

**“Happy Dancing Natives”<sup>1</sup>**

**Minority Film, Han Nationalism, and Collective Memory**

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Clark uses this image to characterize the depiction of ethnic minorities in films of the 1950s and 1960s.

Cinematic representations of China's ethnic minorities have been prominent in Chinese visual culture and collective memory since the 1950s. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party led campaigns to classify China's diverse range of ethnic groups. These social experiments inspired a number of documentary and narrative films about the ostensibly "exotic" and "colorful" non-Han peoples of China. The audience for these depictions of minorities in visual culture varied considerably. Some early documentaries fueled the rise of Han nationalism and political agendas within the Communist Party. Several narrative films had large audiences in mainstream Chinese society and an enduring presence in China's collective memory. In the ways that cultural identity and traditional customs are gradually fading from the Chinese social landscape – a process linked to a combination of modernization and various agencies within cultural communities – depictions of ethnic minorities in China's visual culture face similar threats.

China's ethnic minorities have long carried reputations for folk song, dance, colorful dress, and festive celebrations. These mythologized cultural elements of "colorful" minority peoples have been, unsurprisingly, the focus of many "minority films" in China. Scenes of song and dance from these films conjure vivid memories among members of Chinese society today. In many ways, minority film has not been as much an ethnographic tool as a "boundary-constructing"<sup>2</sup> device that defines majority and minority status in China. Some scholars argue that these films represent "internal orientalism"<sup>3</sup> and cultural imperialism, while others suggest milder forms of naïve romanticism.

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<sup>2</sup>Zhang, 76.

<sup>3</sup>Schein, 70.

In this article, the apparent lack of “authenticity” and the seemingly “exoticized” elements of these films will not be the central debate. Recent scholarly discourse on minority film argues within the rigid categories of post-colonial cultural theory. The influence of cultural theories like Edward Said’s *Orientalism* has led scholars to reject the legitimacy of minority films based on their seemingly backward and essentializing forms of representation. As a result, many fail to consider the aesthetic qualities of these films and their significance in visual culture. This article encourages a more sensitive critique of minority film, one that more thoroughly explores the motivations behind these films and their relationship to the rise of Han nationalism and the establishment of Han majority status. It is impossible to deny the inherent controversy surrounding representations of minorities in Chinese Cinema. The fact that many minority films linger in China’s collective memory suggests that these films warrant a closer look. The vivid images and sense of cultural nostalgia that minority films evoke reveal a great deal about what nationality represents in contemporary China.

### **Interpreting Representations of Minorities in Chinese Cinema**

Scholars argue that one of the most contentious issues surrounding “minority film” has been the portrayal of minority cultures as backward and exotic in contrast to the ostensibly more “civilized” and “normal” Han people. Dru C. Gladney writes: “The widespread definition and representation of the ‘minority’ as exotic, colorful, and ‘primitive’ homogenizes the undefined majority as united, monoethnic, and modern.”<sup>4</sup> These archetypal images of the minority create the illusion of a unified majority, and the Han nationality thus takes shape. These depictions of minority identity involve an objective portrait of the Han, one that fails to address the diversity of China’s cultural,

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<sup>4</sup> Gladney, 93.

linguistic, and geographic history. Some suggest that the Han nationality, or ethnicity, is an “imagined” construct, and it is through representations in visual culture that the majority-minority power structure arises.

Cultural boundaries between the Han and other peoples have long been apparent, though it is not until the rise of China as a nation state that Han identity becomes associated with nationality. Gladney describes the origin of the modern idea of Han nationality: “The notion of ‘*Han ren*’ (Han person) has existed for many centuries as referring to descendants of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – A.D. 220) [...] *Han minzu* or *Han min* (Han nationality) is an entirely modern phenomenon – it arises with the shift of empire to nation.”<sup>5</sup> When this transition takes place, the rise of nationalism seems to necessitate a unified Han ethnicity. In the 1950s, the process of minority classification constructs rigid ethnic boundaries within the Chinese political space. Many scholars such as Chris Berry examine the implications of China’s nationalist movements in cultural discourse, particularly in critiques of Chinese Cinema.

Chris Berry investigates the overflow of cultural theories like Edward Said’s *Orientalism* into the realm of film studies. Berry suggests that the term *minzu*, which generally refers to nationality, denotes “race.” He argues that *minzu*, or in his terms, “race,” moves from a notion of “strategic essentialism”<sup>6</sup> to “merely an essentialism.”<sup>7</sup> The term *minzu* gives rise to other concepts such as “race characteristics” (民族特色), “race form” (民族形式), and “race-ization” (民族化). He describes race as “a transhistorical ideal that once established tends toward conservatism and repression even within the

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<sup>5</sup> Gladney, 98.

<sup>6</sup> Berry borrows this term from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Berry, 47.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 47.

revolutionary movement it originated in, closing off possibilities for development as it denies contradiction, change and history.”<sup>8</sup> In combination with Gladney’s notion of constructing majority identity through representation of the minority, this apparent race distinction contributes to a similar social hierarchy, one that seems to reflect a form of colonialism within contemporary China.

Louisa Schein raises similar concerns about cultural hierarchy in China. She describes the commodification of minority culture in China for purposes of domestic and international tourism, calling the process a “voracious domestic consumption of minority cultures.”<sup>9</sup> She argues that this phenomenon was not solely fueled by attempts to capitalize on foreign “orientalist” desires for the “experience of a more plural and colorful China.”<sup>10</sup> Another aspect to this recent trend is the rise of what she calls “internal orientalism,” which she defines as “a set of practices that occur *within* China, and that, in this case, refers to the fascination of more cosmopolitan Chinese with ‘exotic’ minority cultures in an array of polychromatic and titillating forms.”<sup>11</sup> The most compelling portion of her argument is how she diagrams the structure of this phenomenon in terms of gender and class. Minority culture is generally represented by rural women and observed by urban Han males.<sup>12</sup> In *Sacrificed Youth* (青春祭), a film produced by female director Zhong Nuanxin in Xishuangbanna in 1985, this model of the exotic minority woman emerges prominently.

Yingjin Zhang further explores this majority-minority relationship, and suggests that the “minority film” genre and the “minority discourse” that it evokes “destabilize”

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<sup>8</sup> Berry, 47.

<sup>9</sup> Schein, 70.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, 70.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* 70.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, 70.

categories such as ethnicity, race, and nation-state.<sup>13</sup> He argues that Berry's notion of *minzu* as "race" conflates "race" and "ethnicity," which Zhang considers distinct ideas.<sup>14</sup> He introduces the provocative concept that minority film reflects a "politically motivated and manipulated process of cultural production."<sup>15</sup> This cultural production fuels the Self and Other model of majority-minority identity. These representations, Zhang writes, "involve an impressive array of boundary-constructing devices which tend to stereotype other people, evoking images of the Other only to distance and differentiate it."<sup>16</sup> This formulation of the Other was undoubtedly rooted in the political agendas of Han nationalism. These manipulations of culture in minority films, particularly those of the 1950s and 1960s, are undeniably apparent. Such readings of minority films however, are slave to the rigid structure of contemporary cultural theory. In this framework of discourse, scholars dismiss minority films as illegitimate without full consideration of their value as pieces of visual culture.

Minority film has been a fertile ground for cultural discourse since the emergence of texts like Said's *Orientalism* and the writings of other post-colonial critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Partha Chatterjee. The evaluation of minority films in terms of authoritarian and oppressive Han nationalism has been argued to the point of exhaustion. It is undoubtedly important to explore what the representation of minorities in film reveals about the politics of nationalism in China. However, it seems that many critics have approached the genre with such skepticism that a deeper, more sensitive understanding of these pieces of visual culture has yet to emerge. The next portion of this article will not

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<sup>13</sup> Zhang, 73.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, 74.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, 74.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, 76.

debate issues of representation, but will instead explore the status of minority film in China at the present. With consideration for the lingering presence of these films in China's collective memory, particularly in Yunnan Province, the significance of these works in visual culture will become more apparent.

### **The Presence of Minority Film in Chinese Visual Culture**

Many minority films are no longer in wide circulation in China today, and remain solely in collective memory. Several of the most famous films, such as those from the 1950s and 1960s like *Wuduojinhua*<sup>17</sup> and *Ashima*,<sup>18</sup> have survived through VCD reproductions with discolored images and crackling soundtracks. Most other minority films cannot be found in video stores, even the most specialized shops in major cities like Kunming that stock more obscure, classic films. Although many of these films are no longer prominent in Chinese society and discourse, they have not vanished entirely from the memory of southwest China.

A number of the most famous minority films were produced on locations in southwest China's Yunnan Province. Despite being filmed many decades ago, individuals still recall the songs, dances, and stories of romance in these minority films. In places like the Butterfly Spring outside of Dali and the Stone Forest near Kunming, a kind of cult memory remains that fuels minority tourism. It is crucial to emphasize though that most of these films, which were famous for their folk songs, dances, colorful costumes, and Bollywood-esque grandiosity, have virtually disappeared from the public. Most of these films are not even present in the collections of renowned academic institutions like Yunnan

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<sup>17</sup>English Title: *Five Golden Flowers*

<sup>18</sup>English Title: *Ashima* (name of the female protagonist)

University, which has a department specifically devoted to the study of Visual Anthropology.

I have recently visited a number of the locations of these films in southwest China. My discussions with local people and tourists at these sites reveal a great deal about concepts of majority and minority identity in China today. Comparisons between representations in cinema and the status of cultural practices at present can elucidate many recent cultural transformations. Several of the locations of the minority films have since become major destinations for minority tourism, which have had a significant impact on life in minority areas. Minority culture tends to be exoticized in other forms of visual culture aside from film, such as in advertisements that depict “colorful” minority peoples in stark contrast to the Han majority. These processes of constructing the exotic raise issues concerning “authenticity.” More important perhaps than authenticity of representation however, are the ways that individuals perceive the changes undergone by minority peoples in the areas surrounding these cinematic settings. Many foreign and Han tourists look for the most exotic, remote, and traditional ways of life, which are aligned with images of the minority in visual culture. To a large degree, these representations play into a fantasy, one that fortifies the majority-minority barrier in China.

An analysis of several narrative-style “minority films” will help to contextualize and reevaluate the status of these pieces in contemporary visual culture. Films of this genre attempt to display the cultural traditions and ways of life of China’s minorities. To reiterate, the apparent accuracy or legitimacy of these representations is not the focus of this study, as it has been previously established that films of this genre are notorious for the exoticification and often eroticization of the minority Other. In relation to these trends

however, a number of paradigms emerge in representations of minorities in films like *Five Golden Flowers* (五朵金花), *Ashima* (阿诗玛), and *Sacrificed Youth* (青春祭). These models of minority identity provide fertile ground to explore the majority-minority relationship in contemporary China as well as the significance of minority films in collective memory.

**Singing, Dancing, Naturalistic Nudity:  
A Study of Three Minority Films Produced in Yunnan**

1959: Five Golden Flowers Bloom in Yunnan

*Wuduojinhua* is musical comedy set in a Bai minority region of Yunnan Province during the Great Leap Forward. Produced in 1959 near the ancient city of Dali, the film has an enduring presence in the collective memory of the region. It has been mythologized in a way, and the site of the most famous scene from the film, a tree in the Butterfly Spring, has attracted many visitors since its opening for tourism in 1982. According to a tourist from Shenzhen, the butterfly symbolizes romantic love, and the park plays into this symbolism, cultivating an idyllic setting to attract romantics to its places like “Lover’s Lake” (情人湖). The story and context of the film provoke a discussion of this minority film as a piece of enduring visual culture. *Wuduojinhua* exposes a great deal about the rise of Han nationalism and portraits of majority-minority identity in Yunnan.

The comedic elements of *Wuduojinhua* involve a number of misunderstandings, the most significant involving the name Jinhua (金花). In the Bai village in which the film is set, five young women share the name Jinhua. Apeng (阿鹏), a young blacksmith, meets one of these women at a festival, and makes a plan to meet her again one year later. The plan goes awry, his Jinhua fails to show up, and he soon begins his pursuit of her. He

searches the village for some time, only coming across the other “Golden Flowers.” He finally reaches her and discovers that she is the deputy director of their commune. In the Bai peoples’ *duige* tradition, Apeng and his beloved Jinhua sing to each other under the tree in the Butterfly Spring. The final shot of the film depicts the two gazing dreamily into one another’s eyes.

The film begins as an archetypal minority film with a joyful festival of song and dance, the villagers gathering in traditional Bai dress. The men and women perform call and response songs in the *duige* tradition – women belt out folk songs in high registers and the Bai men reply, playing instruments, dancing, and singing songs of their own. After this dynamic opening scene, which is sure to engage the primarily Han audience for which the film was produced, another paradigm in the minority film genre becomes apparent in the character of the landscape shots.

As is the case in many minority films, there is an emphasis on the naturalistic elements of minority culture, a seemingly seamless link between human and nature. A number of idyllic landscape shots emerge, with particular attention to the grandeur of Dali’s Lake Erhai and the flowers of the region. In typical conversations, particularly among Han Chinese, minority culture often evokes the Chinese idiom for “rich and colorful” (丰富多彩). The film plays into these notions of the minority as “colorful” through the metaphor of the lovely women of the village as golden flowers. This image creates the foundation for the clever plot, which brings great trouble to Apeng as he struggles in pursuit of his elusive, beloved Jinhua.

*Wuduojinhua* raises a number of contentious issues regarding the Han representation of the Bai people. Scholar Yingjin Zhang asserts: “minority films celebrate

ethnic cultural diversity on a superficial level, for all displays of ‘solidarity’ and ‘ethnic harmony’ in these films are actually staged as a spectacle mostly for the Han viewers.”<sup>19</sup> Zhang’s assessment seems accurate to a large degree in that minority films portray minority culture rather one-dimensionally. The Bai are depicted through a Han lens, and the two Han tourists who visit the village in the film represent the dichotomy between minority and majority. The Han visitors are enthralled by the song and dance of the villagers and applaud them for their kindness, yet continue to objectify themselves as the majority in contrast to the minority Other.

It is important not to dismiss this film based on an inherent lack of “authenticity” because it depicts minority culture through nostalgic images of the past. *Wuduojinhua* creates an aesthetic experience that is framed, to be sure, by Han nationalism, yet also reveals something seemingly deficient in Han modernity. Given the historical context in which this film was produced, the era of the Great Leap Forward, the nationalistic undertones and the exotification of the minority Other are unsurprising. The rise of the People’s Republic was bleak, and the Great Leap Forward was an admitted catastrophe. Perhaps the Han sought sanctuary in these staged, “exotic” cultural practices of minorities. While there are undoubtedly political machinations at work in *Wuduojinhua*, and attempts to establish a unified Han majority, this phenomenon should be explored more deeply in order to examine the motivations behind such political messages.

The manipulation of minority identity for political agendas is certainly apparent in the film. Zhang describes the minority people as being cast as “model workers” who enthusiastically support the socialist reconstruction. “This kind of ideological identification of ethnic minorities with the Han people,” writes Zhang, “readily confirms both the

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<sup>19</sup> Zhang, 80.

necessity and the legitimacy of the state discourse in maintaining Han cultural hegemony in the nation.”<sup>20</sup> He extends this argument and suggests that the film emerged not so much to satisfy desires for the “exotic” and “foreign” as much as to objectify the minority and “co-opt them in the construction of socialist China.”<sup>21</sup> These political motivations are evident, yet it is important not to objectify members of the Han audience, who each offer subjective interpretations of the film. Beyond the political currents of the film are the archetypal minority film elements, which intrigue the Han audience, symbolized by the two Han tourists in the film.

Scholars raise a number of provocative issues in discourse on *Wuduojinhua*, both as an individual film and a pillar of the minority film genre. There is a tendency to dwell on the political and nationalistic undertones of the film, and overlook its enduring presence in contemporary China’s memory. In southwest China, particularly in Yunnan Province, the film’s characters and the images of minority culture remain in the form of vivid memories. While walking through the Kunming Science and Engineering School campus on an afternoon in November, the loudspeaker broadcasted a college radio discussion of *Wuduojinhua*, and a number of the songs from the film filled the campus air. Beyond the scholarly interpretations of this film, which tend to deconstruct *Wuduojinhua* in terms of issues of ethnicity and nationalism, this film continues to occupy China’s collective memory. It is a fading memory, yet one that lingers nonetheless. One can argue that these memories reflect cultural nostalgia or internal orientalism, but the film does not carry this stigma or embody these terms for the average person in China.

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<sup>20</sup>Zhang, 80.

<sup>21</sup>ibid, 80.

*Wuduojinhua* was a form of cultural entertainment in the context of the Great Leap Forward. Some argue that such representations exploit the minority and support the majority-minority hierarchy. For the Bai however, who still inhabit the areas surrounding Dali, people recall the film with great pride. I asked a number of local Bai people if their cultural customs were exaggerated (*kuazhang*) in the film, and nearly all said that it accurately (*zhenshi*) represented their traditions. The characters of the film have a heroic mystique in local folklore, and the nostalgic elements of the film conjure fond memories of fading traditions. Scholarly analysis of *Wuduojinhua* overlooks the significance of this film for the minority people that it depicts, and dismisses it based on the nature of representation. The cultural traditions of the Bai are gradually disappearing, particularly their practices of courtship displayed in the film, which the younger generation is unlikely to continue. *Wuduojinhua*, though rather one-dimensional in its portrayal of the Bai, is nonetheless a central piece of visual culture, one that remains in the collective memory of southwest China.

#### 1964: Mountains, Sheep, and Magical Arrows

*Ashima* (阿诗玛) is a Chinese love story, though it does not depict traditional Han courtship.<sup>22</sup> The film is a story of young romance in a remote Yi village in Yunnan. The story has roots in a legend of the Sani, the Yi people of Yunnan, which tells of a lovely girl named Ashima's love for a young man of her village, Ahei (阿黑).<sup>23</sup> Ashima and Ahei, though deeply in love, encounter a major obstacle. The village leader's son, Rebu Bala, is fond of Ashima and seeks to win her love. The two men of the village compete for Ashima's affection. In duels with magical arrows and a contest of song, Rebu Bala

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<sup>22</sup> Love Story: 中国爱情故事片

<sup>23</sup> Senz and Zhu, 15.

ultimately loses to Ahei. Rebu Bala cannot bear the loss and acts vengefully, flooding the river and subsequently drowning Ashima. The memory of Ashima ultimately takes the form of a stone in the Stone Forest, and when her friends and family call to her, she answers their calls with an echo.<sup>24</sup>

The film is an archetypal minority film, with emphasis on minority song, dance, and naturalistic ways of life. These images of minority culture in *Ashima* remain in the minds of many individuals in the region, particularly near the Stone Forest. A boundary between minority and majority becomes apparent between the characters in the film and the primarily Han audience. However, more important than the dichotomy the film constructs is how *Ashima*'s fantastical minority world lingers in collective memory. In Yunnan and the surrounding provinces as well, when one mentions the title *Ashima*, members of older and younger generations alike can generally sing one of the songs from the score. Given its regional and national fame, it lives on in the national memory of China's people. Before looking into the significance of *Ashima* as an enduring piece of visual culture, the nature of the film warrants a discussion of its own.

Much like a number of other minority films of the 1950s and 1960s, the story unfolds primarily through song and dance. The songs in the film sound like minority folk songs in terms of their cadence and high register intonations, yet the characters sing in Mandarin. In addition, during the song sequences there are Mandarin subtitles that run along the bottom of the screen, much like karaoke. Senz and Zhu write, "The film's language also shows a wide range of metaphors and parallels which are on one side typical for folk songs and on the other side they meet the taste of the Han-Chinese, namely the

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<sup>24</sup> Senz and Zhu, 15.

habit to express feelings in an indirect and flowery way.”<sup>25</sup> This process of “Mandarinizing” visual culture to cater to Han viewers reflects a form of cultural control as well as the rise of Han nationalism. In the production of this film, and others of the 1950s and 1960s as well, a number of political symbols become apparent.

The film illustrates a subtle class struggle between the members of the village. Ashima and Ahei represent poor, humble peasants, while Rebu Bala is the privileged son of the village leader. Senz and Zhu suggest: “The primary aim of governmental propaganda in the aspect of minority movies was to discuss class-struggle.”<sup>26</sup> This theme is certainly apparent in *Ashima*, yet they contend: “the presentation of the good poor and the bad rich the motive of class struggle is recognizable but this ideological element has vanished [due to the passing of time].”<sup>27</sup> The diminishing presence of this political interpretation reveals a shift in the collective memory of *Ashima* as a film. “In today’s memory the aesthetic of the film stays in the foreground and not the original political intention,” write Senz and Zhu, “today, the film *Ashima* is assigned to the classics of Nostalgia and can be purchased in the bookshops of Nanjing and is very popular.”<sup>28</sup> This aesthetic preserves a distinct portrait of minority culture, which defines minority and majority identity in terms of rigid criteria. While this portrait of minority culture reflects nostalgic and romantic notions of life in the minority village, these images remain in the collective memory, and the nature of this memory provokes further discussion.

When one views *Ashima*, it is unsurprising that many individuals continue to discuss the characteristics of minorities in terms of their love for song and dance. Senz and

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<sup>25</sup>Senz and Zhu, 15.

<sup>26</sup>ibid, 17

<sup>27</sup>ibid, 16.

<sup>28</sup>ibid, 16.

Zhu point out that an online magazine recently chose two songs from minority films when it did a retrospective on the last fifty years of mass culture in China. One of these songs comes from *Ashima*. In the film, Ahei sings: “The bells of the horse ring, the birds sing, I accompany Ashima back home far away from the house of Rebu Balas and her mama will not be sad anymore.”<sup>29</sup> People in China recall such scenes of the two lovers projecting songs into the surrounding mountains. Chinese individuals, particularly urban Han Chinese it seems, still often think of minorities as exotic peoples on the fringes of society. These notions of culture may reflect the influence of minority representation through visual culture like minority films.

Many cling to notions of minorities as having “colorful” (丰富多彩) traditions and specific minority characteristics (少数民族特色). To embrace such concepts of ethnic identity can lead to oversimplifications of the status of cultural traditions. As a result, minority films often portray ethnic minorities as frozen in previous historical moments. Such views are impoverished in that they neglect to consider cultural transformations due to China’s modernization as well as agencies of change within minority communities. Many cultural traditions have gradually faded from the cultural landscape of China, like the *duige* practice of courtship through song. Images in minority films can deeply influence the way that the majority conceives of the minority, and the minority often takes on the image of being culturally static and unchanging. In the case of the Yi, the younger generation is less likely to court future lovers through folk songs, but more likely through Chinese pop songs, if through song at all.

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<sup>29</sup>Senz and Zhu, 16.

The setting of the film contributes to the sense of “cultural nostalgia” that becomes apparent in the portrayal of the Yi people. The film primarily takes place in an agrarian Yi village in Yunnan, and several particularly famous scenes were shot in the famous Stone Forest (石林), which has since become one of the most widely visited tourists sites in the southwest China. The shot composition of the film accents the idyllic, pastoral setting of the story, with wide-angle shots of mountainous landscapes and long stretches of rice fields. The women of the village wash clothes in the stream, and the characters sing of the large trees and beautiful flowers of the surrounding hills. This type of naturalism creates nostalgic images that seem to conflict with China’s rise to modernity. The Han are often represented as the modern inhabitants of urban China, distant from the idyllic landscapes of the minority regions. Once again, the majority-minority relationship becomes apparent, and reveals the power of *Ashima* as an enduring, yet fading piece of visual culture.

#### 1985: Banana Trees, Sarongs, and a “Sent Down Youth”

*Sacrificed Youth* (青春祭), unlike the aforementioned films from the 1950s and 1960s, does not focus directly on the people of a minority community. Filmed in 1985 by female director Zhang Nuanxin, it explores the experience of a Han girl who is “sent down” during the Cultural Revolution to a small Dai village in the Xishuangbanna region of Yunnan. Based on my conversations with individuals in Xishuangbanna, the film was produced not far from Jinghong. *Sacrificed Youth* has become increasingly more obscure over the years though, even in the region in which it was produced. Most young people cannot recognize the title, even with considerable description, and the film is difficult if not impossible to find in video stores in Jinghong. Only a select few individuals, who seemed to be in their thirties and forties, could recall seeing the film when asked. A select few,

several migrant vendors who sell goods in Menghai outside of Jinghong, were able to sing one of the songs from *Sacrificed Youth*.

The story illustrates the experience of a young woman, Li Chun, who leaves urban Beijing during the Cultural Revolution to do rural labor in a small Dai village in Xishuangbanna, the hot jungle region of banana trees that borders Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand. In the tradition of many minority films before *Sacrificed Youth*, the depiction of minority people, particularly women, emphasizes the ostensibly “exotic” and “colorful” lifestyle and cultural traditions of non-Han peoples. The apparent contrast between Han majority society and the minority villages of southwest China becomes evident through the narration of Li Chun. According to Paul Clark, the representation of the Dai in the film emphasizes the “centrality in Dai life of beauty, nature, and instinct.”<sup>30</sup> These apparent virtues in Dai culture create a harsh juxtaposition with the ostensibly more “modern, pretentious, and inhibited” world of the protagonist’s Han people.<sup>31</sup> Chris Berry also points out how this contrast emerges in a particular scene of the film. When a Dai boy in the village falls ill, “it is the Han girl who is able to save his life with her scientific medical knowledge”<sup>32</sup> This polarization of the modern and “primitive” reveals a majority-minority dichotomy that mirrors many minority films of earlier decades.

Paul Clark emphasizes that the director, Zhang Nuanxin, one of the most prominent female directors of the Fourth Generation in Chinese Cinema, creates a film that is a “departure from the usual mode of expression in the ‘happy, dancing natives’ genre of the 1950s and 1960s.”<sup>33</sup> Clark asserts that the narration of Li Chun throughout the film

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<sup>30</sup>Clark, 188.

<sup>31</sup>ibid, 188.

<sup>32</sup>Berry, 52.

<sup>33</sup>Clark, 189.

contributes to the subjectivity of the film.<sup>34</sup> This notion of representation as subjective seems to fuel the construction of a boundary between the majority and minority peoples of China. While *Sacrificed Youth* portrays minority identity in conformity with notions of the exotic and colorful, it also essentializes the model of Han cultural identity. Through the experience of the young Han woman, Li Chun, the ostensible conservatism of Han social and moral virtues becomes evident.

In one of the most provocative scenes in *Sacrificed Youth*, Li Chun watches the men and women of the village as they sing songs to one another flirtatiously. The Dai women then run gleefully to the river, wade in, shed their sarongs, and swim freely in the water. Her observation of these women causes her to question her supposed Han virtues of modesty and restraint, and she ultimately undergoes a dramatic transformation. Her narration in this scene foreshadows her change in character later in the film as she states: “Later, I learned to swim like they did, and I never wore a swimsuit again.”<sup>35</sup> She seeks liberation from her plain Han clothes, exchanges them for a Dai sarong, and receives praise for her new beauty from the women of the village. The emphasis on freedom and natural beauty is a central concept in the film, particularly for the women of the village. Gladney discusses how Dai and other minority women are frequently represented as openly bathing in rivers, which has become a “*leit-motiv* for ethnic sensuality and often appears in stylized images throughout China, particularly on large murals in restaurants and public spaces.”<sup>36</sup> These images of “ethnic sensuality” seem to eroticize minority women, and Gladney discusses the majority-minority contrast evident in such images of ethnicity.

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<sup>34</sup>ibid, 188.

<sup>35</sup>Gladney, 105.

<sup>36</sup> Gladney, 103.

*Sacrificed Youth* and other pieces of visual culture polarize Han and non-Han attitudes toward sexuality and the body. These models idealize stereotypical elements of minority culture and introduce new grounds upon which to evaluate the widespread political and social control of the state. This phenomenon becomes clear when Gladney writes: “Admiration for minority sexual freedom and a ‘natural’ state of being becomes the foil by which Han majority and state-supported values are criticized.”<sup>37</sup> Like many films of the 1980s, director Zhang Nuanxin reevaluates the collective experience of the Cultural Revolution. As a result, the Han seem deficient and impoverished of what is identified as minority naturalism. Gladney also notes: “While it may be argued whether the images of minority women bathers are actually ‘erotic’ or ‘sensual’ in the eye of the beholder, they are clearly images that do not apply to Han women, who are generally represented as covered, conservative, and ‘civilized’ in most state publications.”<sup>38</sup> The setting of the film also contributes to a portrait of Dai life as having an elevated degree of naturalism, which further elucidates the supposed moral conservatism of the Han. Gladney suggests that the shots of natural landscape, lush forest and waterfalls, present the natural world as cleansing, which in turn “transforms what the state denigrates for the Han as erotic and perhaps ‘pornographic’ into what is natural and unfettered.”<sup>39</sup> The protagonist Li Chun gradually embraces the way of life in the village, which reveals a departure from the restrictions of Han moral and social views.

Yingjin Zhang’s reading of the film emphasizes that the focus of the story is primarily on the recovery of Li Chun’s lost self rather than a representation of the Dai

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, 105.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, 103.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, 105.

peoples' ways of life.<sup>40</sup> Her so-called lost self, taken from her by the political agendas of the Communist Party, reemerges in the Dai village. Zhang also notes how the Han depiction of the Dai reflects cultural nostalgia, which portrays life in the village as pure, distant, and free from the restrictions of modern society. The final scene reveals how the ways of the past fade in the face of modernity. Zhang writes: "The nostalgic evocation of Dai culture comes to an end when years later, returning from a college in the city, the Han girl finds that the entire Dai village has been wiped out in a massive landslide."<sup>41</sup> This scene reflects a social reality that crumbles the idyllic fantasy of life in the village.

*Sacrificed Youth* not only juxtaposes images of majority and minority in the era of the Cultural Revolution, but also creates a gender dichotomy. The images of Dai women bathing in the river exoticify, or at least naturalize the minority female to a degree that exposes Han moral conservatism through a stark contrast. As Schein writes, minority culture evokes the image of an exotic, sensual female, while the audience for such representations is often the cosmopolitan Han male.<sup>42</sup> This phenomenon pervades minority tourism in Xishuangbanna, which attracts tourists to see the Dai peoples' Water Splashing Festival along with Dai songs, dances, and colorful dress. The seemingly exotic or erotic characteristics of Dai women seem to be a matter of perception. The images of what were once natural practices have been misappropriated and manipulated under the gaze of the majority. As the Han majority conceives of the past with nostalgia, imagining the Dai as represented in *Sacrificed Youth*, the majority status of the Han as "modern" and "civilized" materializes.

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<sup>40</sup> Zhang, 81.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, 81.

<sup>42</sup> Schein, 70.

The film idealizes the Dai way of life, demonstrating how Li Chun recovers her youth despite it be sacrificed during the radical political campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s. Her self-discovery occurs among the Dai. She discards her plain Han clothes and learns to embrace her physical beauty as a kind of naturalness as she swims in the river. The Dai way of life is certainly essentialized to reflect a form of cultural nostalgia, yet the end of the film reveals a harsh reality. The crumbling of the village in a landslide seems to represent the decline of cultural traditions and transforms the idyllic ways of life into memories of the past. *Sacrificed Youth* does not have the same lingering presence in collective memory of *Wuduojinhua* or *Ashima*. It has fallen into obscurity, even in the areas of Xishuangbanna in which it was shot. The film is nonetheless a valuable piece of visual culture, one that reflects trends in 1980s cinema to reevaluate the Han experience of the 1960s. Unlike the films of the 1950s and 1960s that focus more closely on minority communities, the film gives a more subjective view of the Dai through the narrative perspective of a Han youth. The critique of Han nationalism and the cultural nostalgia that becomes apparent reveal the provocative nature of this cinematic work. It is crucial to preserve this film as a piece of visual culture, as it has quickly faded from the collective memory. Without such representations of minority culture and China's contemporary history, concepts of majority and minority identities would be greatly impoverished.

### **An Investigation of “Cultural Nostalgia” across Chinese Cinema**

In a broader discussion of the cinematic tradition in China, it is important to consider that not only minority films reflect forms of cultural nostalgia and primitivism. Han directors, particularly of the so-called Fifth Generation filmmakers like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, portray Han identity in similarly exotic manners. Perhaps to export films

to the international film community, Chinese directors often represent Han history and culture in seemingly “self-orientalizing” ways. These phenomena, yet again, illustrate the objectification of ethnicity and cultural identity in visual culture. There are many tendencies in visual media to construct essentialized depictions of culture, which lack subjectivity and fail to represent the complexity of cultural transformation. Many cling to nostalgic notions of an exotic Other, one detached from modernity. The influence of these images in collective memory provokes a discussion of nationality and cultural identity. Chen Kaige produced a semi-autobiographical film in the late 1980s called *King of the Children*. It is a nostalgic account of the collective Han experience of the Cultural Revolution. This film reevaluates the Maoist era in historical memory, and reveals Han conceptions of cultural identity in the context of a minority village.

#### 1987: “Beanpole” Brings Knowledge to the Village

Chen Kaige’s *King of the Children* (孩子王) is another story of “sent down youth” during the Cultural Revolution. A young educated Beijing man finishes seven years of labor in Yunnan and receives a call from the government to become a teacher in a remote, predominantly minority village in the region. In the thatch-roofed village schoolhouse, “Beanpole” (老杆儿) begins his first day as teacher and calls on the students to open their books.<sup>43</sup> He soon finds that they do not have textbooks, and have spent the previous years copying passages from political texts. The teacher, who was educated under similar constraints, challenges the teaching model and encourages his students to write about their lives, their families, and their aspirations. Zha Jianying calls the film “an allegory of the

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<sup>43</sup> Clark, 151.

cultural confinements of the Maoist epoch.”<sup>44</sup> *King of the Children* comments on Han nationalism and educational philosophy in the era of the Cultural Revolution, and exposes what Clark calls “the liberating and confining power of knowledge.”<sup>45</sup> The film reveals not only the learning experience of the children, but also that of the teacher, who receives an opportunity to recover his lost identity that was stripped from him during the political movements of his youth.

The film, produced in 1987, reveals a number of the historical issues that the Fifth Generation filmmakers began to address. With the memory of the Cultural Revolution vivid in popular memory, directors like Chen Kaige made subtle, subversive critiques of the ideology that influenced their early years. The rift between urban and rural China also becomes vividly apparent in *King of the Children*, as a Beijing Youth “brings his new ideas about teaching to the grass huts of this school in the backwoods of Yunnan.”<sup>46</sup> In addition, the separate social spheres in which the teacher and the students spend their early years fortify the notion of the Han majority as contrasted with the minority Other.

Chris Berry suggests that *King of the Children*, like *The Yellow Earth* and other films of the Fifth Generation, reflect a kind of “autoethnography.”<sup>47</sup> In a way, this film explores the common Han experience of the Cultural Revolution, characterized by an educational system overrun by political dogma. The film is considered autobiographical to a degree, in that Chen Kaige himself was sent down to Yunnan during the Cultural Revolution to work on a rubber plantation in Xishuangbanna. If Chen Kaige produces an “autoethnography” in *King of the Children*, it reveals a commonality of historical

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<sup>44</sup> Zha, 85.

<sup>45</sup> Clark, 154.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, 153.

<sup>47</sup> Berry borrows the term “autoethnography” from Rey Chow. Berry, 147.

experience, a sense of “self-alienation” shared by the Han in the Maoist era.<sup>48</sup> From this seemingly unified history of the Han people, Berry suggests that there is an attempt to establish collective agency in Chinese Cinema.<sup>49</sup> If this is in fact the motivation of the Fifth Generation in films such as these, the agency reflects a collective Han agency, one that reconstructs barriers of majority and minority in post-Mao China.

The film introduces a number of contrasting experiences, those of urban and rural China as well as those within the village itself. In several scenes, a young cowherd boy appears on the scene. The teacher confronts him and asks if he can read. The teacher offers to educate him, yet the boy stares silently back at Beanpole and walks away. The boy’s lack of exposure to formal education makes the audience question the apparent value of education itself, as the boy demonstrates a kind of natural wisdom and freedom without the barriers of the classroom walls.<sup>50</sup> In one scene, the boy urinates on the ground so that his cows will eat the salty tufts of grass. The teacher’s observation of the boy then inspires him to invent a new written character. This character combines the characters for cow and water, to indicate “cow piss.”<sup>51</sup> His action represents an attempt to mock the “tyranny of the written word in Chinese culture.”<sup>52</sup> This gesture seems to be aligned with Chen Kaige’s critique of Han nationalism and contributes to the writing of a collective Han history in the memory of the Maoist era.

The focus of this article is on the representations of minorities in Chinese Cinema, yet the film *King of the Children*, which does not necessarily fall into the genre of minority film, is of equal relevance and importance to this study. Much like *Sacrificed Youth*, *King*

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<sup>48</sup> Berry, 147.

<sup>49</sup> Berry, 148

<sup>50</sup> Clark, 153.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, 153.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*, 154.

*of the Children* provides insight into the evolving perception of contemporary Chinese history and Han nationalism. The film comments on the experience of “sent down youth” in the Cultural Revolution, and its setting in a predominantly minority village adds to the discussion of Han nationalism and the majority-minority dynamic in the Chinese political space. In order to explore the roots of nationalism and cultural identity, it is necessary to evaluate the rise of such notions through historical memory. Minority film paints a portrait of the past that deeply influences individuals’ sense of cultural identity at the present. Films like *King of the Children* similarly explore the origins of nationalism and the collective experience of the Chinese nation for both majority and minority peoples. As a piece of visual culture, *King of the Children* has enormous power as a unifier of cultural history, which further elucidates the complex cultural and ethnic landscape of contemporary China as well as the influence of Han nationalism.

### **Conclusions about the Status of Minority Film in China**

It is important to consider that the minority film genre in Chinese Cinema is not only a phenomenon of the past. In fact, more and more films that depict China’s minority cultures continue to emerge in China today. With films like *Mountain Patrol* (可可西里) and Zhang Yimou’s recent film *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* (千里走单骑), representations of ethnic minorities remain prominent in China’s visual culture. While many of the films of previous decades have become increasingly more obscure, the memory of these films remains in the collective consciousness. The model of the minority film as a musical, narrative-style film that depicts minority culture through a nostalgic Han lens has had a profound impact on notions of nationality in China. The political agendas

within minority films that represent the history 1950s and 1960s undoubtedly contributed to the construction of minority and majority status in China.

While the paradigm of the minority film is notorious for exoticizing the minority Other, the model for cultural discourse on these films is equally essentializing. If the evaluation of minority film remains within the rigid categories of post-colonial cultural theory, the aesthetic value of these pieces of visual culture and their enduring presence in collective memory is easily overlooked. The roots of Han nationalism and the polarization of majority and minority nationalities in contemporary China become vividly apparent in minority films. It is my sincere hope that these films do not vanish from Chinese visual culture. As the songs from *Wuduojinhua* and *Ashima* fade from the collective memory, and the idyllic landscape shots blur out of focus, it is unclear what nationality will come to represent in China. If cultural traditions gradually disappear to become distant memories, minority films may be one of the only ways to unearth the history of nationality in contemporary China. These films have elements of absurdity and construct elaborate fantasies, yet their images represent the shift from nationality as an idea to a social reality. Nationality can be considered an imagined construct, but its power becomes manifest in the physical world. Minority film similarly takes an idea, that of the minority Other, and thrusts it forcefully into the realm of the real, for all to gaze upon and remember.

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## Appendix

### Resource Persons

My project would not have been possible without the assistance of a number of individuals. I spent a great deal of time in Yunnan University’s Department of Visual Anthropology. While at *Yunda*, I had many opportunities to converse with a documentary filmmaker, Tan Leshui, who is currently in the post-production phases of several documentary films on the Dai and other minorities of Xishuangbanna. I also received a great deal of help and advice from his film editing staff, particularly from a young Hani man named Ding Ka and his fellow film editors. Without the help of Tan Leshui’s film editors, I would not have been able to acquire copies of many of the films I researched for this project. They assisted me in finding *Sacrificed Youth*, *Wuduojinhua*, *Haiziwang*, and a number of other films online. They also provided me with several DVDs to view for my research. I did not work very closely with an advisor for my research, as my fieldwork was done independently on the locations of several minority films – the Butterfly Spring near Dali and areas surrounding Jinghong in Xishuangbanna. My advisor for this project was officially Prof. Yang Hui, chair of the Anthropology Department at Yunnan University. She gave me access to the resources of the Visual Anthropology Department, without which my project would not have been possible.

Other resource persons included Lu Yuan, Sam Mitchell, and John Alexander, an English teacher at Yunnan Normal University who wrote his masters thesis at Berkeley on a series of minority films from the 1950s. John Alexander also referred me to a number of persons whom I may work with if I return to Kunming next summer to continue research on a similar topic.

One of these persons, He Yuan, has an archive of ethnographic films in an apartment near Green Lake Park. He Yuan was the curator of a large Visual Culture festival in Kunming, which took place on two separate occasions in recent years. The festival was supposed to take place this year but was shut down by the local government due to a politically sensitive film that was to be screened.

### **Itinerary**

November 8:

Day in Dali and trip to the Butterfly Spring

November 9-15:

Research in Kunming

Time spent in Visual Anthropology Dept. at Yunnan University

November 16-18:

Traveling in and around Mengzi (by bus).

November 19-26:

Traveling in Xishuangbanna (plane from Kunming to Jinghong: 500 yuan).

Spent majority of the time in Daluo.

Two days were spent in Jinghong and several surrounding Dai villages.

November 27-December 7:

Research and Writing in Kunming

### **Subjective Account**

My project began with academic research in Kunming for the first ten days of my ISP project. The majority of this time was spent in the Visual Anthropology Department at Yunnan University, where I observed the documentary filmmaker Tan Leshui as he

worked to finish several films with his editing staff. I spent a weekend in the city of Mengzi, returned to Kunming, and then traveled to Xishuangbanna by plane. After arriving in Jinghong and spending the night, I spent the next day traveling to Daluo, three hours southwest of Jinghong, several kilometers from the border of Myanmar. I made several Bulang friends in Daluo and was invited to stay with them in their village. I spent five days in the village of Man Shan, where I lived with Man Dixin and his family for the length of my stay.

After returning to Kunming to write my research paper, I continued to spend time at Yunnan University. The majority of my research in Kunming involved watching films on my personal computer in various locations. The emphasis of my project was placed more on academic analysis of minority films rather than fieldwork. My fieldwork involved discussions with locals and tourists in several areas in which minority films were produced – the Butterfly Spring near Dali, the Stone Forest, and various places outside of Jinghong in Xishuangbanna.

This fieldwork, which took the form of casual interviews, could have admittedly been more extensive. I was able to get a good sense of the collective memory of these films through my interactions with individuals near the locations of several minority films. My discussions with individuals yielded a number of similar results. Most individuals who were familiar with the films could recall songs from the films, the stories portrayed, and the depictions of cultural practices like *duige* (courtship through song). One of the shortcomings of my interview-based fieldwork was the lack of critical discussion on the representations of minority culture. When I would ask individuals if they thought that

minority culture was “accurately” or “authentically” represented in films, most would simply say yes, it was very realistic (*zhenshi*) or a bit exaggerated (*kuazhang*).

The biggest obstacle I faced in researching this topic was finding copies of the films that I planned to view and analyze. In many ways, minority films are vanishing from visual culture. They have survived only on VCDs, which are often difficult or impossible to find. Some films can be found in the form of video clips on [www.tudou.com](http://www.tudou.com). The first few weeks of my project were quite frustrating because I could only find scholarly articles on minority films, yet not the actual films themselves. Fortunately, the film editors at Yunnan University were an enormous help in finding and downloading films online, otherwise I may have been forced to alter my project topic.

I did not encounter many difficulties with a language barrier, though with a translator I may have been able to ask more provocative questions. My conversations with individuals about *Wuduojinhua* and *Ashima* were very rewarding, and helped give me a sense of the collective memory of these films in contemporary Chinese society. I did not have many fruitful discussions of *Sacrificed Youth*, which I discovered has become quite obscure, even in the areas surrounding Jinghong where it was produced.

### **Unrelated Experience**

While in a village outside of Daluo, I witnessed an annual three-day festival that the Bulang people celebrate. The festival involves sending gifts through the spiritual medium to deceased ancestors. On the first day, oxen are slaughtered to be eaten – almost all parts are eaten, including the cow hide, which is dipped in a kind of dark brown, raw meat paste.

The second day is mostly used to prepare for the third day, which involves a variety of festive activities. On the third day of the festival I woke up to the sound of drums and gongs. My friend, Dixin, came into my room and told me that things had begun. We followed the sounds. The people began to assemble and we trailed the procession up to the village's golden temple and monastery. The Bulang people, like the Dai, practice Theravada Buddhism, so the iconography within the temples is much more like that in Southeast Asian temples than Han or Tibetan temples. After we arrived at the temple, we knelt and waited for the monks to begin the ceremony.

The ritual is then carried out to honor the dead. Little bamboo huts on stilts are constructed, miniature models of the houses in which the Bulang and Dai peoples actually live. The family members place items in the little houses, which are located near the large Buddha statue. Objects like clothing and shoes are placed in the houses, and food is placed before the houses on the temple floor. The family chats casually at points during the ceremony, and the men smoke cigarettes as they repeat the lines of text that the monk utters from time to time. The monk chants in Dai, reading aloud from the sacred Buddhist scrolls, which are transcribed in Dai script. The ceremony goes on for at least half an hour. The family kneels, lights candles, and prostrates periodically during the rituals.

After the activities are carried out in the temple, the family joins a larger group who have built a large white, throne-like construction. They carry it up the village hills and then have a sort of reverse tug-of-war, where each side pushes the object forcefully toward the opposing side. While this activity takes place, a woman sprays perfume into the air and a man flings water into the air from a bowl with banana leaves.

By the time the assembled group reaches the top of the village at the golden temple, dozens have gathered to celebrate. There are well over one hundred within the temple gates at this point. Women pluck vibrant red flowers from the trees, stick them in their hair and in the large holes of their gauged earlobes. The older women have black teeth, dyed from chewing a certain substance for years. They wear the bright colors of the Bulang peoples' traditional dress. The younger people and children wear jeans and t-shirts. Large circles of people form. Nearly everyone sings and dances. Some of the middle-aged women walk from circle to circle, pouring rice wine from small cups into the dancing peoples' mouths.

My experiences in the village were very inspiring, and if given the opportunity, I would like to return to Daluo and the surrounding Bulang villages to conduct research. I plan to apply for a grant through the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University to return to China next summer. I spoke to a number of individuals in the village about possibly making a documentary film on the younger generation of Bulang people. The idea was welcomed by a number of members of the village, and several of the friends I made offered to help me with the project.

### **Topics for Further Research**

The topic of minority film in China is certainly fertile ground for continued research. If given further opportunity to explore minority film, more in depth studies of the production and historical context of several films could be conducted. In addition, a more thorough study of recent minority films, those of the 1990s and the past few years, could also be carried out.

Another topic that I would like to explore would be ethnographic documentary filmmaking in China. While at Yunnan University, I was able to view a number of

ethnographic films and converse with filmmakers. The history of documentary filmmaking in China, particularly representations of minority culture in this medium, would be a very provocative study. The role of ethnographic film in visual anthropology could explore a variety of issues relating to ethnic identity, the lingering presence of cultural traditions in modernity, as well as nationality and nationalism.