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## ***Prince of the Himalayas: A Reconstruction of Tibetan Cultural Identities Through the Meeting of Tibet, Shakespeare, and China***

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### **ABSTRACT**

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Engaging in intercultural practice tests our assumptions about cultural identity. From the crossing of borders to the association of differences, does the result come across as mutual communication via cultural exchange or rather as an imperialist act of cultural assimilation? Beneath the aesthetic dimension of amalgamation, there also lies a negotiation between political and economic influences that operate behind cross-cultural productions. This paper seeks to address these questions by examining how Chinese director Sherwood Hu's 2006 film *Prince of the Himalayas*, adapted from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, introduces new complexities and creates new possibilities for the understanding of Tibetan cultural identities and for the recognition and construction of a more heterogeneous Chinese national cinema. Apart from discussing the intercultural discourse on an intertextual level, this paper also approaches the adaptation from a more contextual point of view. This second part investigates *Prince of the Himalayas*'s practice of interculturalism as a significant example of the complexity of defining Chinese national cinema and of constructing cultural images. This paper argues that the film's use of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* leads to its divergence from recent trends of Chinese minority nationalities films and New Chinese Cinema in its attempt to promote a "Tibetan" answer to a question that goes beyond limitations of culture specificity. Lastly, this paper examines how the use of *film* as medium also affects the representation and reconstruction of Tibetan cultural identities. In the meeting of Tibet, Shakespeare and China on screen, Hu's adaptation becomes a heteroglossic product layered with multiple voices, offering new possibilities and challenges to prospects of intercultural practices and communication.

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Keywords: *Hamlet*, Tibet, Chinese cinema, cultural/national identities, interculturalism

## 「喜馬拉雅王子」：從西藏、莎士比亞、 中國的跨文化交會中探討西藏文化身份的再建構

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### 摘要

跨文化創作中，文化身份的定義與認同常面臨考驗。在跨境的交流中，跨文化創作是否能真正促進雙向溝通亦或只是淪為帝國主義下不平等的文化同化呢？在藝術層面的背後，政治與經濟等環境因素的運作與協商也同樣對成品的創作、行銷、以及觀眾接受度佔有舉足輕重的影響力。本文針對中國導演胡雪樺二〇〇六年的電影《喜馬拉雅王子》進行討論，分析該片如何藉由改編英國劇作家莎士比亞的《哈姆雷特》以呈現出西藏的文化身份以及中國民族電影在認同與定義上的異質性和多元化。本文先就《喜馬拉雅王子》與《哈姆雷特》在跨文本方面的改編進行比較和分析，接著再將討論擴展及語境層面的深究，並指出該片不同於近來中國少數民族電影以及新中國電影之處，即在其欲對一個超越文化限制框架的議題提出一個「西藏式」的答案。本文最後針對「電影」如何成就文化表現、建構、與交流提出相關討論。在西藏、莎士比亞、中國的跨文化交會中，《喜馬拉雅王子》並非單一文化的發聲地，而是如同巴赫汀所提出的「眾(異)聲喧嘩」般，引領出跨文化交流在未來更多的可能性以及需面對的挑戰。

關鍵詞：哈姆雷特、西藏、中國電影、文化／民族的身分認同、跨文化主義

## *Prince of the Himalayas: A Reconstruction of Tibetan Cultural Identities Through the Meeting of Tibet, Shakespeare, and China*

Karen Ya-Chu Yang

### Introduction

Engaging in intercultural practice tests our assumptions about cultural identity. From the crossing of borders to the association of differences, does the result come across as mutual communication via cultural exchange or rather as an imperialist act of cultural assimilation? Beneath the aesthetic dimension of amalgamation, there also lies a negotiation between political and economic influences that operate behind cross-cultural productions. When *Prince of the Himalayas* was released in 2006, Chinese director Sherwood Hu stated that his main objective was to create a film combining “Tibet, Shakespeare, and Hu” all in one (“Zhuanfang” 4).<sup>1</sup> The complexity of the process stems not just from placing a western play into a Tibetan context—it is also a result of the delicate situation of involving a Chinese director and the Chinese film industry as the mediators of the intercultural production.

In this paper, I attempt to look into the film’s adaptation process to examine how the film seeks to bring Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* into a Tibetan context, and also how Tibetan culture is presented through the use of a Shakespearean text. Through the camera lens, representations of Tibetan cultural identity and Shakespeare become projected onto a broader framework that involves issues of subjectivity and objectivity, literalness and politicization, history and society, culture and agency. Who is the representative, what is being represented, and how is the representation perceived and received? My main objective will be to discuss how the process of adaptation contributes to

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<sup>1</sup> Sherwood Hu is a famous contemporary Chinese director who is most noted for his award-winning film *Warrior Lanling* (1995). The film won the prize for Best Foreign Feature Film at the Santa Clarita International Film Festival, the Excellence in Cinematography Award at the Hawaii International Film Festival, and the best Feature Film award at the Telluride Film Festival. He studied theater in China and later went to the United States in his twenties and received a master’s degree in Theater and Film at New York University and a PhD degree in Directing at the University of Hawaii. Director Hu’s *Lanli-Loa—The Passage* (1998) also marked his significance as the first Chinese director to work in Hollywood. *Prince of the Himalayas* is his first film after being away from the film industry for almost ten years.

the further questioning and understanding of both Tibet's culture and Shakespeare's renaissance play. I do not attempt to posit any hierarchical system between the two but rather seek to investigate how the collaboration between differences serves as a re-evaluation of both one and the other.

Apart from examining the intercultural discourse on a textual level, I will also be discussing Hu's adaptation from a contextual point of view. In the second part of my paper, I will investigate *Prince of the Himalayas*'s practice of interculturalism as a significant example of the complexity of defining Chinese national cinema and of constructing cultural images by placing the film in dialogue with the genres of *shaoshu minzu pian* ("minority nationalities film") and New Chinese Cinema. Lastly I will examine the film's intercultural workings in relation to Paul Willemsen's notion of "double-outsidedness", which is based on Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic mode, in order to consider how national cinemas can be understood as a means to achieve "creative understanding" (Vitali 37-41) between different nationalities and cultures. Hu's film reworks Willemsen's term for the Chinese audience in China by performing the experience of "internal double-outsidedness" through the double process of crossing cultures and recognizing heterogeneity as an expression of universal humanistic understanding. *Prince of the Himalayas*'s practice of interculturalism introduces new complexities and creates new possibilities for the understanding of Tibetan cultural identities and for the recognition and construction of a more heterogeneous Chinese national cinema.

### **The Making of *Prince of the Himalayas*: Hu's Tibetan answer to *Hamlet*'s revenge**

Released in the year 2006, *Prince of the Himalayas* is a beautiful Tibetan adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The shots of vast highlands and snowy mountains, the emphasis on religious rituals and Buddhist concepts, and the insistence on using only Tibetan actors and the Tibetan language all confer upon the film a strong sense of "Tibetanness." However, the use of a western play as the film's material, combined with the fact that the director is a Chinese director with an academic degree from the United States, further complicates the process of adaptation and brings the notion of Tibetan cultural identity into the broader scope of interculturalism. In one of his interviews, Director Hu stated that he chose to combine *Hamlet* with Tibet for two reasons: his personal "Hamlet complex" and the wish to convey concepts of

love and forgiveness in response to the ongoing turmoil around the world.<sup>2</sup> He chose to set the film in Tibet due to his impression of Tibet as a region that is still pure and natural (“Interview” 76). In response to charges of cultural imperialism, Hu emphasized his insistence on using an all-Tibetan cast speaking the Tibetan language and his cooperation with Tibetan writers during the research process (78) to demonstrate his respect to and incorporation of the local voice in his adaptation of a western masterpiece.

In his effort to promote concepts of love and forgiveness in the film, significant changes have been made to Shakespeare’s play. Two new characters were added: the shaman and the child of Lhamoklodan (Hamlet) and Od-saluyang (Ophelia). In the film, the shaman functions as a narrator and also the person with connections to the gods and spirits, much like the ghost in Shakespeare’s original play. However, the shaman and the ghost are set in opposition in this film. While the ghost keeps calling for revenge in the film, the shaman is seen to preach doctrines of love and forgiveness. Near the end of the film, the birth of the infant symbolizes the crystallization of love and re-born hope.

The film’s most significant alteration comes from its more positive portrayal of Kulo-ngam (Claudius) and Nanm (Gertrude); the plot has been changed to include a motive for their hasty marriage and the act of fratricide. In the film version, Kulo-ngam and Nanm are depicted as two lovers who had been together before King Tsanpo intervened and took Nanm as his wife. The film portrays Kulo-ngam’s killing of the King as self-defense and clearly states that Nanm is guiltless with regard to the murder. Finally, Lhamoklodan is later revealed to be the child of Kulo-ngam rather than the King. In *Prince of the Himalayas*, Lhamoklodan’s struggle for revenge becomes complicated by the agonizing tangle of love, hate, and death. In the end, Lhamoklodan chooses to transcend the desire for revenge in favor of forgiveness and commits to future re-birth.

*Hamlet*’s indoor scenes have been transposed into the wide horizon of the Tibetan natural scenery along with presentations of Tibetan cultural practices such as sky burial, water burial, and cremation burial. Other smaller adjustments work not only to adapt the play to Tibetan culture but also to convey the director’s intention of presenting a new perspective on Shakespeare’s

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<sup>2</sup> Hu does not go into the explanation of his “Hamlet complex” in his interview, but he does mention how *Hamlet* was the play his father had always wanted to direct during the time he was still living (“Interview” 77).

play. These include changing the comparison of the King's appearance with a strong yak instead of to the Roman gods (Shakespeare 3.4.55-60) and switching a metaphor that likens virtue to the melting of wax to one that compares virtue to the melting of butter (3.4.82-85).<sup>3</sup>

## **Textual Discourses: Reconstructions of *Hamlet* and Tibetan Cultural Identities**

### **I. *Prince of the Himalayas's* Divergence from Dominant Chinese Intellectual Discourses on *Hamlet***

The director prioritizes “the spirit of religion” over culture, as he reveals in the interview: “Culture has its limits. The only substance that can transcend this boundary is the spirit of religion. This does not refer to a particular religion but rather to the spirit of religion in general, which can cross over cultural borders and be universally accepted” (“Zhuanfang” 4. trans. mine). His effort to create a Tibetan film assumes that the spiritual image of Tibetan Buddhism can provide an answer to the questions posed by *Hamlet*. This interpretation diverges greatly from the leading Chinese intellectual discourses surrounding Shakespeare's play.

Since the introduction of Shakespeare's works into China a century ago, there have been around sixty to seventy scholarly articles on Shakespeare published each year. In the “Overview of Late Twentieth Century Research of Shakespeare in China,” Lee Wei Min acknowledges the diversity of Chinese interpretations but stresses the fact that there have been only relatively few innovative attempts that diverge from the Marxist interpretations of Shakespeare prominent during the 60s and the Renaissance humanist perspective that has been extremely popular in China since the 70s.<sup>4</sup> Chinese scholars

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<sup>3</sup> In the bedroom scene of *Hamlet* and the Queen, Hamlet refers to his father, the former King, by saying, “See what a grace was seated on his brow,/ Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,/ An eye like Mars to threaten and command, / A station like the herald Mercury/ New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill” (*Hamlet*, III.iv. 55-60). Also in the bedroom scene, Hamlet says to the Queen, “Rebellious hell,/ If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,/ To flaming youth let virtue be as wax/ And melt in her own fire” (III. iv. 82-85).

<sup>4</sup> Although the dominance of Marxism and the ideas of Mao Tse-Tung have declined since the end of the Cultural Revolution in the 1980s, the concepts of dialectical and historical materialism have continued to have a strong ideological influence in various areas of Chinese life and thought. Marxist analytical methods are well suited for literary criticism that addresses the political unrest and social turmoil in modern China. This political orientation helps to explain China's enthusiasm for the historical struggles latent in Shakespeare's drama. As for the interest in humanist perspec-

such as Yuan Di Yong have acknowledged and promoted the multi-functional approaches to studying Shakespeare, yet still clearly attributes Shakespeare's major importance and appeal to the play's themes of anti-feudalism and Renaissance humanism. In the article "The Distortion of Shakespeare Under China's Political Environment", Lee Wei Min categorizes the development of Chinese interpretations of Hamlet's image into three stages: Hamlet as representing the common people, Hamlet as the Renaissance humanist hero, and later on Hamlet as an anti-humanist hero.<sup>5</sup> However, regardless of which image is attached to Hamlet, the play's strong emphasis on the protagonist's conflicts and skepticism remains as the focus of Chinese intellectual discourses.

In her book, *Shakespeare in China*, Zhang Xiao Yang attributes Shakespeare's focus on the "human" and the complexity of human nature as the source of China's major fascination with the bard. According to Zhang, the predominant view of Shakespeare in China is that his tragedies tend to "uphold a universal justice, the dignity of human kind, and the value of life," while traditional Chinese plays are often seen to "reaffirm the supremacy of the existing federal political system and the justification of the Confucian moral order" (29). In a more generalized way, Zhang concludes that Shakespearean and traditional Chinese tragedies may be summarized as "the fall of greatness" and "the destruction of beauty" respectively (43). This examination of the disparity between Shakespearean and traditional Chinese tragedies is not meant to suggest which is superior or more valuable, but rather seeks to explain how the differences contribute to China's interest in Shakespeare in the modern era. Shakespeare's depiction of the complexity of human nature and the search for a higher universal principle provides China with new perspectives of understanding human conflict and possibilities of looking into human nature.

Chinese interpreters such as Zhang Xiao Yang argue that Hamlet's struggle between his high ideals and the realities of society represents a combination of Confucian and Taoist ideologies. From the Confucian perspective,

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tives, this has more to do with the changes in China after the Cultural Revolution. It reflects the new westernized interest in issues such as individual rights, desires, and creativity that were considered lacking in traditional Chinese culture and Marxist philosophy (Zhang Xiao Yang).

<sup>5</sup> Although Lee roughly categorizes Chinese interpretations of *Hamlet* into three successive main trends, he points out that these different standpoints are in fact highly interrelated and still all exist in academic discussions. He also mentions that despite newer propositions of Hamlet as the anti-humanist hero, dominant Chinese intellectual readings still remain more about understanding Hamlet as the humanist hero (40).

Hamlet's nobility and sense of political responsibility have led him to being regarded as the Confucian hero in China, and the Confucian hero is often associated with the country's greatest political figures (Zhang 213). On the one hand, Hamlet's lines, "The time is out of joint... I was born to set it right" (1.5.196-197), strongly echo the Confucian definition of the hero according to which "everybody has a share of responsibility for the fate of his country" (Zhang? 214). On the other hand, Hamlet's solitary disillusionment with the mortal world can be seen as a reflection of Taoism.<sup>6</sup> In addressing how *Prince of the Himalayas* ends with the notion of future rebirth, Ni Zhen may have been right in pointing out that this Tibetan conviction relates to the general prototype of traditional Chinese tragedies, in which the major tragic protagonist "puts his faith in transmigration and fate, displaying a sense of re-birth and hope" (qtd. in Hu 2006: 81; trans. mine). However, as Zhang points out in *Shakespeare in China*, one of the main reasons for the Chinese fascination with Shakespearean tragedy is precisely its difference from the traditional Chinese tragedy format.<sup>7</sup> The main attraction of *Hamlet* for Chinese intellectuals is the complexity of the characters and the play's exploration of the struggle between human nature and the effects of sociopolitical realities. When placed in the context of the evolution of Shakespeare studies in China, Hu's adaptation process appears not to be a projection of Sinological cultural views onto Tibet but, rather, a divergence from modern Chinese perspectives on Shakespearean tragedies through the turning away from discussions on conflicts and struggles to focus on the promotion of love and forgiveness.

## II. The Conflicting Voices of Hu and Shakespeare: Is Love a Better Answer to *Hamlet's* Revenge?

In order to elaborate on the issue of love, the director not only adds in the dimension of profound devotion between Kulo-ngam and Nanm but also prioritizes the episodes foregrounding love in his selection of *Hamlet's*

<sup>6</sup> For more information on Zhang's interpretations of *Hamlet* in relation to classical Chinese philosophies, see her book *Shakespeare in China*.

<sup>7</sup> This refers to the Chinese plays that had not been influenced by Western drama, primarily plays written before the later years of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). The two representative genres of traditional Chinese tragic drama are the Yuan *zaju* and the Ming *chuanqui*, which were dominant from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the greatest tragedies from that time are Wang Shi Fu's *Romance of the Western Chamber* (1295-1307), Tang Xian Zu's *The Peony Pavilion* (1598), and Kong Shang Ren's *The Peach Blossom Fan* (1699).

scenes.<sup>8</sup> However, does the exploration into the amorous relations of *Hamlet* naturally lead to the director's main purpose of promoting concepts of love over revenge? In other words, how might Shakespeare's play in turn also provide its own commentary on Hu's theme through the adaptation process? Shakespeare's play treats the authenticity and fidelity of love with a more negative sense of skepticism or indifference. In the farewell scene preceding Laertes' departure, he and Polonius both warn Ophelia not to trust Hamlet's affections. This scene is treated very differently in *Prince of the Himalayas*. Although Lessar (Laertes) does mention the pain Odsaluyang will suffer if she and Lhamoklodan do not end up together, he still expresses his belief in Lhamoklodan's affections and declares his hope that the horses will bring back good news of their love. The scene ends with Po-lha-nyisse (Polonius) questioning, "Affection?", without going into his lecture on the dishonesty of Hamlet's professed feelings.

The love between Claudius and Gertrude is also portrayed quite differently in the two works. In *Hamlet*, Gertrude's actual motivations and intentions are not clear. Her image is constructed through her innocent yet limited responses and concerns and also through others' descriptions of her. In *Prince of the Himalayas*, the motivation behind Nanm's action is given a logical explanation. She is portrayed as having been Kulo-ngam's lover before the King took her as his bride. Even after eighteen years of marriage to the King, her love for Kulo-ngam remains true and faithful. During the bedroom scene when Lhamoklodan condemns her for "muting in a matron's bones to flaming youth," she informs him that he does not know the truth, the power of love, and the insanity of despair. "Love," he utters in disbelief, "You call this your love?" When Lhamoklodan pleads with her to throw away the worse part of her heart, she responds in despair that the part he refers to is precisely the part that she loves. After the Ghost scene, she reveals to Lhamoklodan the truth of her marriage, and proclaims that "A life without love is death." The unfaithful Gertrude of Shakespeare's play is transformed into the loyal lover Nanm who prioritizes love above all in Hu's film. What should be noted here is that this love, however true and deep, is still based on mundane love and desire rather than Buddhist concepts of spiritual love.

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<sup>8</sup> Compared to other *Hamlet* adaptations, this film is relatively short. It is only approximately one hundred minutes long. Considering its brevity, it becomes significant how the film devotes a considerable amount of time to the portrayal of the two pairs of lovers.

In *Hamlet*, love is portrayed as fickle and delusive, with the indication that love can be manipulated through the art of pretense. When Ophelia obeys her father and rejects Hamlet, the notion that love can be so easily surrendered and changed diminishes the significance of love. The scheme of using Ophelia as a device to find out the reason for Hamlet's madness also shows how love can be manipulated through devious purposes and used as a deceptive tool. When Gertrude says to Ophelia that "I do wish/ That your good beauties be the happy cause/ Of Hamlet's wildness; so shall I hope your virtues/ Will bring him to his wonted way again/ To both your honours" (3.1.38-42), this comes to show that Ophelia is as guilty of manipulating love as the Prince's mother. When Hamlet curses, "Frailty, thy name is woman" (1.2.146), he speaks also in the name of love—the unreliable romantic love between man and woman.

In the nunnery scene, Hamlet questions the relationship between honesty and beauty, which also signifies the discrepancy between inner qualities and outer appearances, *i.e.* between true love and the act of love. He continues to play on the paradox of love and appearance, as shown in the following passage related to the love letter which Hamlet gave to Ophelia:

HAMLET. I did love you once.

OPHELIA. Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

HAMLET. You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not.

OPHELIA. I was the more deceived. (3.1.115-120)

Critics such as Robert Bozanic have pointed out the double meaning of Hamlet's love poem through the two parallel meanings of the word "doubt." He writes that the verb "to doubt" had both in Shakespeare's time its modern sense of meaning "to tend to disbelieve, to be suspicious of" and the now archaic sense "to tend to believe, to surmise" (90-91). The line separating truth and pretense is obscured. It is not just to doubt truth as a liar, but also to doubt truth as truth itself. Hamlet doesn't witness the tragic outcomes that result from the disillusionment and deprivation of love until Ophelia's funeral scene. It is at that point that he realizes the power of love over lovers and familial members, and how it can drive one to "real" madness and to suicidal death. Love can be fickle and madness can be feigned, but love may also be true and madness may also be real. Perhaps the world is but an act—just as it is im-

possible to decipher the authenticity of the madness speeches—yet the emotions that evoke the act seems to be real and true. When Hamlet informs his mother that what he utters are not speeches of madness, he is not only referring to the factual truth of his accusations, but also suggesting that his (feigned) madness has in fact a real cause. Beneath the performed acts of the characters lie the troubled souls struggling with true emotions.

The issue of acting is depicted quite differently in *Prince of the Himalayas*, due to its more positive interpretation of love. Odsaluyang's devotion to Lhamoklodan remains consistent throughout the film. Since her father does not prohibit her relationship with Lhamoklodan, she does not performatively reject his affections. Also, she is excluded from the plot of trying to unveil the reason for Lhamoklodan's madness. Whereas Shakespeare only intimates a sexual relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia, the film presents it as a definite fact with their love-making scene and the child to whom Odsaluyang later gives birth. Lhamoklodan is aware that he is the only imposter in their relationship when he tells Odsaluyang that he does not love her. When he goes to Odsaluyang to confess his sin for having killed her father, he begs her forgiveness by telling her that she is the love that saves him. She returns his gift by saying: "Do not speak to me of love. You are not worthy of it." Having manipulated the honesty of love, Lhamoklodan loses his power to love.

Interestingly, in this adaptation, despite the strength of the love of the two pairs of lovers, their lives still end in tragedy. Love and hate are the two sides of the avenging blade, each equally injurious in its own terms. Romantic love in *Prince of the Himalayas* is depicted as more faithful and significant than the love in *Hamlet*; yet, by directly engrafting scenes from *Hamlet* and by following the play's basic storyline, the love relations in the film cannot escape the pre-inscribed doomed destiny of Shakespeare's tragedy. The love depicted is confined to earthly human love rather than religious or spiritual transcendental love. In fact, the aspect of fatal love becomes even more ironic when one looks into the relationship of Kulo-ngam and Namn. In his prayer scene, Kulo-ngam confesses to the gods that he killed for love. He had committed fratricide to protect Namn. His love also leads to the death of Lhamoklodan and Namn when the poisoned sword and wine originally meant to kill Lesser accidentally end up killing his wife and son. Kulo-ngam kills himself in the end, not so much in an act of penitence but rather because his loved ones have all died and his only hope of joining them is in his next life. Death reunites the broken family that murdered and despaired because of love. In Po-lha-nyisse's words, "Love is the reason the world goes mad."

Although Hu's magnification of love diverges from *Hamlet's* focus on revenge, the outcome also exemplifies how love becomes the reason for revenge and the blade of death. This tangle of love and hate becomes significant when related to the political situation of Tibet today. Since 1951, Tibet has remained an autonomous region under the PRC with the Dalai Lama as its representative spiritual leader. In the history of Tibet, the earliest confirmed record of the Tibetan Empire dates back to when King Namri Löntsän (*Gnam-ri-slon-rtsan*) sent an ambassador to China in 608 and 609 A.C. The Sino-Tibetan political relationships take many forms from here on till the signing of the "Agreement of the Central People's Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet" between Tibet and the People's Republic of China in 1951.<sup>9</sup> Today, representations of Tibet by the exiles and the PRC government are at odds for the most part. The PRC government often portrays pre-1951 Tibet as a house of horror in need of civilization.<sup>10</sup> In opposition to this impression, the government-in-exile of the Dalai Lama promotes an image of Tibet as a place of peace and goodness.<sup>11</sup> Ever since their departure from their homeland, the

<sup>9</sup> In *Tibet, Self, and the Tibetan Diaspora*, P. Christiaan Klieger states that since the first appearance of Tibet on the international scene in the seventh century, Tibet remained an independent empire until China succeeded in claiming its sovereignty in 1951. Before 1951, Tibet and China basically maintained a "priest-patron" relationship; it was not until the Nationalist and Communist governments came to power in the early twentieth century that the relationship changed into a hierarchical situation with Tibet occupying the inferior position (Klieger 223-24). This "priest-patron" relationship is interpreted differently in Chinese records of Tibetan history. According to *A Complete History of Tibet*, the Chinese Yuan Dynasty had already successfully united Tibet into the Chinese territory in the thirteenth century. Later during the early years of Emperor Yong Zheng's rule, the Qing dynasty "directly reigned [over] the entire Tibetan plateau, and appointed four Chinese commissioners.... to mark the national borderlines of China in regions of Tibet, *si chuan*, and *yun nan* from 1926-1928" (Chen 2). Following the Peace Agreement between the PRC and China was signed in 1951, Tibet now exists as an autonomous region of China with the Dalai Lama as its representative spiritual leader in exile. During the time of China's reign, there have been many Tibetan protestations against China's restrictions on and oppression of the religion and culture of Tibet. Although Tibet is stated to be an autonomous region, the laws of China regard autonomy as "relating only to executing policies decided at a higher level" (Heath 35), which means acting in accordance to the policies and authority of the Chinese government. For the Chinese government, Tibetan Buddhism is generally regarded as a threatening power that seeks to break Tibet away from China's rule.

<sup>10</sup> See Thomas Herberer, "Old Tibet a Hell on Earth? The Myth of Tibet and Tibetans in Chinese Art and Propaganda," in *Imagining Tibet: Perception, Projections and Fantasies*; Barry Sautman and June Teufel Dreyer's introduction in *Contemporary Tibet: Politics, Development, and Society in a Disputed Region*; Warren W. Smith Jr.'s *China's Tibet?: Autonomy or Assimilation*.

<sup>11</sup> The Dalai Lama has "characterized pre-1951 Tibet as 'feudal,' but also a society of peace and harmony [where] we enjoyed freedom and contentment,' where peasants and herders had a light work load, with ample land and food, and where people were generally happy" (Barnette 22)

Tibetan government-in-exile has made efforts to preserve their culture and religion, both of which are under threat back home. Yet, there is a disproportionate concentration on religion, which Jamyang Norbu argues “cannot be explained solely by the well known piety of the Tibetan people, but must be attributed partly to the attraction it holds for the West” (85-86). This “Tibetanness” adopted by the diasporic community has oftentimes been criticized for presenting Tibet as a Shangri-La, a hyper-real never-never land that remains independent of outer influences.<sup>12</sup> However, this myth of Tibet appears to be “both a power and a prison for Tibet” (Klieger 211). As P. Christiaan Klieger writes,

The romance between Tibetan exiles and Western supporters has only led to the reproduction of the ideal Shangri-La model—it has not substantially furthered the cause of Tibetan autonomy in China, much less independence.... The messages create national solidarity by representing a culture of difference.... It is the Tibetan diaspora strategy to remain the exotic Other, inhabiting the Western-created golden Shangri-La until some unknowable time when the present national misfortunes are reversed. (Sautman 227)

To return to the film, Hu’s adaptation does not fall into either extremes but rather presents both the inherent turmoil of the Tibetan land and the peace-seeking spirit of the Tibetan community. While the director chose the Tibetan setting of the film for its symbolism of this Shangri-La image, the play’s original elements of murder and conflict come to present a different portrayal of “Tibetanness” that complicates the image of this land as the “Zone of Peace” (“Zhuangfang” 226). The “Tibetanness” illustrated in the film opposes a static cultural image of Tibet by displaying a more complex and unstable representation of Tibetan culture through bringing differences together and opening up intercultural dialogues between Tibet, China, and the West.

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<sup>12</sup> Donald Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*; Robert Barnett, “Violated Specialness: Western Political Representations of Tibet” in *Imagining Tibet: Perception, Projections and Fantasies*; Robert Thurman’s “The Rolling Stone Interview: The Dalai Lama”; P. Christiaan Klieger’s “Riding High on the Manchurian Dream: Three Paradigms in the Construction of the Tibetan Question” in *Contemporary Tibet: Politics, Development, and the Society in a Disputed Region*.

### III. The Transition from Revenge to Buddhist Concepts of Forgiveness

The tragedies of love bring about the other important theme of the film—forgiveness. After knowing that Kulo-ngam killed the King to protect Nanm, Lhamoklodan’s contemplation becomes torn between his fidelity to the King and whether it is justifiable to kill in the name of love. After Odsaluyang’s death, Lhamoklodan’s plight becomes even more complicated when his mother reveals to him that Kulo-ngam was in fact his biological father. He realizes that he cannot carry out the revenge; yet he also finds that he can no longer differentiate between love and hate and thus cannot reconcile with Kulo-ngam. He had loved Odsaluyang, yet she died because of his love. He had hated Kulo-ngam, yet he is the child of Kulo-ngam’s love. Innocent love takes the lives of innocent people and the affections of love become the turmoil of hate. He comes to the same realization as Hamlet that he cannot prevent himself from being trapped in the tangles of the human world. Lhamoklodan’s dilemma also becomes a choice between life in the “mortal coil” and death.<sup>13</sup>

Lhamoklodan’s reason for embracing death is different from that of Shakespeare’s protagonist, though. Hamlet’s acceptance of the fight with Laertes reflects his submission to the “readiness of life” (Jenkins 159), while Lhamoklodan’s insistence on swapping his poisoned sword with Lesser’s shows his “decision” to die. When Lhamoklodan tells the Ghost that he already knows the truth, the Ghost answers by saying that Lhamoklodan’s decision will be what determines the truth. In the final act, Lhamoklodan finds truth to be in the course of death. Lhamoklodan’s resolution to die under the

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<sup>13</sup> First, in speaking of Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet’s main dilemma exists between “the damnation of taking one’s life [and] the certainty of suffering on earth” (Edwards 25). It becomes an intellectual curiosity about “not so much the nature of revenge as the nature of man” (Jenkins, 147). In his great soliloquy, he struggles over “Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer/ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune/ Or to take arms against a sea of troubles/ And by opposing end them” (III. i. 57-60). Either way, he realizes that the world will not change in spite of his efforts. After the graveyard scene and Ophelia’s funeral, Hamlet finally acknowledges the inevitability of human mortality. He comes to accept the limitedness of humans and the earthly emotions and passions of mortals. He says to Horatio that “Our indiscretion sometime serves us well/ When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us/ There’s a divinity that shapes our ends/ Rough-hew them how we will” (*Hamlet*, V. ii. 8-11). In the end, Hamlet comes to embrace his role as a human being existing in the mortal world. Before taking his last breath, he asks Horatio to amend his wounded name by passing his story to others. After death “the rest is silence;” all that is left of him is his name. The death of Hamlet shows his transcendence of mortality, not in the sense of rejecting the suffering in the mortal world, but by “living” life as it is and acknowledging “the readiness is all” (Jenkins 159).

sword of Lesser echoes the scene in which he endeavors to kill himself after realizing he had killed Po-lha-nyisse by mistake and also his guilt for abandoning Odsaluyang and causing her tragic death. The Tibetan Buddhist belief in karma gives rise to Lhamoklodan's recognition of his own impurity and his resolution to die under the sword of Lesser. Being struck by the poisonous sword, Lhamoklodan faces his impending death. The camera moves to a close-up of Lhamoklodan's face before cutting to a scene outside of reality which features his meeting with the ghost of the former King. Lhamoklodan tells the ghost that he cannot take revenge for he "no longer has any strength to love to hate, or to raise his sword" and asks it to leave. He has chosen forgiveness over revenge.

In Shakespeare's play, Hamlet also exchanges forgiveness with Laertes, freeing Laertes from the guilt of homicide and himself from his own crimes.<sup>14</sup> Lhamoklodan's reasons for forgiveness differ from Hamlet's, for forgiveness in his case derives not from offense and guilt but compassion and the easing of suffering. Lhamoklodan's actions take on the Buddhist concepts of forgiveness, which has largely to do with notions of compassion, tolerance, and karma. The book, *Forgiveness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, presents scholars drawing comparisons and discussions between the concepts of forgiveness in different religions. James G. Williams explains forgiveness in Christianity as entailing compassion and graciousness on the forgiver's side and repentance on the offender's side, while Charles Hallisey points out that forgiveness in Buddhism is both beneficial and necessary for the forgiver because resentment only doubles suffering both for oneself and others. Buddhism's chief goal is dedicated to "end[ing] suffering in all its forms," hence forgiveness is encouraged for "[r]esentment directly causes suffering to a person because of the mental torment that it engenders, but more directly, resentment can motivate a person to action that by karma, the law of moral cause and effect, will cause suffering in the future to the person wronged" (Hallisey 27-28). In line with the Buddhist beliefs, Lhamoklodan throws away his sword and chooses to put an end to the never-ending suffering that comes with hatred and retaliation. His disillusionment regarding the mortality and impurity of his own mortal coil brings about his resolution to ascribe hope to future re-birth. It is on the point of death that all is forgiven as

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<sup>14</sup> In response to Laertes's request "Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet./ Mine and my father's death come not upon thee./ Nor thine on me," Hamlet replies, "Heaven make thee free of it. I follow thee" (Hamlet V. ii. 334-336).

Kulo-ngam's last words to Lhamoklodan reveal: "We are finally united. My son, see you in the next life." Love, hate, and revenge all return to innocence as the camera frame changes from the shot of the dead bodies to the new-born child of Lhamoklodan and Odsaluyang. Through a noble death, the purity of love becomes realized in the act of forgiveness and the re-birth of innocent life.

One might venture to ask: Is the adaptation still *Hamlet* after the significant changes made to Shakespeare's play? Quoting the director's own words: "The form is still Shakespeare, but it feels different from Shakespeare's work" ("Interview" 78; trans. mine). On the whole, *Prince of the Himalayas* still explores *Hamlet*'s parallel storylines yet changes the emphasis to love and forgiveness and has a different attitude towards the meaning of life. Rather than undertaking a re-interpretation of the original play as a whole, the film focuses on exploring Hamlet's dilemma regarding revenge. The film both opens and closes with the theme of forgiveness. In the film's first scene, the camera shows Kulo-ngam asking the gods for forgiveness, while the concluding shots of the film also end with the Tibetan Buddhist answer of forgiveness and peace. However, through the presentation of the film, it is seen how between these "covers," agony prevails and battles arise. Rather than designating answers to questions concerning "Tibetanness" and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the experience of the film rather works to inspire the questioning of surface images and given answers.

### **From Text to Context: Negotiations between Universalism and Self-Orientalization**

Reconstructions of Tibetan cultural images in the film work not only through intercultural communications of textual content but also through socio-political negotiations taking place in the institutional context of Chinese national cinema. A good example of political negotiation in this instance would be the film's time setting and the absence of Buddhist rituals. Due to the critical situation between China and Tibet, Hu endeavors to avoid certain political allusions by setting the film in the period before Songtsän Gampo united Tibet and ruled the kingdom, since "at that time, Tibet was not called Tibet, but rather only a small domain or tribe" ("Interview" 10). Despite the theme of love and forgiveness being basically a Buddhist concept, the religious rites portrayed in the film are the practices of Tibet's indigenous religion, Bon. Since the film is mostly sponsored by Chinese film companies and

is also meant for the Chinese-speaking public, the choice of Bon rituals over Buddhist practices is mainly due to the director's attempt to avoid unnecessary political connotations. The application of aspects of the Bon religion rather than Buddhism comes closer to *Hamlet's* use of a ghost character and the depicted relationship between Heaven and humans, since believers in the Bon religion also hold a strong belief in spirits of earth and sky and of good and evil. However, the more significant contribution of applying the Bon religion in the film has to do with the diversification of Tibet's cultural images. Today in Tibet, although Bon is very much influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, it still exists as a distinct religion practiced by some Tibetans. It is a dimension of contemporary Tibet that has often been overlooked due to Tibet's cultural image as exemplifying Buddhism.

The previously mentioned mediations reveal continued governmental restrictions towards the promotion of Tibetan cultural identity in China in the twenty-first century. According to the report *China: Minority Exclusion, Marginalization and Rising Tensions* by HRIC, "[Previously in Tibet], over 6,000 monasteries and nunneries served as centers of education. In addition, Tibet had many lay schools run by the government as well as by individuals. The Chinese Communist Party labeled these traditional learning centers as hotbeds of 'blind faith' and the nurturing ground for 'feudal oppression'. They were, therefore, targeted for attack and shut down soon after the 'liberation of Tibet'" (29). On the one hand, Tibetan Buddhism is regarded both as a backward culture and a threatening power to the Han community. This viewpoint has led to China's constant endeavor to "civilize" Tibet and to diminish the unifying effect of the nation's religion. It is an attempt to assimilate Tibet and break down its image as the "other." As Thomas Heberer writes, "It was the duty of the Han to civilize and modernize the minority societies.... The Chinese treatment of minorities confirms this: The Communist Party claims that the immediate responsibility of any ethnic group is to catch up with the big brother so that it may be embraced by (socialist) society" (134). On the other hand, the exoticism of Tibet also holds a certain appeal for Han Chinese people, in that being largely "inspired by the Western imaginative construction of Shangri-la, the romanticized, exotic image of Tibet has now become an important component of Han Chinese perception of Tibet" (Murakami 61). In *Prince of the Himalayas*, this conflicting attitude of fear and appeal is played out and affects the film's reconstruction of a Tibetan cultural identity within the framework of Chinese national cinema.

The original appearance of the phrase “national cinema” is generally linked to political and economic factors of the industry and cultural strategies. In the introduction of *Theorising National Cinema*, Valentine Vitali and Paul Willemen write, “It is this political dimension of similar economic developments that makes a cinema ‘national’. The products generated by such an economic sector are endowed with cultural ‘nationality’ at a later stage, partly as a competitive move and partly as a way of legitimizing such a move” (1). While earlier discussions on national cinema focused more on nationalism as a fixed and homogeneous entity, studies after the 1980s began to question the definition of “nation” by arguing for the constructiveness of the term. Along the lines of this newer concept of national cinema, Benedict Anderson’s theory on “imagined communities” is among the most influential conceptions in this field because his theory proposes the concept of national identity as being an “imagined” communal image that is “imaged” as limited, sovereign, and conceived as a horizontal comradeship (Anderson 5-7). Chris Berry takes up Anderson’s concept along with Judith Butler’s work on “performativity” to argue for the “recasting [of] national cinema as a multiplicity of projects, authored by different individuals, groups, and institutions with various purposes, but bound together by the politics of national agency and collective subjectivity as constructed entities” (“If China Can Say No” 161). As Paul Willemen also writes, it is “to ‘think’ cinema not as an immutable object, but as a historically (institutionally) delineated set of practices caught within, among others, the dynamics besetting and characterizing a national configuration” (42). Both Berry and Willemen argue that the intertextual communication between nation-state and national cinema goes both ways, meaning that the nation-state affects the construction of films while films in turn also serve to construct the nation-state. In regards to highlighting the latter process of how films contribute to breaking down notions of organic-ness, unity, coherence, etc., Philip Rosen addresses national cinema through aspects of textuality and intertextuality. He defines national cinema as “a large group of films, a body of textuality. This body of textuality is usually given a certain amount of historical specificity by calling it a *national* cinema. This means that issues of national cinema revolve around an intertextuality to which one attributes a certain historical weight” (17).

Recent scholarship on Chinese national cinema follows this newer line of thought by problematizing the definition of “Chineseness” through a higher awareness of cultural heterogeneity and the influence of cultural diversity on constructions of Chinese national identity. This indicates not only the

inclusion of other Chinese-speaking communities such as Taiwan and Hong Kong or the Chinese diaspora in the discussion of Chinese national cinema, but also the increased attention placed on cultural minorities in China like the Tibetans, Mongols, and Uyghurs. While there have been quite a few studies that take up a more transnational view of Chinese cinema as cross-spatial, there is still only very limited research in the field of film studies that addresses the non-Chinese speaking minority communities living in China. One of the main reasons is the relatively small number of minority films being produced, very few of which achieve influential status both critically and commercially.

In China, the category of *shaoshu minzu pian* (“minority nationality films”) was developed by the Chinese government after 1949 in an effort to “stabilize the tension between the ethnic difference and national identity posed by the presence of non-Han peoples” (Berry, *China on Screen* 180). According to Zhang Ying Jin, “the outcome of locating ‘national style’ in ethnic cultural practices was never a restoration of ‘minority’ cultures to a ‘majority’ status but always a legitimation of minority people as part of the ‘solidarity’ of the Chinese nation” (“Minority Film” 79-80). In “Where Do You Draw the Line? Ethnicity in Chinese Cinemas,” Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar argue that

the earlier films [pre-Cultural Revolution] represent the minority nationalities as backward peoples liberated from feudalism and led toward modernity by their Han ‘elder brothers.’ The later films [post-Cultural Revolution] are marked by an absence of the Communist Party on screen and a high degree of exoticism. Yet in both cases, the apparent emphasis on ethnic difference is complicated by fantasies of cross-ethnic identification. (170)

For *Prince of the Himalayas*, the strong emphasis on enigmatic Tibetan cultural images such as ritualistic burials and concepts of Tibetan Buddhism suggests an outsider-imposed exoticism and mystification. Yet, while Chinese minority films in the past have usually been accused of exoticizing Chinese minority cultures in an effort to appeal to the Han public, the box office results for *Prince of the Himalayas*—which was a great hit in Tibet and a big failure in majority China—proved the exact opposite of regular assumptions.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Information on box office receipts and audience reception can be found on the Chinese Movie

At first glance, the blunt “Tibetanness” of *Prince of the Himalayas* would seem to fit the film into recent Chinese minority films’ trends of eschewing “modernization among the minority nationalities in favor of more colorful ‘primitive customs’” (Berry, *China on Screen* 185); however, the film’s attempt to address Shakespeare’s more universal question of love and revenge through the lens of Tibetan culture sets it apart from majority Chinese minority nationality films which usually exoticize minority cultures within the social context of present-day China, thus creating the impression of how these fantasized and primitive cultures cannot be *real* in regard to the contemporary world’s state of modernization. This outcome of cultural exoticism connotes a strong sense of “Orientalism,” not in Edward Said’s example of West to East but rather from China to its minorities. Scholars such as Zhang Ying Jin have discussed the similarity between minority nationality films after the 1980s and New Chinese Cinema.<sup>16</sup> He relates this similar trend to what Rey Chow calls “cultural exhibition” or the “Oriental’s orientalism.” In the case of New Chinese Cinema, although the films have been successful at the box office both in China and abroad, critical responses from national and international audiences tend to take opposite stands. The main reason for this disparity in audience reviews—the films are embraced by the West and criticized by the Chinese—is the same: oriental exoticism is being sold to a Western audience (Chow, *Primitive Passions* 176). The reception of *Prince of the Himalayas* runs counter to that of other films exhibiting an Asian orientalism—receiving praise from cultural “insiders” (the Tibetan audiences) while meeting with indifference from cultural “outsiders” (the Chinese-speaking public) in China because of the current situation and development of both Tibet and Shakespeare in China and also the significant differences in the way Asian orientalism functions in *Prince of the Himalayas* and in New Chinese Cinema.

First, with regard to politics, Tibet’s severe political situation has much to do with why the film has been critically acclaimed among Tibetan audiences. A major reason for the film’s success in Tibet is the fact that it is one of the very few films that is cast entirely with Tibetan actors speaking the Ti-

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Database website and in interviews with the director.

<sup>16</sup> “New Chinese Cinema” refers to films that emerged after the Cultural Revolution, in particular the so-called Fifth Generation directors such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, who came into prominence during the 1980s and 1990s. Their recent films often bear traits of cultural fetishism and mystification, which have been criticized for turning of “traditional good taste into ‘vulgar’ mass culture and put[ting] ethnic and national ‘origins’ in crisis” (Chow, *Primitive Passions* 102).

betan language in the land of Tibet. While Tibetan audiences admit that there are some places in the film which overlook or oversimplify certain Tibetan cultural practices and religion, most feel that, on the whole, the Tibetan spirit has been well portrayed.<sup>17</sup> For the Tibetan audience, the real attraction of the film lies not so much in the western plot, but rather in the joy of seeing their culture being put on the big screen. Being in the crisis of gradually losing their cultural identities, most Tibetan audiences have embraced the film's elaboration on the "difference and uniqueness" of Tibetan culture and continued to revisit the film's screening during its run. The social factors that have influenced *Prince of the Himalayas*'s reception in China, the current crisis of the Chinese film industry and Shakespearean performances are also probable determinants. Although the film was successful in Tibet, its box office in China has not lived up to expectations. The version screened in most Chinese theaters was the one dubbed in Chinese by Tibetans. The director has expressed resentment over the production company's going back on the promise to show the Tibetan version alongside the Chinese dubbed version, insisting that the dubbed version needs to at least be done by native Tibetans rather than Chinese dubbers. For the common Chinese-speaking audience, however, the main attraction of the film was in fact the leading actor Purba Rgyal (Lhamoklodan), the 2006 winner of the "My Hero" competition in China.<sup>18</sup> As Kevin Latham concludes in his book *Pop Cultural China: Media, Arts, and Lifestyle*, "In the long run, commercialism proved to be one of the strongest forces in Chinese cinema in the late 1990s and early 2000s" (181).

The current situation of Shakespeare in China is also not so promising. Li Ruru's *Shashibiya: Staging Shakespeare in China* claims that both modern and traditional Chinese theaters have lost much of their audience since the 1980s, while also confronting issues of how the Chinese government "advocates the 'main theme' and puts strict controls on any Western culture that might challenge that" (229).<sup>19</sup> In other words, "currently, Shakespeare productions do not enjoy consistent financial support, nor is the cultural atmos-

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<sup>17</sup> This conclusion is based on the reviews I have been able to gather from news reports, film discussion boards, and personal blogs.

<sup>18</sup> This competition comes from the extremely popular television show in China called "Go! My Hero!" The show consists of young men competing with each other on a stage, who are being judged on the basis of their talent, looks and popularity. The winner is produced through an elimination process that extends over a few months.

<sup>19</sup> Li's use of the term "main theme" refers to "Deng Ziaoping's famous slogan 'socialism with Chinese characteristics,'" according to which "the whole country is run on a dual-track which attempts to maintain the communist ideology while operating a capitalist economy" (229).

phere very receptive to him” (230). It turns out that when director Hu claims “Shakespeare and Tibet. The world has no bigger star” (“Zhuanfang” 4; trans. mine), he is evidently not speaking from the standpoint of the Chinese mainstream audience.

Apart from restrictions of the social and political environment, the more significant reason behind *Prince of the Himalayas*'s defining effects has to do with the film's departure from the Asian orientalism that characterizes New Chinese cinema. To illustrate my argument, I would like to compare *Prince of the Himalayas* with *The Banquet* (*Ye Yan*), a Chinese adaptation of *Hamlet* that also came out in 2006 and follows the trend of Chinese “big films.”<sup>20</sup> *The Banquet* is directed by Chinese director Feng Xiao Gang and stars famous actors Zhang Zi Yi, Ge Yu, Daniel Wu, and Zhou Xun. Feng Xiao Gang is widely known as one of the Chinese Fifth Generation directors, who are also the main practitioners of New Chinese Cinema. *The Banquet* is a loosely adapted version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The film is set in tenth-century China and follows the contemporary trend of Chinese “big films,” displaying features of ancient Chinese culture and martial arts through aesthetically commercialized models. The main protagonist of the film is Empress Wan (Gertrude) rather than Prince Wu Luan (Hamlet). In this adaptation, Empress Wan is not Wu Luan's mother but rather the young woman for whom the prince had always had a secret love. However, Wan became Wu Luan's stepmother when Wu Luan's father, the Emperor, married her, and she later re-marries the new emperor Li (Claudius) after the death of his predecessor. She does not love either of the emperors but rather desires the love of Prince Wu Luan. While Wu Luan tries to end the illicit attraction by turning his attention to Qing Nu (Ophelia), Wan's love for the prince becomes a threatening envy and possessiveness. The poisoned wine originally prepared by Claudius in Shakespeare's play is here used by the Empress in an attempt to murder the emperor during the grand banquet. By the end of the banquet, all of the main characters except Empress Wan die—Emperor Li and Qing Nu by the poisoned wine and Wu Luan and General Yin Sun (Laertes) by the poisoned sword. In the following scene, the camera shows the new ruler Empress Wan lamenting the deaths. As she caresses the “red cloth of burning desire” and announces how “I am the only one made more glorious by the burning of

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<sup>20</sup> This term refers to the films of the New Chinese cinema made mostly by the Fifth Generation Chinese directors.

desire” (trans. mine), a blade suddenly comes flying from behind and into her heart. Desire wins over all, and nobody is left out.

In terms of textual modifications, *The Banquet* also plays around with the relationships of characters and aggrandizes the influence of love. Like Hu in *Prince of the Himalayas*, Feng seeks to find an explanation for Gertrude’s actions through the complication of her personal relationships. Another similarity is the humanization of Shakespeare’s Claudius, taking him off the spot as the ultimate villain. In *The Banquet*, although Emperor Li is cold and ruthless in many ways, he displays an intimate gentleness and love towards Empress Wan. In the end when he learns of the Empress’s plot against him, he still drinks the poisoned wine. He utters his last words in Wan’s lap, saying “How can I not drink the wine you pour for me?” (trans. mine). His act of suicide results from the disillusionment of life caused by the disillusionment of love, leaving death as the inevitable final resort to release him from the tangles of love, power, and hate. Prince Wu Luan also marks his final moments by saying: “To be able to die is a gift” (trans. mine). Both films address Hamlet’s death as a liberation from the distorted power struggles of love in a mundane world. However, the difference lies in the fact that characters in *Prince of the Himalayas* not only receive death as the end of sin but also project hope onto future rebirth. This concept of committing hope to one’s future life is a common theme in traditional Chinese tragedies, yet there is no mention of re-birth in *The Banquet*.<sup>21</sup> In the context of New Chinese Cinema, the idea of “self-exoticism” is usually exercised through the simultaneous experience of fetishized classical cultural representations along with up-dated or modernized conceptions, which invoke visual appeal and recognition through the synthesis of heightened extremes. While films of New Chinese Cinema such as *The Banquet* exoticize to unveil “the corrupt Chinese tradition” (*Primitive Passions* 202) and to show how “the ‘object’ recorded is no longer simply the ‘third world’ but ‘the West itself as mirrored in the eyes and handiwork of its others’” (202), *Prince of the Himalayas* exoticizes to promote the love-and-forgiveness-oriented cultural traditions of Tibetan Buddhism as a critique of external dominating notions of conflict and revenge.

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<sup>21</sup> According to Xun Sun, the idea of “re-birth” originates from both China’s indigenous religion Taoism and the exotic Buddhism. Taoism’s concept of “*zhe shi*” and Buddhism’s “*zhuo shi*” merged with Chinese literature and became influential ideas, especially among popular literature during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. These ideas not only prevailed in terms of content but also structure (Xun 207). Examples of prominent texts that reflect this feature are *Flowers in the Mirror* (1827) and *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1791-92).

While *The Banquet*'s intensification of *Hamlet*'s power and revenge parodies the Chinese gazer's self-orientalizing viewpoint, *Prince of the Himalayas*'s choice of love and forgiveness critiques the Chinese gazer's prioritized subjectivity. Both films oppose their "to-be-looked-at-ness"—*The Banquet* through the caricature of the orientalizing voyeurism of "Chineseness," and *Prince of the Himalayas* through the proposition of "Tibetanness" as rather the better beholder of the gaze.<sup>22</sup>

The major attractions of both *Prince of the Himalayas* and *The Banquet* for audiences have little to do with the grand name of Shakespeare. On the contrary, the combination of Tibetan culture with Shakespeare is perhaps why Chinese-speaking people in China did not go to see *Prince of the Himalayas*. There is a difference between exoticizing Tibetan culture as a far away Shangri-La living in its own culture and fetishizing Tibetan culture to promote a Tibetan cultural ideology to the Chinese public. The majority of the Chinese-speaking public in China do not care to learn what Tibetan culture has to say about *Hamlet*, let alone be preached about understanding *Hamlet* through the eyes of the "subaltern" Tibetan culture. The crisis of this film is not the lack of positive feedback from Chinese-speaking audiences who have experienced it, but rather the reluctance of Chinese people in China to even consider watching it. The film's proposition of Tibet as the subject of the gaze perhaps explains why most Tibetan audiences praise the film's fetishized "Tibetanness" while Chinese-speaking audiences in China appear indifferent to this supposedly visually appealing exoticization.

In reference to recent studies on Shakespeare as a global cultural field, the effects of *Prince of the Himalayas* could be read as a response to Kate Chedzoy's claim to see "Shakespeare as an empowering resource which has allowed other voices to make themselves heard, to stake a claim to cultural centrality" (qtd. in Massai 5). It takes effort to bring the minority's voice into the majority discourse. Despite the film's box office failure in mainland China, it has continued to win prominent awards and favorable praise outside the nation. To list a few examples, for instance, the film was highly popular when it was shown at the China Shanghai Film Festival in Tokyo. In 2007, *Prince of the Himalayas* was nominated for five awards under the category of "Best Foreign Film" in the first round of nominations for the 64<sup>th</sup> annual Golden Globe Awards, including best director, score, cinematography, adaptation, and

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<sup>22</sup> According to Saïd, orientalism is in part a form of voyeuristic aggression (Chow, *Primitive Passions* 171).

actor. The film had its North American première at AFI FEST 2007 and was also screened at the Cannes Marché du Film in 2008. Later that same year, Purba Rygal won Best Actor at the Monaco Charity Film Festival and the film also claimed the Best Film Award and Best Director Award at the Italy Kaleboruiya Film Festival. As *Prince of the Himalayas* continues to win recognition overseas, it can be hoped that, as a prominent promotion of Chinese minority nationality discourse, the film will eventually rise in significance and generate further efforts in cultural reconstructions of Tibetan cultural identities on the national and international stage.

### **Prospects of Experiencing Difference through Film: Willemen's "Double-Outsidedness"**

Apart from using Shakespeare as a possible bridge for intercultural approaches and cinema as a more widely distributed and influential cultural commodity, adopting film as a medium for intercultural experiences also helps to situate "Tibetanness" within the scope of cross-cultural communication. Adopting Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on "creative understanding," I will be discussing the productiveness of intercultural film-viewing experiences not only as inspiring communications between different entities but also as enabling realizations of the heterogeneous potential of the self. This idea of the self refers to two dimensions: the concept of "nation" and the human individual. As discussed earlier, traditional understandings of national cinema usually characterize national cinema as a practice of definite segregations between different nations or cultures; however, in Willemen's further usage of Bakhtin's theory, national cinema can also be regarded as the experience in which one "others" oneself to learn about the meanings of other cultures. For this particular film, the concept of "double-outsidedness" can be read as "internal double-outsidedness." Categorized under the title of Chinese national cinema, *Prince of the Himalayas*, with its ethnic difference that distinguishes it from majority or mainstream Chinese films, complicates the separation between insiders and outsiders, a feature generally associated with a national cinema. The film highlights the recognition of national "cinemas" as being internally diversified, calling for the necessity of intra-national intercultural communication.

According to Willemen's concept, it is through a film's creation of this experience of double-outsidedness for the audience, of seeing the other as the "other" and also of seeing oneself as the other's "other," that audiences are

able to combine the simultaneous experience of the “insider” and the “outsider” into one. In the case of *Prince of the Himalayas*, the use of *Hamlet* functions as a familiar platform for different cultures to better come together and also as a mutual yet diversified reference to the general human condition regardless of cultural differences. The film’s response to larger human questions, such as love and forgiveness, is indeed culturally accented yet also universally comprehensible, since love and forgiveness are general human emotions not restricted to certain cultural groups. The emotional concerns are relatable world-wide, but at the same time may work to invoke significantly varied responses among disparate individuals. By adopting the medium of film, *Prince of the Himalayas* practices Bakhtin’s idea of “creative understanding” through the multiple layers of “double-outsidedness.” The film offers various experiences for the individual, both on the cross-cultural level and the humanistic level. The distinction between the “other” and oneself is no longer discrete but rather based on an interrelated and fluid construction of identities through intercultural communications.

### **Conclusion: Multiplicity of Voices**

In his essay, Clive Barker writes that “The future of intercultural penetration and exchange lie for me in the structuring of meetings between individuals and groups of people, in which there are some shared features or understanding, but which also embody a range of cultural differences” (256). In the case of *Prince of the Himalayas*, the use of a well-known Shakespearean play has the hopes of increasing the possibility for Tibetan culture to cross over cultural borders and reach a broader international audience. Through the process of interculturalism, this adaptation becomes an experience of cultural difference both in the intracultural and intercultural senses. It is a questioning and further exploration into both the diversity of the Tibetan cultural image and also *Hamlet*’s theme of revenge. The major changes made in this adaptation do not characterize the film as a re-interpretation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as a whole; instead, the film’s presentation of a Tibetan Buddhist perspective on *Hamlet*’s theme of revenge works to suggest a different outlook on Hamlet’s dilemma of whether one should continue to suffer in the world or to accept death, given “the futility of fighting against an uncontainable and overwhelming force” (Jenkins 278). In addition, through the juxtaposition of *Hamlet*’s plot with the Tibetan Bon religion, the film also comes to present

another dimension of Tibet that serves to break out of Tibet's culturally and politically constructed Shangri-la and Buddhist image.

In the course of intercultural practice, the crossing of cultural borders not only involves literal translations but also social and political transformations. As Chow writes, "cultural translation needs to be rethought as the co-temporal exchange and contention between different social groups deploying different sign systems that may not be synthesizable to one particular model of language or representation" (*Primitive Passions* 197). In regard to the final product, the film becomes also a "translation" of the current cultural and political images of Tibet and Shakespeare, both in the sense of production and consumption. By making a Shakespearean film with Tibetan cultural foundations or the other way around of deciding to produce a Tibetan film with Shakespeare's play, the final product invokes an original critique and re-examination of both texts in the framework of this newly created intercultural platform that breaks through former stabilized textual and sociopolitical categorizations.

Perhaps one cannot say that this is an authentic Tibetan interpretation of *Hamlet*, not so much because the director is not Tibetan but because of the poststructuralist understanding that cultural images can only be constructed through representations or represented through constructions. Critics and scholars have indeed questioned the director's motives in bringing together Shakespeare and Tibet. Why Tibet? Why Shakespeare? When he stated his initial goal as being the advocacy of love and forgiveness, one could not help but wonder whether the film becomes Hu's own answer to Hamlet's question rather than a possible Tibetan solution to Hamlet's dilemma. While the film may have initially been made to convey the director's own ideals of love and forgiveness, by contributing to the creation of a Tibetan film and adapting Shakespeare's plot along with direct quotes from the play, the film becomes an amalgamation of the three. Hu may wish to speak through Tibet and Shakespeare, but Tibet and Shakespeare also speak for themselves. In the meeting of Tibet, Shakespeare, and Hu, *Prince of the Himalayas* constructs new representations of Shakespeare, Chinese nationalities, and Tibetan cultural identities that reflect their origins through the lens of the director and of the camera, subjectively and objectively, literally and politically, culturally and socially. Three voices speak in unison, yet three voices also speak separately, to each other and to others.

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