

# Research on the Propagation Effects and Paths of China's Ethnic Minority Films in the New Century

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**Abstract:** Since the new century, the economic system of China has undergone profound transition to market economy; the trend of cultural globalization has been surging forward vigorously. Analyzing China's ethnic minority films from the perspective of media ecological environment theory, it can be seen that these movies have explored a path of expressing localization in the context of globalization, and found a unique diversification mode after a series of trial and error in the changeable new media environment. In the propagation paths constructed by the new content and new approaches, this paper explores the propagation effects of national films in the new century, and their relations with propagation logic, communication orientation and aesthetic standards.

## 1. Introduction

Ethnic minority films have developed rapidly since the beginning of the new century; nearly 100 films have been released in theaters. The condition of multiple nationalities decides that ethnic minority film is a special movie type in China. In the new century, changes in exogenous factors of film ecological environment affect movie creation, resulting in unprecedented diversified ethnic minority films. In these films, the perspective of observation has changed from overlooking to looking at the front horizontally. Filmmakers approach ethnic minorities as "insiders", taking the reality into consideration, and lifting films from the level of self-examination to introspection.

## 2. The Phased Transformation of Ethnic Minority Films

Since the new century, China's minority films have developed in diversified directions; common themes include fighting against foreign aggression, love life of the youth and relationship between man and nature; adventure action movies and original ecology folklore films also come into being. The first two categories continue the successful achievements of the 20th century, while the development of latter three types is particularly noticeable. Comedy movies begin to appear. In the new century, ethnic minority films keep a distance from the mainstream of urban rhythm; they increase the intensity of self-interrogation, and present a broad perspective and colorful forms.

In the new century, there are obvious changes in minority films, which are reflected in the decline of certain types and the emergence of new types. Firstly, films with myths and folklore themes and representing regional scenery are relatively reduced. Previously, there were *Avanti*, *Peacock Princess*, *Magical Emerald*, *Death of a Beauty*, *Dream of a Fairy* and other movies. Since the new century, similar films are hard to find. Secondly, biographies of historical figures and epic movies, such as *Ao Lei Yilan*, *Srongtsen Gampo*, *Madame Shexiang* and *Going East To Native Land* are also relatively reduced. In the 1990s, more works adopt the theme of "returning"; *Gada Melin* is the only movie after the new century. Thirdly, adventure, magic and thriller movies begin to appear, relevant movies include *Red Snow*, *Way of the Snowstorm*, *Prince of the Himalaya*, *The Last Headwoman* and *Soul on a String*. *Way of the Snowstorm* has taken the first step in creating minority films through western film techniques. Fourthly, movies with the theme of "man, nature and society" become a new favorite of the media. These films express the connection between environment, animals and people, focus on building a community with shared future for humanity. Representative films include *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol*, *Tuya's Marriage*, *Urtin Duu*, *Household on Clouds*, *Where is My Home* and *Tharlo*. Fifth, there are more than 30 works with distinctive

characteristics of original ecology. Native culture is constantly nurturing and conveying distinct indigenous traditions, which can enrich the theme. Representative works include *The Silent Holy Stones*, *Anayi*, *The Flavor of Green Betel Lang*, *Emma's Wedding*, *Nest*, *Gun of Gun Lala*, *Our Voice*, *Sonata in Spade*, *Tima and His Son* and *Sky in Tibet*. Innovations in expression forms have attracted great attention from the academia and the industry. It is often integrated with works of "nature and society". *Urtin Duu* is also a typical work of original ecology.

In addition, works expressing humanistic concern and self-redemption should also be mentioned. *Welcome to Aer Village* directed by Wan-feng Han and *Migration* directed by Jing-wu Ning tell stories about the reconstruction of the Qiang people after the Wenchuan earthquake. *Haitao's Xilingol League* • Wenchuan also fully demonstrates the exchanges between different nationalities, and finds a reasonable logic for the mutual support of two nationalities after the disaster.

### **3. The Evolution of the Ecological Environment of Ethnic Minority Films in the New Century**

Film art is an important form of mass media. The construction and extension of its ecological environment are closely related to the "big environment". [1] The "Order No. 43" promulgated in 2004 established the legal and reasonable status of non state capital in films and television. State and folk capitals offer creators with great freedom and right of speech. "Minority films should return to endorse their own nationality, and dominate the right of speech." [2] The request shows creators' initiative to enhance the subject consciousness of minority culture and break the stereotype of spectacular films.

The premise of national policy in the new century is the promotion of cultural prosperity. Specific measures have changed from "prohibition" to "encouragement", and clearly stipulated that national cultural undertakings should develop independently. The Multicultural Film Fair in Beijing International Film Festival in 2011, as well as the Film Project of Chinese Ethnic Minorities which launched in 2013 which aims to "preserve cultures of ethnic minorities through films", [3] strongly promoted the revitalization of Chinese ethnic minority films.

In the new century, the tourism industry as well as the film and television industry have mutual benefits and can cooperate with each other. As one of the name cards of ethnic minority areas, tourism resources with both natural landscape and human customs call for the attention of modern media; movies are also enriched by different natural and cultural heritages. Movies like *Beautiful Homeland* which was released in Kazakhstan in 2006, *Close to the Sun* which won three awards at the 17th Sedona International Film Festival in 2010, and *Thang-ga* which commemorated the 60th anniversary of Tibet's peaceful liberation in 2012 have thickly propaganda color, and integrated a large number of "original ecology" elements, like traditional customs and singing, dancing arts, into pictures.

The combination of the original concept and images is a symbol of the authenticity of ethnic culture. From the early ethnographic documentaries to present dramatic films, "original ecology" has been used to record the colorful cultural life of ethnic minorities to the greatest extent. [4] With the deep excavation of world heritage, the awakening of national subject consciousness prompted the collision between "cultural heritage theory" and "original ecology theory" in films and television. In the global context, cultural diversity has become the prevailing "political and cultural correctness". [4] Primary culture has become the external motivation to the awakening of cultural heritage self-awareness. The light comedy *This is What Money* is produced in 2014 combines traditional "cockfighting", modern "parkour" and "street dance" with humorous animations, and weaves a network of original ecological ideas. Turpan cockfighting is one of the four major cockfighting events in China. [5] The value of Uygur folk heritage with a long history endows the original gambling folk games with the positive energy of "political and cultural correctness". The old game presented in the film has progressed from simple entertainment to a project in the Autonomous Region Peasant Games. The wise playwright skillfully made the game of "cockfighting" legal through the idea of "winning or losing is not about money", reflecting the spirit of rejecting the dross and assimilating the essence in traditional folk culture.

#### 4. Bottleneck and Outlets of Ethnic Minority Films in the New Century

Media ecology points out that, in environments with limited resources, the quantity of resources can control and inhibit the development of ecosystem; competition within populations can affect the birth and survival rates, and reduce the actual growth rates of populations. [7] In the new century, competition in the media ecological environment is fierce; ethnic minority films of China are deeply restricted by commercial capital. Due to the concession of state capitals, “marketization” becomes a double-edged sword which deprives the policy advantages of minority films. These movies are relentlessly abandoned by the game rules of cinema chain.

The permeation of commercialization makes it difficult for minority films to cooperate with capitals calmly. Some scholars commented on *Mount Awa* and pointed out that the film was “lacking in contemporary knowledge and the deep reflection on the power of capital in contemporary society”; it “beautified the image of capital”. Scholars felt regretted that the film failed to “return to the moral and ethical order”. [6] In the film *Oh, My Oroqen*, capital is symbolized by a real estate dealer, who appears as the Savior of villagers, causing the illusion that money is omnipotent. Indiscriminate capitals distort traditional resources, and may alienate or even destroy the authenticity of traditional heritage.

“Original ecology” is a rational instrument in movie creation. But in the process of game with the market, it may also become a negative factor that restricts the development of minority films. The recognition of “original ecology” identity improves market awareness; people’s chasing makes it become an innocent ornament at the mercy of the free market. In visual texts of movies, symbols without reasons can only produce a sense of loading. Symbols should be arranged based on the plot. Unreasonable loading can only destroy the logic of lens language and reduce the pleasure of watching movies. Until 2015, many original ecological works did their best to connect elements, but were not good at mobilizing film languages. They tended to flatter the audience and ignore the integrity of movie language. There is an obvious gap between the strong desire of preserving the cultural heritage of native folklore and the current situation of inadequate knowledge and skills on movie creation. Perceptual knowledge cannot make up shortcomings in rationality. Countless symbols are included in a single work; sincere feelings cannot be expressed by superficial and extensive spectacles. Behind the passion there is infinite anxiety and powerlessness. The unreserved presentation of national complex can only consume original ecology. Capital is not equal to achievement; original ecology is not equal to quality. The development and utilization of the original ecology must be rational, beneficial and economical. Improper position is the fundamental reason of ineffective expression. Close to the Sun is the mix of a large number of “elements”. Filmmakers were eager to portray the beautiful scenery and simple folk customs in Dong village, as well as the noble soul and humane spirit of Dong people; they ignore the danger of self-naivety and divorcing from reality logic. “Propaganda” becomes the only purpose. It is generally believed that existing “original ecology” movies fail to understand the rules of commodity development, and repeatedly express the same theme. In order to carry on the long history of humanities, break through capital constraints and achieve a qualitative leap, the original ecological strategy must be adjusted to explore a new development path.

The main audience of ethnic films is Han nationality receivers in the downstream of the communication ecological chain; the essence is cross-cultural communication from the national perspective. “Content is the king” requires minority films stop seeking “novelty” and convey the concept of spiritual “core”. Some scholars believe that “cultural identity between films and audiences” is the basic condition for obtaining market economy effects; “the more the film reflects cultural universality, the better market economy effect will be obtained.” [7] Just as the theory of universal identity expresses, cultural identities are “the foundation of individuals and ethnic groups, the criterion for judging right from wrong, and the scale of determining one’s own identity”. [8] Now Film Project of Chinese Ethnic Minorities becomes a part of top-level design of China, the keys to solve problems of minority films are establishing narrative norms, setting up a bridge for communication between minority culture and mainstream culture, and establishing a cultural identity system which can be apprehended by the mainstream society.

## 5. The Universal Values of Ethnic Minority Film Propagation in the New Century

Behind the enthusiasm of recording cultures of ethnic minorities, there may be an overemphasis on differences and an over-interpretation of deviation. Isaiah Berlin said that the differences between individuals and societies may be overstated. "No culture lacks the concepts of good and evil, truth and falsehood". [9] The cultural basis supporting the emergence and continuation of media species is ultimately rooted in the aesthetic generality of indifferent "people". The aesthetic standards that run through all kinds of human beings are always the universal values of "truth and falsity, good and evil, beauty and ugliness".

Gada Melin directed by Xiao-ning Feng is only ethnic minority film with prominent historical theme in the new century. In the film, Mongolian Urtiin Duu, horse head string instrument, Nadam Fair, toast singing and dancing ceremony and Mongolian wrestling in traditional costumes are connected with the traditional "Duguilang" which symbolizes equality to tell the love life and battles of a historic hero. Creators attempt to restore the history of more than 100 years ago through these small items. In northern Liaoning, the cultural value system formed after years of precipitation; the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, different nationalities and different modes of production was wrecked due to territorial and sovereignty loss caused by barbaric selfish desires. With the help of rich connotation in images, emotions conveyed in the movie can impress audiences deeply. The dissemination has thus produced profound and lasting effects. The rich information contained in the emotion is enough to make it stay in a high position in the media ecological communication system for a long time.

Epic stories are usually unpopular in the entertainment-oriented media circle and in audiences influenced by fast-food popular culture. Gada Melin is the only masterpiece of historical themes in the new century. Bayin's Norjmaa conceals the historical background and abandons the form of preaching. It highlights the theme of mutual acceptance and redemption. The tranquility of Khoomei, the silence after battles, the acceptance of all life and the "chicken and duck talk" communication pattern laid the foundation of transformation between good and evil, beauty and ugliness. Warmth for a moment brings infinite comfort; the heroine's loneliness and persistent waiting convey the feeling of hope. Skillfully techniques are reflected in motif reappearances, lens language, color contrast and composition ratio. In the movie, history becomes ambiguous; the love and anti-war themes are emphasized. The film about the modern life of minority nationalities, Tuya's Marriage, tries to avoid nationalization and tells the daily stories of the Mongolian people. It emphasizes the equality of life based on the people oriented principle, jumps out of the circle of national discourse and preserving traditional heritage. The universal survival laws become the necessities of life. The film uses the simplest language to describe frustrations and pain of life, and dispels the sense of heterogeneity between nations. In addition, starting from the establishment of core values and drawing lessons from Three Idiots created by Bollywood, the successful commercial film This is What Money is fully illustrates that the "heterogeneity" among ethnic groups is an external subsidiary on the basis of homogeneity; the proper use of identity scales can help us to tell the good from the evil, beauty from ugliness.

In order to establish narrative norms between the mainstream society and the minority nationalities and build a general system for the interaction and dissemination of cultures from all nationalities, movie creators must deeply recognize the deep value contained in national cultures, and create stories which can touch the soul of traditional culture in images and realize the deep counter-action to cultural value. To solve the problem of superficiality, symbolization and fragmentation of national films, filmmakers need to create communication paths and brands with new century characteristics, and explore more effective communication methods. Without a solid foundation of universal understanding, the healthy and steady development of ethnic minority films will be out of the question.

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