Tibet in Debate: Narrative Construction and Misrepresentations in *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Red River Valley*

Vanessa Frangville

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transtexts/289>

DOI: 10.4000/transtexts.289

ISSN: 2105-2549

Publisher

Gregory B. Lee

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2009

ISSN: 1771-2084

Electronic reference

Vanessa Frangville, "Tibet in Debate: Narrative Construction and Misrepresentations in *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Red River Valley*", *Transtext(e)s Transcultures 跨文本跨文化* [Online], 5 | 2009, document 6, Online since 22 April 2010, connection on 21 September 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transtexts/289> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transtexts.289>

Transtext(e)s Transcultures 跨文本跨文化

Journal of Global Cultural Studies

5 | 2009 :

Varia

(Re)Inventing "Realities" in China

Tibet in Debate: Narrative Construction and Misrepresentations in *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Red River Valley*

VANESSA FRANGVILLE

Résumés

Cet article propose une analyse comparative de la construction des discours sur le Tibet et les Tibétains en « Occident » et en Chine. Il suggère que les films de propagande chinois comme les films hollywoodiens pro-tibétains mettent en place des perceptions orientalistes et essentialistes d'un Tibet imaginé et idéalisé, omettant ainsi la situation sociale, politique, économique ou même écologique telle qu'elle est vécue par les Tibétains en Chine. Les représentations cinématographiques participant grandement à la formation des imaginaires modernes, cette analyse illustre ainsi le fait que la question du Tibet n'est pas un vrai débat mais bien plus un champ de bataille politique qui mène à une impasse internationale et locale.

This essay proposes a comparative perspective of the construction of narratives of Tibet and Tibetans in the 'West' and in China through cinema. It suggests that Chinese propagandist films and Hollywood pro-Tibetans films both promote similar orientalist and essentialising perceptions of an imagined and idealised Tibet, concealing social, political, economic and even ecological situation experienced by Tibetans in China. Considering that cinematic representations are dramatically influential in shaping imaginaries, this analysis thus illustrates that the Tibet issue is not a real political *debate* but more a *battlefield* that leads to an international and local impasse.

Texte intégral

- 1 Throughout the last thirty years, the 'Tibet issue' has become a significant topic on the international agenda, and a critical factor for conducting US-China relationship, as some legal measures may have suggested.¹ Two positions chiefly became part of the public debates. On one stand, Tibet is considered as an "inalienable part of China", "liberated" from feudal oppression and "guided to modernity" by the "elder Brother" Han.² On the other stand, Tibetan government-in-exile depicts Tibet as an "independent state in fact and law" before the Chinese communist invasion in 1949, claiming for a "cultural genocide" in Tibet.³ The historical and political status of Tibet has been extensively discussed among scholars, and such positions, although much qualified, have found their way into academic discourses in China, in Tibetan exiled communities and in the "West".⁴ As a consequence, pictures of Tibet have turned into more political and ideological representations to support discourses on the status of Tibet. In particular, cinematic representations of Tibet have intersected with politics, power and diplomacy, as this article will illustrate.
- 2 Hence, this study proposes to examine the construction of these narratives on Tibet in cinema. Cultural productions (novels, paintings, photographs, films...) are dramatically influential in shaping an imaginary of Tibet, not only in Europe and the United-States, but also in China.⁵ As the visual is central to the manufacturing of meanings to interpret "realities" in modern societies, films are one of the materials that produce narratives on what Tibet and Tibetan's aspirations are supposed to be.⁶ They involve audiences in the construction of representations: spectators do not only receive representations, they also contribute to them when they accept images as evidences of "reality" or what theorist Jacques Aumont calls "impressions of realities".⁷ Therefore, it is essential to analyse visual narratives to understand how perceptions of Tibet are constructed.
- 3 This article focuses on visual representations of Tibet and Tibetans in the context of two films both released in 1997: a Chinese film called *Red River Valley* (Chinese: *Honghegu* 红河谷) and a famous Franco-American film, *Seven Years in Tibet*. This study first attempts to provide a concise examination of representations of Tibet in Chinese cinema. Indeed, while some literature can be found on 'Western' representations of Tibet through cinematic production, little has been done on the shaping of an imaginary of Tibet through recent Chinese films.⁸ We contend that images and films are significant in the process of

creating Tibet's representations in China, probably even more than political propaganda and education. Besides, this essay proposes a comparative perspective of the construction of images of Tibet and Tibetans in the 'West' and in China. Surprisingly, while many studies tackle the Tibet issue from a Chinese perspective, or from a Tibetan perspective, very few make parallels of both versions.⁹ Our assumption is that none of these discourses can be fully understood if read isolated, since they mutually influence and induce each other.

- 4 By looking at images of Tibet in these films, it will be possible to identify significant rhetorical strategies as well as relevant similarities that characterize representations of Tibet in the two factions. The importance of the economic, political and cultural context in which films were produced should be underlined first. Indeed, images are received and perceived historically and rely upon larger discourses. Thus, a comprehensive but non-exhaustive historical overview of imaginaries of Tibet, as well as a general context of these specific productions will be given. This will be followed by a more detailed examination of the films. The point here is to deconstruct representations of Tibet, because modern representational practices produce knowledge, and representations establish control through knowledge formation.¹⁰ What this analysis suggests is that both discourses contribute to construct very similar collective imaginaries, rather than historical, political or social knowledge of Tibet through analogous processes and functions, to the point where confrontation focuses more on partisanship than on the way Tibetan experience their situation in Tibet. We argue that neither of these positions is able to provide a fully understanding of the situation of Tibet, and that such approaches prevent from seeing the Tibet issue as a serious political conflict involved in a global and complex context.

Tibet in Europe and in the 'Western' imaginaries

- 5 In Europe, growth of interest in Tibet since the end of the 18th century led to what has been called a "tibétophilie européenne" or European Tibetophilia¹¹. According to French historian Hugues Didier, European fascination for Tibet dates back from the 17th century with the Portuguese Jesuit Antonio de Andrade's Tibetan travel account.¹² Although we do not completely follow Didier's assessment of Tibet being "*the only Asian culture with whom Europeans can identify*", one cannot deny Tibet's appeal for some decades. Nevertheless, interest in Tibet were largely imbued with ideologies, may they be religious, political not to say racist.
- 6 Indeed, some European scholars and Jesuits have sought close connections with Tibet, thus identified as an early place for Christianity's influence and prosperity. The idea of Jesus travelling to Tibet was also largely spread and extensively discussed through the last

century. Nicolas Notovitch, a Russian Jew converted to Greek Orthodoxy, claimed that he acquired a copy of a sacred book mentioning Jesus (called 'Issa' by Tibetans, close to Arabic word 'Isa' for Jesus) visiting Tibet and Lhasa, and gave a translation and an analysis of the texts in *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, first published in 1894 and reprinted in 1926.¹³ Although ink flew in all directions to denounce the book, the idea of Jesus in Tibet resurfaced regularly within Christian communities to explain Jesus' teenage years missing in the Holy Book but also, more than obviously, in an attempt to make a 'spiritual' bridge between Europe and Tibet to assess the idea of *universalism* in Christianity, as Tibet is often considered as one of the most remote and inaccessible place in the world.¹⁴ Tibetan religions and beliefs were very popular in the New Age Movement that emerged in the 19th century and took on a new life in the 1960-1970s.¹⁵ The New Age Movement indeed seeks for a 'universal truth' expressed by the 'oneness' of humankind. Hence, East Asian religions combined with mysticism, spiritualism and esotericism, are very influent among New Agers. Not only Buddhism and Lamaism but also Tibetan cultural and environmental practices or medicine are appropriated by what has been qualified equally as a counterculture, a religious movement, a political group or an profitable commercial activity.¹⁶ Mysticism also persisted through accounts from European climbers and explorers and documentary films shot along expeditions.¹⁷ Himalayas represented a significant challenge to "elevate the human spirit" and, implicitly to impose the "White" domination in conquering the Everest.

7 Pursuit of 'universal truth' went hand in hand with search for 'purity'. An –extreme but sadly explicit– example of this search for 'purity' through Tibet is the *Ahnenerbe* (Ancestral Heritage Organisation), founded by the very influent politician of the Third Reich, Heinrich Himmler, and sent to Tibet to find about a Nazi 'Shangri-la'.¹⁸ This team of Nazi SS 'scientists' mission consisted in examining Tibetan for signs of Aryan descent.¹⁹ Nazi's racial beliefs were at the centre of the journey, and that Tibet was considered as the birthplace of the Aryan race at the end is not so difficult to comprehend for Tibet being, again, a 'remote' and 'preserved' place 'untouched by the outside's world influence' in European imaginaries.

8 Recently a growing literature contested this approach of Tibet and deconstructed the Western "dreamworld" or "virtual" Tibet.²⁰ Therefore, Europeans' identification with Tibet is less a "*coincidentia oppositorum*" ("union of oppositions") as suggested by Hugues Didier, than a deliberate connection to assert and impose European values and beliefs, or "an ego trip of uniquely Western proportions", in Orville Schell's words.²¹ Tibet is thus a rich depository for the projections and fantasies of Westerners. *Seven Years in Tibet* is not excluded from this process, and is largely influenced by current debates on Tibet.

Seven Years in Tibet: Tibet F(or)ever

9 *Seven Years in Tibet* was released in 1997, directed by French Jean-Jacques Annaud and starring mostly American actors such as Brad Pitt. The film is based on the book of the same title by Heinrich Harrer, an Austrian mountaineer who took refuge in Tibet after being imprisoned by the British²². Harrer and Aufschnaiter were part of an expedition in the Himalayas when the Second World War breaks out. Harrer is depicted as a selfish, ambitious and self-centred man who did not hesitate to leave his pregnant wife in Austria to reach the Himalayas and glory. Arrested by the British on a journey in India, the two climbers manage to escape and cross the Indian border to Tibet. They eventually arrive in Lhasa after month of wandering in the mountains. As they try to steal food, a Tibetan invite them at his home and they decide to settle in the city. They meet a young woman tailor they both try to seduce. Aufschnaiter and the young tailor finally get married, and Harrer takes refuge in the Potala Palace where the 14-year old Dalai Lama asks him to build a film theatre. From then on, Harrer becomes his instructor and his friend, as they happened to be both isolated and lonely people. Harrer is then able to accomplish his emotional transformation from an egotistic to a thoughtful person and father. In the mean time, the Chinese take control of Tibet, and the film portrays Tibetan as so pacifist and spiritual people that they are simply unable to build a proper army to defend the Potala Palace. This event coincides with Harrer's decision to return to Austria, although the film does not make clear whether they are connected or not. The last minutes of the film show how Harrer finally comes to know his son in Austria and trains him in the art of climbing mountains. In the very last image, Harrer is at the peak of a mountain in Europe with a Tibetan flag.

10 The film was released while 'Tibet fever' was reaching its highest point in the United-States of America. In the late 1990s, American studios produced several films about Tibet, such as *Kundun*, *Windhorse*; in the mean time, such films as *Red Corner* described China as a complex, ambiguous and impenetrable country, starring Hollywood's 'Mr Tibet' Richard Gere.²³ Sympathy for Tibet and Tibetans was then expressed in "Concerts for a Free Tibet", books on Tibet, Hollywood stars converting to Tibetan Buddhism, Buddhist centres in the Unites-States.²⁴ However, "Tibet fever" is much more than a cultural movement: interest for culture and political interests constantly overlap here. The role of the internationalisation strategy of the Tibetan exiled government should not be understated as it clearly intervenes in popular imaginaries The Dalai Lama is often portrayed as a passive victim overwhelmed with political conflicts and a supreme pontiff of Tibetan Buddhism in common narrative largely spread in Europe and the United over the last twenty years.

11 Nevertheless, the image of the Dalai Lama as an exclusively spiritual or religious leader advocating pacifism actions for Tibet's rights, although very attractive, is a modern construction as Professor Robert Barnett argues.²⁵ Furthermore, through the Dalai Lama, Tibetan people is dramatically represented as an abstract, unreal and unmaterialistic

community. Such assessments, which both deny Tibetan's ability to control and influence their own destiny and set them out of the real world, are very present in the "Tibet fever" movement. At the same time, this image is largely promoted and spread by the Tibetan government itself, although it has been established the Dalai Lama had entertained not only religious but also political leadership in the course of the Sino-Tibetan history.²⁶ Not surprisingly, most of the texts supporting such discourses and waving historical arguments are written in American English, very likely to draw's Americans' sympathy for Tibetan exiled communities.²⁷

- ¹² In this context, *Seven Years in Tibet* was, among other events, emblematic of growing popular support for the Dalai Lama and Buddhism in a peculiar political context that should not be forgotten.²⁸ The Dalai Lama himself was said to have given his approval for the film, and his sister, Jetsun Pema, even plays in the film as the Dalai Lama's mother (and hence her own mother). Undoubtedly, this production played a major role in the shaping of a popular assessment of the Tibet questions, notably because it depicts the Chinese invasion with harsh images of a violent Chinese Army. The film, for its "brutal and impolite image" of the Chinese Communist Party, was condemned and forbidden in China. Interestingly enough, *Red River Valley*, released the same year, constitutes what could be seen as a response to Harrer's romanticized seven-year experience in Tibet.

Uses of Tibet in Chinese imaginaries: From "Hell on Earth" to The Tibet Craze

- ¹³ Few studies tackled the Chinese imaginaries of Tibet before the twentieth century. Thomas Heberer, in his analysis of Chinese official journals, art and literature, insists on the "otherisation" of Tibetans through centuries that asserts Chinese control of the Tibet Plateau in the modern political discourse. The German scholar on China justifiably establishes a parallel between representations of Tibetan and representations of "Chinese ethnic minorities" in general, going back over the dichotomy between "barbarian outsiders" and "civilised Chinese" under the Chinese dynasties. The exclusion of the "Other" prevailed in the Chinese imaginary, as far as the "Chinese" can be defined as a cultural sphere governed mainly by Confucianism. What this study suggests, however, is that one cannot dissociate Chinese vision of Tibet from Chinese vision of non-Chinese in general. It does not give a precise and detailed account but only some clues of the Sino-Tibetan relationship before the twentieth century.
- ¹⁴ On the other hand, construction of Tibet in the Chinese official propaganda became a new object for scholars recently, in relation with issues on Tibet's political status.²⁹ The image of Tibet after 1950 has been debated in a more detailed and multi-layered way. Communist propaganda, soon after the foundation of the Popular Republic of China,

provides relevant imageries of Tibet that somehow persisted in the Post-Mao area. “Otherisation”, feminisation and infantilisation were largely spread to qualify Tibetans. Old Tibet was described as a “Hell on Earth” (as opposed to the imaginary “Garden of Eden” in Western narratives) in contrast with the “liberated New Tibet” after the Chinese army entered Lhasa in 1951.³⁰ In order to promote the Chinese “liberation”, Chinese cultural and historical products emphasised the cruelty of the feudal system and the rudeness serfs experienced under a “dictatorial” theological leadership. One famous illustration in cinema is the film *The Serf* (in Chinese: *Nongnu* 农奴), directed by Li Jun 李俊 and released in 1963. Unlike the many other “ethnic” films (*shaoshu minzu pian* 少数民族片) produced in the 1950s and 1960s which rarely draw critics and scholars’ attention, *The Serf* caused a noticeable amount of ink to flow. It depicts the life of Jampa, a mute serf, brutalised and constantly humiliated by the feudal lords. Jampa and his peers are finally emancipated and re-humanised by the kindness of the Communist government’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers and the benevolent thought of the “Bodhisattva” Mao Zedong. The sympathetic image of Jampa, who finally recovers his voice when liberated from his lord’s oppression, contrasts with previous description of wild and barbaric Tibetans. It obviously appeals for Han Chinese compassion as it portrays Tibetan feudal system as extremely bloody and inhuman. The film is punctuated with visible marks of political propaganda, including symbols of the Communist Party and socialist views of work, religion, family and gender.³¹ Therefore, the film has been criticised for its depiction of “patriarchal”, “pedagogical” and “ideological” domination of Han over Tibetans.³² The impact of the film, largely diffused in Chinese urban and rural Han and non-Han communities, was certainly relevant in the Chinese communist cinema. It was clearly significant in shaping an imaginary of obscure and terrific representation of Tibet that support and legitimise the Chinese intervention and control of Tibet.

- 15 Elliot Sperling makes very clear that “*the Tibet issue said to be reflective of centuries of popular consensus are actually very recent constructions*”.³³ As he demonstrates in a thorough analysis of Tibetan and Chinese historical material on the status of Tibet, Chinese assessment of Tibet being an integral part of China does not appear before the second part of the twentieth century.³⁴ In spite of this, the Chinese perception of Tibet cannot be reduced to nationalistic and propagandist feelings, and images of Tibet as a “lost paradise” and a heaven for spirituality and purity are not the prerogative of the ‘West’. Tibet drew attention of numerous Chinese intellectuals and cultural producers in the 1980-1990s. Writers, painters, singers and even politicians made Tibet very popular through their works and policies. This appeal of Tibetan, and more generally of all ‘minority nationalities’ (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) cultures and areas, was involved in different intellectual movements in a post-cultural revolution context. In this context, Chinese anthropologists, including Fei Xiaotong, contended the need for the Han to learn from minority peoples’ vitality in contrast to the “feeble Han character”.³⁵ It was indeed

part of a wider concern about post-Maoist China's faith crisis, and an attempt to redefine 'Chineseness', as scholar Kam Louie 雷金慶 demonstrates in his study of Zheng Wanlong's short stories.³⁶ Search for "pure and original" China in rural areas was predominant among Chinese cultural theorists, although very ambiguous as the TV documentary series *RiverElegy* (*He Shang* 河殇) has attested.³⁷ In this perspective, Tibet has been very present in the Chinese cultural world. To name a few, Ba Huang's 巴荒 works on Tibet, as well as in Nyi Ma Tshe Ring's (Chinese: Nima Zeren's 尼玛泽仁) *tanka* paintings, are both very popular in China.³⁸ Writer Zhaxi Dawa 扎西达娃, half-Han half-Tibetan, had success in the 1990s with his novels "inspired by Tibetan culture".³⁹ In such cases, Tibet became the support to resuscitate the dominant culture of the Han.

16 At the same time, the movement was definitely imbued with search for spiritualism as well as exoticism and 'Otherness'. 'Minority' and 'Tibetan' flavour and motifs started to be a significant economic feature. Zheng Jun's 郑钧 album's single "Return to Lhasa" (回到拉萨) was a big hit in 1994, and Dadawa's "Sister Drum" 阿姐鼓 shipped over a million copies in China in 1996. Their incorporation of 'ethnic' voices and images lent their music a certain novelty, but such marketing achievements caused fury among Tibetan exiled communities who accused Chinese artists to exploit and distort Tibetan culture and music for commercial purposes.⁴⁰ Appropriations of 'minorities', including Uygurs, Mongols, Tibetans, Yi, Zhuang and some others, are very common, although still controversial, in contemporary Chinese cultural production in general.⁴¹ Cinema thus plays a major role in the shaping and the diffusion of an imaginary Tibet in the PRC.

17 The 1990s witnessed an outstanding growth in entertainment-focused cultural products in China; thus several market-oriented reforms were undertaken to boost the film industry.⁴² The association of entertainment and Tibet imagined characteristics (Tibetan music, clothing or landscapes) proved to be convincing in attracting mostly urban, educated, male and Han audiences.⁴³ The process of consumption of the 'Other' was displayed in a process of "internal orientalism" or "oriental orientalism".⁴⁴ In the late 1990s, state-industry collaboration was established by the Party and tried to create a more attractive form of propaganda through combining political authority and market forces: the so-called "major melody film" (*zhu xuanlu pian* 主旋律片). In 1997, some propaganda films or "major melody films" were released, such as *Liu Hulan* (刘胡兰 *Liu Hulan* by Shan Yaoting), *The Great Turn Around* (大转折上集 *Dazhuangzhe shang ji* by Wei Lian) or *The Opium War* (鸦片战争 *yapian zhanzheng* by Xie Jin), and *Red River Valley*. As a matter of fact, *Red River Valley* relays an imaginary Tibet as well as a commercial and political project.

Red River Valley

¹⁸ *Red River Valley* (aka *A Tale of the Sacred Mountain*; in Chinese: *Honghegu* 红河谷) was released in 1997 in China. It was screened in the United-States only two years later but did not draw American audiences' attention. Very few academic accounts have discussed this film.⁴⁵ The story is also based on a book, *Bayonet in Lhasa: The First Full Account of the British Invasion of Tibet in 1904* by a British travel writer, Peter Fleming.⁴⁶ It relates to the British military action led in the Gyantse region in Tibet by the soldier-explorer Francis Younghusband. The film starts with a religious sacrifice, from which a young Han girl, Xu'er, escapes. Pursued by the villages, she falls in the river and eventually reaches the bank of a river in Tibet. As John Powers ironically mentions, "*Tibet's rivers flow down into China, and so it is difficult to imagine that following her plunge she would have been carried upstream to Tibet*".⁴⁷ There, a Tibetan family adopts her, and she meets Gesang, a handsome Tibetan youth whose masculinity is expressed in outstanding riding and shooting. The two fall in love, in spite of the local Tibetan princess's attempt to seduce him. Meanwhile Gesang rescues a soldier-reporter, Younghusband (but renamed Mr Jones in the film), and other officers from an avalanche. There in Tibet, the British soldier found serenity among "pure" and friendly Tibetans who welcome him as a member of their family, treating his wounds and nursing him. When completely recovered, Younghusband/Jones leaves Tibet but comes back again at the head of British expedition to enforce trade agreements. On his way back to the Gyantse area, he understands that the real goal for their journey is the conquest of Tibet and its annexation to the British Empire. Negotiations are undertaken with the local force, whose commander is... a Han. As Tibetans refuse to "be freed" by the British and claim their belonging to the Chinese "big family", the British troops kill "fifteen hundred Tibetans in fifteen minutes". Younghusband/Jones witnesses, horrified and grieved, the cruel and bloody British invasion of Tibet. Xu'er, who fought at Gesang's side with her Han brother, dies during the battle, trying to protect her beloved Tibetan who dies too. At the end, only Younghusband/Jones survives and declares that "the West" should not conquer "the Orient" or it will destroy its civilisation.

¹⁹ *Red River Valley* appealed to filmgoers through images of visual grandeur of Tibet, a love story between a Han girl and a Tibetan young man and an exotic blond-haired British soldier. Directed by Feng Xiaoning, this film is the first of a trilogy called "War and Peace" that tells historical events through foreigners' lenses⁴⁸. It was intentionally released in the same year as China's recovery of Hong Kong and is very much a celebration of Chinese solidarity with the return of Hong Kong. Promoted by the Chinese central government and largely relayed by state-run mass media, the film won numerous prizes at China's main award ceremonies, and served as the inaugural film of the 22nd Singaporean "Speak Mandarin Campaign" (讲华语运动 *Jiang huayu yundong*) in 2000.⁴⁹ *Red River Valley* is thus definitely connected to a context of government's ideological hardening and a renewed and necessary enthusiasm for big commercial production.

Narrating Tibet: Stereotyped and Naturalised Encounters

- 20 Both films are based on biographical fictions and use narrative techniques to stress the “authenticity” of the stories. Two non-Tibetan characters (Harrer in *Seven Years in Tibet* and Younghusband in *Red River Valley*) narrate the stories from their point of view in the major part of the films. The voice-over creates a storytelling effect that insists on the recording of observed facts, or what is supposed to be an account of roughly “true-life”.⁵⁰ This approach is effective in naturalising the characters’ behaviours and relationships.
- 21 In the narrators’ eyes, Tibetans are backward and child-like, although in a positive way: they are represented as “Noble savages”, an ideal that has been very influential upon humanist movements in ‘the West’ and in China after the nineteenth century through anthropological studies.⁵¹ The perceived simplicity of Tibetan is regarded as a virtue, and savagery as the original and natural state for humankind. In the films, Tibetan main characters are naturally good and pure-minded and welcome both Han Chinese and Western foreigners as members of their families. Generosity, as well as their “innocence” (stressed by the presence of children and young women), their infinite loyalty to their foreign friends (they even die for them), their close relation to nature and apparent disregard for material and their “innate wisdom” are all aspects of the “Noble savage”.
- 22 Meanwhile, it is essential to consider myths of “Noble savage” and Golden Age closely.⁵² Tibet is thus perceived as a “Lost Paradise” having “*something we (Western society) have long lost, that’s pure innocence*”, in Younghusband’s words. Meanwhile, *Seven Years in Tibet* chiefly centres around Harrer’s change from an arrogant, selfish man to one very much enlightened by Tibetan culture. Tibet represents a redeeming hope for they all escaped from harsh fates (the Han girl from a sacrifice, Younghusband from an avalanche and Harrer from the British army) and found physical rest and spiritual redemption among Tibetans. The two stories are about Harrer and Younghusband’s spiritual transformations thanks to their experience in Tibet.
- 23 As a matter of fact, all of them use Tibet as a medium for constructing better Selves. Their relationship with Tibetans is largely influenced by such stereotypes. This supposed backwardness is shown as essential to Tibetans and to their relationship with Westerners and Han. Refined and learned Western men contrast with Tibetan children, childish women, strong but simplistic Tibetan men. Harrer (Brad Pitt) becomes the tutor of the young Dalai Lama on the one hand, teaching him what the world looks like in the literal sense, through geography lessons.⁵³ On the other hand, Younghusband also introduces his new Tibetan friends to Western technology: the young Tibetan princess plays with Younghusband’s binoculars, jumping back when she naively thinks the yak is so big that it is rushing up to her; in the mean time, his “Tibetan family” (including the Han) is

fascinated by his fashion magazines and pictures.

24 Similarly, Han, in *Red River Valley*, are depicted as more “civilised” than Tibetan. Tibetan are said to be primitive, living simple lives without any physical or moral restraints. They are, in Gesang’s words, free to “*love the way they love*”, to what Xu’er’s brother, who fortunately found her sister in Tibet, replied “*I envy you, but I am Han*”. In this perspective, Xu’er has to leave her adoptive family and Gesang when her brother tells her that she is Han and should not be acculturated to Tibetan ways. The concept of “oriental/internal orientalisation” is generally described as a two-part process: first, subjects perceive orientalised images of them, and then they reproduce these orientalised images on other subjects. However, the process of “otherisation” should not be underestimated in the process of “oriental” or “internal” orientalism, as it constitutes a major step that connects “orientalisation” to “internal/oriental orientalisation”. Contrasts between Tibetans and the main non-Tibetan characters involve a distance that carries out an “otherisation” of Tibetans.

25 Such representational logic stigmatises Tibetans and results in a fragmentation. As a matter of fact, the relationship is not well balanced for it hides asymmetrical relations of domination.⁵⁴ The non-Tibetan is shown as the dominant, the one who possesses and shares knowledge, and produces knowledge of Tibet through his account. Western heroes tell Tibetans, but Tibetans do not tell them in return in the films, and remain subjected by the narrators. As a consequence, Tibetans are “passive” whereas non-Tibetans maintain a dominant position by producing narratives. Images and narratives are legitimised by the physical presence of the narrators in Tibet. The claim for authenticity is then established through Younghusband and Harrer’s historical experiences of Tibet.⁵⁵ The appropriation of perceived “Tibetan characters and nature” is part of a process of a “cultural disguise”:

Such ‘cultural disguise’ (...) enriches the privileged travellers, legitimises their authority as ‘minority expert’ and masks their appropriation of minority strengths as genuine facilitation of cross-exchange.⁵⁶

26 This “cultural disguise” is to be pointed out at different levels: the narrators and the spectators who identify with the former. However, it is crucial not to underestimate this narrative strategy as a way to produce and sustain mythologies and relations of power.

Knowing Tibet: Ephemeral and Superficial Encounters

27 Delocalisation and deterritorialisation of the non-Tibetans come within the scope of the search for the Self through confronting the perceived “Other”. The experience of Tibet is a transition Harrer, Younghusband and the Xu’er actually benefit from. Unlike them,

Tibetans are not intended to better their position, neither are they able to extract themselves from their fates. In the end, they get nothing good out of encounters with non-Tibetans: they are harmed by “invasions” of the Chinese in *Seven Years in Tibet* and the British in *Red River Valley*.

28 In this sense, this one-way relationship is only ephemeral and superficial. In *Red River Valley*, the Han girl adopted by the Tibetan family is able to break the rules of Chinese “traditional” society through transvestism or cross-dressing. Indeed, considering that clothes constitute a social stabiliser, wearing Tibetan clothes and adopting Tibetan way of life allow the young Han to go beyond her Han identity.⁵⁷ She is even able not to wear clothes at all, bathing in the sacred lake and unconcerned when Gesang sees her, proving that she has adopted Tibetan’s disregard for “moral rules”. However, destabilising frontiers does not mean to subvert them: non-Tibetan hybridity through the appropriation of the perceived “Other” emphasises disparity between the Self and the “Other”, but does not undermine it. This cross-exchange is systematically unilateral: Chinese or Westerners may be able to “go back to the nature” for a while; but Tibetan people are condemned to stay at the stage of “savage” and never “proceed to the civilised world”. More, this supposed cross-exchange is only temporary and is not an ultimate end for neither of the Han girl, Younghusband and Harrer. All of them have to, for various reasons, leave Tibet and go back to the world they are said to belong to. The Han girl’s brother insists that she has to come back in the Han community since she “does not belong to Tibetan people”. She is then forced to leave Gesang and her adoptive family. This impossible love story between the Han girl and Tibetan Gesang is symbolic of the fundamental barriers that separate Han and Tibetan societies in orientalist imaginary.

29 As for Younghusband’s character, the Tibetan princess turned down his love, and he leaves Tibet after recovering his wounds. When he comes back, his mission to Lhasa turns into a nightmare and he would rather leave Tibet than being involved in the British invasion. In parallel, Harrer leave Tibet after the Chinese Army enters Lhasa and goes back to Austria where he could see his son for the first time: his departure from Tibet is romanticised by the ideal of a reunited family, thus emphasising his belonging to another group and another world. This is contrasted by the fact that his travelling companion, Peter Aufschnaiter (actor David Thewlis), already married to a local girl, does not go back home: unlike Harrer, and he is probably the character spectators can not identify with for he is not the omnipresent narrator.⁵⁸

30 However, all these characters have mobility that Tibetans are not allowed. In brief, something is always separating Han and Westerners from Tibetans and their “mysterious and definitely impenetrable world” in Harrer’s words. As a result, deconstruction of Tibetan and non-Tibetan relationship leads to the reconstruction of the dominant-dominated rapport. This relationship is marked by the impossibility of really “knowing” the ‘Other’: Tibetans are always considered as mysterious, essentially different and

unfathomable. Being a transition in their lives, Tibet remains a dream, a lost paradise, a fantasy shared by Chinese and Westerners. But, at the same time, these familiar narratives based on Harrer and Younghusband's memories are presented as testimonies of historical facts.

Historicising Tibet: Memories, Histories and Politics

- ³¹ German cultural theorist and Egyptologist Jan Assman's work distinguishes cultural and communicative memories.⁵⁹ Communicative memory is based on communication in every day life. Memories are collected and selected by members of a family or a group, then transmitted between generations or within a specific community: in this perspective, all the members can be narrators. Narratives supported by communicative memory structure the group and its relation to other groups. As a matter of fact, communicative memory changes with the passing of times, and is openly controversial as other groups can sustain other versions of the same history in the present. More structured and codified, cultural memory refers to a master narrative that gives a plausible account of past, present and future: it ensures cultural continuity in a society. Cultural memory is hierarchical as not all members are narrators, and is similar to an official memory or, in Derrida's words, an "archive".⁶⁰ The concept of cultural memory emphasises that "traditions" are the results of a construction or an invention.⁶¹ However, it is essential to go beyond this division and to point out the interactional aspect of these two levels. Indeed, as media and official discourse largely relay cultural memory, and memory is shaped by different social practices, communicative memory and cultural memory intertwine in many aspects.
- ³² *Red River Valley* as well as *Seven Years in Tibet* present personal accounts of specific period in the collective history. The familiarity with spectators, induced by the use of the first person singular in the narrative, seems to be a matter of communicative memory. Yet, as narratives are displayed in films, which constitute material for archiving, frontiers between communicative and cultural memories are blurred. It is even more difficult to distinguish which element belongs to one or another level as historical facts related by official documents and other cultural material are displayed.
- ³³ The question of history is central to the question of Tibet's status and the time-period and conflicts related to it (invasion by the British in 1904 and invasion by the Chinese Communists in the 1950s) have been deliberately selected.⁶² They obviously relate two different and competing versions of Tibet's history. On the one hand, the Chinese film points out the role of the British Army in what is called a massacre of Tibetans in 1904. The narrative insists on the pretentious intent of the British to "civilize" and "liberate" the Tibetan people. On the other hand, the Chinese Communists invasion is strongly

condemned by *Seven Years in Tibet* as it marks the end of a “peaceful” and a “happy” life for Harrer and for the Tibetan people.

34 Memory and history, which some scholars consider completely separate, are nevertheless parallel to each other, both claim for “authenticity” and are tools for political ends.⁶³ An interesting point in the films is the assertion that memory and history do not conflict, but some modifications have been undertaken to construct this seeming coherence. In fact, the objectivity of the history and memory are highly questionable. Let’s consider *Seven years in Tibet* first. Interestingly, the film differs from the book, notably by making Harrer an anti-Nazi while he in reality joined the Nazi Party before the War. This incidentally made the film very controversial even before its release. As a response to multiple and severe criticisms that the film made a “Nazi a hero and a friend of the Dalai Lama”, the director, Annaud, and the film team decided to emphasise Harrer’s SS experience as part of his personal crisis he eventually solves in Tibet. Besides these historical arrangements on Harrer’s character, while in the book Harrer draws reader’s attention to a relatively disciplined and tolerant behaviour of the Chinese troops comparing to the previous 1910’s Chinese invasion, the film depicts the Chinese invasion as extremely violent and pitiless. Moreover, the book does not mention Harrer’s desperate love for a son he actually did not know about when he was in Tibet, while the film is largely concerned with their virtual relationship of disowning and reunion. Finally, as for historical facts, the film omits and distorts significant details. For instance, in the film Harrer is in Lhasa when the Chinese army reaches the city. He is shown counselling the Dalai Lama and praying with him. He condemns the Tibetan surrender and insults the regent secretary for his weak attitude. Nevertheless, before the Chinese troops entered Lhasa, the actual Harrer had already fled to the Indian border with the Dalai Lama and his entourage. Only after several months did the Dalai Lama accepted the Seventeen-Point Agreement signed in Beijing and returned to Lhasa. As for Harrer, he was already on his way to Austria and did not go back to Tibet.

35 Moving onto *Red River Valley*, the film ends with a really violent and bloody fight between the British army and Tibetan people assisted by Han. The role of the Han girl is not part of Fleming’s book on Younghusband. It has been deliberately added to the story to justify and testify the presence of Han in Tibet and their “undeniable” and intimate connection with Tibetans. Besides, the harmony between Han and Tibetan is emphasised by their ability to communicate without translators (unlike British and Tibetan) and the paradoxical love-story between the young Han girl and Gesang. She becomes a Chinese Han martyr when she dies to protect her beloved Tibetan young man from a British soldier. Concerning the narrator, Jones alias Younghusband, it is not clear either what role the actual Younghusband played in the 1904 British intrusion in Tibet. Initially in charge of a small diplomatic assignment in Tibet, the actual aim of the expedition was to establish British hegemony on Tibet. In the film Younghusband is disenchanted when he finally

comes to realise the actual reason for British Army's presence in Tibet; in this case, it follows Fleming's description of Younghusband's experience in Gyantse region. But in other versions, Younghusband intentionally came to invade Tibet and defeat Tibetan authorities. His responsibility in the 1904 incident is thus very controversial and contested.⁶⁴ This version of Younghusband's story has been selected rather than others for obvious reasons. As he is very affected by the massacre he witnesses, he can sustain the Chinese disapproval of the British invasion in contrast with the faithful support of the Han. As the only main Western character, he is also the only character Western spectator is invited to identify with: the film clearly attempts to convince spectators that this version is the only correct version, although riddled with inaccuracies. The Chinese audience can as well identify with the Han while considering Younghusband as the only sympathetic British character.

Idealising Tibet: A Virgin Territory Outside the Modern World

³⁶ In both cases, specific elements have been purposely omitted, distorted, simplified or artificially added to support opposed ideologies. As Sperling demonstrates, "*critical aspects of history have been misconstrued by both sides*".⁶⁵ Likewise, the popular consensus on Tibet that has been supposed to survive through centuries in both sides are modern constructions. Implausible facts and depiction of these confrontations in Tibet are intentionally exploited to draw the spectator's attention to one or the other perception of Tibet, and are part of political strategies hidden behind seemingly sincere accounts of tragic events. All in all, these films depict very dark historical re-constructions without any nuance, turning them out to their advantage. Through this process, both Chinese and Western treat Tibetan "*as objects in stories of heroic achievement by outsiders, or as victims of abuse incapable of agency*".⁶⁶

³⁷ While history represents a vast battlefield on which one side tries to be more imaginative than the other, what narratives underlie is that Tibetans should be preserved and protected from realities of the outside world, for the dream not to turn out into a nightmare. This fantasy of a dreamlike Tibet excludes it from the real world and denies Tibetans their history as well as their power to influence their own situation.⁶⁷ What is obvious is that both sides try to put the blame on the other, without questioning their own role on Tibet's actual situation. This process conceals any consideration for a shared responsibility. Tibet is always represented as a remote place, virgin and untouched by outside world. *Red River Valley* describes what seems to be the very first invasion of Tibet, omitting previous foreign incursions, notably Chinese incursions. Moreover, the British are blamed for being arrogant and pretending to educate Tibetan people, although Chinese used the same

arguments to impose Communism in Tibet in 1950. Besides, involving Westerners and modernity in violation of Tibet exonerates the Chinese state as a perpetrator of abuse. At the same time, *Seven Years in Tibet* does not bring up the previous British invasion and focuses on Chinese invasion only, pretending that Tibet was a virgin territory intact until the arrival of the Chinese Army.

- 38 Although different in their origins and purposes, perceptions from both sides of a “pure and untouched” Tibet are central in both sides. Tibet, as a “primitive and barbarian” nation, requires to be “civilised” by the Han. In the mean time, pure and powerless Tibetan needs to be protected and preserved by the West. The image of “a virgin Tibet” is part of “pro-Tibet” and “pro-Chinese” strategies. In both cases, it is perceived that Tibetans are in need for modernity only through the formation of a state apparatus and strong nationalism, may they be Chinese or independent. Within the Western representations, modernisation and globalisation of Tibet in economic, industrial, cultural and social domains are assimilated to “the rape of Tibet and its special state of purity and isolation”, as Robert Barnett argues, in his essay on Tibet’s “violated specialness”.⁶⁸ In this sense, Tibet is not expected to enter the modern world, but rather to be fixed in an imaginary and idealised past. As for the Chinese narratives, modernisation and emancipation of Tibet society are largely promoted to legitimate the Party line on the Tibet’s status, but it does not enable Tibetans to act by and for themselves. Tibet is represented as having no other alternative than to follow the Chinese central policy.

Tibet in Debate: What Tibet and What Debate?

- 39 The beginning of twenty-first century saw a growth of interest for Chinese films on minorities in China *and* in the West: hence the success in international festivals of Zhang Jiarui’s *When Ruoma was Seventeen* (2002), Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *Delamu*, Lu Chuan’s *Kekexili* (2004), Ning Hao’s *Mongolian PingPong* (2005), Liu Jie’s *Courthouse on the Horse Back* (2006) etc.⁶⁹ In these films, political stakes are still very present, as they sustain the idea of a united and non-conflicting China, although in a more subtle way than *Red River Valley*. As for Western productions on Tibet, Eric Valli’s *Himalaya* (1999), Nalin Pan’s *Samsara* (2001) and Shirley Knight’s *Cry of the Snow Lion* (2003) keep singing Tibet “spirituality” praises.
- 40 While Pro-Tibetan films focus on Tibetans, Chinese films also depict Mongolians, Dai, Zhuang, Miao or Yi. Although their representations are similar to Tibetans, for they are shown as essentially rural, poor, remote, simple and nature-related characters, Western audiences do not perceive them as political and ideological. Neither Tibetan exiled-community nor Human Right activist did criticise *Mongolian PingPong* or *Courthouse on*

the Horse Back although they particularly eulogize the Party policies. On the contrary, these films were very well received in Europe and in the United-States. However, they are part of the whole process of “otherisation” of non-Han for the central state’s political ends.

41 Therefore, cinematic representations of Tibet from both sides continue to cross and do not manage to go beyond the political conflict opposing Tibetan exiled and Chinese governments. Films do not present any new alternative and do not give optimist vision for a future resolution to the Tibet issue. Space for negotiation through cinema is thus decreasing in a worrying manner.

42 These two collective imaginings support two different not to say opposite ideologies: China representing itself as a unified state and a big family including “Tibetan brothers”; Tibetan defending what they perceive as “real authentic independent” Tibetan culture. However, this article suggests that Chinese propagandist film and Hollywood pro-Tibetans film both promote similar orientalist perceptions of Tibet. Therefore, practices of essentialising and stereotyping characters provide the backbone to put flesh to the imagined Tibetan. Meanwhile, a Knowledge/Power relationship is established that conceals social, political, economic and even ecological situation experienced by Tibetans in China. This analysis thus illustrates the Tibet issue is not a real political *debate* but more an “*attempt to achieve political effects by engaging people in shared image or representation*”⁷⁰.

43 In fact, such polemical discussions suggest that the question of Tibet political status is complex and do not call for simplified or truncated answers. The necessity for multi-layered dimension is critical for, as Professor Robert Barnett from Columbia University noticed pertinently:

(...) Fundamental questions underpinning these discussions are rarely broached: who are the Tibetan people? And what are Tibet’s boundaries?⁷¹

44 Indeed, Tibet is not as homogeneous as such discourses may pretend. Therefore, speaking in the name of Tibetans or defending such or such political status of Tibet is brought down when one has to consider the subject in its global nature. Neither Sautman nor Norbu do question what defines Tibetan people as a unified people. Rather, they avoid giving definition of their own subject (probably because there is not unambiguous definition). They omit to mention that there is not one Tibetan language and culture but several practices and dialects spread among different groups and subgroups in various regions of a large and indeterminate territory.⁷² They also leave the many non-Buddhist religious communities living in Tibet out of the discussion, as well as the several dissensions existing among Buddhist communities.⁷³ Besides, historical evidences repeatedly used to impose a “truth” do not have relevance as long as they constitute hidden political tools rather than scientific facts.

45 This, of course, does not mean that Tibetan people do not, under certain circumstances

that it would be useful to define, feel and regard themselves as a single and unified nation. But identity “*is not so much a provable fact of history as a situation that Tibetans have created through their determination to be considered as a single people*”.⁷⁴ Furthermore, political identity among Tibetans is not so clearly determined either: Tibetan narrative on Tibet and China’s relationship is even less homogeneous than the Chinese discourse, and “*even something as basic as the point in time at which Tibet finally fell under PRC domination has differed in various accounts*”.⁷⁵ The ambiguity on Tibetan political expectations, from independence to “real autonomy”, to “cultural rights” to “minimum rights protected under the PRC’s constitution”, dramatically illustrate dissents and hesitations among exiled Tibetan community and leadership. In short, regardless of who produce narrative, the manufacturing of a Tibet is inevitably questionable and problematic. Representing Tibetan culture and Tibetans’ experiences and aspirations as homogeneous is thus a false start and has to be questioned in order not to reach a political and social impasse.

Notes

1 The American Congressional Executive Commission on China (CECC) was established in 2000, including a coordinator for Tibetan issues to “monitor and promote human rights” in China. See the official website of the CECC: <http://www.cecc.gov/>

2 Chinese official positions on Tibet are stated in several white papers issued by the Information Office of the State Council: *Tibet – Ownership and Human Rights Situation* in 1992; *The Development of the Tibetan Culture* in 2000; *Tibet’s March Toward Modernisation* in 2001; *Regional Ethnic Autonomy in Tibet* in 2004. The last issue, *Tibetan-Chinese Education System Adopted in Tibet*, has been published a few months after Tibetan riots in March 2008. Documents are available on Chinese embassies Websites; see for instance: www.china-embassy.org (Embassy of the PRC in the United-States of America).

3 Tibetan government in exile responded to 1992’s Chinese white paper and gave its own version of the Tibetan status: *Tibetan – Proving Truth From Facts*, 1993. Since then, the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy issued numerous reports on Human rights violation in Tibet: most of them are available on the Government of Tibet in exile’s Website: www.tibet.org

4 See discussions between Barry Sautman, associate professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and Jamyang Norbu, Tibetan writer and political activist exiled in India. Barry Sautman’s controversial article after protests in Tibet in March 2008 has widely circulated on Internet: *Protests in Tibet and Separatism: the Olympics and Beyond*, Letter submitted to South China Morning Post, March 2008. See: www.blackandwhitecat.org/2008/04/01/separatism-and-tibet/ followed by numerous comments by Internet users. Discussion of this article in Jamyang Norbu’s article “Running-Dog Propagandists” and “Barry Sautman’s response to Jamyang Norbu’s opinion piece “Running-Dog Propagandists”” are available online at www.phayul.com.

5 More details will be given in the following sections on production of images of Tibet in Europe and the United-States, and in China.

6 Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992; Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulations*, Paris, Galilée, 1985.

7 French theorist of cinema, Jacques Aumont, argues that “the impression of reality” results from the image and sound, the perception of a continuous movement and the coherence among diegetic universe constructed by the fiction. Jacques Aumont, *Aesthetics of Film*, translated by Richard Neupert, University of Texas Press, 1992, pp.121-125.

8 The exception is Tian Zhuanzhuang’s *Horse Thief* (*Daomazei*盗马贼, 1986) which has been extensively studied: Paul Clark, *Reiventing China: A Generation and Its Films*, Hong Kong, Chinese University Press, 2005, pp.106-114; Xia Hong (Ed.), *Chinese Film Theory, A Guide to the New Era*, Westport, Praeger Publishers, 1990, pp.31-38; Bérénice Reynaud, *Nouvelles Chines, nouveaux cinémas*, Paris, Cahier du cinéma, 1999, p.45. For a concise account of Western cinema of Tibet, see Peter Hansen “Tibetan Horizon: Tibet and the Cinema in the Early Twentieth Century”, in Thierry Dodin and Heinz Rther (Eds.), *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*, Boston, Wisdom Publications, 2001, pp. 91-110; “The Dancing Lamas of Everest: Cinema, Orientalism, and Anglo-Tibetan Relations in the 1920s”, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 101 (3), 1996, pp. 712-747. Scholar and journalist Orville Schell gives a thorough examination of “virtual Tibet” through interviews of actors and director of *Seven Years in Tibet* and visits on the shooting. See Orville Schell, *Virtual Tibet: Searching for Shangri-La from the Himalayas to Hollywood*, New York, Henri Holt, 2000.

9 John Powers gives an interesting overview of the pro-Chinese and pro-Tibet literature, and probably the most unbiased examination of their competitive narratives in the West, comparing Tibetan and Chinese works in English on the Tibetan issue. Elliot Sperling provides a comparative analysis of Tibetan and Chinese historical arguments on Tibet’s political status. Apart from these two studies, we have not found such comparative approach. John Powers, *History As Propaganda: Tibetan Exiles versus the People’s Republic of China*, Oxford University Press, 2004. Elliot Sperling, *The Tibet-China Conflict: History and Polemics*, East West Center Washington, 2004.

10 See Michel Foucault’s theories on Power and Knowledge, *Power/Knowledge*, Colin Gordon, 1980. See also *L’ordre du discours*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971.

11 Kaschewsky gives a useful and well-documented overview of Tibet’s representation in the West from ancient Greece to the 18th century. See Rudolf Kaschewsky, “The Image of Tibet in the West before the Nineteenth Century”, in T. Dodin and H. Rther (Eds.), *Imagining Tibet*, pp.3-20.

12 See Hugues Didier, “Antnio de Andrade l’origine de la tibtophilie europenne”, in *Aufstze zur Portugiesischen Kulturgeschichte*, Vol. 20, 1988-1992, pp.45-71; and *Les Portugais au Tibet, les premires relations jsuites (1624-1635)*, Magellane Chandeigne, Paris, 1996. A four-part television series includes the story of the Portuguese priest 2005 *In Search of Myths and Heroes: The Search for Shangri-La*, directed by Jean Smith and presented by Michael Wood. From Michael Wood’s book *In Search of Myths and Heroes: Exploring Four Epic Legends of the World*, University of California Press, 2005.

13 See Nicolas Notovitch, *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, translated by J. H. Connelly and L. Landsberg, Dragon Key Press, 2002.

14 The book was extensively criticized by many, amongst which German Orientalist Max Mller (1823-1900) or Indian Buddhist scholar Swami Abhedananda (1866-1939). See Max Mller, “The Alleged Sojourn of Christ in India”, *The Nineteenth Century*, n.36, 1894, pp.512-522.

15 See Frank J. Korom, “Old Age Tibet New Age America”, in F. Korom (ed.), *Constructing Tibetan Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, Quebec, World Heritage Press, 1997, pp.73-97.

16 See Lisa Aldred’s critical article on the movement: “Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality”, *The American Indian Quarterly*, Vol. 24 (3), 2000, pp.329-352. On the New Age Movement as a religious movement, see for instance Ruth Prince and David Riches, *The New Age in Glastonbury: The Construction of Religious Movements*, Berghahn

Books, 2001.

17 On various expeditions undertaken in Tibet by the British and their political implications, see Peter Hansen's article "The Dancing Lamas of Everest: Cinema, Orientalism, and Anglo-Tibetan Relations in the 1920s", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 101 (3), 1996, pp. 712-747. This article also provides a comprehensive account of documentaries on Tibet produced in the 1920s.

18 Shangri-la is a fictional place in Tibet popularised by British writer James Hilton's novel, *Lost Horizon*, published in 1933. Considered as a paradise on earth or an ideal community 'isolated from the corrupted civilisation'. See James Hilton, *Lost Horizon*, London, Macmillan, 1933. Several movies, mangas, novels, songs and musical stages have been using the Shangri-la theme until nowadays. Like many others, a county in Chinese province of Yunnan, Zhongdian 中甸, has claimed to be the location of Hilton's Shangri-la and was renamed after it 香格里拉 to attract tourists. See Ashild Kolas, *Tourism and Tibetan Culture in Transition: A Place Called Shangrila*, London, Routledge, 2008.

19 See Christopher Hale, *Himmler's Crusade: The Nazi Expedition to Find the Origins of the Aryan Race*, Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons, 2003.

20 See Schell, *Virtual Tibet*; and Martin Brauen, *Dreamworld Tibet: Western Illusions*, Weatherhill, 2004.

21 Schell, *Virtual Tibet*, p.45.

22 First published in 1953. Heinrich Harrer, *Seven Years in Tibet*, Tarcher, 1997.

23 Peter Hansen mentions several films produced and released in the United-States and in Europe, which contributed to "the magic and mystery" image of Tibet: Frank Capra's *Lost Horizon* (1937); Andrew Marton's *Storm Over Tibet* (1952), Val Guest's *Abominable Snowman of the Himalayas* (1957), the remake of *Lost Horizon* (1973) and Michael Ritchie's *Golden Child* (1986)... See Hansen, "Tibetan Horizon".

24 See Barry Sautman, "The Tibet issue in post-summit Sino-American relations", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol.72 (1), 1999, pp. 7-21.

25 Robert Barnett, "Introduction" to Steve Lehman, *The Tibetans: A Struggle to Survive*, Umbrage, 1998.

26 Sperling, *The Tibet-China Conflict*.

27 Sperling. see also Powers.

28 On the film's context of production and release, see Sautman, "The Tibet issue"; Richard Kraus and Wan Jihong, "Hollywood and China as Adversaries and Allies", *Pacific Affairs*, 2002, Vol.75 (3), pp.419-434.

29 Thomas Heberer "Old Tibet a hell on Earth? The myth of Tibet and Tibetans in Chinese art and propaganda", in T. Dodin and H. Räther (Eds), *Imagining Tibet*, pp.111-150; Warren Smith, *China's Tibet? Autonomy or Assimilation*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2008.

30 Heberer, "Old Tibet".

31 This is especially remarkable when, at the end of the film, a portrait of Mao Zedong replaces the portrait of the Dalai Lama the spectator is shown in the main temple at the beginning. Red stars are also repeatedly displayed in the film. Besides, woman and men are encouraged to work together for their liberation. Their first Chinese language lessons consists in learning such vocabulary as "tractor", "machine" etc, which introduces notions of modernity taught by the "elder brother Han".

32 See Warren Smith's third chapter on "Democratic Reforms" in Smith, *China's Tibet*.

33 Sperling, introduction, p. x.

34 See also Barnett who argues that “*the nationalistic perception of Tibet as a centuries-old “integral part of China” is new*”, Barnett, introduction.

35 Louisa Schein, *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China’s Cultural Politics*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2000, p.114.

36 Kam Louie “Masculinities and Minorities: Alienation in *Strange Tales from Strange Lands*”, in *The China Quarterly*, No. 132, Dec. 1992, pp. 1119-1135.

37 *River Elegy* by Su Xiaokang, aired in 1988, announced the death of the Chinese civilisation and calls for modernisation through westernisation. See the book derived from the film: Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, *Deathsong of the river: a reader's guide to the Chinese TV series Heshang*, translated by Richard W. Bodman and Pin P. Wan, Ithaca, East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1991. On cultural and intellectual movements in China from the 1970s to 1989, see Chen Fong-ching and Jin Guantao, *From Youthful Manuscripts to River Elegy, The Chinese Popular Culture Movement and Political Transformations, 1979-1989*, Hong Kong, Chinese University Press, 1997.

38 See Ba Huang’s book *Temptations of Sunshine and Wilderness—Ba Huang*, Sichuan Art Publishing House, 1994; and his Website: <http://www.bahuang.com/> As for Nima Zeren, he is now the vice-director of the Gandun Tibetan Autonomous District Art Institute and Research Fellow of traditional Tibetan and Buddhist Drawing in the Chinese Tibetan Institute. His Website displays his main works, also collected in a book. See <http://nimazeren.artron.net> See also Landsberger’s page dedicated to Nima Zeren: <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/sheji/sj-nmzr.html> For an account on Tibetan’s cultural production after 1978, see Mark Stevenson and Susan Costello’s articles in Toni Huber (ed.), *Ando Tibetans in Transition: Society and Culture in the post-Mao era*, Brill, 2002.

39 Among his work, see Zhaxi Dawa 扎西达娃, *Fengma zhi yao* 风马之耀 (Dazzling of Wind Horses), Beijing, Beijing wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1991; or *Xizang, yinmi sui yue* 西藏, 隐秘岁月 (Hidden years of Tibet), Hubei Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 1992.

40 See Janet Upton’s article: “The Politics and Poetics of *Sister Drum*: ‘Tibetan’ Music in the Global Marketplace”, in Tim Craig and Richard King (Ded.), *Global Goes Local: Popular Culture in Asia*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2001, pp.99-119.

41 Wang Luobin and Dao Lang are two major figures of the appropriation of Uygur culture and still play a significant role in shaping Xinjiang’s image. See Rachel Harris’ article on Wang Luobin’s controversy: “Wang Luobin, Folksong King of the Northwest or Song Thief?”, in *Modern China*, n.31, July 2005, pp.381-408. Dao Lang is sometimes considered as “Wang Luobin’s spiritual son”. His first album, *First Snow of 2002* (2002 nian de diyi changxue 2002年的第一场雪), put him at the height of fame.

42 For an account on Chinese film industry after the 1980s, see Paul Clark, *Reinventing China: A Generation and Its Films*, Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press, 2005; Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema*, Londres, Routledge, 2004; Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006; Hao Xiaoming et Chen Y., « Film and Social Change: The Chinese Cinema in the Reform Era », *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 2000, 28:1, pp.36-45. See also an *History of the Chinese Film Industry*, by the Australian Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, available online on the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s Website: <http://www.dfat.gov.au>

43 See a depiction of cinema audiences in Hao Xiaoming et Chen Yanru, « Film and Social Change: The Chinese Cinema in the Reform Era », *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 2000, vol.28, n°1, pp.36-45.

44 See also Dru Gladney and Louisa Schein on “internal/oriental” orientalism: Dru Gladney, *Dislocating China Reflections on Muslims, Minorities and Other Subaltern Subjects*, London, Hurst and Company, 2004; and Louisa Schein, “Gender and Internal Orientalism in China”, *Modern China*,

Jan.1997, 23:1, pp.69-98.

45 Except for John Powers, scholars usually skim over the film as part of the propagandist production after the Hong-Kong handover in 1997. See Powers, *History as Propaganda*, pp.89-96. See also Sheldon Hsiao-Peng Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*, Stanford University Press, 2001, pp.105-106.

46 First published in 1961. Peter Fleming, *Bayonet in Lhasa: The First Full Account of the British Invasion of Tibet in 1904*, London, Hart Davis, 1961.

47 Powers, *History as Propaganda*, p.90.

48 The second entry of Feng Xiaoning's trilogy in 1999, *Grief of the Yellow River*(*Huanghe juelian* 黄河绝恋), deals with a grounded American pilot in the WW2 who is rescued by Chinese, and falls in love with a Chinese girl soldier fighting Japanese. The third film, released in 2001 (Purple Sunset- *ziri* 紫日), pays tribute to crossing borders friendship through the story of a Chinese prisoner, a Japanese officer and a Russian soldier who survived a big battle in 1945.

49 This campaign encourages young Singaporeans to speak Mandarin as a common language instead of dialects. First launched in 1979 by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, it is a year-round campaign including Mandarin handbooks, CD-Rom, music, films... See Lee Kuan Yew *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000*, Harpercollins, 2000.

50 On cinematic methods of narrative, see Laurent Jullier, *L'analyse de séquences*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2000; and *Le son au cinéma*, Paris, Cahiers du Cinéma, 2006.

51 The term of "bon sauvage" (good savage) dates back from the sixteenth century during the Renaissance and came back in the nineteenth century to serve anthropological and racist agendas. For a historical overview, see Ter Elligson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*, University of California Press, 2001.

52 Elligson, p.12

53 In some parts of the film, Harrer also explains the young Dalai Lama what an elevator is, and helps him building a 'movie house' or theatre. Harrer is also able to repair an old radio, making Tibetans so happy that they immediately begin dancing.

54 Dibyesh Anand analyses Western colonial and neo-colonial discourses on Tibet and underlines asymmetrical power relations that remains not only in popular Western imagining but also among scholars. See Dibyesh Anand, "Western Colonial Representations of the Other: The Case of Exotica Tibet", *New Political Science*, March 2007, 29:1, pp.23-42.

55 One may assume that this process allows Chinese to take distance from the story as well, and suggests that it is told from "White foreigner"'s point of view only. Chinese then seem to be neutral, spectator but not actor of the history of Tibet, avoiding any criticism on Chinese hegemony.

56 Esther Yau, "Is Chine the End of Hermeneutics? Or, Political and Cultural Usage of Non-Han Women in Mainland Chinese Films", in Diane Carson, Linda Dittmare and Janice Welsch (eds.), *Multiples Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, Minneapolis, University Press of Minnesota, 1994, p.289.

57 On the role of clothing being a "social sign" and a "public dimension", see Peter Corrigan, « Interpreted, Circulating, Interpreting: The Three Dimensions of the Clothing Object », in *The Socialness of Things, Essays on theSocio-semiotics of Objects*, Stephan Riggins (Dir.), Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 1994, pp.435-449; and Pierre Guiraud, *La sémiologie*, Paris, PUF, 1983.

58 The character played by Thewlis in the film does not go back to Austria. But the actual Aufschnaiter did leave Tibet one year after Harrer. He spent the rest of his life between Nepal and Austria, and a book was published as an account of his Tibetan experience, compiled and edited by Martin Brauen: *Peter Aufschnaiter's: Eight Years in Tibet*, Orchid Press, 2002.

- 59 See also Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (translated from German by Rodney Livingstone), Stanford University Press, 2006.
- 60 Derrida's conferences in London on the notion of archiving, as a selection of what has to be remembered and what has to be eluded, has been collected in an essay: Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive*, Galilée, 1995.
- 61 Another approach of memory as an invention is developed in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- 62 For an examination of the use of historical arguments in narratives of the Chinese government and the Tibetan government in exile, see Sperling. Another account of history as propaganda tool can be found in: Powers, *History as Propaganda*.
- 63 On the difference between history and memory, see for instance Paul Ricoeur, *Le mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*, Paris, Seuil, 2003.
- 64 Tim Coates *The British Invasion of Tibet: Colonel Younghusband, 1904*, Abridged Ed, 1999. Michael Carrington, "Officers Gentlemen and Thieves: The Looting of Monasteries during the 1903/4 Younghusband Mission to Tibet", *Modern Asian Studies*, vol.37 (1), 2003, PP 81-109.
- 65 Sperling, introduction, p.x.
- 66 Barnett (2001), p.272.
- 67 On the political impact of such "dreamlike Tibet", see Jamyang Norbu "Behing the Lost Horizon: Demystifying Tibet", in Dodin and Räther, pp.373-378.
- 68 Robert Barnett, "Violated Specialness", p.274.
- 69 Documentary by Tian Zhuangzhuang : *Delamu, Chama gudao zhi Delamu* 茶马古道之德拉姆 (aka *Tea-Horse Road Series: Delamu*), Beijing, 2004.
- 70 Robert Barnett, "Violated Specialness: Western Political Representations of Tibet", in T. Dodin and H. Räther, 2001, p.279.
- 71 Robert Barnett, "Introduction" to Steve Lehman and Mark Bailey, *The Tibetans: A Struggle to Survive*, Umbrage/Twin Palms, 1998, p.1.
- 72 The lingua franca of Tibet is Lhasa dialect, though completely different and unintelligible to many Tibetan communities in Central, Western and Northeast part of the actual Tibet. See Nicolas Tournadre, "L'aire linguistique tibétaine et ses divers dialectes", in *Lalies*, n°25, 2005, p.7-56; Roland Bielmeier, "A survey of the development of Western and Southwestern Tibetan dialects", in B. Nimri Aziz and M. Kapstein (Eds.), *Soundings in Tibetan civilisation*, New Delhi, Madohar, 1985.
- 73 Muslim communities are quite important in Tibet (including Tibetan Muslims and Chinese Hui). Muslim and Buddhist communities relationship is another note of discord among intellectuals in and out of Tibet, Tibetan Buddhists being accused to persecute Muslims in order to keep Tibet "purely Buddhist". See debates between Jamyang Norbu and the novelist Ian Buruma on the latter's article: Ian Buruma, "Tibet Disenchanted", in *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 47 (12), July 2000, pp.22-25; and Jamyang Norbu, "The Muslims of Tibet", in *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 48 (15), October 2001.
- 74 Barnett, "Introduction", p.2.
- 75 Elliot Sperling, *The Tibet-China Conflict: History and Polemics*, East-West Center Washington, 2004, p.15.

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

Vanessa Frangville, « Tibet in Debate: Narrative Construction and Misrepresentations in *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Red River Valley* », *Transtext(e)s Transcultures* 跨文本跨文化 [En ligne], 5 | 2009, document 6, mis en ligne le 22 avril 2010, Consulté le 22 avril 2010. URL : <http://transtexts.revues.org/index289.html>

Auteur

Vanessa Frangville

Vanessa Frangville completed her PhD in Chinese studies from Jean Moulin University of Lyon in 2007. She spent two years at the Central University for Nationalities in Beijing (2002-2003 and 2004-2005) and has conducted extensive research on Chinese non-Han communities or "minority nationalities". Her research interests range across theoretical approaches of nationality, race and ethnicity, and visual and textual representation of minority groups in China, Taiwan and Japan.

Droits d'auteur

© Tous droits réservés