

How to Read a Film: *The Search*
ORIAS/PFA

Pre-viewing topics:

- Context and Audience: Chinese *minzu* policy and “minority nationalities” films in China
- Narrative and Message: *Drime Kunden* and traditional values
- Cinematography: long takes, composition, perspective

Context and Audience: Chinese *minzu* policy and “minority nationalities” films in China

The Peoples Republic of China officially recognizes 56 ethnic groups within the country, collectively called the *Zhonghua minzu*. This term, which is loosely translated as “Chinese ethnicities” is fraught with complex problems, just like ideas and laws related to race, tribal affiliation, borders, and Americanness in the United States. The appeal of current *minzu* policy is that it supports China’s current territorial claims and provides a way to incorporate non-Han-led Dynasties (like the Manchu) into an unbroken national history.

Among the many problems of the current policy are, first, that *minzu* were delineated and officially recognized by the Chinese government, not by themselves. Second, some groups referred to as *shaoshu minzu* (ethnic minorities within China) don’t consider themselves to be ethnic minorities, so much as conquered nations still living on their own land under Chinese control. For comparison, imagine a person in the United States who is officially enrolled in the Lakota nation and who lives on the Cheyenne River reservation in South Dakota. Is this person a member of an ethnic minority within the larger American nation? Or is the person a member of an ethnic majority that still occupies its historical homeland, but under the control of an imperialist US government? How might these different ideas of identity affect your ideas about your culture, your political rights, and your aspirations for the future?

Until about 1990, Chinese films were produced to communicate state-sanctioned messages within categories that were identified by their thematic messages. “Minority nationalities” films were films that conveyed the idea that the PRC had liberated China’s official *shaoshu minzu* from class oppression. After 1990, this genre of film split into two sub-genres. One sub-genre continued to be directed at Han audiences, generally featuring Han actors (even in non-Han roles). Films in this sub-genre flatten and romanticize non-Han peoples (think *Dances with Wolves*). The second sub-genre is films made by ethnic minority people, more often featuring actors from that community, speaking in languages other than Chinese. That said, funding film-making, attracting sufficient audiences to justify that funding, and getting films past the government censorship process require film-makers to navigate social and political concerns beyond the exploration of community identity and experiences.

What do you think Pema Tseden is communicating about the relationship between Tibetan people and the land of Tibet?

Narrative and Message: *Drime Kunden* and traditional values

All the characters in *The Search* are Tibetan and the action takes place in the director’s birth-region of Amdo, an area that used to be northeastern Tibet, and is now the Qinghai province of China. It is northeast of the Tibet Autonomous Region.

The film follows the search for actors to play parts in a film version of a well-known Tibetan “opera” (*Ihmo*). There are about 8 or 9 well-known traditional Tibetan operas, of which *Drime Kunden* is one. Operas are traditionally performed in the spring as part of an annual festival. Training for the opera differs inside and outside Tibet (e.g. in India or Nepal), and ranges from local village theater companies to university programs. Performance can be politically charged in both places, depending on funding and context:

Likewise, watching senior members of Ihmo associations performing in Lhasa, prostrating themselves in front of the summer palace of an exiled yet continually revered Dalai Lama is certainly not effective Chinese propaganda. Watching the noble and suffering prince Drime Kunden, one of Ihmo’s most potent protagonists, stand powerless, eyeless, and alone as hundreds of onlookers weep uncontrollably for a fallen leader, either in exile or in Tibet, is political. But it is also simply effective performance. (Fitzgerald, 2014)

What is the story of *Drime Kunden* and how does Pema Tseden use the focus on this opera to explore diverse values within the Tibetan community?

Cinematography: long takes, composition, perspective and reverse cuts (crossing the 180-degree line)

The Search incorporates unusually long takes with very little camera movement. **How do these long takes make you feel and what do you find yourself looking at during each shot?**

How does Pema Tseden frame individual people and groups within space? How does this technique make you feel as you view?

How does Pema Tseden position the camera vis á vis the actors? When does he break the 180-degree rule? What is the effect of each of these techniques for you, as viewer?

Final Questions

How does the cinematography of *The Search* contribute to Pema Tseden’s exploration of (1) the relationship between Tibetan land and Tibetan people and (2) the diversity of values within the Tibetan community?

What does this film teach you about how particular film-making techniques are used to generate feelings about time, individualism, identification with characters, etc.?