

A Study on the Aesthetic Form of Chinese Tibetan Theme Films in the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

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Abstract: From the "17 years" period of the new China after 1949 to the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, after decades of development, the creative content and aesthetic style of Chinese Tibetan Theme Films have undergone great changes, which are closely related to the changes of the times. This article will start with the induction of the development of Chinese Tibetan Theme Films in different periods, and analyze and study their aesthetic presentation and aesthetic style in the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.

1. Introduction

China's Tibetan-themed films are a very important part of China's ethnic minority films. They mainly focus on the Tibetan region, the Tibetan people and the Tibetan culture. Through the art form of film, they present the magnificent plateau scenery, unique ethnic culture and mysterious religious beliefs in Tibetan areas, which is a true portrayal of the life of the Tibetan people. It is also the epitome of the social changes of the Tibetan ethnic group.

Since the "17 years" period in the early years of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Tibetan films began to radiate a different kind of light, but the Tibetan films at that time were basically restricted by national policies, and most of the content was the theme of propaganda of national ideology. After the reform and opening up, the domestic environment changed from turbulence to stability, and domestic film creation was affected by the adjustment of literary and artistic policies. At this time, the aesthetic style of Chinese Tibetan Theme Films began to appear gradually. After 2000, with the continuous deepening of globalization, China entered a new social transformation period, and various thoughts began to emerge. The creation of Tibetan films also presented more and more rich aesthetic styles.

The 18th CPC National Congress was held in 2012, and socialism with Chinese characteristics entered a New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. The New Era of Socialism with

Chinese Characteristics means that Chinese Tibetan film has ushered in a new development process, and the aesthetic form of Chinese Tibetan film has also produced a corresponding historical evolution. The study of the aesthetic form of Chinese Tibetan Theme Films in the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics will not only provide a model for the reflection of the aesthetic deviation of contemporary ethnic minority films in China, but also benefit the construction of the aesthetic theoretical system of Chinese films.

2. The Development of Tibetan Films

2.1 The Beginning of Tibetan Films in China during the "17 Years" Period

At the beginning of the founding of PRC, the Party and the state, in order to consolidate the political power and promote the unity among ethnic groups, took film as a tool to publicize the Party's policies and ideological education, and made use of the powerful social communication function of film to convey the ethnic policies and advantages of New China to ethnic minority areas through entertaining and teaching [1].

The first of these films, *The Gold and Silver River Band* (Figure 1), came out in 1953. After *The Gold and Silver River Band*, other films such as *Dawn of Meng River*, *Flying Over The Sky*, *The Red Sun of Ke mountain* and *Serf* in the same period also praised the greatness of the People's Liberation Army and the Communist Party, so as to achieve the purpose of educating the public.



Figure 1: Communist Party officers communicate with local Tibetans (A screenshot from the film, *The Gold and Silver River Band*)

One of them has to mention the film *Serf*, it is new China's first film reflecting the Tibetan serf system, is the first Chinese film with Tibetan actors, and is one of the most classic representative works of Chinese film during the "17 years" period. The film tells the story of Tibetan serfs who were oppressed by serf owners in New China and finally liberated with the help of the People's Liberation Army. The film has both the camera style of a documentary and the climaxes of a feature film, coupled with the unique performances of Tibetan actors, making it a great success both in thought and art.

In general, the Tibetan-themed films in the "17 years" period have the responsibility of publicizing the mainstream ideology of the country. "Through the portrayal of the proletarian revolutionary heroes to express the sublimity and praise the sublimity, it has aroused strong resonance among the audience, and has a very distinct aesthetic form of "sublime beauty [1]"[2].

2.2 Reform and Opening up Period

After the “Cultural Revolution (1966-76)”, the film industry of Tibet stagnated for more than a decade. It was not until the reform and opening up in 1978 that the film industry of the whole country was revived. The great liberation of people's thoughts gave the film art more opportunities to develop, and the creation of Tibetan films opened a new stage of development. However, in the early period of reform and opening up, especially during 1978-79, there were still some films that did not get rid of the ideological shackles of the Cultural Revolution, and their contents did not change according to the development of The Times [3]. For example, 1978's *Snowlotus on the Icy Mount* and *Forbidden To Be Born*, 1979's *Ya Ya* and other films continue to inherit the theme of the "17 years" of revolutionary struggle, without great innovation.

In the 1980s, with the deepening of reform and opening up, people's minds were gradually emancipated. At this time, the Tibetan theme film creation had a greater breakthrough, and the artistic forms were richer. During this period, the Tibetan-themed films in China mainly included *The Third Goddess*, *The Colorful Night*, *The Magic Emerald*, *The Wheel Quartet*, *The Living Buddha*, *Horse Thief*, *My lover*, *My hate*, *The king songtsan gambo*, etc. Among them, "Horse Thief", shot by Tian Zhuangzhuang, a famous director of the fifth generation in China, was one of the most representative ethnic minority films at that time. The most prominent highlight of the film was the bold questioning of religion.

In the 1990s, China's economic system has undergone a huge transformation, gradually transforming into a socialist market economic system. However, due to the impact of the market and the structural changes in the film industry, the Tibetan films that have been supported for a long time have experienced a downturn in creation, and the number has not increased significantly. The main films include *The Sun at the Roof of the World*, *Kong Fansen*, *Red River Valley*, *Song of Tibet* and so on.

In a word, under the grand background of reform and opening up, Tibetan films bear the historical burden of the reform of the national system and the expansion of vision, and the process of film reform is closely linked with commercialization and industrialization [4]. Compared with the previous Tibetan films, the films in this period are more modern in content, more open in religious issues, and more Tibetan in art.

2.3 In the New Century

Since 2000, with the development of globalization and economic prosperity, all walks of life in China have entered a period of rapid development, and the creation of Tibetan films in China has also gradually recovered.

During this period, there were not only major films about the construction of Tibetan aid, such as *My Lucky Flower*, *The Dream of A Young Soldier*, *A Tibetan Girl Wearing Buddhist Beads*, *The Qinghai-Tibet Line*, and *A Tibetan Love Song*, but also commercial films that continued the 1990s by utilizing the star effect and big-budget route, such as *Red Snow*. At the same time, there are such mysterious religious films as *The Chainbreakers*, *Sunshine That Can Move Mountains* and *Soul on a String*. These films often contain some Zen thoughts of Tibetan Buddhism, which is thought-provoking.

When it comes to Tibetan films after the new century, we have to mention the "Tibetan native language films" directed by Tibetan directors represented by Pema Tsenden and Sonthar Gyal. Before that, almost all Tibetan films in China were filmed under the guidance of Han directors. They were filled with a large number of Confucian ideas and the "other" perspective, which was difficult to accurately reflect the true cultural life of the Tibetan people. The appearance of "Tibetan native language film" focused the camera on "small people" and really started the "self talk" of the

Tibetan ethnic group. Among them, the representative films are Pema Tseden's Tibetan trilogy *The Silent Holy Stones* (Figure 2), *The Search* and *Old Dog*, as well as Sonthar Gyal's work *Sun Beaten Path*.



Figure 2: The monks get together to watch DVDS (A screenshot from the film, *The Silent Holy Stones*)

In the multicultural context of the new century, the current Tibetan theme films begin to focus on the spiritual world of Tibetans, based on the form of art films, and more explore the "beauty of human nature", creating a rich artistic style, ushering in a new process of diversified development.

2.4 A New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

In 2012, the convening of the 18th CPC National Congress marked the entry of socialism with Chinese characteristics into a New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics [5]. The literary and artistic circles, including the film industry, began to learn the spirit of the 18th CPC National Congress. With the support of national policies and the encouragement of the market, the creation of Tibetan films in China has ushered in a new wave of prosperity and development, and the number and quality of films have been greatly improved.

The creation of Tibetan native language films has gradually stepped into a good situation, and most films are no longer produced in Mandarin. Among them, the films such as Deji's *Lawsuit*, *Ala Changso*, *The Sacred Arrow*, *River*, *Pathof TheSoul*, *Jinpa*, *Eternal Day*, *Wind* and so on all use Tibetan dialogue, and the main actors in the film are also from Tibetan areas. The works of the creators of Tibetan theme films, represented by Pema Tseden and Sonthar Gyal directors, have attracted wide attention in the film industry at home and abroad, and have made many achievements. Therefore, they are called the "Tibetan New Wave"[6].

In 2017, the 19th CPC National Congress clearly put forward "four self-confidence", which added "cultural self-confidence", which is the improvement of the "three self-confidence" of the 18th CPC National Congress. Since then, the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics has entered a critical period, and the production of literary and artistic creation has continued to prosper. The same year also became the outbreak year of Tibetan theme films in China. The films such as *Ambans*, *Pathof The Soul*, *Chainbreakers*, *Tianyuan Namtso*, *Soul on a String*, *Sunshine That Can Move Mountains* and so on came out in one year. Among them, *Pathof the Soul* directed by Zhang Yang won a high box office of 100 million yuan, which not only won the recognition of

the audience, but also became the focus of attention and discussion in the film industry at that time.

3. Aesthetic Presentation of Chinese Tibetan Theme Films in the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

In the past, China's Tibetan-themed films insisted on displaying the "sublime beauty" of heroes in the content, as well as displaying the "poverty aesthetics" in the images with the "original ecology" simplicity of Tibetans. In essence, this is the reflection of the spiritual and material life of that era, and the aesthetic form produced in that particular social period. But as we enter the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, our social form has changed, and the aesthetic form at this time is also different.

In the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, the audience's aesthetic has changed greatly. The former "spectacle" Tibetan film style can no longer attract more attention of the audience. The aesthetic fatigue requires the film creators to change their thinking. In order to open up the market, Tibetan theme films should also consider the aesthetic needs of the current audience while deeply exploring the Tibetan culture.

3.1 Aesthetic Expression of Mainstream Values in the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

In the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, with the diversified development of Tibetan theme films in China, new aesthetic concepts have emerged, but most Tibetan theme films still convey the mainstream ideas of the past. The aesthetic needs of the audience have changed greatly with the development of the times. Under the great historical trend, the creators of Tibetan films must also make changes according to the changes in the film market. Even some red films with the main theme should also have some appreciation. Therefore, Tibetan theme films have aesthetic reconstruction in the creation of "theme".

A Doctor A General, Gannan Love Song, A Noble Spirit(Figure 3), Watching the Sky Lake, Singing at the Roof of the World, 40000 kilometers and other films are all films that represent the mainstream ideology of the current society in the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. These films are obviously more life-oriented, humane and contemporary than the previous theme films. The films A Doctor A General and A Noble Spirit are based on the real "good deeds".



Figure 3: Help Tibetans living in tents to build houses (A screenshot from the film, A Noble Spirit)

3.2 The "Excavation" of Human beauty

In the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, China's Tibetan-themed films basically began to change from the grand narrative of "national will" to the small narrative of "individual life"[7], focusing on ordinary people, and the personal heroism began to degenerate. This kind of excavation of the human nature of ordinary people can better reflect the humanistic care of the film.

When displaying such "beauty of human nature" theme in China's Tibetan films, they are usually portrayed through stories such as the protagonist's inner salvation. One of the more prominent types is the road film. The three Tibetan-themed films, Highway beauty, Path of The Soul and Ala Changso, are excellent road films in this period. The basic mode of this kind of film is to tell the protagonist's experience on the road, and slowly learn to grow and change on the road. In addition to the description of the natural landscape and social customs and culture of the Tibetan region, this kind of road film with Tibetan theme also shows the subtle changes in the inner psychology of the characters [8].

Ala Changso (Figure 4) is Sonthar Gyal's second road film after directing Sun Beaten Path. Ala Changso tells about the pilgrimage of a Tibetan family. In the film, the wife is ill, and her husband and son accompany her on the pilgrimage to Lhasa. During the pilgrimage, his wife died of illness. The husband and son decided to continue the journey with his wife's commitment to her ex-husband. The three members of the family slowly opened their hearts to each other and found their own integrity. In Sonthar Gyal's works, the pilgrimage has both escape and face; There are both losses and gains. In this long journey, we have gradually learned to balance ourselves, others, life and destiny.



Figure 4: Pilgrimage (A screenshot from the film, Ala Changso)

In today's era of emphasizing cultural self-confidence, if the Tibetan theme films only blindly attract the audience through "spectacle" of the Tibetan people, they will not go far. Only by exploring the "beauty of human nature" and looking for the common emotional resonance of different nationalities can we promote the Tibetan theme films in China to embark on the path of sound development. More and more Tibetan film creators are also making efforts to this end.

4. The Nationalized Development of Realistic Aesthetics of Chinese Tibetan Film in the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

In the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, the Tibetan theme films in China show obvious realistic aesthetic characteristics. During this period, the focus of Tibetan films in

China has begun to shift to more detailed and secret characters' hearts, and try to reveal the most fundamental things in human nature.

4.1 Daily Narration and Artistic Pursuit

During the "17 years" period in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Tibetan film and television works at that time were often restricted by national policies, and the content was mostly grand narrative that expressed national unity and promoted patriotism. The reform and opening up period also basically continued the macro narrative of the "seventeen years" period. After 2000, with the further development of globalization, the creation of Tibetan films gradually separated from macro narrative and emerged a new daily narrative style [9]. After the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, the narrative style of Tibetan films basically moves towards daily life.

The awakening of the self-consciousness of the creators of the Tibetan ethnic group has also realized the transformation of the Tibetan theme films in China from the "other" imagination to the "self-speaking". The most outstanding feature is that there are less "spectacle" scenes and "curiosity seeking" culture in the film, and more plain narration, which is the unique feeling and true presentation of the Tibetan culture of the film creators.

In addition, the Tibetan theme films in China in the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics are also different from the traditional mainstream commercial films in the narrative principle. These films often like an open ending with a meaningful artistic conception. The development of the story is ambiguous, without strong causality and logic. These narrative arrangements often also convey the Tibetan people's outlook on life and values, which are deeply influenced by Zen thoughts, and are very in line with the Tibetan national cultural characteristics. When the movie story stops abruptly, isn't it a kind of artistic blank?

4.2 Lifelike Presentation of Images

In the New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, the Tibetan theme films in China are mainly represented by a large number of long shots, non-professional Tibetan actors, and real Tibetan shooting. These aspects together constitute the realistic aesthetic style of Tibetan films in China.

The lens is the basic means of film creation. Each shot should be connected to tell a story by means of "montage" editing. The long lens can become a complete narrative paragraph because of its sufficient length of time. The use of long shots not only makes the story real and objective, but also maintains the spatial integrity, and can naturally bring the audience into the scene [10]. Sonthar Gyal used a large number of long shots in the film "Ala Jiang Se" and insisted on shooting a scene with one shot, which made the whole film only have more than 100 shots.

A large number of non-professional Tibetan actors are used in Tibetan-themed films, which aims to naturally present the real living conditions of the Tibetan people [11]. Most professional actors of other ethnic groups know little about the real life of Tibetans. When playing Tibetans, they inevitably interpret their roles from their own imagination. There are inevitably many stereotypes and "other" imagination. Tibetan non-professional actors may not act professionally enough, but when they speak their own language, do their own moves, and act themselves, it makes sense to act.

Tibetan live shooting can also help Tibetan non-professional actors perform more naturally, which is the real living environment for them [12].

The use of long shots, the participation of non-professional Tibetan actors, and the live shooting in Tibetan areas together constitute the image of Tibetan-themed films. In addition, these images are presented in the way of life, without the participation of the state will form, the curious picture, or

the exaggerated national ceremony, which fully reflects the subjectivity of Tibetan culture and shows the real life of the Tibetan people, and also accords with the pursuit of realism aesthetics of the film [13].

5. Conclusion

In the second decade of the new century, China ushered in a New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, and the creation of Tibetan films not only made new breakthroughs in art, but also greatly expanded in the market. Of course, if Chinese Tibetan films want to better improve their aesthetic connotation and commercial value, they must pay more attention to the research of aesthetic problems, and continue to learn and expand their own existing styles.

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