



# Transmutation of the Narrative Discourse and Artistic Style of Chinese Tibetan Films in the New Era

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## Abstract

In order to explore the future development and trend of Tibetan-themed films, it is necessary to explore in depth the evolution of Chinese Tibetan-themed films in terms of narrative discourse and artistic style. This article first analyses the development of Chinese Tibetan films since the new era and its important stages, and discusses in detail the great changes that have taken place in Chinese Tibetan films in recent years along with the "cultural self-confidence" advocated in the new era, taking into account the narrative perspectives of cinematography, such as narrative theme, narrative structure, and narrative subject, as well as the perspectives of artistic style, such as camera language, actors, and landscapes, to further explore the future development and trends of Chinese films with Tibetan themes. The film discusses the great changes that have taken place in Chinese Tibetan films in recent years, along with the issue of "cultural self-confidence" advocated in the new era, in order to further explore Chinese Tibetan films in depth.

## Keywords

Tibetan-themed Films, Artistic Style, Narrative Discourse

## 1. Development of Tibetan Cinema in China since the Development of the New Era

### 1.1 Current Development Trend of Tibetan-themed Films in China

The development of Tibetan films can be traced back to the 17th century, but at that time, due to the influence of the background of the times, most of the films focused on revolution and liberation, promoting positive culture such as patriotism, national unity, and Tibetan-Chinese friendship and development. Later, during the new era of reform and opening up, Chinese cinema also gradually developed into its own as China made progress toward marketization, gradually combining diverse themes like audience interests, culture, and religion. As a result of the influence of such diverse themes, Tibetan-themed films changed to "a landscape narrative oriented to commercial and popular demands, highlighting the peculiarities and mysteries of Tibetan nature, humanities, and daily life" (Jingyi Dong, 2023).

Since the new century, China's economy has been developing at a high speed under the impetus of globalization, and with the continuous promotion and deepening of "China's market economy", a diversified and complex development has emerged in various fields such as culture, economy, politics and so on. In order to seek a new path for China's film development and to meet the impact of globalization and marketization, China will continue to open itself to the outside world to meet the challenges. Under the environment of multiculturalism, Tibetan films should pay more attention to exploring the world of the human mind and present a colorful artistic style in the form of art to meet the new developments of the times (Hou Qian, 2019).

## 1.2 The Development Stages of Tibetan-themed Films Since the New Era

It is easy to see that whether it is the creation of films on ethnic minority subjects that mainly followed the state's will in the earlier period, or the use of cultural expressions such as "landscaping" and "othering" in Tibetan films to meet the tide of market changes since the new century, the subjectivity of the deep "self" expression of Tibetan culture is mostly absent in the whole period.

The development stages of Tibetan-themed films in China in the new era can be divided into three stages:

The first stage is the political narrative stage. At the beginning of the founding of the new China, due to war and other factors, the artistic expressions shown by the state mostly carried the meaning of political narratives, focusing mainly on the great mission of promoting national unity and national identity, and this stage was mainly a creative stage that complemented the state in promoting the spirit of revolution and liberation. It is for this reason that the narrative creation after the founding of New China had a profound impact on Tibetan-themed films, so the Tibetan-themed films of earlier periods were mainly political narrative themes, such as promoting Tibetan-Chinese unity and friendship, and the serfs who had long been oppressed by the feudal culture changing their minds and rising up against the war with the help of the PLA to liberate Tibet peacefully, such as "The Serf", "Ya Ya", "Keshan Red Sun", etc. (La Li & Jae Cheol Moon, 2022).

The second stage is the stage of spectacle narrative, which is the stage when the state opens up the people's awareness of Tibetan ethnic culture, and is the stage of creation that mostly attracts attention with the spectacle of Tibetan culture and shows the folk culture different from that of the Han Chinese. After the reform and opening up, Tibetan films went through a transitional stage. On the one hand, they continued the macro narrative of the "Seventeen Years" as the national political discourse, on the other hand, under the background of the modernization and transformation of the society and the state, Chinese films emerged as commercial films with the main goal of making profits, and Tibetan films also adopted some methods to satisfy the curiosity of the audience. For example, a large number of religious rituals and traditional Tibetan costumes are shown in "Song of Tibet", and some stars are added in "Red River Valley" (Kwai Cheung Lo, 2014).

The third stage is the stage of living narrative, which is the stage that Tibetan films are currently in, and the stage where Tibetan film creators truly show the self-knowledge of ordinary Tibetan people in their daily lives in the times. For example, Pema Tsenden's "Jinpa" combines Tibetan culture and spiritual core, and begins to explore the inner growth process of the main character, such as "revenge, redemption and release", and also integrates the religious culture of the Buddhist faith, which can be said to be an important stage for Tibetan films to truly show "self". It can be said that this is an important stage for Tibetan films to truly show their "self" (Yuan Na, 2020).

## 2. The Transmutation of Tibetan Film Narrative Discourse in New Era China

### 2.1 The Everydayness and Exploratory Nature of Narrative Themes

#### (1) Pursuing the everydayness of narrative life

The artistic narrative of current Tibetan films is every day, full of life fragments, ordinary but complex. After a long period of "othering" creation in the past, the creation that is absent from the position of "self-expression" does not truly show the real life of Tibetan people, so the choice of this daily life narrative principle, this presentation is consistent with the purpose that the creators want to express. In the interviews with the most representative Tibetan directors of the new era, most of them said that in the past, Tibetan films mainly pursued eye-catching performances, or the narrative performance of films to achieve entertainment and commercial film purposes, which could not make the audience truly recognize the deep cultural core of Tibetan culture, therefore, the creators deliberately gradually changed the theme of Tibetan films in the current development.

This change creates an everyday narrative that expresses the feelings of Tibetan culture in this era, which is instead accepted, understood, and praised by today's audience and the film industry. It is precisely because of this distinctive artistic exploration in the new era period that Tibetan-themed films are frequently nominated and honored in famous film festivals at home and abroad. The awards are an encouragement for the film creators and also strengthen the confidence of the creators.

#### (2) Explore the complexity of the inner world

Nowadays, in the context of the new era, the urgent concern and reflection of Tibetan films are the main "characters", not the "plot" that commercial films are overly concerned with. Such a narrative gives the film a profound

meaning and philosophical significance, making the film more profound in exploring the existential and social issues of life, rather than easily expressing the characters' spiritual dilemmas and changes in the spiritual world with words (Yingjin Zhang, 1997).

In commercial films, the development of characters and their characterization are often provided for the subsequent plot, but in the new age film narrative logic, the conflict, and the development of the plot are instead used to pave the way for the psychological growth of the characters. If in classic commercial movies, the psychological character of the protagonist is characterized at the beginning, the plot is going to continue to move forward with time, and the character's personality may not change much, but the narrative style of new-age Tibetan-themed movies tends to have the character's personality passively transformed in the drive of the story plot, with a complete mental journey to achieve the purpose of breaking through the character itself. In addition to exploring the spiritual world of the Tibetan people, with the advent of the new era, facing the new survival problems and environmental problems that the people encountered cannot be ignored, the film directors placed these realistic situations in the film precisely to get close to the audience and the inner collision of the characters, using the greatest superiority of film art to reflect the real face of life, so as to explore a kind of universal values and human survival problems (Tian Huiqun, 2019).

## 2.2 The uniqueness and artistry of narrative style

### (1) The non-mainstream of narrative structure

The classic Hollywood-style narrative structure in new-age Tibetan films no longer seems appropriate, and the once logical cause-and-effect relationship has been replaced by a more concise and non-logical one. In order to break away from the clichéd commercial film formula, the creators of Chinese Tibetan films even try to break the original fixed pattern, choosing instead to adopt a discordant and redundant narrative, making the plot fragmented and difficult to understand, downplaying the plot conflict, not paying attention to the cause-and-effect relationship between the plots, and using a psychological emotion or life perception as the tone to create an aesthetic style like prose, but more expressive of the artistry of the film (Choi & Sun Wha, 2015).

### (2) Non-group image of the narrative subject

The subject of Tibetan films has changed from the representation of the Tibetan people to the Tibetan masses in the modern era. In recent years, Tibetan directors have often chosen the theme of personal destiny or the clash of ethnic cultures in the face of modern civilization, instead of facing Tibetan culture from the perspective of the other.

The images are shifted from Tibetan characteristic landscapes to characters, the style tends to be more documentary-like and distant, and the treatment is more refined; in terms of narrative perspective, it also shifts from the previous grand collective narrative to individual subjective narrative. The director, in order to strengthen the characters in the film, does not hesitate to use black and white or gray techniques to weaken the unique beauty of Tibet and highlight the subjectivity of the characters. The icing on the cake, rather than overwhelming the main character, is the strange landscape of the plateau and the change from the relationship between people in the context of the larger era to the exploration of the protagonist's own inner world, which is the biggest change in contemporary Tibetan ethnic and even minority films (Liu Jing, 2019).

## 3. The Transmutation of Chinese Tibetan Film Artistic Style in the New Era

### 3.1 Pursuing the Artistic Style of "Long Time, Long Distance and Static" Shots

As in the case of documentaries, the common zoom lens, remote pickup, slow motion, and other cinematographic techniques are custom-made for Tibetan films to truly reflect the lifestyle of Tibetan people, which to some extent determines the characteristics of the film language.

The distant view is more about the interdependence and intrinsic correlation between the environment and the subject. The distant scenes usually show open scenes and natural landscapes, which not only account for the spatial environment in which the characters move but also focus on depicting the direction of movement and behavioral activities of the characters. Pema Tseden's films basically use medium and long-distance shots, with few close-up shots of prominent characters. The people in the film are always small, between the high and distant mountains. Many times it is not even possible to see the expressions on their faces, and it is this that makes the actors more natural and the performance more realistic (Chris Berry, 2016). The use of a zoom lens makes the film's pace slow, without too much camera movement or fancy scenery changes, but such simple treatment can be fascinating, allowing the audience to quietly bring into the world of the main character's mind.

The reason for the use of quiet and unadorned footage is that the director expects the film to enable the audience to have an immersive experience, to truly feel in front of the cinema screen the texture of the Tibetan culture that can be transmitted with a deep and leisurely feeling, and to accept the intimate care and passion for all the smallest details of life. Compared to attracting the audience with a large number of wondrous Tibetan scenery, this approach may be purer but full of deep meaning, and may also be the most suitable direction for Tibetan-themed films to "break-through".

### 3.2 Pursuing the artistic style of "original" actors

Tibetan-themed films choose non-professional actors because their appearance and movements match the core of the film. Lack of experience as an actor is instead their greatest advantage. Sometimes over-acting will instead break the rustic quality sought by the film and seem too unreal. Pema Tsenden pays great attention to the selection of actors in order to keep his films in the most original state of Tibet. The reason why the characters in his films show the living environment of Tibetan land and the living conditions of Tibetan people well on the screen is that whether they are professional actors or not, they must have originally lived in this environment and led exactly this kind of life. The use of non-professional actors undoubtedly adds to the documentary style of expression that the director is seeking (Chen Ge, 2021).

Nowadays, the characters in Tibetan theme films are chosen as far as possible to be very similar to the protagonist of the film in daily life, so as to ensure the authenticity and credibility of the performance of this role, to make the audience resonate emotionally, and also to avoid or eliminate the feeling of imitation or playing by the actors to the audience in the film. Just like the real performance of the two Tibetan actors in Pema Tsenden's movie "Balloon". The experimental approach pioneered by Wanma Tsetan has not only made his works more popular, but not only the entire film creation team is from the native Tibetans, but also insists on using the native language for all the lines in his works. The dialogues are all in the pure language of the region, which adds a mysterious Tibetan color to his films and brings a unique feeling to the audience. In addition, the Chinese language in the film is also pronounced according to the local pronunciation of Chinese (Dang Li, 2018).

### 3.3 Pursuing the Artistic Style of "Documentary" Narrative

It pursues the original simple glory of life, no longer deliberately pursues dramatic plots, and allows the original face of life on screen to be truly displayed. Today's Tibetan-themed films focus on the content of the various states of reality that exist, gathering the artistic point of view on the daily lives and ordinary lives of ordinary Tibetan people. It adopts a single, balanced narrative to present us with a realistic image of Tibetans, and presents the current situation of contemporary Tibetan life to the audience in a confessional narrative rhythm. Most of the films record the details of life in an almost documentary style, and do not seek to create dramatic conflicts and arrange typical events like Hollywood blockbusters, nor do they have shocking scene design and various music to set the scene, but it is this aesthetic pursuit of consciously staying close to real life that makes Tibetan films show a very valuable quality in today's Chinese film market, with a plain, simple yet meaningful style (Lauri Kitsnik, 2019). The use of temporal narrative is a test of the director's skills and requires a strong ability to control the film so that it shows the everyday, simple Tibet to everyone in an unintentional and uncomplicated way.

## 4. Conclusion

As Chinese films flourish under the development of the new era, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasizes the need to adhere to the people-centered creative orientation and to deeply understand and grasp the dialectical relationship between literature and art and the people. However, with modern development, people's need for a better life and eyesight has become increasingly widespread, and the people's demand for cultural products, including works of literature and art, has become higher and higher, and all fields of literature and art have to keep up with the development of the times, so as to enable the people's spiritual and cultural standard of living to be constantly raised (Yiyun Chen, Minwei Sun, & Jianguo Wang, 2019).

The development of Tibetan-themed films in the new era is precisely based on this guideline, taking the ordinary and pure life of Tibetan people as the base color, maintaining and exploring the charming colors of Tibetan culture, and developing with the important goal of continuously enlarging the horizon to achieve sustainable development (Zhou Xing, 2021).

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