

Article

# Buddhist Spirituality and Disadvantaged Social Strata in the Films of Pema Tseden

Xiaotong Wang <sup>1,2</sup><sup>1</sup> School of Art, Southeast University, Nanjing 211189, China; academicw@163.com<sup>2</sup> School of Art, Anhui University of Finance & Economics, Bengbu 233030, China

**Abstract:** Thoughts on the relationship between Buddhism and Tibetans permeate Pema Tseden's films. His early films focused on whether the Buddhist spirit, such as feelings, dedication, and self-sacrifice, was recognized in modern Tibet. Identity is a problem that Tibetans have always faced in the process of modernization. People in economically disadvantaged positions often face difficult choices between self-survival and maintaining moral and cultural traditions. Pema Tseden's films, however, focus more on the philosophy of Buddhism and use an ethnic internal perspective to examine the problems in ethnic modernization, which provides his stories with a strong allegorical color.

**Keywords:** Tibet; Tibetan film; Pema Tseden; Buddhism; identity

## 1. Introduction

The group of Tibetan film directors represented by Pema Tseden and Sonthar Gyal, also known as "Tibetan New Wave", has received widespread attention in recent years. Over the past decade, Chinese and overseas scholars have published papers on the films of Pema Tseden, which are mainly represented among four areas. The first is to interpret Tibetan films as "minor cinema" (Frangville 2016), which is a collective speech act. This kind of research tries to find a new way to understand Tibet, different from the image of Tibet found in the Western or Chinese mainstreams. The second type is interpreting the films from the perspective of genre films, i.e., road films (Berry 2016). These films reconstruct the geographical space of Tibetan areas and reflect the modernity crisis of Tibetan culture through the crisis of the presentation of Tibetan masculinity. The third focuses on the interpretability of the landscape. The films of Pema Tseden resist and destroy the metaphor of the landscape, making the symbolic association of the landscape easily questioned (Grewal 2016). The fourth concerns the visualization of Buddhism, which plays a leading role in the geocultural identity of Tibet (Smyer Yu 2014). The conflict between Buddhist values and modern secular life is the eternal theme presented in Pema Tseden's films.

In the abovementioned studies, Pema Tseden's earlier films, such as *The Silent Holy Stones* (静静的嘛呢石 ལྷན་འཇགས་ཀྱི་མ་འཛོལ་ལུང་།, 2005), *The Search* (寻找智美更登 འཛོལ་།, 2009), *Old Dog* (老狗 འཛོལ་།, 2011), and the short film *The Grassland* (草原 ལྷན་འཇགས་།, 2004), have received more discussion. This paper focuses on three of his latest films, *Tharlo* (塔洛 ཐར་ལོ།, 2015), *Jinpa* (撞死了一只羊 ལག་རམས།, 2018), and *Balloon* (气球 རྒྱུ་གུ་ལྷན་འཇགས་།, 2019), and analyzes the conflicts inherent in Pema Tseden's films on issues, such as ethnic and historical backgrounds, the current situation of herders' lives, and the dilemma of women's identity. These three films come from backgrounds relatively different from those of their earlier counterparts for the following reasons: (1) because of the rapid development of China's film market, art films have had some room for distribution with the surge in the number of cinemas and box offices, and all three films were released into mainstream theaters; (2) compared to previous works, which mostly used nonprofessional actors and a documentary style, these three films all starred professional actors, and the images are more



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obviously stylized; (3) Pema Tsenden himself was no longer the only notable Tibetan director, and Tibet-themed films have become more visible to the Chinese public. In this context, the cultural significance of Pema Tsenden's films is worthy of more in-depth examination.

## 2. Tibetan Cinema and Buddhist Cinema

"Tibetan film" is a vague concept that can be defined in terms of region, culture, and language. The geographical scope of Tibetan areas in China is traditionally divided into the Ü-Tsang (卫藏, རྒྱལ་གཞི་རྒྱུ་ཁོར་), Amdo (安多, ཨ་མདོ་), and Kham (康, ཁམ་མཚོ་) regions, including all regions in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), as well as parts of Qinghai Province, Sichuan Province, Gansu Province, and Yunnan Province. The films about Tibetan people's lives that take place in the above areas can be called "Tibetan Areas films", but this definition obviously cannot accurately reflect the essence of "Tibetan film". For example, some films made by Han Chinese in Tibet (such as *The Serf* (农奴, 1963) and *Red River Valley* (红河谷, 1997)) can hardly count as "Tibetan films" but more as "Tibetan-themed films" or "Tibetan-related films" (Hladíková 2016). From the perspective of language, "Tibetan-language film" is different from "Chinese-language film" with a Mandarin or Chinese dialect as the language, and it is a noteworthy concept. However, this perspective ignores the author's identity. For example, Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Horse Thieves* (盗马贼, 1986), Xie Fei's *Song of Tibet* (益西卓玛, 2000), Zhang Yang's *Paths of the Soul* (冈仁波齐, 2015), and *Soul on a String* (皮绳上的魂, 2016) are all Tibetan-language films shot by Han Chinese directors. These films' identity as Tibetan films has been questioned because the producers lack a deep understanding of Tibetan culture (Barnett 2015) and the complexity of the Tibetan language itself (the dialects of Ü-Tsang, Amdo, and Kham are very different or can even be unintelligible to one another, and the actors in *Paths of the Soul* were criticized for speaking different dialects) (Berry 2019). The works of Tibetan directors such as Pema Tsenden provide "Tibetan film" with an "internal perspective" within their ethnic group, opening up a new narrative of "telling Tibetan stories by Tibetans" for the first time. However, Pema Tsenden himself has also shot films that have nothing to do with Tibet. Thus, it is not accurate to define "Tibetan film" only by the identity of the author.

Buddhist films are presented in a variety of ways, covering a very broad spectrum. "Buddhist themes are presented *expressis verbis* as norms and values, sometimes they are implicit in action and dialogue, in visual sequences and musical accompaniment" (Renger 2014). John Whalen-Bridge put forward one possible answer for the question, "What is a Buddhist film?", asking us to consider the criteria for selecting films for international Buddhist film festivals (Whalen-Bridge 2014). He divides Buddhist films into those that are about Buddhism and those that are not. The former refers to films that represent Buddhism, meaning the actual Buddha, important Buddhist figures, ordinary people who are Buddhists, and so forth (some films of this kind made by Western filmmakers have an orientalism perspective to varying degrees). The latter refers to films that express or explain some Buddhist concepts, such as *Groundhog Day*. This magic-realist framework can be understood quite well in terms of a Buddhist understanding of samsara and karma (Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff 2014). Francisca Cho pointed out that, because Buddhist metaphysics holds that reality itself is empty of inherent existence, film provides a most fortuitous medium for representing reality and imparts new modes of religious interpretation and experience. As modern-day religious texts, Buddhist films, therefore, have the potential to allow audiences to reimagine the self and other(s) through the lens of a kind of visual scripture that gestures toward a new way of living in and through the world (Cho 2009).

Considering the prominence of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibetan culture, the social reality that Tibetan people generally believe in Buddhism makes it difficult to separate "Tibetan cinema" or "Tibetan area cinema" from the prevailing religious nature of Tibetan culture. Considering the bilingual Tibetan-Chinese cultural background of Tibetan writers and film directors, coupled with the Chinese government's special attention to minority cultures, it is difficult for creators not to consider the acceptance of their work within the Han Chinese audience. In addition to the "visual exoticism" brought by the geographi-

cal landscape of Tibetan areas, the narrative based on the spirit of Buddhism has become the key to the remarkable cultural identity of Tibetan films. Since Chinese Buddhism occupies an important place in Chinese cultural tradition, Han Chinese people can easily understand Tibetan culture through Buddhism. Tibetan cinema provides an effective way for Chinese people to understand Tibetan Buddhism and the daily lives of Tibetan people. Similar to the “Tibetan films” made by Han Chinese directors, the majority of the audience of Tibetan films is also Han Chinese people. The Buddhist perspective is reflected not only by the landscape of Tibetan films but also by the adaptive or conflicting behaviors brought out by Tibet’s modernization of the characters in the films. As Chinese society faces the impact of modernization and transformation, Tibetan culture faces the dual influence of both Western and Han cultures. On the issue of how to deal with the conflict of values between ethnic traditions, individual freedom, and modern development, “Tibetan cinema” infused with the Buddhist perspective undoubtedly provides a religious answer for Chinese people.

### 3. The Creation of Pema Tseden’s Early Films and the Application of Buddhist Elements

Pema Tseden was born in Amdo, Qinghai Province, in 1969, approximately the same period in which China’s “sixth-generation (第六代)” directors were born. Unlike the “sixth-generation” directors with elite characteristics who emerged in the 1990s, Pema Tseden once worked as a primary school teacher and a civil servant who wrote poems and novels and entered the Beijing Film Academy to study film production in 2002. During the 1980s, when Pema Tseden was growing up, a number of dynamic and influential cultural producers emerged in Amdo, most of whom were born between 1959 and 1967 and whose success has been attributed to the gradual restoration of Tibetan-language education and the implementation of relaxed cultural policies in the Amdo region during the later years of the Cultural Revolution. Growing up in a disorderly society, this generation had unique life experiences (a diversity of experience and relative lack of early formal education) and saw the increased secularization of Tibetan society, both of which contributed to their success in cultural production, thus filling the void of cultural production that was traditionally dominated by religion (and males) at the time. (Thurston 2018) Pema Tseden was born slightly later than the abovementioned period, but his cultural origins are similar to those of this generation.

Pema Tseden made two short films while studying in college. His first feature film, *The Silent Holy Stones*, was adapted from the short film of the same name and won the Golden Rooster Award sponsored by the Chinese government that year. As the first Tibetan-themed film directed by a Tibetan, *The Silent Holy Stones* not only received official praise (2005, the year of its production, coincided with the 100th anniversary of Chinese cinema) but also piqued Western curiosity about Tibetan films. This film tells the story of a young monk (Lama) who, while practicing in a monastery, watches the TV show *Journey to the West* (西游记). The little Lama not only watches with his family but also lets his father transport the TV, carried by a horse, to the temple to share the show with other monks. The film also shows the daily lives of Buddhist and secular children in the Amdo area, such as them watching Tibetan opera, playing, and discussing their education. The TV drama *Journey to the West*, first broadcast in 1986, is based on a well-known ancient Chinese novel of the same name. It tells the story of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang (玄奘)/Tang Sanzang (唐三藏) during the Tang dynasty, who went to India for Buddhist scriptures and gained a wide influence in China. Watching the TV show *Journey to the West* as a Buddhist story has multiple meanings: Firstly, as a modern medium, TV is a window through which Tibetan people can understand the outside world, and it also serves as a symbol of modernization in Tibetan areas. Secondly, the little Lama invites other monks to watch *Journey to the West* to understand the difficulty in Tang Sanzang’s acquisition of Buddhist scriptures, which can serve as educational material for practitioners. Thirdly, the deployment of *Journey to the West*, a show widely known by Han people, in Tibetan stories undoubtedly shortens

the emotional gap between the secular and the religious, and Han and Tibetan. On the other hand, the film also talks about the estrangement between the little Lama and secular society, as well as between Tibetans and mainstream society in China. The little Lama received a religious education while his classmates received a Chinese education. In addition, when it comes to watching videos of Hong Kong action movies, the little Lama keeps the precept and refuses to watch them. These details implicitly show that Tibetans try to maintain their cultural identity in the face of modernization.

After the success of the first film, Pema Tsenden tried to make a sequel and submitted a story outline about the little Lama's pilgrimage to Lhasa, but it was rejected by the censors. *The Search* is another sequel developed from *The Silent Holy Stones*, because the latter spent considerable time on children rehearsing the Tibetan opera *Drime Kunden* (智美更登). *The Search* uses a director's attempt to find a suitable actor to play Prince Drime Kunden as the film's theme. On the way from the countryside to the county, roads, herdsman's families, schools, and cultural institutions are all shown in the film. Apparently, whether the Buddhist spirit—sympathy, dedication, and self-sacrifice—reflected in the drama *Drime Kunden* is recognized in modern Tibet is the most concerning issue for Pema Tsenden. After receiving a series of different answers, the director in the film cannot find a suitable actor. In the film, two stories about love form an interesting correspondence with the process of looking for actors: the masked girl willing to embark on the journey to find the old love with whom she used to act, and the boss's experience of returning to secular life for his beloved girl but letting go of his feelings for her. In the end, the director, the boss, and the masked girl all make the same choice—giving up their obsessions, similar to the choice made by Prince Drime Kunden in the Tibetan opera *Drime Kunden*, that of giving up his rich life, wife, children, and even his own eyes. On the surface, Drime Kunden's virtues are not in line with the values of modern society, whereas the troubles of "greed, anger, and obsession" often plague people in modern society. The persuasion of the Buddhist values provides spiritual consolation for people's futile search in the film.

#### 4. Disadvantaged Social Strata: Truth and Metaphor

Since the reform and opening up in 1978, Chinese scholars have been accustomed to using the word "social strata" instead of "class" to discuss the group differences in Chinese society. In China, "class" has been given a strong political meaning. Its meaning and influence go far beyond the academic and theoretical fields. For most Chinese people, class analysis is an offensive, taboo, and sensitive topic (Wu 2006). However, "social strata" has been repeatedly proposed since the 1990s to replace Marxist class analysis and to express concern about China's changing social structure (Anagnost 2008). Some scholars try to divide social strata according to differences in economy, culture, power resources, and professional status, forming different classification models (C. Li 2020). However, there is no doubt that industrial workers, peasants, herdsman, and the unemployed can hardly be classified as "middle class" because of their economic vulnerability, and they are often labeled as "disadvantaged social strata".

According to data from China's Comprehensive Social Surveys in 2010 and 2013, ethnic minorities are placed lower than the Han nationality in terms of family income, occupational status, and average length of education (Wang and Chen 2016). A comprehensive analysis of data from 1982, 1990, 2000, and 2005 shows that the dramatic economic and social changes in China over the past three decades have placed Chinese ethnic minorities into even more disadvantaged positions in the labor market than before (Wu and He 2016). Since the third film, *Old Dog*, Pema Tsenden has focused more on the lives of Tibetans in the disadvantaged social strata and working class, including herdsman, truck drivers, and the unemployed. His films focus on portraying the conflicts and dilemmas of such people in terms of economy, culture, and ethnic identity. At the same time, the values brought by Buddhist beliefs have become the basis for their judgments in life choices. Therefore, Pema Tsenden's films are a good example for viewers to observe the relationship between the disadvantaged social strata of China's ethnic minorities and their religion.

*Old Dog*, shot with digital cameras just like *The Search*, reveals the more tense Tibetan–Han relationship in the context of China’s rapid economic development from a more realistic perspective. The Tibetan Mastiff was once a commodity pursued by the rich in China. The price of a Tibetan Mastiff can be as high as tens of thousands of yuan (CNY). The picture first shown in the film is a desolate town in Amdo, with unfinished houses, roads, and abandoned building materials scattered everywhere. Gonpo, a middle-aged man, plans to sell his old purebred Tibetan Mastiff to the dog dealer in town. His father insists on keeping the old dog and tries to catch up with his son who is on his way to sell the dog. The old man does not understand the significance of rich people in the mainland raising Tibetan Mastiffs, and he firmly refuses when the dog dealer tries to buy it at a higher price. The film shows a family in which members are indifferent to each other. The son Gonpo lives a life of idleness and infertility. The money he obtains from selling the dog is only for playing billiards and drinking in town. The father, his son, and his daughter-in-law watch TV together, while the TV is full of false luxury advertisements. They all lack interest in the content on TV. After the old man releases the dog and the dog is stolen by the dog dealer, the old man realizes that the old dog cannot continue to live on this land. The end of the film implies that the old man kills the dog. Killing the dog is contrary to Buddhist doctrine. The old man would rather let the dog go or let the dog lose its life than exchange the dog for money, which, to some extent, reflects his insistence on self-identity.

In the tide of economic globalization, even remote towns are inevitably involved in the production and consumption of popular goods. As one of the vast poverty-stricken groups in China, Tibetan herdsmen have only limited contact with the outside world, coming from production and consumption, which force the original closed cultural tradition and identity to experience great instability. In *Old Dog*, the behaviors of the father and the son are disordered and disoriented. At first, Gonpo sells the dog to Lao Wang and then he beats up Lao Wang, trying to retrieve his stolen dog back, and he is detained for 15 days because of his actions. The old man redeems the dog from the dog dealer, releases the dog to the mountain, and finally kills the dog. His actions are also full of inconsistencies and irrationality. The film is full of noisy environmental sounds: the ear-piercing sounds of renovations and truck sirens show chaos and restlessness. Contrary to the TV show *Journey to the West*, in *The Silent Holy Stone*, the cheap and fake luxury advertisements on TV in *Old Dog* are exaggerated and noisy, full of errors, distortions, and ambiguous images. The husband’s inability to have children and his excessive drinking imply that the family’s life is in crisis. The scene of the old man killing the dog was deleted and replaced by a more obscure one (the image disappears when the old man brings the dog behind the broken wall). The invalid release and the final killing of the Tibetan Mastiff by the old man may indicate that the cost of maintaining identity involves even the violation of Buddhism. It seems that religious belief is fragile due to the wave of modernization and the market economy in Tibet, and the significance of the individual struggle is virtually eliminated.

After *Old Dog*, Pema Tseden accepted an invitation and investment from the Jainca County (尖扎县 གཅེན་ཚུར་རྫོང་།) Government of Qinghai Province and shot the film *The Sacred Arrow* (五彩神箭 གཡུང་མཐུད།, 2014) for the local archery competition, with its rich ethnic traditions. This film is a typical, low-budget television film, and it plays a role in promoting local tourism and cultural resources. Interestingly, compared with other works, this film is more popular among local Tibetans. This fact reflects that the main audience of most of his films is not Tibetans themselves. After shooting this film, Pema Tseden started a distinctly different creative path: the use of professional actors, stylized photography, and more metaphorical narratives, which may be related to the changes in the Chinese film market. In 2015, the annual box office sales in China reached CNY 44.069 billion (USD 6.835 billion), with 1.26 billion moviegoers and 31,627 screens (Shi 2015). The annual growth rate of the film economy is remarkable, and it is several times higher than that in 2010. As internet giants began to invest in China’s film and television industry, Chinese independent films also gained more commercial potential, and Pema Tseden’s films have received higher production budgets.

In 2016, *Tharlo*, adapted from his short story of the same name, was released. “Tharlo” means “escapee” in Tibetan (Xiaomujiang 2017), and it is also the word for “liberation” in *The Sutra of Great Liberation* (聖大解脫經, sheng da jie tuo jing). *The Sutra of Great Liberation*, also known as *The Sutra of Datong Fangguang* (大通方廣懺悔滅罪莊嚴成佛經, da tong fang guang can hui mie zui zhuang yan cheng fo jing), is one of the few sutra classics translated into Tibetan from Chinese. The protagonist of the film, who is also called Tharlo, has an amazing memory. At the very beginning of the film, he recites Mao Zedong’s “Serve the People” (为人民服务) in full. It is obvious that Tharlo does not understand Chinese, and he recites purely by memorizing the pronunciation, unable to understand its meaning. “Serving the People” is a famous speech delivered by Mao Zedong in 1944. Every Chinese person who has experienced the Mao era is very familiar with it. The most famous concept in the speech is the quotation of Sima Qian (司馬遷), a historian of the Han Dynasty, who said that “Though death befalls all men alike, it may be weightier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather” (人固有一死，或重于泰山，或轻于鸿毛。). The quote triggered a reflection on the meaning of life, and an argument was further extended to the impact of a dichotomous good–bad value judgment on the meaning of life: the life of good people is valuable, while the life of bad people is worthless. Tharlo’s recitation’s intonation is similar to Buddhists reciting scriptures, and to some extent, it is a metaphor for the film’s religious consciousness—the communist belief in the Mao era—simplified as the opposition between good and bad, and the value of life. As if it were faith, it is engraved in the mind of a shepherd who is disengaged from the world.

The reason why Tharlo came to the county was to apply for a second-generation ID card. This ID card with an embedded chip was launched in 2004 and has become an important tool with which Chinese authorities identify citizens. Tharlo lacked identity. His official name is rarely known, but he is famous in the village with the nickname “Little Braid” (coincidentally, Shide Nyima, who plays Tharlo, is a famous comedian and a poet in Amdo and is also famous for his braid hair style). The lonely lamb he took with him once again showed the fact that he lacked identity in essence. Shortly after the opening of the film, a newly married Tibetan couple takes wedding photos. The background of the photo changes from Lhasa, Beijing, and then to New York. In the follow-up plot of the film, this detail is mentioned again: Yangtso, the girl running the hair salon, asks Tharlo to sell the sheep and leave the county with her. Tharlo replies that the three cities he most wanted to go to are the same. Amdo, the place where the film’s story takes place, is on the edge of the whole Tibetan region, and the characters in the film are often on the edge of the image rather than at the center. The above three places imply three choices in Tibetans’ imagination of modernization: center of Tibet (from the edge of Tibet), center of China, and center of the world (the West). After Tharlo shaves off his hair, Yangtso disappears with the money. Tharlo realizes that not only was he was cheated but he also became a “bad” man, and he cannot bring himself to recite “Serve the People” in front of the police once again. Tharlo’s attempt to establish his identity and escape from his town begins with a temptation and ends with a scam. He punishes himself by hurting himself. The ending of this story forms a meaningful contrast with *Old Dog*: the father in *Old Dog* and Tharlo are both herdsmen, who have actively or passively established a new identity. Whether they choose to persist or escape, the outcome is tragic, as well as against Buddhism. The narrative model of *Tharlo* is very close to the old but gender-biased Buddhist story: the male monk is tempted by the secular life and women and cannot maintain discipline, finally suffering retribution. If we say that belief in Buddhism, Tibetan languages, and the primitive way of labor form the original identity of Tibetans, after becoming involved in the modernization of the country and a prosperous market economy, it is difficult for Tibetan herdsmen who belong to disadvantaged social strata and ethnic minorities to find a balance between the old and new identity in terms of occupation, culture, language, and nationality, that is, between maintaining the old identity, which is derived from the uniqueness of the Tibetan language and culture, and becoming a member of the “unified and diversified” Chinese nation. The whole process is full of internal conflicts.

*Jinpa* was released in 2018. This film was produced by Wong Kar-wai and has a more metaphorical style. The film is adapted from two short stories: Tsering Norpu (次仁罗布)'s *The Slayer* (杀手) and Pema Tsenden's novel *I Ran Over a Sheep* (撞死了一只羊). The heroes of these two novels are both truck drivers. The name of the driver and the killer "Jinpa" means "alms" in Tibetan. The connotation of the two novels is consistent: only with religious devotion—forgiveness, compassion, and dedication—can a person be redeemed and meritorious. To avenge the killing of his parents, the Khampa slayer searches for the murderer for ten years. In Tsering Norpu's novel, the killer is more of a practitioner than an avenger. His search is pitiful rather than intimidating. At the same time, in Pema Tsenden's novel, the truck driver accidentally kills a sheep on the road in no man's land, but he is inexplicably obsessed with helping the sheep release its soul and is concerned with his accumulated merits. The film stitches together the common connotation of the two novels and expands the dream of the driver in the novel *The Slayer*: the slayer finds the murderer and then forgives the other party and gives up his plan for revenge, while the driver enacts revenge for the killer in his dream. The film's absurdist fantasy style makes the killer and the driver seem like two doppelgängers of the same person. The story of the Khampa slayer is a recurring theme in Tibetan literature. Revenge causes killing to continue like an ever-turning wheel. The driver, Jinpa, takes revenge on behalf of the slayer, Jinpa, in his dream, thus ending the wheel of killing and healing the wounds of the soul with sympathetic feelings. If the first two films from Pema Tsenden (*Holy Stone* and *The Search*) have a mild attitude toward Buddhism and *Old Dog* and *Tharlo* have a pessimistic attitude, this film is a turning point. The protagonist actively chooses to follow Buddhist teachings to pursue moral self-actualization. What is different from other films is that this film involves Tibetan–Han relations to a lesser degree. For the first time, instead of Amdo, the shooting takes place in the Hoh Xil (Kekexili 可可西里) area, with an average altitude of 5000 m, which intensifies the nonrealistic style of this film. In terms of geographical space, Hoh Xil, located at the edge of the three Tibetan areas, far away from the traditional political order, is a place where people are rarely seen, and where the director's ideal spirit rests. In this environment, the problem of identity is no longer troubling for the protagonist, and Buddhism has become his pure and traditional spiritual dependence.

From these three films, we can draw some conclusions about Pema Tsenden's thinking concerning the relationship between Tibetan people and Buddhism. In these three films, metaphorical and unrealistic styles progressively increase. The daily lives of the Tibetan working class are inseparable from Buddhism, which not only provides those individuals with basic moral concepts but also supports them when it comes to self-identity. When facing the temptations of modern secular life, it is risky for people to either accept or reject them, and the Buddhist values cannot provide guidance. In the fantasy world, Buddhism's morality is sublime and guides people to practice it themselves. At the end of the film, Jinpa looks up at the vultures in the sky, and the scene changes to a plane flying toward the sun. The film ends with a Tibetan proverb:

"If I tell you my dream, you might forget it; if I let you enter my dream, it will also become your dream".

The whole story is set within the framework of a dream, and the director straightforwardly sends an invitation from Buddhism to the audience to enter his dream. In this dream, people's grudges and vengeance can be defused; the dead can be transcended; and the virtue of charity can be promoted. It is an ideal Buddhist pure land. Pema Tsenden used a Lensbaby camera lens, a 4:3 picture frame, and the Tibetan and Italian versions of the song *O sole mio* to express the absurdity of this ideal world. This style of expression is Freudian rather than Buddhist. The film neither shot scenes inside the temple nor highlighted the symbols of Tibetan Buddhism, such as white pagodas, prayer cones, and prayer flags. In other words, the Buddhist belief in Pema Tsenden's films is closer to the ultimate pursuit of Buddhist values by individuals and less grounded in temples and scriptures. Considering that Pema Tsenden has always refused to show Tibetan areas as exotic, his films always lack those magnificent Tibetan geographical landscapes, and the real Tibetan space cannot

embody the ideal Buddhist world. Jinpa, the driver in modern clothes and sunglasses, ended the revenge cycle of the Khampa slayer in traditional clothes. It can be seen as putting an end to tradition in modern times; the Tibetan people still need to believe in Buddhism, but this belief is new and can adapt to modernization.

### 5. Women, Religion, and Family Planning—Female Subjectivity among Hierocracy, Patriarchy, and Secular Society

The female figures in Pema Tsenden's films have been criticized for a long time (Robin 2020; Y. Li 2021). There are few female characters in his films, and the female faces are always intentionally or unintentionally obscured. For example, the only female character in *The Search* does not show her face from the beginning to the end; Gonpo's wife in *Old Dog* always appears on the edge of the picture (dispensable). The female characters in *Tharlo* and *Jinpa* are alluring, and these films always lack a female perspective. On the one hand, Pema Tsenden discreetly disenchanting Tibetan images, maintaining a distance from the way Tibetan films used to portray female characters. On the other hand, the lack of female perspective also implies a crisis of Tibetan masculinity, which, to some extent, shows the lack of perspective of Tibetan natives. In Pema Tsenden's recent film *Balloon*, the above problems seem to have been corrected. There is no doubt that this film about Tibetan women's fertility is the first film by Pema Tsenden with a female perspective. This film shows many contradictions: reincarnation, female body autonomy, family planning policy, patriarchal family culture, abortion, and the poverty of herdsmen. The issue of family planning is especially prominent, since it is usually regarded as a problem of Han Chinese people rather than minorities, which makes this film worth discussing in a multidimensional manner.

The story of *Balloon* is not complicated: There is a herdsman family living on the Amdo grasslands, including a middle-aged couple, their three sons, and the children's grandpa. The husband, Dargye, has a strong desire similar to a breeding ram. His wife, Drolkar, must constantly find a doctor for condoms to avoid pregnancy. These condoms are always used by children as balloons to play with. Drolkar finds out she is unexpectedly pregnant at a time that coincides with her father-in-law's (the grandpa's) death. The guru believes that the grandpa will be reincarnated into a newborn baby, and Dargye hopes that his wife will keep this baby. However, the wife does not agree at all. After a quarrel between husband and wife, the film gives us an open ending. Drolkar goes to the hospital and leaves home, ready to follow her sister who is a nun to the temple for a period of time. The end of the film suggests that Drolkar finally chooses to have an abortion, not only in compliance with the nationwide family planning policy and the lack of money to raise a fourth child but also because of the awakening of female consciousness. However, the condemnation of Buddhist morality makes it hard for Drolkar to avoid her guilt. This film is full of Buddhist details, from the "Four Harmonious Brothers" (和睦四兄弟, མཐུན་པ་སྣུན་བཞི།) on the school blackboard shortly after the opening to the red balloon representing the Buddhist light at the end of the film (as well as the reaction shot of people looking at the sky). The "Four Harmonious Brothers" is a famous legend in Tibet, symbolizing the harmony and perfection of family, society, and religion. The three children and grandpa form the "four brothers". Therefore, the abortion of the grandpa's reincarnation symbolizes that this harmony has been broken. In this film, Drolkar, Drolkar's sister, Shangchu Drolma, and the female doctor, Drukto, represent three Tibetan women in different positions. Drolma, as a nun, represents Buddhist values, and the female doctor represents scientific and secular values, while Drolkar, who lives in a patriarchal family, can hardly accept either secular or religious values fully. The dilemma faced by Tibetan women is tested by the birth problem. Drolkar, who refuses to give birth to her fourth child, faces oppression from patriarchy and hierocracy, and the realistic choice she made due to the fact of national policy and economic difficulties can hardly soothe her emotional pain.

Compared with the original novel, the most important plot expansion is the elaboration of the backstory between the nun Shangchu Drolma and the middle school teacher Dakbum Gyal. Dakbum Gyal and Drolma were high school classmates and lovers. The

film suggests that Drolma became a nun because she had an abortion before marriage. When Drolma goes to the school to pick up her nephew, Dakbum Gyal meets her again by chance and gives her a novel describing their feelings. The setting of this plot reminds people of two details: Pema Tseden's experience as a Tibetan teacher and a novelist in his early years, and the male teacher who refuses to change his mind in front of the masked girl and also refuses to play the Prince Drime Kunden. Drolkar's reaction to Dakbum Gyal giving the novel to Drolma is to throw the novels into the furnace and accuse Dakbum Gyal of being a morally corrupt person. On the surface, Drolkar burns the novel out of her resentment toward Dakbum Gyal for impregnating her sister, but on a deeper level, she is virtually discontented with the male who controls the narrative—a metaphor for the hegemonic narrative. Compared with the one-child policy of the Han Chinese, the Chinese Government has adopted a relatively loose birth policy for ethnic minorities such as Tibetans; that is, urban residents can have two children or even three if one parent is a herdsman (Yincuo 2001). The sex ratio at birth in China has always been criticized. In some regions, the proportion of male newborns is too high, which is mainly attributed to the preference for sons in East Asian culture and sex-selective abortion. In the Tibet Autonomous Region, the gender ratio is always the most balanced among all provinces in China, which is related to the moral constraints of Tibetan Buddhism on abortion/killing. The existence of the family planning policy has led to a large number of involuntary abortions. However, considering the patriarchal family culture prevailing in Asia, this policy gives women under family pressure a legitimate reason to refuse involuntary childbearing. Therefore, in the film, the family planning policy is an important basis for women to claim their physical rights, which reflects the views of progress, science, and modernization. At the same time, religious points of view are also reflected in the film: one is reincarnation and another is the mystery of religious hierocracy, evident when the face of the guru is not shown. The religious idea of reincarnation is the reason the husband asks his wife not to have an abortion. Religious hierocracy and patriarchal families became the oppressors of Tibetan women.

Pema Tseden carefully adopts a balanced attitude between religious tradition and secular society. The heroine's choice of abortion represents that she agrees with the rules of secular society but never denies the authority of Buddhist morality. Both this film and *Jinpa* involve "reincarnation", the most special concept of consciousness in Tibetan Buddhism, which is particularly prominent in this film—Jamyang is considered to be the reincarnation of grandpa. Therefore, it is worth looking forward to the reincarnation of grandpa into the same family after his death. Pema Tseden uses the legend of the "Four Harmonious Brothers" and romantic camera language to express reincarnation. This transmission of life and identity is the core of Tibetan culture, which is affirmed and recognized by the director, but it is arbitrary for the guru to manipulate the process and identify the reincarnation. Drolkar was put in a dilemma. She was unwilling to admit that the fetus was the reincarnation of her grandfather, but she could not deny it. She did not want to give birth to a child, but she could not escape the guilt that comes from having an abortion. Therefore, in Pema Tseden's films, women's self-consciousness is the product of modernization, and women have the right to control their bodies according to modern ethics, which is in sharp contrast with the traditional Buddhist ethics of reincarnation and the prohibition of killing. The female doctor saying that "We women are not on earth just to give men children" clearly has a distinct feminist color. On the other hand, the film is filled with images of sheep breeding with pronounced fertility anxiety (it also reminds one of the young infertile couple in *Old Dog*) (Hu 2021), offering an opposite viewpoint: if fertility is impacted, the survival of Tibetans would be in crisis. Interestingly, Pema Tseden himself had different interpretations of the film's ending and denied that Drolkar must have chosen abortion. He said in an interview that the audience in Tibet thinks Drolkar would choose to compromise, while the audiences in Han or other regions think Drolkar would fight. Drolkar's choice has been given a high degree of modern imagination. Just like the red balloon at the end of the film, the audience also has two completely different interpretations: a life

disappears under the baptism of Buddha, in which everyone prays and redeems; a universal modern rule and order cover the earth, and nobody can escape from them (Tseden and Suo 2020).

Looking back on the women in Pema Tseden's films, if it is difficult for someone with Tibetan identity to find a proper position between religion and modernization, then Tibetan women will undoubtedly find it more difficult to find and maintain their identity. With the process of modernization, women's sense of autonomy has inevitably become a problem that families, societies, and nations must face. Gender awareness derived from patriarchal families and religious hierocracy cannot provide women with a reasonable new role, so women must be in a position that is opposed to tradition. On the one hand, Pema Tseden does not believe that modernization has solved all of Tibetan women's problems, and the repeated anxiety about fertility negates the one-child-only concept represented by the female doctor. On the other hand, fundamentally speaking, reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism cannot solve the problems of female identity, fertility, etc., and can only provide a place for spiritual rest and repentance for women in confusion.

## 6. Conclusions

In Pema Tseden's films, Buddhism is "not a moral and spiritual paragon outside the lives, the conscience, and the cultural reflexes of his characters but is an animated, immaterial component in his cinematic narratives" (Smyer Yu 2015). Pema Tseden's films focus on marginalized people, which corresponds to the relatively marginal position of Tibetans to mainstream Chinese people. His films often provide a Buddhist-based solution for people in trouble.

First, from the perspective of language, Pema Tseden's films have constructed a pure "Tibetan world". Within the space of his screen, not only do Chinese characters rarely appear, but, in fact, it is difficult to hear languages other than Tibetan in dialogue. This simplified language background is obviously selected. The director excluded different languages in order to facilitate the introduction of a "pure" Buddhist perspective into the film, using the ethnic "internal perspective" to examine the problems in the ethnic group's modernization.

Secondly, Pema Tseden's films, to some extent, emphasize the connection between Tibet and China's mainstream culture. From *Journey to the West*, Tibetan Mastiffs, "Serve the People" to family planning policy—these elements are all based on shared memory, from ancient history to popular culture, from consumption trends to national policy, and the Han audience can also recognize the common ground between the problems faced by Tibetans and their own. Pema Tseden makes use of Buddhist modes of thought to reflect upon complex situations in his community (Lo 2016). This further strengthens the symbolic and allegorical nature of these Tibetan stories themselves.

Thirdly, the characters in Pema Tseden's films are often in marginal social strata and in a disadvantaged economic position. In the face of strong economic and cultural shocks, people of this stratum often face difficult choices between self-survival and maintaining moral and cultural traditions. In his films, the Buddhist spirit, including compassion, charity, altruism, reincarnation, and the "five precepts", cannot give the characters the final answer and a moral model but can make people temporarily free.

Finally, from the perspective of Buddhist films, the films of Pema Tseden reflect the philosophy of Buddhism more than the process of practice. In Sharon A. Suh's *Silver Screen Buddha*, one definition of Buddhist film is to offer Buddhist interpretations of reality or a uniquely Buddhist solution to a social problem. The criteria for a more laudable account of Buddhist films are those that attend to Buddhism's inherent diversity, which is to say Buddhist films that address the ordinary lives of the laity, affirming everyday life as potential grounds for enlightenment (Suh 2015). Visually, his films do not pay attention to the representation of Buddhist symbols and do not intend to display the exoticness of Tibet with Buddhist landscapes and Tibetan geographical characteristics. On the contrary, he starts from the nonreligious life of ordinary people and ends with reflecting people's confusion and choices based on Buddhist values.

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