent from the nation’s capital. At the end of the film it is explained in the subtitle that Ga Yu returned to Beijing and wrote “a report that shocked the world.” His journey from the center to the periphery of the nation’s geo-body gives him the status of power and authority, and his trip back to the center results in the realization of his power and offers a link with the outside world. These seemingly irrelevant bits of information reveal a deep-rooted spatial hierarchy of the local, the national, and the global; they also reveal the important and unchallenged role of nation in Chinese’ spatial imagination of their own world. During the 17-year-period, when the construction of a multi-ethnic nation image was still an on-going process, any mentioning of Beijing or Mao in a Han-minority encounter in minority films would require explanation and persuasion, whereas here no questioning or explanation is necessary any more. The nationalization of China’s geographical space is already completed. Another similar incident in the film occurs when Ga Yu is discussing with a patrolman about the beauty of Kekexili. The patrolman tells him that Kekexili means beautiful maiden and beautiful mountains in Tibetan. Then, almost as an afterthought, he mentions that every footprint they leave on Kekexili might be the first one left there by the human kind. He later admits that this line is not from him, but a geologist from Beijing, for whom he once worked as a guide. This anecdote also has suggestive power on the audience in its unchallenged association between the nation’s

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99Kekexili (Hoh Xil) is actually a term from Mongolian, a vestige of the historical Mongolian rule of the region. See Wei 115. I do not know whether the reference to the name as a Tibetan word is an intentional misrepresentation or careless slippage. Perhaps it is done to avoid possible confusion, or to avoid complication of the neat dichotomy between center and periphery, modernity and tradition, because any historicization of ethnic minority, which an accurate explanation of the place’s name would no doubt initiate, would start to deconstruct the dichotomies mentioned above.
capital and authority. It is also interesting that a universalist imagination is summoned here. The significance and primordial purity of a local region needs to be explained in terms of a universalist connection between human kind and nature, and this connection needs to be endorsed by a specialist from the center of the nation: these subtle references to the nation, in combination with the film’s purported realistic mode of representation, are what lead Daniel Fried to argue that *Kekexili* differs from many other contemporary Chinese westerns in that it revisits “the modern, nationalist Chinese West” instead of constructing a blank mythological West (1492).

It is important to keep this imagined national space in mind when watching the film. Without this awareness one is easily perplexed by the film’s political message, as *New York Times* reviewer Manohla Dargis does. She argues that “given China’s historic and violent aggression against the Tibetan people, it’s hard not to read the film on several levels at once” and complains that “Mr. Lu never explains why a Chinese journalist would find this story [of the Tibetan patrol team fighting antelope poachers] especially newsworthy.” Perhaps to a Western film critic, it is hard to imagine that a film about Tibetans, funded by Time Warner and Columbia Pictures and directed by a provocative emerging director, would portray a harmonious national space, in which it is taken for granted that Tibetans form an integral part of Chinese and both the Tibetan patrol team as well as the primordial nature in Kekexili would have national resonance. The film can, indeed, be read on several levels at once, but perhaps not exactly the ones that Dargis has in mind. Within the national space in which the story of *Kekexili* unfolds, it is unnecessary to explain why a Chinese journalist would find the story newsworthy. Both the Tibetans’ resilient strength and the destruction that the primordial Kekexili is
suffering would be interesting to a Chinese journalist as well as the Chinese audience, because not only do they form a part of the contemporary Chinese experience, they also stand for the strength of the Chinese and their predicament.

When *Kekexili* was released in China, it was applauded as a powerful ecological film (*huanbao dianying*) and raised public awareness of the environmental problems in Kekexili. To the film’s creator, this response is perhaps not entirely expected. Lu Chuan has emphasized on various occasions that his film is not a *huanbao dianying*. His primary focus in making the film, according to Lu himself, is on the power and resilience that the characters in *Kekexili* demonstrate. Lu claims that this resilience, a national spirit, is what sustained China’s five-thousand-year history (Li Ke 33). He insists that, unlike many of his fellow directors of Fifth and Sixth generations, he does not want to reveal problems in Chinese society or criticize its dark sides. To him, the characters’ life in the film, though poor and lackluster, is a quiet but powerful existence.

The discrepancy between the director’s understanding of the film and its popular reception is more apparent than real. Lu’s portrayal of the power and resilience of the Chinese people is achieved through Tibetans and the primordial nature that seems to be an intrinsic part of the people. The popular reception of the film as a *huanbao dianying* might also see the primordial nature portrayed in the film as a symbol of the national spirit and a warning against the disappearance of the homeland. After all, the film managed to make the Tibetan antelope such a well-known national icon that it became one of the five images chosen to be the mascots of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, together with panda, another veteran national animal.
Different from *Wolf Totem*, power in *Kekexili* does not carry the connotation of dominance and victory. Instead it refers more to human beings’ instinctual adherence to and almost infinite capacity for survival and sustenance. Put together, these two types of power – one aggressive and one resilient – are the two sides of China’s new national identity in a world with a globalized economy and escalating inequality. The frequency with which contemporary Chinese cultural producers summon ethnic minority and nature when constructing this national image of power is a new manifestation of old stereotypes that relate ethnic minorities with ideas of primitive innocence and undiluted strength, as such connections have been common in the history of ethnic minority representation. Yet it is also a response to modern woes that many Chinese experience when confronted with economic polarization, rapid landscape transformation, and the disappearance of physical and spiritual homelands at an age of state-sponsored transnational capitalism.
Conclusion

Beyond Representation

It is difficult to understand how a nation’s self-image making would derive inspiration and rigor from the nation’s margin. We expect an emerging nation to quest for continuity and homogeneity. Internal differences are usually “assimilated, destroyed, or assigned to ghettos” in the course of this quest (Tölölyan 6), rather than being displayed and glorified. But just as a nation’s self-image making is a discursive practice, the image of the internal other – as the opposite of a putative center – can also be a strategic construct. As such the image of the internal other can be appropriated to achieve different purposes in the process of discursive nation-building. In the three waves of ethnic representation in post-1949 China discussed in this dissertation, the image of the ethnic minorities has become a sign of alterity from which intellectuals and artists have drawn rejuvenating energy to reform the image of the nation.

The way in which the modern Chinese envision their nation has been subject to frequent modification, due to a shared belief in progress, which has often been put to words by the intellectual elite but is also prevalent in the general public. Commensurate with this teleological view of history is a perennial collective anxiety over the national image under the real or imagined gaze cast by the world. What this dissertation has demonstrated is how the image of ethnic minorities has been appropriated, at different moments of national identity crises, to facilitate changes to the existing national identity perceived to be dilapidated. In this sense, the idea of “difference” contained in the image of ethnic minorities – its alterity – becomes its definitive quality. As the content of the
anxiety changed during each identity crisis, the meaning of the image of ethnic minorities – the content of the sign of alterity – also changed in each wave of ethnic representation.

One major element of discontent in my study of ethnic representation in post-1949 China is the problematic of agency. As my narrative frames ethnic representation as processes of China’s self-identity negotiation, I discuss cultural producers as if they were parts of one collective historical consciousness. Filmmakers, writers, painters, and cultural officials – these different agents of cultural production all played their parts in this long and tortuous process of national identity negotiation. Although my discussion demonstrates that the national identity anxiety has been a strong force in the cultural production of the PRC, such a grand narrative inevitably leaves out many different levels of identity negotiation that occurred simultaneously with the national one. Most notably, how do we approach the role played by ethnic minorities in this discursive nation-building project? Have they become passive objects of representation under a hegemonic national gaze? Have their voices been silenced?

To answer these questions, we need to reconsider “representation” and the concept’s political implication when it is used to discuss cultural politics. The history of academic – or popular – critique of representation can be seen as a map-in-the-making that identifies sites of oppression. One by one these sites were located by scholars, accompanied by accounts of discursive violence. The power asymmetry between the two ends of representation – the representer and the represented, or the seer and the seen – determines that any act of representation is by definition an act of symbolic violence. This is true in general, as any effort to re-present the reality is necessarily an act of mutilation, but it becomes more politically relevant when the representation is produced
by a group of people about others. That is why critiques of representation often occur along fault lines of social relations, such as gender, race, and class.

After Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, the tempo of this mapping process quickened exponentially. As a major component of a contemporary theoretical movement – with contributors such as Althusser and Foucault – that has revolutionized the way we think about culture and knowledge, Said’s account of the West’s aesthetic and epistemic subordination of the Orient provides us with a new paradigm for understanding the correlation between traditional sites of control, such as economic exploitation and political coercion, and newly discovered ones, such as cultural and knowledge production. One of the new perspectives that *Orientalism* has brought to the studies of representation is the issue of agency. Said’s study focuses on the right to representation rather than representation’s correspondence to a putative “reality.” In the practice of Orientalism, the West not only speaks of the Orient, but also speaks *for* the Orient. This differentiation emphasizes that representation is a violent act of silencing regardless of its content. Hence Orientalism is politically malignant because it enacts an erasure of the Orient as a subject. As Said puts it, Orientalism’s logic is, “if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and faute de mieux, for the poor Orient” (21).

This points to representation’s other meaning, to “stand for.” The right to speak for oneself, in this context, is the right to make one’s presence known and to produce subjectivity. With Said’s input a new trope of “voice” entered our understanding of intercultural relations, in addition to the old trope of “gaze.” Said’s theory on intercultural representation has led to an extensive conversation on questions of authenticity (whether
certain cultural producers are eligible to represent who they claim to represent), repression (how various communities are denied their voices), tactics of resistance (how the subalterns appropriate the dominant discourse for their own purposes), and so on. In this large body of literature on representation, “gaze” and “voice” are frequently used as two paramount tropes to analyze the reality of repression and the possibility of resistance.

Yet when we encounter moments of real cultural production and identity enunciation, this large body of literature on representation still seems inadequate. The experience of the Miao dancer mentioned in my introduction might be used as an example to illustrate this inadequacy. When he performed Miao dances as a member of the Central Nationalities Song and Dance Troupe, was he responding to a gesture of interpellation (as a Miao who subscribed to the role of a happy minority member of the multi-ethnic nation) or performing an act of self-representation? A self-representation of whom? Himself, the intellectual-artist elite, his Miao community, or his nation? What should we think about his non-Miao ethnic dances? When the Miao audience saw his dance, did they consume it as a representation of their ethnic culture and identify with it? Did they see it as a hegemonic national discourse appropriating their culture for imperialist purposes, or did they identify with this new multi-ethnic representation of their nation? Or did they see him as a person from their community that had successfully arrived in a coveted realm of cosmopolitan modernity?

All these different levels of identity negotiation can co-exist in cultural production and consumption. In our effort to understand the myriad meanings and functions of cultural products that involve ethnic minority subject matter, the majority/minority binary power relationship cannot accommodate the complexity and multiplicity in actual cultural
encounter, even though it does make us see certain political implications and possible subversive strategies. In this sense, representation – as a concept that presupposes a binary power relationship – is perhaps an inadequate tool. The tropes of “gaze” and “voice” need to be “sutured,” as Stuart Hall suggests, because, in the end, every act of “gaze” at an “other” is also an utterance of a “self,” and without the external “gaze,” there is really no way to “speak” for or of the self.

My study of ethnic representation in post-1949 China has not investigated the problematic of agency fully, because it focuses on the articulation of one exponent of identification: nation. Ethnic minority participation did exist in the production of some texts covered in this study. Most minority films used ethnic minority actors and cultural consultants. *Nongnu* and *Liechang zhasa*, for example, both had an exclusive minority cast. The third wave of ethnic representation, in particular, saw extensive participation of ethnic minority cultural producers. Yet to explore the individual input and experience of the ethnic minority cultural workers would turn my project into an anthropological study that I am not prepared for. To do a comparative study of the Han and minority experiences in the cultural production would also signal a return to the model of majority/minority binary power relationship that presupposes a repression/resistance agon and the myth of pre-existing subjectivity awaiting expression.

What actually happens in the contact zone between the framework of nation and the expression of sub-national identities or supra-national aspirations – the consumption and appropriation of ethnic representation by people with multiple levels of identification other than the national one – is a realm that this dissertation has not addressed fully. What it has focused on – the use of image of ethnic minorities in the national identity
construction in modern China – is only one aspect, albeit an important one, of a complex process of identity negotiation that involves multiple axes of difference. Nation, as one of the modern world’s most important and effective forms of political agency and a major frame of identity formation, continues to figure large in the cultural politics of contemporary China. The history of ethnic representation in modern China is a polyphonic history with multiple interlocutors, multiple agenda and contingent legacies. This dissertation has hopefully shed some light on one aspect of this polyphonic history and contributed to our understanding of the ways in which representation, identification and performative enunciation shape our sense of self and our relationship with the world.
Appendix

Minority Films of the 17-year-period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Directors</th>
<th>Studio</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>International Prizes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>内蒙春光 Neimeng chunguang</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>干学伟 Gan Xuewei</td>
<td>东影 NE* Mongolian</td>
<td>1952 Karlovy Vary International Film Festival Best Script</td>
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<td>内蒙人民的胜利 Neimeng renmin de shengli</td>
<td>1951</td>
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<td>东影 NE Mongolian</td>
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<tr>
<td>草原上的人们 Caoyuan shang de renmen</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>徐韬 Xu Tao</td>
<td>东影 NE Mongolian</td>
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<td>金银滩 Jin yin tan</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>凌子风 Ling Zifeng</td>
<td>上影 SH Tibetan</td>
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<tr>
<td>山间铃响马帮来 Shanjian lingxiang mabang lai</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>王为一 Wang Weiyi</td>
<td>上影 SH Miao &amp; Hani</td>
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<tr>
<td>哈森与加米拉 Hasen yu jiamila</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>吴永刚 Wu Yonggang</td>
<td>上影 SH Kazak</td>
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<tr>
<td>神秘的旅伴 Shenmi de lüban</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>林农 Lin Nong 朱文顺 Zhu Wenshun 朱文悦 Zhu Wenyue</td>
<td>长影 CC Yi</td>
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<tr>
<td>沙漠里的战斗 Shamo li de zhandou</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>汤晓丹 Tang Xiaodan</td>
<td>上影 SH Uighur</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>边寨烽火 Bianzhai fenghuo</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>林农 Lin Nong</td>
<td>长影 CC Jingpo</td>
<td>1958 Karlovy Vary International Film Festival Best Young Actors</td>
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<td>暴风雨中的雄鹰 Baofengyu zhong de xiongying</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>王逸 Wang Yi</td>
<td>长影 CC Tibetan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Year</td>
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<td>Studio</td>
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<td>芦笙恋歌 <em>Lusheng lian’ge</em></td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>于彦夫 Yu Yanfu</td>
<td>长影 CC</td>
<td>拉枯 Lahu</td>
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<td>牧人之子 <em>Muren zhi zi</em></td>
<td>1957</td>
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<td>蒙古 Mongolian</td>
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<td>患难之交 <em>Huannan zhi jiao</em></td>
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<td>朝鲜 Korean</td>
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<td>苗族儿女 <em>Miaozu ernü</em></td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>陶金 Tao Jin</td>
<td>江南 JN</td>
<td>苗 Miao</td>
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<td>回民支队 <em>Huimin zhidui</em></td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>冯一夫 Feng Yifu</td>
<td>八一 AF</td>
<td>回 Hui</td>
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<td>朝鲜 Korean</td>
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<td>绿洲凯歌 <em>Lüzhou kaige</em></td>
<td>1959</td>
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<td>海燕 HY</td>
<td>维吾尔 Uighur</td>
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<td>金沙江畔 Jinsha jiang pan</td>
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<td>傅超武 Fu Chaowu</td>
<td>天马 TM</td>
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<td>孔雀公主 Kongque gongzhu (animation)</td>
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<td>靳夕 Jin Xi</td>
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<td>1982 Spain Santander International Music and Dance Film Festival Best Dance Film</td>
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<td>草原英雄小姐妹 Caoyuan yingxiong xiaojie mei (animation)</td>
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<td>钱运达 Qian Yunda</td>
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<td>黄沙绿浪 Huangsha lülang</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>江雨声 Jiang Yusheng</td>
<td>上影 SH</td>
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<td>1965</td>
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<td>景颇 Jingpo</td>
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*Abbreviation of Film Studios:*

AF August First Film Studio
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<td>BJ</td>
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<td>Changchun Film Studio</td>
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<td>EM</td>
<td>E’mei Film Studio</td>
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<tr>
<td>HY</td>
<td>Haiyan Film Studio</td>
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<tr>
<td>JN</td>
<td>Jiangnan Film Studio</td>
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<td>NE</td>
<td>Northeast Film Studio</td>
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<td>QH</td>
<td>Qinghai Film Studio</td>
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<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Shanghai Animation Film Studio</td>
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<tr>
<td>SH</td>
<td>Shanghai Film Studio</td>
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<td>TM</td>
<td>Tianma Film Studio</td>
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<tr>
<td>XA</td>
<td>Xi’an Film Studio</td>
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<tr>
<td>XJ</td>
<td>Xinjiang Film Studio</td>
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            Introduction to World Mythology
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