Yunnan, Tibet, and the Northwestern Grassland:

Representations of China's Ethnic Frontiers in the 1980s

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines literary and cinematic representations of ethnic frontiers in China in the 1980s to illustrate how they serve to express intellectuals' different views of China's sociopolitical condition, especially ultra-leftist history and the burgeoning market economy. Works under examination include Zhang Nuanxin's *Sacrificed Youth*, Bai Hua's *The Remote Country of Women*, Tashi Dawa's "A Soul in Bondage," Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Horse Thief*, and Zhang Chengzhi's *The Black Steed*. These different discourses of ethnic frontiers contest with each other, reflecting intellectuals' disagreement over how to understand China's past, present, and future.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Revolution, ultra-leftism, modernity, Yunnan, Tibet, Inner Mongolia.

Introduction

The 1980s are of particular importance in the history of China. While the end of the Cultural Revolution and the launch of reform and opening up in the second half of the 1970s signified the beginning of China's fundamental transition towards urbanisation and marketisation, the 1980s witnessed more substantial progress in this transition. In 1981, the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party adopted the Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China (*Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi* 關於建國以來黨的若干歷史問題的決議). In the Resolution, the Party officially recognised some ultra-leftist movements, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Anti-rightist Movement, as erroneous; it also recognised that the Cultural Revolution "led to domestic turmoil and brought catastrophe to the Party, the state and the whole people."[1] As the government tentatively relaxed its ideological control, intellectuals began to have more freedom to express their different ideas on various sociopolitical issues concerning China's past, present, and future (Link 2000: 13-21). Consequently, writers and filmmakers in the 1980s offered different responses to China's major social transition: while some felt excited to bid farewell to the Cultural Revolution and embrace the burgeoning market economy, others cherished a strong nostalgia for the revolutionary past and remained suspicious or critical of the upcoming social changes. Such different attitudes are intriguingly reflected in literary and cinematic representations of China's frontiers concerning cultures and societies of ethnic minority peoples.

This paper intends to closely examine three major representations of ethnic frontiers in the 1980s, each based on one intellectual thought about China's sociopolitical condition. The purpose of this paper is neither to merely study how ethnic frontiers are represented nor to simply review intellectuals' thoughts about the sociopolitical condition of China. Rather, this paper intends to reveal the interconnection between the two issues. It attempts to elucidate how the different representations of ethnic frontiers reflect intellectuals' different views of China's ultra-leftist history, especially the Cultural Revolution, as well as urbanisation and marketisation in the 1980s.

This paper will analyse five literary works and films to illustrate the three major types of representations of ethnic frontiers and their correlated ideological connotations: (1) Zhang Nuanxin's 張暖忻 *Sacrificed Youth* (*Qingchunji* 青春祭) and Bai Hua's 白樺 *The Remote Country of Women* (*Yuanfang you ge nü'erguo* 遠方有個女兒國) depict non-Han societies in Yunnan Province as pristine and liberal, in contrast with the modernisation efforts of the Cultural Revolution, which yield oppression; (2) Tashi Dawa's 扎西達娃 "A Soul in Bondage" (*Xizang, jizai pishengkou shang de hun* 西藏, 繫在皮繩扣上的魂) and Tian Zhuangzhuang's 田壯壯 *The Horse Thief* (*Daomazei* 盜馬賊) depict Tibetan culture and religion as irrational and superstitious to allegorically mirror ultra-leftist history as unmodern and oppressive; (3) Zhang Chengzhi's 張承志 *The Black Steed* (*Heijunma* 黑駿馬) represents the grassland

1. "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China," *Marxists Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm (accessed on 30 November 2022).

in China's Inner Mongolia as a rural homeland not yet contaminated by capitalist modernity to imply a resistance to the urbanisation and marketisation after the Cultural Revolution.

All of these intellectuals tend to represent ethnic frontiers as essentially *primitive* or *backward* – in either a positive or negative sense – to mirror or contrast with urban China during and after the ultra-leftist years. In a sense, this departs from the way of representing China's ethnic frontiers in the "seventeen years" (1949-1966). According to Lei (2013: 24-34), a body of works in the "seventeen years" serve collectively to construct a new imagined community – the People's Republic – by incorporating ethnic minorities' struggles into the grand narrative of national liberation and construction: as poor ethnic minorities are oppressed and exploited by reactionary classes, they are supposed to fight shoulder-to-shoulder with their Han Chinese comrades to overthrow their common enemies under the leadership of the Party; then, they are expected to actively participate in the construction of a new socialist country and particularly work towards modernising their rural homelands on the frontier. These works thus mainly serve the ideological purpose of the new country rather than being expressions of writers' individual concerns.

In the 1980s, however, literary and cinematic representations of ethnic frontiers became more the personal expressions of intellectuals – of their worries and anxieties about their nation's past, present, and future – and ceased to be merely a means of political education and mass mobilisation. We thus see that the ethnic frontier is more flexibly portrayed: it has become a signifier loaded with different political connotations to serve as intellectuals' responses to the condition of China proper where Han Chinese predominate. As Dru C. Gladney (1994: 94) has pointed out, "the representation of the minorities (…) has more to do with constructing a majority discourse, than it does with the minorities themselves." In this sense, the representation of frontiers still denotes the hegemony of the centre over the periphery and invariably embodies what Louisa Schein (1997) theorises as internal orientalism. Thus, we should fully acknowledge the need to further critique this hegemony. We should also recognise a vibrant tradition of ethnic minority authors writing in either Chinese or their ethnic languages, though this paper will not focus on this issue in particular.

Yunnan as a liberal sanctuary: Sacrificed Youth *and* The Remote Country of Women

We shall briefly discuss the relationship between revolution and modernity to facilitate our examination of the texts discussed below. Li Tuo (1993: 237-8) points out that the Maoist revolution in general is essentially modern in a noncapitalist way. Such an idea is echoed in Wang Hui's article. Wang (1998: 14) calls Maoist socialism "both an ideology of modernisation and a critique of Euro-American capitalist modernisation": it is a type of "antimodern theory of modernisation." In this sense, Li Tuo and Wang Hui recognise two kinds of "modernities": capitalist modernity and socialist modernity, the latter associated with Maoist discourse and ideology in China.

Correspondingly, Zhang Nuanxin and Bai Hua perceive ultra-leftist history, particularly the Cultural Revolution, as essentially modern. However, this type of modernity is also oppressive and thus subject to critique. In their works – the film *Sacrificed Youth* and the novel *The Remote Country of Women* – romanticised depictions of non-Han villages in Yunnan sharply contrast with the ugliness of people's lives in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. In a sense, these works aptly echo the Party's 1981 Resolution that the Cultural Revolution "led to domestic turmoil and brought catastrophe" while carefully avoiding more direct criticism of Maoist ideology itself.

Sacrificed Youth, released in 1985, is a film adapted from Zhang Manling's 張曼菱 novella *There Is a Beautiful Place* (*You yige meili de difang* 有一個美麗的地方). The director Zhang Nuanxin is a key member of China's Fourth Generation directors. According to L. Wang (2012: 333), Zhang Nuanxin is "a pioneer of both mainland new cinema and women's personal cinema in the late 1970s and early 1980s."

In this film, Li Chun, a Han Chinese girl, is sent down as an educated youth (*zhishi qingnian* 知識青年) to an ethnic Dai village in Yunnan to live and work with Dai people during the Cultural Revolution. Although the Down to the Countryside Movement (*shangshan xiaxiang yundong* 上山下鄉運動) intends to offer an opportunity for young people to be reeducated by peasants so they can be more revolutionary, what Li Chun actually learns from the local Dai people is not quite compatible with the ideology of the Cultural Revolution. The emphasis of the film is not on how Li Chun learns to work together with local people, but on how she learns to recognise herself as a female.

In the 1980s, a popular critique of ultra-leftism in China's history is that ultra-leftism forcefully erases women's gender characteristics and makes women look masculine. As Wang Ruoshui and Feng Yuan argue in an article, "the high tide of leftist thought obliterated sex difference, making it impossible for women to actually be women," because this ultra-leftism often depicts female characters as equal or even superior to men in their revolutionary career but not knowing what romance and marriage are (Wang and Feng 1988: 145-6, quoted in Barlow 2004: 260).[2]

As scholars have already pointed out, this gender problem is critically represented in *Sacrificed Youth* (Duan 2012: 79-81). When the female protagonist Li Chun enters the Dai village, she is dressed in white and grey, while Dai girls wear colourful skirts every day and openly flirt with young men by singing love songs to each other. In other words, at the beginning of the film, Li Chun is "desexualised" by ultra-leftist ideology and isolated by Dai girls because of her sexless and unattractive clothing. Dai girls, by contrast, are not restrained by the Cultural Revolution, because their village is remote enough to avoid politics at large. As Li Chun wants to be accepted by Dai girls, she decides to dress as beautifully as they do. Her sense of beauty and femininity is awakened.

Duan (ibid.: 80) points out that this corresponds with the idea of intellectuals, such as Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛 and Li Zehou 李澤厚, that people should regain their humanity and subjectivity by recovering their ability to appreciate beauty after the Cultural Revolution. L. Wang (2019: 15-6) makes a more intricate argument: the protagonist does not simply identify with the Dai way of dressing but later "changes her clothes back to the plain, 'sent-down youth' style," which signifies a "refusal to affix herself to the Dai feminine

2. I follow Tani Barlow's translation here.

position" and connects with the director Zhang Nuanxin's critique of "the naturalisation of sexual difference and women's domesticity that strongly reemerged in both post-Mao feminism (…) and male-centred cultural practice around the mid-1980s."

While these are sound analyses, it seems that scholars generally focus only on the issue of feminine beauty as a political trope in the post-Cultural Revolution context. Few have noticed that this is also an issue of modernity along the line of ethnic and gender identity and that it is the filmmaker's ambivalent attitude towards modernity and modernisation that makes the film paradoxically embrace and reject the Dai way of life at the same time. In an article, Zhang Nuanxin (2005: 153) discusses the issue of modernity to explain what the film intends to illustrate:

> The film script depicts what is beautiful: a beautiful place and a beautiful people. But the depiction of beauty is not its ultimate goal. The beauty here is symbolic: it abstractly represents youthfulness. The Dai people love beauty, life, and youthfulness. But for the urban young girl Li Chun, who grew up in a leftist political environment, her soul is distorted. She has no idea what beauty is, or what youthfulness means. During the chaotic era, the whole generation had their youth wasted. Dai people's love for life and pursuit of beauty then awaken Li Chun from her emotional torpor and spark a feeling of youthfulness from the bottom of her heart. However, Han Chinese girls of this generation, like Li Chun, who were brought up to uphold our modern values, can never have the courage to pursue what they want, to make a bold exhibition of themselves, and to seek love. Thus there is a cultural conflict between the Dai civilisation (primitive, unaffected, in harmony with human nature) and the Han civilisation (modern, somewhat hypocritical, and distorting human nature), which causes the tragedy of Li Chun. She is awakened, but this only makes her feel more pain.

Zhang uses a dichotomy between the primitive and the modern to explain the conflict between Dai culture and Han culture. The ethnic frontier is thus portrayed as essentially "primitive" to form a sharp contrast with China proper: the ethnic frontier is more humane and liberal as it values such feminine beauty, while China proper is drastically modernised only to excessively restrain and repress its people. I would argue that it is in this sense that the film is critical of the Cultural Revolution as a modernisation project.

Nevertheless, although Zhang Nuanxin criticises Han Chinese modernity, she also actively embraces what is modern, which makes her film full of paradoxes. In 1979 she and Li Tuo (her husband) published an important article entitled "On the Modernisation of Cinematic Language." In this article, they criticise China's filmmaking techniques as too backward and argue for further modernising the cinematic language by learning from the West to serve the new era of the "four modernisations" (1979: 40-52). Later, Zhang (2005: 135) mentions that she would continue to use "a combination of long take and montage" in *Sacrificed Youth*, which means that she intends to make the film as modern as possible.

Such an embrace of modernity is not only seen in the use of cinematic techniques. It is also conspicuous in the depiction of characters. Li Chun is positively portrayed as a Han Chinese young woman who can help non-Han people particularly because she is "modern." She is interested in medicine and reads books to learn how to cure illnesses. She then delivers a baby for an ethnic Wa woman and cures a child, Anhu, of food poisoning.[3] Later, she works as a teacher to teach local children. In this sense, the film portrays her as capable of using modern knowledge to help Dai villagers. Finally, she decides to go back to the city and receive higher education, which signifies that Li inevitably has to return to modern life and abandon the primitive ethnic culture. Therefore, Zhang Nuanxin seems to have an ambivalent idea about modernity: she criticises the Han Chinese ultra-leftist modernisation process because it desexualises women and deprives them of the ability to appreciate beauty, but she also values modernity in general. The film's criticism is targeted not at modernity itself but at the Cultural Revolution, which is falsely modern, while it assumes that there should be a better kind of modernity worth pursuing.

Consequently, the film's depiction of the Dai ethnic culture is also ambivalent. While depicting the Dai village as a place of beauty and love, the film also emphasises that Dai people are backward and ignorant. For example, when Anhu gets poisoned, villagers perform a ritual trying to exorcise the ghost that haunts the child, which is of course in vain. Later, the "big brother" in Li Chun's host family falls in love with Li and becomes jealous when seeing Li's close friend Ren Jia, a Han young man, in Li's room. While drunk, he beats Ren and goes berserk even after Ren runs away. He is represented in this scene as a violent and uncontrollable barbarian. The girls in the village are not much better, as Ren reminds Li: "Haven't you seen that young Dai girls can only enjoy a few years of youthfulness? After marriage they soon become old, their teeth becoming black as they chew too much betel nut." The film thus reveals the uglier side of the village and overturns the earlier romanticised depiction of it. In this way, the image of the Dai village is manipulated flexibly in the film: its "primitiveness" is at first depicted positively to serve the film's criticism of the Cultural Revolution as a modernisation project, but the female protagonist has to abandon the village eventually because it is too "backward." While scholars tend to focus only on gender and ethnic issues as political tropes, I argue that the problem of modernity and modernisation can give us a particularly useful perspective to view the female protagonist's – and the film's – ambivalent attitude towards the Dai people. It is also because of this that the southwest frontier can be uniquely significant in making a critical discourse of the Cultural Revolution.

Another case in point is *The Remote Country of Women*, a novel first published in 1986. Its author, Bai Hua, suffered persecution during various political incidents and movements after 1949 and is famous for his criticism of the Cultural Revolution in the 1980s. Michael S. Duke (1985: 124) calls him "one of the most outspoken and critical writers after 1977." Like *Sacrificed Youth*, *The Remote Country of Women* also depicts a village of non-Han people in Yunnan to contrast with modern Han Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution.

In the very beginning, readers are told that eight years earlier (in

3. The scene of delivering the baby is not kept in the final edition of the film, but is recorded in Zhang Nuanxin's (1984: 52-3) written description of the film.

1967) Red Guards entered the Mosuo village to mobilise villagers to join the Cultural Revolution, only to fail, because Mosuo people naturally resist political propaganda. Later, a "work team" (a small group of cadres) comes to the village to abolish the local custom of "walking marriage": "walking marriage" means that the Mosuo people traditionally do not get married; instead, a Mosuo woman lives in a room of her own, spends nights with male visitors she loves and raises her children on her own.

According to the novel, two members of the Gang of Four, Zhang Chunqiao 張春橋 and Yao Wenyuan 姚文元, write an essay in which they use the discourse of modernisation to attack "walking marriage": "In China, the most advanced and the most revolutionary socialist country in the world, why haven't we rooted out this most primitive, most backward and most barbarous lifestyle?" (Bai 1994: 6). The work team keeps the entire village under surveillance, arrests men and women who dare to spend nights together, and forces them to choose either to marry each other or to reform through labour. After claiming the success of their mission, the work team leaves the village, but local people recover their walking marriage right after their departure. Later, the novel shows us that the custom of walking marriage, instead of being "barbarous," is actually quite liberal as it can guarantee men and women the free choice of lovers. When the Mosuo girl Sunamei is 13 years old, she is given a room of her own and begins to receive male visitors. Her mother teaches her: "The Mosuo [women] work in the field during the day to produce clothes and food and make love at night both to continue their line and for enjoyment. They are their own masters during the day and remain their own masters at night" (ibid.: 61). The walking marriage thus sharply contrasts with the idea of modernity promoted by the work team. It endows women with freedom and happiness, while the work team uses marriage as a means of social control.

According to J. Liu (2003: 22-3), the Cultural Revolution repressed "private feelings, sex, and personal love," and expelled such topics from literary production, because the Party regarded them as "harmful and destructive." However, the early 1980s witnessed a revival of personal love as a theme in novels, poetry, plays, and films: as intellectuals want to recover what has been destroyed by the Cultural Revolution, they assert personal love to represent "the banner of humanism, a way to save society, and a tentative vision of the lost 'self'" (ibid.: 24). While Zhang Nuanxin reasserts feminine beauty to counter the desexualising effect of the Cultural Revolution, Bai Hua highlights the importance of sexual love to resist the rigid morality imposed on people during the Revolution. Both Zhang and Bai draw a dichotomy between the primitive and the modern. They use non-Han villages in Yunnan to create their utopias in which the individual triumphs over the collective.

Like Zhang Nuanxin, Bai Hua does not criticise modernity on the whole but criticises the Cultural Revolution as a modernisation project in particular. Meanwhile, he still actively embraces modern values. As a result, he is uncertain whether the "primitive" ethnic culture should be admirable. Like the Dai village in *Sacrificed Youth*, the Mosuo village in *The Remote Country of Women* is initially described as a utopian community where people have innocence, love, happiness, and freedom, but this picture begins to change later in the novel. After the Cultural Revolution, the Han Chinese male protagonist Liang Rui falls in love with Sunamei and decides to marry her, though he knows that Mosuo people usually do not get married. They decide to return to the Mosuo village to see Sunamei's relatives and friends and stay in Sunamei's private room, where Sunamei used to receive her lovers. While Sunamei and her mother view the room as beautiful, Liang Rui does not like it. He thinks: "Perhaps in the modern world no lovers would meet in such a crude place. The Mosuo were not rich, but they could have made their surroundings cleaner and more attractive" (Bai 1994: 348). When he visits Sunamei's friends he thinks:

> Every Mosuo courtyard was too dirty for me to set foot in. Everywhere there was manure, and the worn-out clothing of the children and the elderly seemed to have never been washed. Although beautiful girls wore beautiful clothes, their necks were dirty. (ibid.: 350)

The Mosuo culture, represented as "primitive," begins to lose its glamor as the Han intellectual comes closer to it. Liang is fascinated by its culture because it is quite liberal and innocent, ensuring women's freedom, but he also dislikes the place because it is not yet modernised. Finally, what he appreciates – the Mosuo culture – turns out to be unacceptable. He finds that Sunamei once again secretly receives her old lover. In a great rage, he flings a piece of wood into the fireplace and inadvertently causes a huge fire. He has to leave the village in the end.

Liang Rui's marriage is a failed attempt to modernise or civilise his Mosuo wife. The Mosuo culture, at first resisting the harsh ideological control of the Cultural Revolution and embodying love and freedom, now becomes incompatible with the intellectual's obsession with modernity. This is similar to what we see in *Sacrificed Youth*: Li Chun is at first "awakened" by Dai culture but finally has to leave the village for a modern way of life. In both texts, we see a similar intricate relation between the primitive and the modern.

Tibet as irrational and superstitious: "A Soul in Bondage" and The Horse Thief

While Li Tuo and Wang Hui recognise the Maoist revolution as a modernisation project, there is also a quite popular view that ultra-leftist history embodies a rejection of modernity. In 1987, Li Zehou published an important article, in which he argues that the Cultural Revolution is essentially feudalistic and unmodern: it revived feudalism in the name of socialism, and only after the Cultural Revolution did China "rediscover" the values of the May Fourth period, such as "the need of enlightenment, science, and democracy, human rights, and truth" (1987: 36). Li's argument is typical of the spirit of New Enlightenment (*xinqimeng* 新啟蒙), which according to Wang Hui (1998: 17) is "the most dynamic intellectual current of the entire 1980s decade."

Tashi Dawa's short story "A Soul in Bondage" and Tian Zhuangzhuang's film *The Horse Thief* echo the spirit of the New Enlightenment. Particularly, they depict Tibetan culture as hopelessly irrational; they also ridicule Tibetan religion as it falsely promises heavenly blessing to the characters. Such a representation of Tibet allegorically mirrors the two authors' view of ultra-leftist history as essentially unmodern and oppressive. By exposing the terrible conditions of Tibetan culture and religion, Tashi and Tian express

their criticism of and disillusionment with the ultra-leftism that once troubled the whole nation.

"A Soul in Bondage" was first published in the journal *Tibetan Literature* (*Xizang wenxue* 西藏文學) in 1985. According to Ma (1998: 129), the author Tashi Dawa is half-Han half-Tibetan. His writings in the 1980s are representative of a body of works known as "new fiction of Tibet" (*Xizang xin xiaoshuo* 西藏新小説), which tend to depict Tibet as a land of mystery and spirituality. In the story, the first-person narrator is a writer who visits a mountainous but modernised Tibetan village. A living Buddha, before his death, tells the narrator the old myth of Shambhala – a Tibetan Buddhist utopia – and says that two young Tibetans have been on their journey in search of it. The narrator then realises that this story, now told by the dying living Buddha, is actually a story that he wrote but didn't finish. He then goes on to tell his unfinished story to readers: a young Tibetan woman, Jing, is visited by a young Tibetan man, Tabei, who is on a journey supposedly in search of Shambhala. She decides to travel with him, though not knowing where he is headed. As they reach a village, an old man tells Tabei about people's unsuccessful quests for communism as a paradise by crossing over the Kalong snow-capped mountains:

> Back in 1964, (…) the communes were just beginning. Everybody was talking about communism, but nobody knew what it was. They said it was some kind of paradise, but nobody knew where it was. (…) No one had been across the Kalong snow-capped mountains so it had to be there. A few people sold all they had and went off, with sacks of roasted barley flour on their backs, to find communism on the other side of the mountains. They never came back. (Tashi 1985: 10)[4]

The old man then tells Taibei that by crossing the snow-capped mountains one can follow the deity Padma Sambhava's palm lines into an extremely mysterious world: "Humans who enter that maze will be lost" (ibid.: 11). Clearly, the old man's description of communism conflates with the living Buddha's description of Shambhala.

Tabei's quest for Shambhala is thus also a quest for communism. In the village, Tabei plays with a new tractor and seriously hurts himself, but he still decides to cross the mountains in search of Shambhala. The unfinished short story ends here. Now, as the narrator tries to cross the mountains alone to see Tabei in person, he experiences a time reversal and sees the dying Tabei with Jing beside him. Tabei dies and the narrator takes Jing back.

Cai (2004: 149) recognises this story as "a story of pursuit of Communism." Yet a more nuanced examination is needed here: while the story conflates Shambhala with communism, it does not intend to attack communism per se. As a writer from mainland China, Tashi could not openly question the Party and its ideology. What he could do instead was to carefully use the narrative as a trope to question the falsely envisioned utopian dream (mis-)recognised as the communist ideal and the unreasonable means of pursuing this dream in history. Note that the villagers' quest for communism was performed in 1964 – two years after the Great Leap Forward and two years before the start of the Cultural Revolution. Paradoxically, Tashi's critique here is in line with the Party Resolution adopted in 1981. As mentioned earlier, the Resolution officially recognised the ultra-leftist movements in history as erroneous and even disastrous.

Åshild Kolås (2003: 26) argues that Tashi Dawa in this story "takes a highly critical approach to both the 'modern' and the 'traditional.'" In other words, the story can be read as a critical commentary on the condition of modernity and economic prosperity in the post-Cultural Revolution context. Nevertheless, the story generally tends to celebrate, rather than reject, this new condition. The story initially draws a picture of Tibet, supposedly in 1984, that has been highly modernised and cosmopolitan: the mountain area has "a small airport, from which a helicopter made the trip into the city five times a week," "an electric generator powered by solar energy," a "Himalayan transportation company" with container trucks built in Germany, "a carpet factory where designers worked out their ideas on computers," and a satellite dish that picks up five channels (Tashi 1985: 3). The story thus embraces the "material progress" resulting from modernisation.

The two youngsters' journey also shows the story's general celebration of modernity: they travel from un-modernised areas – first the desolate hill on which the girl lives, then old villages, temples, caves, peasants' houses, and shepherds' tents – to more modernised (and Westernised) villages in which people suddenly begin to use calculators and enjoy beer, disco, and movies. While Jing is attracted by such modern pleasures and wants to stay, the determined wayfarer Tabei views modern life as merely a distraction and continues his journey. The story tells us: "His destination is absolutely not a metropolis noisy with various sounds mixed together" (ibid.: 8). His journey supposedly follows the palm print of Padma Sambhava to the other side of Kalong mountains, where there should be Shambhala.

The story does not represent Tabei's rejection of modern life and pursuit of Shambhala in a positive light. When the narrator crosses the mountains to find Tabei, a strange thing happens: time goes backward, and the narrator comes to an ancient battlefield. The time reversal indicates that the final destination – the religious/political utopia – is "backward" in terms of temporality. The narrator finally comes under a "huge red boulder," a barren place where Padma Sambhava's palm lines spread as "countless dark gullies" crisscrossing "like monsters' claws" (ibid.: 13). There he finds Tabei, who is dying, as he has been hit by the tractor while playing with it in the village. The narrator then begins to question himself: "Why have not I created the image of a 'new person' yet? (…) If someone questions why in such a great era I still allow them [Tabei and Jing] to exist, how should I respond?" (ibid.: 14). Tabei, who has so much faith in his pursuit of utopia but has his life wasted, is a person who cannot keep up with the forward movement of time, or modernity. The narrator tries to persuade Tabei that his dreamland is just like what is described in Thomas More's *Utopia* and does not exist, only to find that "as he is about to die, now it is impossible to let him give up the faith that he has been cherishing for so many years" (ibid.: 14). Then, the narrator hears a man's voice in English reporting

4. I largely follow David Kwan's translation (Tashi 1992), with modifications based on the original text in Chinese (Tashi 1985).

the opening ceremony of the 23rd Olympic Games in Los Angeles, aired all over the world: historically, it happened in 1984 and was also the first time the People's Republic of China fully participated in the Olympics. This voice – in this cosmopolitan, post-Cultural Revolution context – magically "recovers" time, as the narrator notices that his watch once again begins to tell him the current time. But Tabei seems to be beyond redemption: he does not understand this voice of modernity, but stubbornly recognises it as "God's speech." Finally, the narrator has to take Jing back to make her a "new person."

There is an intriguing tension between Shambhala and modernity. Shambhala, as a trope referring to the falsely envisioned utopian dream that enchanted the masses through ultra-leftist political movements, resists modernity and remains an illusion in the end. Tashi Dawa, half-Han and half-Tibetan, has two different perspectives to represent Tibet. He delves deep into his own ethnic culture in search of what is mysteriously intriguing, but he also occupies a position that is distinctively "Chinese" as he uses Tibet as a trope to express his deep concern for China as a nation.

In the same vein, *The Horse Thief*, a film produced in 1986, also represents Tibetan culture and religion as irrational and superstitious to express a critique of the Cultural Revolution and people's blind faith in it. Its director Tian Zhuangzhuang is a key member of China's Fifth Generation directors.

In this film, a Tibetan couple, Norbu (husband) and Dolma (wife) have a child and live with their tribe. Norbu is a horse thief, but he is also very pious in Tibetan Buddhism and loyal to his tribe. His crime is exposed, and his family consequently banished from the tribe. Meanwhile, his first child becomes sick and dies. As the family is constantly stigmatised and remains shunned by the tribe, Norbu finally decides to rebel against his tribe and his religion: he kills the sacred sheep for meat and steals two horses so that he, his wife and newborn baby can flee for their lives. As they are pursued, Norbu decides to turn back to intercept the pursuers so that his wife and baby will survive. In the end, we see Norbu's knife on the ground and his blood spilled, which indicates his death.

Dru C. Gladney (1995: 169-70) reads this film as a criticism of modernity, or more specifically, a criticism of modern social structure and rules. However, I would argue that the target of criticism here is the Cultural Revolution rather than modernity. When interviewed by Zha (2006: 409-10), Tian Zhuangzhuang explicitly states:

> Then is *The Horse Thief*. It is still about my experience of the Cultural Revolution, about gods and men, life and death. In fact, I depicted this Tibetan character in an allegorical way. If I had made the film directly about Han Chinese society, it would not have passed censorship. So I had to make it a film about ethnic minorities. (…) It is in fact a simple story about piety towards and betrayal of a god. It was my experience of the Cultural Revolution that actually motivated me to make this film.

Tian also says that in the original version of the film, there was a scene of "sky burial" to "represent how a human body is split into parts as a religious ceremony," which was "the soul of the film" but had to be expunged to pass censorship (ibid.: 414). In this sense, the film's representation of Tibetan culture and religion, which are quite primitive and oppressive from the filmmaker's point of view, serves as an allegory to mirror the social condition during the Cultural Revolution.

Tian Zhuangzhuang makes a great effort to represent various Tibetan Buddhist ceremonies not only to highlight the importance of religion in Tibetan society but also to reveal its oppressiveness and falsehood. Norbu is very pious as he enthusiastically participates in religious ceremonies. He donates his loot to the temple and prays for his first son in the hope of letting him receive heavenly blessings. When his son is ill, he patiently collects rainwater dripping from the eave to apply to the forehead of the child, believing that the "sacred water" can cure him. But all this is of no avail and his son dies of illness. Meanwhile, when the tribe's sheep are sick, people are also blindly pious and try to use religious ceremonies to repel the disease, but their sheep still die, which in some sense parallels the death of Norbu's son. In this way, Tian represents Tibetan Buddhism as essentially a kind of superstition to be contrasted with modern medical knowledge. It is obvious to the modern audience that such blind faith in religion does not help cure illnesses at all and can lead to even more disastrous consequences, such as the death of Norbu's son and the tribe's sheep.

Figure 1. Norbu, the horse thief, prays to Buddhist gods in a monastery for his child, who is ill.

Credit: screenshot by the author, from the film *The Horse Thief* (Xi'an Film Studio, 1986).

Just as Tashi Dawa does, Tian Zhuangzhuang uses a dystopian representation of Tibetan religion to express his veiled criticism of ultra-leftist history: the latter is as unmodern and unreasonable as the former. By letting Norbu finally kill the sacred sheep for food and leave the tribe and the monastery, Tian himself is blasphemous and rebellious. In an interview with Michael Berry (2005: 64), Tian explains:

> The death of the [elder] son brings a difficult choice for the main character, between religion and life – but there lies a contradiction between these two elements. Religion has the power to tie one down, whereas life points to a larger degree of freedom and autonomy. But in the end, he chooses life and decides to protect his [newborn] child. That is really the heart of the film.

The Horse Thief thus anticipates *The Blue Kite*, his well-known film made in 1993, which more directly criticises the Cultural Revolution.

Northwestern grassland as spiritual home: The Black Steed

While the four texts discussed above are all critical of ultra-leftist history, we should not overlook a subtle sense of nostalgia for the "revolutionary" past, which, I would argue, is also indicative of intellectuals' anxiety over urbanisation and marketisation in China in the 1980s. We shall thus examine Zhang Chengzhi's *The Black Steed*, in which the protagonist expresses nostalgia for his childhood spent with a Mongol family on the northwestern grassland, as he has already left for modern life in a city.

The novella was first published in 1983 in the literary journal *October* (*Shiyue* 十月). The author Zhang Chengzhi, a Hui Muslim, was a prominent young leader during the Cultural Revolution and coined the word "Red Guard."[5] He spent four years as an "educated youth" in Inner Mongolia. Unlike many writers who criticise the Cultural Revolution, Zhang radically romanticises it and laments its failure even in the twenty-first century.

In the story, the grassland in Inner Mongolia is depicted as the protagonist's home, which is full of love and warmth, while urban life symbolises a betrayal of the rural home. The young Mongol first-person protagonist, Bayanbulag, is sent by his father to an old Mongol woman's yurt. Bayanbulag calls the old woman "Grandma" and lives happily with her and her granddaughter Somiya. As he grows up, he falls in love with Somiya and plans to marry her. In the meantime, he decides to leave the grassland to study veterinary medicine in the banner (*qi* 旗) administrative centre. Somiya, left unprotected, is raped by Shara and becomes pregnant. Knowing this, the protagonist leaves the grassland for good and becomes a college student. Not until many years later does he return to the grassland, only to find that Grandma has passed away and Somiya is now the wife of a cart driver and mother of four children. The protagonist thus feels guilty for having left Grandma and Somiya, who loved him dearly.

The Black Steed thus implicitly criticises the protagonist for betraying his rural Mongol home. When explaining why he chooses to leave the grassland for college, the protagonist examines himself in retrospect and confesses that because he was not born a herdsman and because he had received years of education before coming to the grassland, he could not fully embrace the "natural law" of the grassland (Zhang 1990: 56). He had "a fresh and fervid hope" at the bottom of his heart, which drove him "to seek a purer, more civilized beauty endowed with human dignity, a life richer in its prospects" (ibid.: 57). In other words, the protagonist is strongly lured by a more "civilised" way of life in the city. Also, when Grandma and Somiya decide to keep the baby and put the rape behind them, the protagonist, at the time more educated than others on the grassland, is deeply saddened and unable to accept it. The different reactions to the rape thus highlight a fundamental difference between "the primitive" and "the modern" as represented in the story: while Mongol culture, less restrained by the patriarchal order, cares about the mother and child, modern values render the protagonist unable to love. The rape of Somiya thus makes him finally decide to leave the grassland for college.

Nine years later, when the protagonist returns to the grassland for a visit, he feels quite guilty for his abandonment and betrayal of his rural homeland. Grandma is dead. Somiya lives a hard life. Her daughter Qiqig is not well treated by her stepfather. The protagonist, while talking with Somiya, feels that the grassland has now become a "strict tribunal" to judge his soul (ibid.: 87). Meanwhile, disappointed with urban life, he feels quite nostalgic for the good old days. He questions whether the life path he has chosen is right:

> Only after having lost it forever did we remember to value all we had wearied of and abandoned in the past, including home, including friendship, including our personal pasts. Nine years since that five-year-old, thick-chested, thin-waisted black horse had indeed become the ever-victorious Ganga-hara, and what about you? What did you gain, Bayanbulag? A successful career, or the true meaning of life? Crowding with others in the buffeting blasts of air, formulating dry official documents, attending endless meetings, witnessing countless frictions between people, bit by bit being forced into the network of personal relationships, or perhaps getting a taste of the truly civilised life in salons for which the language of the grasslands has no word? Watching those who hated special privileges complacently enjoying those same privileges? Listening to friends about to emigrate to the United States or Canada talk about the advancement of the nation? (ibid.: 26)

To the protagonist, urban life makes people toil and moil all day. It deprives people of their ability to love and understand each other.

Zhang Chengzhi also tends to connect this urban life to the capitalist West: people living in Chinese cities are more likely to migrate to Canada and the US, thus betraying their mother country. Here the city where the protagonist lives becomes so modernised and Westernised that it loses its "Chineseness." The story further emphasises such an urban-rural dichotomy by contrasting the daughter of the protagonist's friend with Qiqig, daughter of Somiya: the former now lives in America – a "paradise" – and has "forgotten her father and her homeland," while the latter lives her poor life on the rural grassland but stubbornly recognises the protagonist as her father (as Somiya has told her) (ibid.: 83). The loyalty to "father," or to the poor, rural "home," allegorically refers to loyalty to the Chinese identity. The grassland thus represents China, while the city, where the protagonist works and sees the photo of the aforementioned Chinese American girl, is closer to the West. The author Zhang Chengzhi nevertheless has an ambivalent attitude towards the grassland and the West. Although the grassland as the protagonist's "home" is emotionally comforting, it is also a place of poverty and backwardness. Qiqig is unhappy and not properly educated there. The West, by contrast, is a place of material affluence and happiness: in the photo the protagonist sees, the Chinese American girl wears a sweater with the English word "happy" printed on it and plays heartily with her American friends.

There is a tradition of viewing China as essentially rural, and Chinese cities as essentially Western. Robin Visser (2010) summarises various intellectuals' views that follow this tradition.

5. Hai Pengfei 海鹏飞, "張承志: 走不出烏托邦" (*Zhang Chengzhi: Zou bu chu wutuobang*, Zhang Chengzhi cannot walk out of his utopia), *Nanfang renwu zhoukan* (南方人物周刊), 30 June 2014, https://nfpeople.infzm.com/article/2438 (accessed on 1 November 2022).

As early as 1947, in his book *From the Soil* (*Xiangtu Zhongguo* 鄉土中國), Fei Xiaotong 費孝通 "characterises fundamental aspects of Chinese society in relation to its unique rural features, in opposition to Western culture, which equates civilisation with the metropolis" (Visser 2010: 10). Another intellectual, Frederick Mote, also describes Chinese civilisation as essentially rural, whereas cities in ancient China "were never separate and discrete from the rural areas that supported them" (ibid.). Then, according to Rhoads Murphey, Chinese cities as treaty ports emerged as a result of Western exploitation and became closer to the West than to the Chinese hinterland (ibid.: 11). This idea of urban-rural dichotomy, though problematic for its essentialism, embodies the traditional intellectual perception and imagination of China. Visser points out that based on such a dichotomous view, "in the wake of Western infiltration the concept of the city became increasingly problematic in China, acquiring a number of predominantly negative qualities" (ibid.: 12).

Mao Zedong also sees cities in the prerevolutionary period as "consumer cities," "parasitic and unhealthy," in contrast with the "producer cities" in the socialist system, which serve as industrial bases supporting the national economy (ibid.: 15). The urban-rural dichotomy in *The Black Steed* is in line with the Maoist view: cities are now "parasitic and unhealthy" again, while people on the grassland remain pure and innocent. This is an intellectual response to the change that took place in the early 1980s: with the end of the Cultural Revolution and the launch of reform and opening up, China began to experience fast urbanisation and marketisation. As Zhang Chengzhi understands it, the urban space has been transformed from Maoist socialist "producer cities" back to capitalist "consumer cities," which is a betrayal of the socialist lifestyle and the national identity. In contrast, the northwestern grassland in *The Black Steed* still keeps its ruralness and Chineseness relatively intact. It can thus best represent the real socialist China. The protagonist, as an intellectual, though greatly lured by cities and even the West, is supposed to shoulder the responsibility for the well-being of people on the grassland. A strong sense of nostalgia is at work here. The object of such nostalgia is interestingly ambiguous: it can be the past in terms of temporality and the grassland in terms of locality; it can also be the interpersonal relation and social structure under the socialist system. In all, the good old days on the grassland can serve as a metonymy for the years before China entered an era of market economy and globalisation.[6]

Conclusion: Frontiers as a site of contestation

During the "seventeen years," literature and films served their sociopolitical purposes by subsuming frontiers into the grand narrative of national liberation and socialist construction (Shi 2010: 110; Duan 2012: 46-72; Lei 2013: 24-34). In contrast, in the 1980s intellectuals began to render different images of ethnic frontiers to express their concerns and anxieties about fundamental social change – the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of urbanisation and marketisation.

This paper thus discusses how the representations of frontiers can be intellectually meaningful in this particular context. The film *Sacrificed Youth* and the novel *The Remote Country of Women* embody the idea that the Cultural Revolution is a modernisation project, but a wrong one, as it causes oppression and suffering. They depict non-Han villages in Yunnan as sanctuaries immune from this modernisation project, where people have much more freedom to pursue personal happiness. By contrast, the short story "A Soul in Bondage" and the film *The Horse Thief* reflect the idea that ultra-leftist history is feudalistic and unmodern. They depict Tibetan culture and religion as irrational and superstitious to mirror the backwardness, irrationality, and oppressiveness of ultra-leftist history. These four stories nevertheless have something in common: they all follow the intellectual trend of the 1980s, which, though far from monolithic, generally welcomes the new social conditions resulting from China's recent "reform and opening up" and rejects the ultra-leftist past.

The Black Steed, however, demonstrates a different attitude. Its positive depictions of the Northwestern grassland as the protagonist's rural home indicate a nostalgia for revolutionary history, a loyalty to Chinese national identity, an anxiety over China's modernisation and marketisation, and a resistance to the capitalist social condition represented by the US.

Through these politically charged depictions of frontiers, writers and filmmakers follow the tradition of Chinese intellectuals to shoulder responsibility for the nation. Such an ideal connects well with what C. T. Hsia (1999) calls the "obsession with China": from the late Qing period, Chinese writers were concerned about the fate of China as the nation was in deep crisis under the threat of feudalism and Western imperialism. They wished to use literature as a weapon to expose social evils and to educate and mobilise Chinese people in order to save the nation.

I would argue that such an obsession does not diminish but continues to exist in the post-Mao period. Intellectuals in the 1980s carried on the May Fourth tradition by considering themselves prophets of their era and expressing concerns about the fate of the nation. K. Liu (1993: 25) discussed this issue: "New Era literature (…) is characterised by a pervasive ethos of 'recovery' and 'return': a recovery of once-denounced humanist values and a return to the May Fourth enlightenment projects." Y. Zhang's (2002: 172) idea of "new Chinese cinema" is particularly relevant here: "It is of crucial importance that a minority discourse takes a strategic position of marginality – a reconstructed marginality that questions and challenges the centrality of the state discourse." Altogether, these representations of ethnic frontiers relied heavily on various utopian and dystopian elements to yield contesting cultural and intellectual meanings in the 1980s.

Manuscript received on 30 November 2022. Accepted on 10 July 2023.

6. A comparable case is Zhang Xianliang's 張賢亮 short story "Body and Soul" (*Ling yu rou* 靈與肉), which was published in 1980 and adapted as a film entitled *The Herdsman* (*Mumaren* 牧馬人) in 1982. In the story, the protagonist Xu Lingjun is labelled a rightist and sent to a ranch in the Northwest to reform himself through labour because his father has fled China as a capitalist. After the Cultural Revolution, his father visits Beijing and asks the son to go abroad (supposedly to the US) to help him manage his company there. The protagonist, however, feels uncomfortable staying in Beijing, a Westernised city by then. He feels a strong attachment to the Northwestern grassland and decides not to leave.

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