

# The Realistic Dilemma of Overseas Dissemination of Chinese Ethnic Minority-themed Films

Jing Deng

Graduate University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

---

**Abstract:** Films on ethnic minority themes are important components of Chinese films, and are also the main way to promote the cultures and customs of ethnic minorities and build up a distinctive cultural image of China. In recent years, the overseas dissemination of ethnic minority films has become more and more prosperous, gradually forming a pattern of dissemination that is coordinated by many parties and jointly constructed at home and abroad, but their communication still faces practical difficulties that affect the efficiency and impact of overseas dissemination of ethnic minority themes. The main purpose of this study is to understand the practical difficulties in the overseas dissemination of films on ethnic minority themes as a commodity, a cultural product, and an ideological expression, and to analyze the dissemination difficulties in order to gain a clearer understanding of the problems faced by the overseas dissemination of ethnic minority films, so as to provide a valuable reference for the development of overseas dissemination in the future.

**Keywords:** Themes of Chinese ethnic minorities; Film; Overseas dissemination; Dilemma.

---

## 1. Introduction

Films with ethnic minority themes have a long history of overseas spreading, dating as far back as before the founding of New China. As early as 1939, "Mulan Goes to War" was screened in Singapore cinemas, which was also the beginning of the overseas spreading of Chinese ethnic minority films. After the founding of New China, with the gradual deepening of the reform and opening-up process, the film industry with ethnic minority themes embraced a golden period of development. During this period, the Chinese government vigorously promoted the production and dissemination of ethnic minority films, which have been screened in nearly 40 countries, not only allowing people in more countries to understand China's ethnic minorities but also making an important contribution to the construction of China's ethnic cultural discourse system. After the implementation of the "One Belt, One Road" strategy, films with ethnic minority themes are facing a broader space for dissemination, and at the same time a new dilemma of overseas dissemination. In order to disseminate ethnic minority films more efficiently and widely, and to promote the propagation of China's ethnic culture, we should first understand the current difficulties we face so that we can grasp the future development directions and enhance the overseas dissemination strength of films with ethnic minority themes

## 2. The Dilemma of the Overseas Dissemination of Ethnic Minority-themed Films as Commodities

### 2.1. The Lacking of the Spirits of Films Entertainment

Ethnic minority-themed films are ultimately films, which have obvious commodity characteristics, and whether or not they have commercial value is one of the bases for measuring ethnic minority-themed films. Since 2000, China's minority-themed film works have become more and more abundant. Take the works of director Han Wanfeng as an example, he

has made seven ethnic minority-themed films, namely: The Taste of Green Betel Nut, The Wedding of Irma, Our Voice Ga, Spade Li Sonata, Home on the Clouds, Son of Tima and The Bride of Manai, all of which were made by him on his own initiative to contact the local government and obtain funding from the perspective of local tourism and cultural propagation. These films also integrate certain commercial elements without interfering with artistic creation, so that the films on ethnic minority themes have both cultural attributes and commercial value. The theme of this series of films is largely similar: the influence of modern civilization on traditional cultures and the main character's adherence to cultural heritages. In the Taste of Green Betel Nut, for example, the hero, Wang Qinglin, a teacher of the Li ethnic group, is worried about the disappearance of the Li Language of Li ethnic groups and tries to promote it with his own efforts. In "Erma's Wedding", the main character, Erma, a girl of the Qiang ethnic group in Sichuan, is married to a young Han Chinese man, Dachuan, which highlights the cultural differences between the two ethnic groups and drives the plot by depicting the clash of cultures between the Han and the Qiang.

It can be seen that these minority films are all devoted to showing the preciousness of minority languages and cultures, trying to awaken people's memories of minority cultures, and advocating active participation in the promotion and transmission of ethnic minority cultures. Although these films have integrated commercial elements to some extent, such as promoting a certain brand of merchandise or tourism in a minority region, their overall tone is still heavy, serious, and even pessimistic. As a cultural art, these films are very successfully portrayed, but as a commodity, their spirits of entertainment seem to be missing. In the case of films about ethnic minorities such as The Cocomnuts and Prince of the Himalayas, the emphasis on their own "entertainment" has led to superficial entertainment, which not only fails to reflect the spirits of the entertainment in film art but also leads to a gradual shrinking of the search for cultural values. In many of the current ethnic minority films, the plot is simple and orderly, the tension of the plot is weak, and the plot is rigid,

all of which leads to ethnic minority films being reduced to simple symbols of ethnic cultures, lacking spirits of dramas and amusements.

## **2.2. Over-elegant Artistic Approaches to Filming**

The filming and overseas dissemination of ethnic minority films have political and cultural significance. With the rapid development of the Chinese commercial economy, the resources for ethnic minority films have become more and more abundant, the material base for filming has gradually increased, and more and more local departments are participating in the filming of ethnic minority films. The production of minority films has become a "local project" and a "national process". While the attribute of the commodity has defined the new ecology of Chinese cinema, the support of the state and the government has promoted the sublimation of the attribute of ethnic minority films, which have gradually formed a special commodity ecology with ethnic minority culture as the core. The forms of public welfare projects and cultural preservation projects are gradually emerging. In order to meet the government's call for the promotion of minority cultures, directors and others pay more attention to the language of the cameras when filming films, and try to present the traditional customs of ethnic minorities in a more elegant manner. Such filming techniques contribute to the loss of authenticity of minority cultures and customs in films.

## **2.3. The Redundancy of Genres and the Weakness of Styles**

Among the ethnic minority-themed films currently being disseminated overseas, the films always spare no effort to show the languages and cultures of ethnic minorities and demonstrate the directors' and producers' understanding of the cultural connotations of ethnic minorities. Director Han Wanfeng once said, "The easiest way to distinguish an ethnic group is their language. Although, many of these ethnic minorities do not have their own writing, they all have their own mother tongues .....". The use of ethnic languages to assist in the representation of minority cultures also introduces a large number of redundant real-life elements. This redundancy of elements has led to a weakening of the cultural style of the film itself, and the overlapping of many different real-life elements has made the genre of the film even more difficult to define, with many films neither being able to be described entirely as urban emotional dramas nor being able to directly and prominently reflect the cultural characteristics of ethnic minorities. Take the *Bride of Manet* as an example, the film was initially positioned as an ethnic minority-themed film. During the process of filming, in order to enhance the film's merchandising value, the director introduced emotional elements, while adding a large number of elements such as single mothers, marriage, multi-ethnic emotions, ethnic cultural differences, cancer patients, ethnic languages, etc. The final presentation could not fully demonstrate the basic sincerity of an ethnic minority-themed film, and there are problems such as a complicated plot, confusing logic in driving the plot, and lack of focus in the interplay of multiple elements, which greatly weaken the style of films.

## **2.4. Many Obstacles in the Dissemination Market**

According to the current overseas dissemination practice of

China's minority-themed films, there are many obstacles to their dissemination market, manifested in the lack of a mature overseas film market. An essential sign of the deep development of the film market is the classification of film categories, which means a film market that can meet the needs of different audiences. However, there is a contradiction between the types of demand and the content of supply in the Chinese film market at present, and films with ethnic minority themes are severely squeezed. Most films with ethnic minority themes can only be broadcast on specific television stations and cannot enter theatres, and their distribution channels overseas are narrow. Take "The Holy Land of Jinnah" as an example, its entry into local cinemas in various countries is at the 8:30 am or 10:00 am stage, with prime time almost always scheduled for foreign blockbusters. Take the *Quiet Manihot* as an example, despite the fact that the film has won several awards at the Shanghai International Film Festival and the Busan Film Festival, it has not been released in cinemas and has only been screened within a film forum.

## **3. The Dilemma of the Overseas Dissemination of Ethnic Minority-themed Films as Cultural Products**

### **3.1. The Poor Ability to Avoid Cultural Discounts**

The phenomenon of cultural discounting is a common problem in ethnic minority films and is one of the difficulties in the overseas dissemination of such films. Taking *Gangla Medo* as an example, the film depicts the story of An Yu, a Han Chinese singer who loses her voice and is summoned by a vision to travel to Tibet in search of the voice of the gods. In this film, the focus is on the natural beauty of Tibet, showing the scenes of Tibet as not only mysterious but also exciting. It can be seen that the film implicitly shows the resistance to city life and modern social life, promoting the more primitive minority life, but with little subtlety to show the charming cultures of ethnic minorities. This is a concrete manifestation of cultural discounting. The films of ethnic minority themes are similar in their methods of expression, and their ability to avoid cultural discounting is weak, which seriously affects the communication value of ethnic minority films overseas and is not beneficial to the development of overseas communication markets.

### **3.2. The Tendency of Ethnic Cultures to Be Flattering**

The development of modern society has caused an impact on traditional production methods, values, and cultural customs, and some ethnic minority regions are gradually developing from the original agricultural and nomadic civilization to the modern civilization, and are in a transitional stage. This transition is reflected in the films on ethnic minority themes, and gradually manifests itself in a dichotomy between tradition and modernity, leading to a polarization in the expression of ethnic minority cultures in the films. One of them makes ethnic minority cultures the antithesis of modern cultures, makes moral accusations against modern cultures, and invariably glorifies ethnic minority regions and cultures. At the same time, they emphasize the purity and simplicity of minority regions, stressing that there is no worldly strife or deceit in minority regions, only simple folkways and pious beliefs. It can be seen

that this tendency to flatter the expressions of minority films is a serious problem in the overseas dissemination of minority films, which is not conducive to enhancing the overseas dissemination of minority films.

### **3.3. The Elevated Portrayal of The Mainstream Culture**

Since the 21st century, the process of globalization has deepened and the overseas dissemination of Chinese films has flourished, which has pushed ethnic minority-themed films into a more complex dimension of intermingling between the nation and the world. In such a context, the overseas dissemination of ethnic minority films has become more sensitive, and many films with ethnic minority themes have a tendency to blindly promote Chinese culture across the board, to encourage people to learn about traditional culture while overlooking the bad things in it, and to over-exalt it. Such elevated depictions portray ethnic minorities as protected characters, contributing to mysterious and submissive-orientated images of ethnic minority groups, and weakening the overseas appeal of ethnic minority cultures.

## **4. The Dilemma of the Overseas Dissemination of Ethnic Minority-themed Films as the Ideology**

### **4.1. The Division between Ethnic Minority Cultures and Chinese Cultures**

Films with ethnic minority themes are not only a commodity or a cultural product, but also a form of ideological expression. The visual languages and core ideas in minority-themed films should be the refined representations of mainstream ideologies. However, in current films about ethnic minorities, many people completely separate ethnic minority cultures from traditional Chinese cultures in order to emphasize the preciousness and specialness of ethnic minority cultures. This form is not only detrimental to the use of ethnic minority-themed films for overseas publicity to build up the image of Chinese ethnic cultures but is also likely to cause people to have a wrong perception of ethnic cultures.

### **4.2. The Loss of Cultural Spirits and the Aggravation of the Ethnic Crisis**

It is very important to establish a cultural protection concept for ethnic films. In the process of overseas dissemination of ethnic minority films, attention should be

paid to the protection of ethnic resources, folk customs, and ethnic spirits, and ethnic resources should be reasonably used for filming and the folk cultures should be truly recorded in the films. However, in some ethnic minority films, the promotion of ethnic minority culture is superficial and exaggerates the weakness of certain ethnic cultures, such as the part in *The Horse Thief* where "the 'outsiders' do not respect ethnic concepts"[3]. These exaggerations not only fail to show the essence of national cultures but also affect the effectiveness of the film's overseas publicity.

## **5. Conclusion**

In summary, as an essential medium for promoting Chinese ethnic cultures and highlighting cultural characteristics, films with ethnic minority themes need not only to meet the background of the times but also to have independent cultural values and avoid becoming a vessel for other cultures; they also need to pay more attention to the films themselves, taking into account the cultural and entertainment spirit of the films. As for the current situation, the films on ethnic minority themes lack the spirits of entertainment as commodities, the filming methods are too elegant, and the dissemination market is hindered; as cultural products, there is an obvious cultural discount in the process of dissemination, and the cultural connotations are gradually distorted and exaggerated due to the elevated portrayal of mainstream culture; as ideological carriers, there is still a separation between ethnic minority cultures and Chinese cultures in the films. All these problems have hindered the overseas dissemination of ethnic minority films and affected their communication value and effectiveness. In the future, we should take the current real-life difficulties as a basis and find the right starting point in order to enhance the overseas dissemination capacity of ethnic minority films.

## **References**

- [1] Chen Jingyao. The cross-cultural communication value of ethnic minority-themed films from the narrative turn of Tibetan-themed films in the new period [J]. *Drama House*, 2021(30):138-140.
- [2] Mu Ling. Films with ethnic minority themes: the problem of "unity and diversity" and the shaping of community consciousness[J]. *Contemporary Films*, 2020(11):62-69.
- [3] Ma Xiaohu. The Cross-National Ethnic Narratives in the Films of Ethnic Minorities since the New Period[J]. *Contemporary Films*, 2020(02):120-125.