Strangers at Home:
An Account on Minority Film in the People's Republic of China

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Encounters with the Other usually take place on a transnational ground, an in-between space where border-crossing interplays challenge the discourse of the nation. They often occur across the external borders of the nation-states, when two distinct cultural-political bodies contrast their respective national(istic) values while considering mutual influences. However, these interactions might also take place at another level, that is within the borders of a given nation-state. In these cases, internal cultural boundaries risk being transgressed, threatening the hegemonic assumption of homogeneity which informs the ideology of the nation.

In this sense, the ethnic minorities in the People's Republic of China (PRC) represent an interesting case of 'domestic Other'. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the politics of their representation in the context of PRC cinema, addressing the articulation of their ethnic otherness as expressed by a number of films categorised under the label of 'minority film' and usually directed by filmmakers belonging to the Han ethnic majority. To accomplish this goal, my analysis follows the development of the minority film genre in the PRC along three major historical periods: the first goes from 1949 to the mid-1960s; thus, when the film production resumed after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), a second significant period is temporally located in the 1980s; and finally I will consider the first decade of the twenty-first century as another significant timeframe for an historical evaluation of the genre.

1. From barbarians to national minorities

Approximately representing the 92% of the entire population, the Han people constitute the ethnic majority in the PRC. The remaining 8%, instead, is occupied by a mosaic of 55 nationalities generally living in the border regions of the Chinese state.[1]

Before the implementation of the nation-state system in the twentieth century, all non-Han people were traditionally considered simply as *yi*, 'barbarians'. Factors such as language and territorial settlement were not deemed as significant elements for classifying between different groups. The only relevant attempt of differentiation in this sense was referred to food-consumption habits in relation with the resulting temperamental attitude:

"The *shengfan*, literally 'raw barbarians' [e.g. eating raw food], were considered savage and resisting. The *shufan*, literally 'cooked barbarians,' were tame and submissive."[2] Only after the founding of the PRC in 1949 the 'barbaric' populations living within the borders of the new Chinese state were officially labelled *shaoshu minzu*, 'national minorities', to be therefore clearly distinguished from the *waiguoren*, literally 'people from the outside countries', that is foreigners.

At this point, Chinese anthropologists embarked in a project of internal differentiation between these minority groups, following four Stalinist criteria—common language, territory, economic life, and culture—to grant each of them a specific set of policies and rights.[3] At the legislative level, both the Common Program of 1949 and the Constitution signed in 1954 penalise any act of discrimination against the minorities and endorse the preservation and development of their traditions, customs and religious beliefs.[4] However, the Soviet-inspired national ethnic policy held by the communist state in the 1950s fostered a programme of systematic appropriation of natural resources, abolition of local elites, and institutionalisation of ethnic differences in the minority regions to pursue the goal of national unity and defence. "In other words, military, organizational, and discursive forms of violence helped sustain the official-national constructions of unified struggle, harmonious coexistence, and cultural diversity" of the communist state, while actually aiming to the economic exploitation and cultural homogenisation of the national minorities.[5]

2. Sing, dance, die (1949—Mid-1960s)

Films dealing with the theme of ethnic minorities did not appear out of the blue with the founding of the PRC in 1949, but one can count a relatively small number of them also before this date, as in the case of *Sai shang fengyun* (Storm on the Border, Ying Yunwei, 1940), a love story between Mongolian and Han youths fighting against the Japanese enemy.[6] However, it is only after 1949 that film critics' in the PRC institutionalised the genre and that the number of minority films noticeably increased, reaching the level of more than fifty of them produced between 1949 and 1965.[7]

It is possible to argue that ideological and political reasons stand behind the establishment of the genre, as it can be envisioned as a didactic tool to support the nationalising project of the communist government and to contain the disrupting power of the ethnic Other. In contemporary academia Homi Bhabha's and Prasenjit Duara's theorisations of the nation as characterised by cultural differences and fluid relationships provide a multi-faceted and anti-hegemonic overview of a given national formation. However, to understand the ideological if not even spiritual construction of the nation during the Maoist years, the recourse to Ernest Renan's ideas proves to be more helpful. As early as 1882, the French philosopher interpreted the nation as "a large-scale solidarity" transcending ethnicities,

languages, and territory. It is exactly in this guise that we can imagine the Chinese nation-state in the first two decades (at least) after its founding.[8] Within this ideological scheme, as far as national minorities are concerned, the PRC government highly emphasised a spirit of intercultural tolerance, while actually aiming to homogenise them with the Han majority. The politics of representation of the ethnic minorities in Chinese cinema reflects this nationalising project in a subtle way. Charged with the national goal of assimilation, the purpose of these films was not to demonstrate that 'they are just like us', but rather that 'they are learning to become like us (because they want to)'. In other words, minority films negotiate a construction of the minority Other not as already accomplished or as an natural given, but more significantly as an on-going process which reveals the persuasiveness of the Chinese nationalising project.

Commentators have noticed a recurrent set of stereotypes that are almost invariably deployed in minority films of this period. Possibly extending the traditional classification of 'raw' and 'cooked barbarians', we can discern two distinct climate- and territory-related subcategories affecting the film narrative: minorities living in the cold Northern and North-Western regions are most likely to play in films dealing with class conflicts and foreign espionage, while those living in the subtropical South-Western areas seems more suitable for romantic loves stories to be consumed in the backdrop of an unfailing political subtext.[9] Moreover, to justify the need of Han intervention, minorities are always depicted as experiencing harsh backwardness and feudal oppression before the advent of the Communist Party, which now guarantees an undoubtedly brighter future. However, the main reason which granted high popularity to the genre in the 1950s and 1960s was its carefully exploited exotic potential. At a time when the main source of cinematic exoticism —Hollywood films—was banned from circulation due to political reasons, the national minorities represented the perfect substitute for an audience (mainly composed by Han viewers) looking for entertainment beyond the standardised propaganda films.[10] The ethnic minorities (in particular those living in the South-Western regions) were thus portrayed within picturesque landscapes, wearing colourful dresses, and always ready to start singing and dancing. Furthermore, unlike the more morally-upright and politically-conscious Han, minorities were shown as engaging in romantic affairs, therefore conveying a more or less sublimated eroticism which was unthinkable in 'majority films'.

To unveil the symbolic structures of power inherent in the politics of representation of minority films of this period, I find it useful to draw on Esther Yau's suggestion for which "national minorities films invariably set up a triangular relationship that consisted of non-Han men and women and a Han cadre through which sexual transgression was negatively correlated with ethnic leadership."[11] In this interrelated system, non-Han men (usually oppressive landlords or any other kind of political reactionaries) are represented in

terms of male aggressiveness through which they abuse the native women in some form. The native female character, in turn, is presented in all her vulnerability, until a Han man comes to rescue her. The female non-Han character thus has a pivotal function, as she links the viewers' narrative and visual interest with political consciousness. Moreover, by means of her ideological construction as a Han supporter, she allows the accomplishment a double goal: on the one hand, the promotion of a stereotyped misperception of minority groups as uncivilised if not even primitive through the figure of the non-Han violent man; on the other hand, the endorsement of the civilising mission of the Chinese nation-state via minority women's compliance with Han socialism.

Besides the exoticised image of national minorities as adept to singing and dancing, their representation is most significantly complicated when they come to be depicted as eager to contribute to the construction of the Chinese socialist state. Exceeding Prasenjit Duara's argument for which ethnicity constitutes a stable basis of identification within the borders of the nation-state, minority films look instead for an even more durable bond.[12] Borrowing the words of Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, in these films "by placing the exploited members of minority nationalities in the same narrative position as liberated workers, peasants, and soldiers [in 'majority films'], class overrides ethnicity as the common characteristic constituting the 'people' of the People's Republic."[13] Hence, in *Wu duo jinhua* (Five Golden Flowers, Wang Jiayi, 1959), the minorities are shown as 'model workers' wholeheartedly participating in the nation-building project; in *Nongnu* (Serfs, Li Jun, 1963) the theme of class exploitation and Han legitimisation is embodied by the protagonist Jampa, a Tibetan serf, who finally speak his first words after many years of silence by invoking Chairman Mao at the end of its ideological education; in the classic socialist musical *Liu Sanjie* (Third Sister Liu, Su Li, 1960) the narrative suggests a class-based identification between the minority Zhuang people and the Han as long as both groups were previously oppressed by evil landlords while now they are fighting together against the same class enemy.[14] Quite interestingly and perhaps ironically, it is significant that a film like *Liu Sanjie* was highly praised at the time as expressing a distinctive 'national style' (*minzu fengge*) or 'national forms' (*minzu xingshi*). However, we should bear in mind that, as Zhang Yingjin argues, "going to the 'alien' and 'exotic' minority regions did not entail an equal distribution of power in the symbolic structure." That is, stating that a specific minority film conveys national characteristic "was never a restoration of 'minority' cultures to a 'majority' status but always a legitimisation of minority peoples as part of the 'solidarity' of the Chinese nation."[15]

Therefore, we can argue that an unquestionably Han-centred viewpoint is displayed in these films, both at the visual and the conceptual level. Han directors casting Han performers to play minorities' role and characters invariably speaking Mandarin are only

the most apparent features which reveal how the Chinese national minorities never became "a full-fledged subject of knowledge" on screen.[16] Constantly objectified to pay homage to the nation-state and nullified in their distinctive cultural traits by a systematic plan of stereotypisation and homogenisation, minority films make it clear that the nationalising project was not only intended for the *shaoshu minzu*. On the contrary, it specifically addressed the majority Han viewers who, through these cinematic representations, learn to distinguish between primitivity (minorities) and modernity (Han socialism), while keeping on being instructed about how the Chinese communist society has to be correctly built.[17] Hence, we can contend that minority films in the PRC have participated in some kind of 'internal colonialism' or even 'internal orientalism' aiming to establish the Han cultural hegemony: if one of the main functions of orientalism is to produce the West in contrast to the Oriental Other, when it comes for the Han majority to define itself, it takes the same orientalist position by marginalising and exoticising the minority Other.[18]

3. Fantasies of cross-ethnic identification (1980s)

During the tumultuous decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the film production in China came to an almost complete halt. When it resumed after 1976, Chinese politics and society were undergoing a period of radical reforms that profoundly affected the cultural realm. In the same years, new generations of filmmakers gave rise to a season of unprecedented cinematic renewal, often in the name of a fierce challenge to the aesthetics and ideology of socialist realism.

In the 1980s, fewer minority films reached the Chinese silver screens, and most of them were not even classified as such.[19] This highlights the fact that the new films had very little in common with the previous products classified within the minority film genre. Cinematically speaking, major differences can be pointed out both at the visual and the narrative level. On the one hand, in terms of visual style, minority films of the 1980s almost completely abandoned the stylistic tenets of socialist realism and its blend of Soviet-imported and classical Hollywood techniques. By contrast, new directors experimented at large with Bazin-inspired realist features such as long takes, long shots, synchronous sound and natural light. On the other hand, in terms of narrative, the ideologically-oriented and neatly-written plots of the preceding production were replaced by extensive narrative ambiguity if not even non-narrative solutions. It is important to notice in this regard that characters representing Communist Party members virtually disappear in minority films of the 1980s, and in a few significant cases, no Han character in general is represented on screen.[20] Accordingly, these films interrogate the national 'grand myths'—revolutionary wars, ethnic brotherhood, socialist achievements—perpetuated in the previous genre production, destabilising the hegemonic Han culture in its subject position: it is no longer

intended as a self-stabilising construction, but rather as the product of intense negotiations occurring between constantly redefining notions of centres and margins. Therefore, drawing on Homi Bhabha, Zhang Yingjin understands minority film of the 1980s as generating a 'minority discourse' which takes a strategic position of marginality to challenge the centralistic discourse of the Chinese nation-state.[21]

Acknowledging the new features of PRC minority films and particularly stressing the value of their rupture with the preceding cinematic period, Chris Berry argues that minority films in the 1980s challenge the ethnocentrism inherent in the previous production.[22] But is this rupture so clear-cut? Is ethnocentrism really challenged?

Although stylistically displayed in a completely different manner, minority films in the 1980s still show a large amount of exoticism. Minority people arguably do not sing and dance that much anymore, but the insistence on their alien rituals and lifestyles serve to stress their ethnic difference, therefore setting them apart from the majority Han audience. Whilst in the 1950s and 1960s minority films aimed to propel an ideal of cultural homogenisation, in the 1980s instead, freed from urgent ideological pressures, they rather point to create something that we could name 'cinematic distance'. This is particularly apparent in Tian Zhuangzhuang's films *Liechang Zhasa* (On the Hunting Ground, 1985) and *Daoma zei* (Horse Thief, 1986). Both the former, set in Inner Mongolia, and the latter, set in Tibet, are works which depict an encounter with the ethnic Other so radical in visual and narrative terms that the (Han) viewer cannot but feel completely excluded from its contents and bewilderingly at loss. To provide an example, I could mention the intense feeling of cultural alienation that is provided by the extended opening sequence of *Liechang Zhasa*, when the viewer powerlessly stares at a number of wild animals as they are systematically gunned down in the steppe without any comment or narrative development. Otherwise, *Daoma zei* famously depicts a 'sky burial', that is an ancient Tibetan ritual for which a corpse is left at the open air and devoured by vultures.[23]

In the conceptual, visual, and even physical gap that the 'cinematic distance' creates between the audience and the minorities depicted on screen, "fantasies of cross-ethnic identification" take place.[24] This complicates the relationship occurring between the two poles, to the extent that one could almost contend that minority films in the 1980s break with earlier representations of ethnic minorities just to simultaneously reconstitute them. On the one hand, these films admittedly convey the filmmaker's personal fascination with the minority cultures without the specific will to truthfully represent the actual life conditions of these minorities (and despite the documentary techniques that are largely adopted in these works).[25] On the other hand, they work on a symbolic level to address the fate of the whole Chinese nation, therefore using a minority set as an alienated metaphor for national issues pertaining to the majority.[26] For instance, as director Tian Zhuangzhuang discussed

in several interviews, his films were profoundly inspired by the experience of the Cultural Revolution. Accordingly, they should be understood as allegorical constructions highlighting the "tensions between individual victimization and group survival", a typical mechanism of the era. Likewise, we can notice that the protagonists of both his films are individuals ostracised by their respective clans after the transgression of the (majority) group's rules. In this light, the rules of the 'hunting ground' metaphorically parallels the Maoist doctrine aiming to social conformity.[27]

As stated above, Chris Berry sees minority films of the 1980s as challenging the ethnocentrism of the previous genre production. By contrast, I understand these films as still deeply anchored in a fundamentally ethnocentric, Han-centred viewpoint, in the form of 'we stage them to talk about ourselves'. This becomes apparent when we realise that minorities in most cases keep on speaking (or being dubbed) in Mandarin, while their native language is exclusively "reserved for singing, greeting and cursing".[28] Furthermore, the ethnocentric discourse becomes even alarming in a case such as *Qingchun ji* (Sacrificed Youth, Zhang Nuanxin, 1985), the story of Han girl who recovers her lost self while living in a Dai minority area. As for this film, it is not so much the abundant recourse to exoticisation and eroticisation that I would like to address, but rather its narrative viewpoint. The story is presented as the memories of the Han protagonist who recalls her experience after that a landslide has completely wiped out the Dai village. Being the only survival, the Han girl is also the only subject who is able to tell the story, but if the minorities can exclusively live through the words of the majority, a self-evident imbalance in the symbolic structure of power is therefore displayed.[29]

4. Self-destructing inabilities (2000s)

The first decade of the twenty-first century can be deemed as another significant period for minority film in Chinese cinema. In this span of time, the representation of ethnic minorities on screen reaches a new form, to the extent that we can say that their image is more true to life, as it is far from both the ideological fakery typical of socialist realist films and the allegorical construction of the works from the 1980s. What we see on screen now are real minorities shown in real socio-economic contexts, in particular those affected by the relentless process of globalisation affecting contemporary China.

However, despite this link with a recognisable everyday reality, I contend that if we keep on focusing on the actual representation of the minority people, the imbalance of symbolic power between the Han and the minorities is still widely ostensible. The minority subjects no longer sing and dance now, they all possess televisions and drive their cars, but they are ultimately depicted as unable to deal with the advent of this modernity. This inability, this historical inadequacy unmistakably leads them to a potential self-destruction which signals

the necessity of Han intervention to be avoided. Understanding the politics of representa-tion in such a light, what remain unchallenged and unchanged is still an ethnocentrism that asserts Han superiority and stereotypes minorities in turn by perpetuating misconceptions about their supposed primitiveness.

An example for the abovementioned concerns is Liu Jie's *Mabei shang de fating* (Court-house on the Horseback, 2006). The narration takes place in North-Western Yunnan, an area in which ten different ethnic minorities share the same territory. A judge and his two colleagues travel around the mountains to solve local judicial cases. The originality of the film lies in the presentation of the inter-ethnic relationship as occurring not only between the Han majority and one national minority, but it is primarily the interaction between several minority groups that is taken into account. Focusing on these relationships, the film contends that the harmonic coexistence between the different national minorities is impossible and their incessant fights can supposedly be pacified only by means of Han intercession. Therefore, after the break of the 1980s, this is how the Chinese state powerfully returns on screen and, almost reconfiguring a socialist realist *topos*, it is significantly embodied in the figure of a female character: the judge assistant. She is notably a non-Han woman who is educated in Han modern law and this middle-status allows her to be the only character in the film who is really able to mediate between the law of the central state—which is depicted as abstract, repressive, and still unaware of the different souls composing the Country—and the traditional rules of the minorities—archaic, outdated, almost senseless. Therefore, if on the surface we can notice a superficial critique of the monolithic rationality of the Han nation-state, when it comes to the representation of the minorities, the film shows them as totally irrational, self-destructive, almost animal-like when they fiercely fight against each other for cases that the judge does not even want to solve by means of the law, but only using his common sense, as he implicitly deems them as totally trivial. The fact that the only rational component of these minorities is personified by the judge assistant —a woman educated in Han culture—implies a conception for which the Han central state is still the only organism able to maintain the order and to avoid the mutual destruction of the minority peoples. By equating the minorities' otherness with a marked display of primitiveness, this film stresses ethnic difference and does not attempt cross-ethnic identification or homogenisation as in the previous practices of the genre. Ethnocentrism here is expressed by means of the idea that the Han majority and its civilisation are superior to the irrational thought and lifestyles of the minorities, and therefore they should be righteously seen as the legitimate leaders who guide the nation through the multiple challenges of the contemporary era.

Regarding the minorities' supposed inability to protect themselves and to survive without Han intervention, another example is represented by Lu Chuan's *Kekexili* (Kekexili:

Mountain Patrol, 2004). The narrative is set in Tibet, where the precious Tibetan antelope is seriously endangered by the illegal activities of a group of evil poachers, while the Tibetan mountain patrols fight as much as they can to save the situation. It is interesting to notice that the poachers are identified as Muslims—another minority group within the Chinese state—therefore as in *Mabei shang de fating* the violent actions specifically occur between minorities and Han intervention is accordingly required to avoid mutual destruction.[30] In the end the case is solved only by a journalist from Beijing—once again, Tibetan of origins, but educated in the capital—who goes back to the city to report the news and, by raising the nation's consciences, finally manage to stop the poachers and to save the antelope. Therefore, if the antelope (symbolically representing Tibet and Tibetans) can only be saved by the Tibetan-turned-Han journalist (embodying the central state), this again reinforces the perception that the Han are far more superior and therefore deserving of their subjugation.

Concluding remarks

Through an analysis of the historical development of the minority film genre in the PRC, I have attempted to shown how it worked visually as well as conceptually. It aimed to achieve the nationalising project of cultural homogenisation in the 1950s and 1960s; it was instrumental to a cultural self-critique through the adoption of alienating cross-ethnic strategies in the 1980s; it emphasises the minorities' supposed inability to survive without Han intervention and re-affirms the centrality of the majority in the latest production.

Despite the different stylistic and narrative characteristics that minority films have shown in all these historical and cinematic timeframes, what remains unchallenged is a marked ethnocentrism, that we could identify as the major (if not the only) constant of this specific genre.

Notes

1 Ma, "Press Release on Major Figures of the 2010 National Population Census".

2 Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, 9.

3 See Heberer, *China and Its National Minorities*, 30–39; and Dwyer, "The Texture of Tongues," 68–85.

4 See *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, chap. 3, sec. 4.

5 Yau, "Is China the End of Hermeneutics?" 282.

6 Zhang, "From 'Minority Film' to 'Minority Discourse'," 78–79.

7 Yau, "Is China the End of Hermeneutics?" 282.

8 Renan, "What Is a Nation?" 19. See also Bhabha, "Introduction" and "DissemiNation"; Duara, "De-Constructing the Chinese Nation". For a discussion of Bhabha, Duara, and Renan, see Zhang, "From 'Minority Film' to 'Minority Discourse'," 75–76.

9 Clark, "Ethnic Minorities in Chinese Films," 29 n 4.

10   Ibid., 15–16.

11   Yau, "Is China the End of Hermeneutics?" 283.

12   See Duara, "Transnationalism and the Predicament of Sovereignty," 1032.

13   Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 184.

14   Analyses of the abovementioned films can be found in Zhang, "From 'Minority Film' to 'Minority Discourse'," 79–81, and Clark, "Ethnic Minorities in Chinese Films," 20–23 (*Liu Sanjie, Wu duo jinhua, Nongnu*); Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 182–84 (*Nongnu*); Loh, "From Romantic Love to Class Struggle" (*Liu Sanjie*); Shaffer, "Happy Dancing Natives," 8–12 (*Wu duo jinhua*).

15   Zhang, "From 'Minority Film' to 'Minority Discourse'," 79–80.

16   Ibid., 80.

17   Gladney, "Tian Zhuangzhuang, the Fifth Generation, and Minorities Film in China," 164–65.

18   See Zhang, "From 'Minority Film' to 'Minority Discourse'," 81; Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 172. See also Schein, "Gender and Internal Orientalism in China."

19   Clark, "Ethnic Minorities in Chinese Films," 25–26.

20   See Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 185.

21   Zhang, "From 'Minority Film' to 'Minority Discourse'," 82–83.

22   Berry, "Race," 45–58.

23   Analyses of Tian Zhuangzhuang's minority films can be found in Clark, "Ethnic Minorities in Chinese Films," 27–29 and *Reinventing* China, 106–21; Zhang, "From 'Minority Film' to 'Minority Discourse'," 81; Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 184–87; Xia, "The Debate over 'Horse Thief'"; Gladney, "Tian Zhuangzhuang, the Fifth Generation, and Minorities Film in China"; Berry, "'Race'," 51–52.

24   The term is taken from Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 170.

25   Xia, "The Debate over 'Horse Thief'," 40, 44.

26   Gladney, "Tian Zhuangzhuang, the Fifth Generation, and Minorities Film in China," 167, 169.

27   Ibid., 172. See also Clark, *Reinventing* China, 108, 112; Sklar, "People and Politics, Simple and Direct," 36.

28   Gladney, "Tian Zhuangzhuang, the Fifth Generation, and Minorities Film in China," 170.

29   For discussions on *Qingchun ji*, see Shaffer, "Happy Dancing Natives," 16–21; Zhang, "From 'Minority Film' to 'Minority Discourse'," 81–82; Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 187–88; Berry, "'Race'," 52; Yau, "Is China the End of Hermeneutics?" 285–91.

30   The 'evil Muslims' are presented also in Tian Zhuanzhuang's *Daoma zei* in the guise of unfair merchants. Hence, it is significant to notice how it would be possible to sketch a 'scale of values' of the different Chinese minorities as apparently they do not occupy the same position in the system of representation of minority film. See Gladney, "Tian Zhuangzhuang, the Fifth Generation, and Minorities Film in China," 171.

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