

Broadening the Scope of Renminxing: The Communication of Emotion in Pema Tseden's Balloon

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In 1942, Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" raised "the question of whom literature and art are for." Following this line of thought, filmmaker Chen Bo'er distilled the core of film production into what she called the "Threefold People-Oriented Conception of Art": learn from the people, serve the people, and become artists of the people. This conception carried forward the spirit of the "Talks" and located the vitality of Chinese cinema in its renminxing.¹ It required filmmakers not only to attend to the lives and images of the broad masses but also to strengthen their ties with them. The conception is a remarkably generative proposition: as historical conditions have changed, it has continued to release theoretical energy and has quietly entered into a noteworthy dialogue with contemporary film practice. Pema Tsenden's *Balloon* is one such case. The film offers an exemplary vantage point and a layered framework for understanding the contemporary renminxing implicit in this threefold conception.

As one critic has observed, the significance of *Balloon* lies in its movement beyond Orientalist and "internal Orientalist" imaginings of Tibet, its departure from the romantic Shangri-La tableau, and its attempt to "represent" a contemporary Tibet in the making.² Most films on Tibetan themes prove unsatisfactory in two principal respects. First, their visual representation readily lapses into the entrenched habit of converting Tibetan regions into spectacle, favoring a folkloristic mode of narration. Second, filmmakers from the Chinese interior³ often find it difficult to enter the lived space of Tibetan culture deeply enough to apprehend the conditions of Tibetan existence. *Balloon*, by contrast, can rightly be called "Tibetan cinema" because it possesses an "insider's gaze." One of the most important reasons it achieves this is that the wellspring of Pema Tsenden's art lies among ordinary Tibetans. Much of the film was shot in Tibetan villages; the production team repeatedly embedded itself on the plateau, on the grasslands, and even in uninhabited areas, drawing strength from Tibetan life. In breaking through numerous preconceptions, *Balloon* may be said to embody an attitude of "learning from the people": it captures the emotions and moral sensibilities of Tibetans through the particulars of everyday life.

1 Translator's note: *Renminxing* is a core term in Chinese Marxist literary and art theory. Depending on context, it has been rendered as "popular character," "the people's character," "people-centeredness," or "people-orientedness." Because this article treats it as a historically evolving theoretical category rather than a simple stylistic attribute, the pinyin form is retained throughout. On Chen Bo'er's formulation, see Hu Zhifeng and Hu Yuchen, "Yi renmin wei zhongxin, buduan kaituo dianying jiaoyu xin jingjie" [Centering the People and Continually Opening New Horizons in Film Education], *Zhongguo yishu bao* [China Art News], June 1, 2022, https://www.cflac.org.cn/new_dtxw/202206/t20220601_1247545.html.

2 Tsering Bum (才让本), "Zangzu renleixue zhe tan *Qiqiu*: Qu dongfanghua de zhenzheng 'Zangzu dianying'" [A Tibetan Anthropologist on *Balloon*: A Genuine "Tibetan Film" beyond Orientalization], *The Paper*, December 4, 2020, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_10255485.

3 Translator's note: The Chinese term *neidi* (literally, "the interior") is used here in contrast to Tibetan regions and refers chiefly to predominantly Han areas of China outside Tibetan cultural regions. It is therefore translated as "the Chinese interior," not "mainland China."

For example, when the Buddhist nun Shangchu Drolma pauses in her reading, she places her prayer beads on the scripture; Drolkar tacitly withdraws when the men breed the sheep; and the villagers gather to perform rites for the deliverance of the dead. Such details are the outcome of patient, concrete observation. As Pema Tseden himself explained: “The truth I pursue is the truth of detail. I hope to convey authenticity through such details as ways of living, speaking, and thinking.”⁴ The characters in the film all speak Tibetan, and its portrayal of the lives of people in the borderlands is notably faithful. Viewed across his filmography, Pema Tseden’s subjects traverse the natural, economic, and cultural dimensions of Tibetan society, while his films apprehend the opportunities and challenges facing Tibetans through the changing dynamics of daily life. A documentary impulse is thus folded into a stylized visual idiom.

In literature and art, *renminxing* refers not only to the recording of material-cultural forms; more fundamentally, it concerns the apprehension of people’s thoughts and emotions. To assess a film’s *renminxing*, one must attend to its expression of feeling and to the filmmaker’s sensitivity to, and understanding of, the emotional world in which people live. In the words of the Russian Marxist literary critic Nikolai Dobrolyubov, the decisive question is whether a work is permeated by the people’s spirit and feeling. Faithful representations of their language, rituals, and customs are not enough; deeper insight is required: “one must be imbued with the people’s spirit, experience their life, and place oneself on the same level as they are.”⁵ *Balloon* concerns the experiences of ordinary Tibetans within a complex sociocultural world, experiences that belong to the texture of mundane life. Dargye, his wife Drolkar, their three sons, and Dargye’s elderly father live by herding sheep in a pastoral village on the grasslands. The father dies unexpectedly while tending the flock, and the story’s dramatic development coincides with Drolkar’s unplanned pregnancy. After consulting a reincarnate lama (tulku), Dargye becomes convinced that Drolkar is carrying his father’s reincarnation and takes it for granted that the child must be born. Drolkar, however, is mindful both of the fine imposed under the family-planning policy and of her claim to bodily autonomy, and she ultimately decides to have an abortion. In matters of livelihood and economy, culture and religion, responsibility and freedom, each family member makes a different choice. The film centers on the existential predicament confronting Tibetans under the impact of modernization, together with the confusion, anxiety, and disorientation that attend it. It focuses on the psychic anxiety of an ethnic minority group under such pressure; yet the emotions of ordinary Tibetans in a period of transition also possess a marked universality, and the shared moral questions of desire, freedom, and responsibility ultimately exceed ethnicity. The sense of anxiety articulated in the discourse of an ethnic group from the borderlands is fully shareable: people in the Chinese interior, no less than Tibetans, are subject to the shocks of the age. The questions the film raises about women’s bodily autonomy and the meaning of love, for example, are hardly confined to Tibetan communities. In choosing this theme, Pema Tseden seeks to view the whole through the individual, to look back toward the center from the margins, and ultimately to confront problems shared by China and the world at large. Audiences can feel an affective circulation between the particular and the universal, and between Tibetans and Han

4 Pema Tseden, Wang Xiaolu, and Yu Qing, “Gaoyuan juchang he dianying Zangyu: Wanma Caidan fangtanlu” [Highland Theater and Cinematic Tibetan: An Interview with Pema Tseden], *Dangdai dianying* [Contemporary Cinema], no. 11 (2019): 14.

5 Nikolai A. Dobrolyubov, *Duboluoliubofu xuanji* [Selected Works of Dobrolyubov], vol. 2, trans. Xin Weiai (Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 1983), 184.

Chinese. This is why *Balloon* has elicited such powerful resonance and affection in the Chinese interior.

The value of *Balloon*'s communication of emotion should not be overlooked. It can not only expand the range of spiritual and intellectual content available in the cultural marketplace and respond to individualized needs; more importantly, it can broaden the horizons and pathways of identification available to audiences in the Chinese interior. Emotional communication itself carries an active appeal to identification with particular values. In "On the Concept of the 'National-Popular,'" Antonio Gramsci argues that artists must not only experience the feelings of the people but also undertake art's pedagogical and mobilizing tasks, assume the mission of "national educators," and cultivate the people's thoughts and feelings.⁶ Good filmmakers both give expression to the people and educate them; through national-popular art, they continually help form a new people and a new culture. From the perspective of reception aesthetics, films such as Pema Tsenden's *Balloon* have given many viewers a deeper understanding of Tibetans and promoted exchange among different ethnic groups. Through shared feeling, the film broadens the scope of *renminxing*, crosses the boundaries of ethnic and cultural difference, and offers another means of strengthening interethnic identification. Its ideal audience includes both Tibetans and the broad public of the Chinese interior. If *Balloon* also seeks to call "the people" into being, then it possesses a capacity for cultural expansion: the community bound together by its emotional expression exceeds any single ethnic group.

Renminxing is a criterion for gauging how literature and art are oriented toward the people; its core lies in emotional resonance and the construction of value. The expression of emotion in literature and art is therefore inseparable from the meaning of *renminxing*. From a more open perspective, *renminxing* within the Threefold People-Oriented Conception of Art is a multilayered and continually changing theoretical term. The people are the protagonists of literature and art; questions of which people and what kind of art are at stake are repeatedly reopened by new cinematic practices. In the revolutionary era, *renminxing* concerned images of revolution and struggle, yet it could never be separated from the everyday lives of ordinary people. It may narrate mainstream history, but it must not overlook marginal voices and emotions. Films such as *Balloon* embody the inclusiveness and generativity of literature and art themselves. They offer a vivid demonstration of the continuing vitality of *renminxing* as a theory and help bring the theoretical energy of the Threefold People-Oriented Conception of Art to fuller expression.

⁶ Antonio Gramsci, "Guanyu 'minzu-renminde' gainian" [On the Concept of the "National-Popular"], in *Gelanxi lun wenxue* [Gramsci on Literature], trans. Lu Tongliu (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1983), 47.