

## **EXOTIC LANDSCAPES AND ETHNIC FRONTIERS CHINA'S NATIONAL MINORITIES ON FILM**

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This paper presents a seldom known chapter within the general history of Chinese documentary film: the early history of ethnographic film in the People's Republic of China between 1957 and 1966 - prior to the outbreak of the so-called "Cultural Revolution". Taking as example the films on the Oroqen, Mosuo and other Non-Han-Chinese ethnic groups—films which were produced during the late 1950s and early 1960s as part of a wider National project—the pre-1966 ethnic identification campaigns—this paper—by way of contextualizing the historical and political background of these early Chinese Ethnographic films, discusses the strategies of filmic representation of the ethnic Other and strategies of ethnographic authentication which are specific for these very early examples of ethnographic documentary film in China.

**Keywords:** China. Ethnographic Film. National Minorities. Authenticity. History of Documentary Film.

### **Introduction**

Visual media (including ethnographic film) are now an integral part of the canon of ethnographic studies and social and cultural analyses. The American anthropologist Karl Heider (1991) showed in his study of Indonesian cinema how the Indonesian state authorities have used film to help create national consciousness in their multi-ethnic state. In the age of satellite television and affordable video cameras, visual media have become new instruments for forging identity. The same phenomenon holds true for China as for Indonesia. The current political leaders are well aware of the influence of visual media in creating a national identity. Since the founding of the PRC, film as a mass medium, which could be seen by a large populace, even in remote rural areas—small film-teams with a projector were traveling from one village to another showing educational films and news-reels to the village people, thus continuing a tradition which was established centuries ago by opera troupes and ballad-singers—were strategically employed by the leadership to forge political conscienceness and to transmit the correct ideological conception of the world. Film, which was called „Electric Shadows“ by the Chinese, this new technical apparatus, product and medium, was introduced to China at a very early stage. It was Charles Pathé, who showed some films, which were shot by

a Lumière cameraman on a screening which took place on the 11th of August 1896 in the Xu amusement park in Shanghai (Cf. Kramer 1996: 14). But contrary to the development in the West, it took more than half a century until the first ethnographic films were shot in China. As it is common knowledge, Film was invented over a century ago and ethnographic films have been produced ever since the technological inventions of nineteenth-century industrial society made possible the visual recording of encounters with other societies (Cf. de Brigard 1995). And yet, without exaggeration, the influence of visual anthropology, including ethnographic documentary film, continues to grow day by day, both in a global societal sense, in terms of the ever-increasing importance of audiovisual media in everyday life, and within anthropology itself, due to the increased significance of this discipline. A remarkable improvement in the contextual and technical quality of the products - primarily ethnographic films - has been achieved through improved technical approaches like digital video or multimedia, accompanied by an improvement in international communication since the 1970s.

Almost all filmic approaches developed in the realm of Anthropology, whether labeled direct cinema “observational film-making”, or “cinema vérité”, or any other approach employing a non-privileged camera style or a more self-reflexive stance in film-making, have to deal with the problem, either explicitly or implicitly, of filmic veracity or ethnographic authenticity.

Especially since post-modernist discourse and the critique of master narratives took a firm hold within the humanities and social sciences, deconstruction and cognitive constructivism are discussing the problem of „ethnographic authentication“ (Cf. Loizos 1993:10) and it is therefore also of central importance to theorists and practitioners of Ethnographic film. In the early 1990s, in a seminal essay, the film-maker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha even goes so far, as to question the by now established canon of Ethnographic film-making i.e. long shots, unity of time and space, hand-held camera, as little editing as possible, synch-sound recording etc., as false allure, as an orthodoxical apotheosis of the literal trope, authenticity“. Or to put it in her own words:

A beautiful shot is apt to lie, while a bad shot is a guarantee of authenticity, one that loses in attractiveness but gains in truth (Trinh 1991: 61).

Filmic authenticity and ethnographic authentication is becoming a problem, since the natural taken-for-grantedness of a realist film document as purely authentic and unmediated becomes more and more questionable. Of course, it is exactly this kind of concept of filmic authenticity which starts to be challenged by theorists like Thrinh T. minh-Ha, Bill Nichols, Michael Renov and Brian Winston.

Nevertheless traditional Film Studies knows of an authentic version of a certain film text and many film scholars are eagerly working on the production of these historical film texts. Another question, albeit not less philological, is to ask

about the historical source value of a filmic document. By asking this question it is the aim to find systematic methods or models within a general critique of historical evidence. Or to say it in other words, to clarify whether the film material can meet with the expectations additional information (written captions, commentary text, programme information, production information) is trying to provide or what the film context tries to convey. To give but one example: It is “non-authentic” when the german news reel or „Wochenschau“ shows the overtaking and bombardement of a bridge, not showing the explosion of the latter, but cutting in the explosion of a factory workshop, because the explosion of the bridge happened too quickly and the cameraman was killed while performing his job. In general all compilation films and news-reels are measured against this ideal of authenticity.

Until recently it was generally agreed upon that in order to give an authentic image or representation the documentary filmmaker only has to film what is in front of his/her eyes, what is already „out there“, without any medial arrangement of the reality in question, at the same time refusing all sorts of inscenatory staging which are common in fictional film.

Following this concept, developed in orthodox documentary filmmaking, the authenticity of a documentary film scene argues for the representation of an action or event, which would have happened in exactly the same way, if no camera had been present to put this event into its filmic representational context. It is the ideal of an unobstructed, direct filmic representation of a reality which is expressing itself almost immediately in indexical terms on the film or TV screen extending seamlessly from a pro-filmic event to what is captured in the frame of the camera.

Another aspect of the meaning of the attribute “authentic” is not directly referring to the praxis of the documentary filmmaker. It may make sense to speak of an authentic scene or filmic document if the film’s protagonist who most of the time is a non-professional, in the very moment of “acting“ or behaving in front of the camera is not constantly aware of her own visual representation or what she might mean to the audience. This of course has something to do with social drama, and it were the filmmakers belonging to the “Direct Cinema” tradition e.g. Frederick Wiseman, the Maysles brothers, Richard Leacock and Richard Pennebaker amongst others, who were exactly choosing these social situations which developed according to a certain intrinsic socio-psychological structure.

The expectations of the audience is crucial in this context. Only when a film is able to trustworthy claim that it is following the above mentioned ideals will it be treated as belonging to this historical established canonical register and the audience will recognize the film as being part of the genre „documentary film“. Only in the very moment of a film’s reception by an audience can this film live up to the trust which the audience is investing in it. It can win the audience, only by inscribing it’s very integrity into the film text proper. Of course, nowadays, in the

age of mockumentary and fake documentaries, it is ever more harder to achieve this recognition and the genre boundaries between fiction and non-fiction films are getting increasingly blurred.

Recently, poststructuralist theories of documentary filmmaking under the influence of semiopragmatics, cognitive semiotics and cognitive film theory, are questioning the taken-for-grantedness of authenticity in documentary film. They see authenticity more as a reception effect. The impression of direct evidence, filmic trustworthiness in documentary is, according to these recent theoretical models, achieved by a distinct filmic structuring, sending out filmic signals or signs of authenticity, which the audience tends to read in following a certain genre convention and identifying this film as a documentary film. The overall impression of being an authentic documentary is not any more depended upon the relationship of filmic and profilmic reality. On the contrary it is intrinsic to documentary as a visual medium following certain genre conventions and constructions, especially in the age of digital media.

### **The “Chinese Historical Ethnographic Film Series” at IWF**

It soon will become clear what kind of theoretical impact the problem of “ethnographic authentication” or “filmic authenticity” will have for the Chinese ethnographic compilation films from the 1950s and 1960s. But before turning to an albeit tentative theoretical analysis of this film material, it is necessary to develop the historical background of the re-editing and publication of these films at the Institute of Scientific Film–knowledge and media (IWF) and the history of the films production as such.

In October 1992 a delegation of the Institute of Nationality Studies (INS), Beijing, visited the IWF in Göttingen, Germany in order to sign a cooperation contract about the editing of historical ethnographic film material.

Contacts between the INS and the IWF are longstanding and date back to May 1989. At that time, Yang Guanghai, a senior research member of the INS, cameraman and director of most of the film-productions of the INS, visited the IWF. We were discussing with him the possibilities and chances of a cooperation project between INS and IWF. It was decided to begin with the re-editing and publication in the IWF of ethnographic documentary films from the P.R. of China shot between 1957 and 1966, thus establishing the “Chinese Historical Ethnographic Film Series”. In Beijing it was agreed upon that the INS would provide the IWF with video master copies of fourteen ethnographic documentaries and the IWF would be ceded the right to re-edit and publish these films for western audiences.

These ethnographic documentaries were originally shot on 35mm black and white film-material. They were produced during the period from 1957 to 1966, that is to say, prior to the outbreak of the so-called “Cultural Revolution”. It was

during that time that the State Council of the P.R. of China and the Nationality Affairs Commission ordered the INS to send out film-teams to the ethnic minority areas in China and to start documenting the life and culture of these non-Han ethnic minorities.

If one takes a closer look at the current situation of ethnographic film-making in China, one can easily see that the work carried out today owes its merits and shortcomings in many respects to a more than forty year old tradition, which had its beginnings in the 1950s. The film on the Dulong (Drung) ethnic group, for example, is a first-hand anthropological source. As to my knowledge, apart from some articles and short monographs all written in Chinese, no anthropological literature exists in Western Languages on this ethnic group, at least not for the 1950s and 1960s.

The main aims of the Chinese Historical Ethnographic Film Series can thus be described as follows:

#### **Preservation of Historical Documents**

The film-material was copied on Betacam SP and is distributed by the IWF as VHS-videotapes. The original films are not being re-cut or re-edited, so that their original content is fully preserved. They are therefore important historical source material for an analysis of the beginnings and methods of ethnographic research in the P. R. of China.

#### **Editing of Ethnographic Source Material**

Apart from publishing the films together with a brief written publication some of the above-mentioned films are going to be analysed in greater detail within the framework of anthropological theory. A comprehensive monograph about these films will be published taking into account all written source materials in Western languages and Chinese. Together with film director Yang Guanghai the content, methodology and historical origins of these films are being analysed (see Krueger: 2002).

#### **Analysis of Film-historic Documents**

Yang Guanghai is one of the most important ethnographic filmmakers belonging to the first generation of Chinese documentary directors who immediately started to work after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. He has been engaged in ethnographic filmmaking from its early beginnings in the 1950s, when he was working as cameraman and director of many of the ethnographic films of the INS. He is the Doyen of ethnographic film in China and has worked for more than 36 years in the field. I have undertaken a critical reappraisal of his work as an ethnographic filmmaker by analysing not only the content of these films but also their technical and stylistic particularities. This work is an important contribution

to the history of ethnographic filmmaking as a whole and will hopefully close some gaps in an all to seldom explored field of research. In addition to the written documentation on the life and works of Yang Guanghai I also hope to produce a biographical film portrait of director/cinematographer Yang Guanghai with the collaboration of some of my Chinese colleagues at a later stage of this long-term project. By focusing on his personal experiences and recollections we will provide a vivid general introduction into the history of Chinese ethnographic documentary film.

Until now I have completed the re-editing of the following films for the IWF:

1. Naxi Art and Culture in Lijiang
2. The Azhu Marriage System of the Yongning Naxi (Mosuo)
3. The Dulong (Drung)
4. The Oroqen People.
5. The Kawa (Wa)
6. The Kucong
7. The Hunting and Fishing life of the Hezhe(n)
8. The Li from Hainan Island
9. The Jingpo
10. The Ewenki on the Banks of the Argun River
11. The slave-system in the town of Shahliq (Uygur)

Three more films, one on the Dai from Yunnan and two on the Yi and Yao from the Cool Mountains in Sichuan Province and the Greater Yao Mountains in Guangxi Autonomous Region of the Zhuang are still awaiting to be published in an international English version.

When I started to work on this film corpus I was only interested in this material from a purely anthropological or ethnographical point of view. But as I continued to work on this material more intensively, scrutinizing these films over and over again, more and more serious questions came to mind to which I did not had satisfying answers. It seemed that I had to take a closer look at the films' filmic structure, their editing strategies and the overall production background. I thought that there must be more to it than simple dismissal or outright rejection of these films as fore instance the German anthropologist Michael Oppitz seems to suggest when he writes:

These films which were realised by the INS in Beijing were produced according to a leitmotif or identical structure: Every minority was represented visually imitating a summarized classical monography. Scences from daily life, religious practices,

marriage customs, social and economic relationships, etc follow each other. But the accompanying commentary and the way of editing these scenes gave these different films, whether they were portraying the Wa, Kucong or Li a homogenous, ideological framework which was forced on them from the outside thus positioning these ethnic groups on a grand evolutionistic scale. In the end these films do not really document the tribal societies, they claim to portray, but on the contrary, they tell more about the overall ideological situation of the Han-chinese after 1949 (Oppitz 1989: 25).

Although in general I do agree with Oppitz, there still remains a feeling of unease. Is he not too quick in delivering this verdict? Are these films really mutually exchangeable, is their filmic structure really all the same? Are there not distinct variations in portraying, for instance, the Oroqen or the Mosuo? But all the more urging was the question, despite of generally accepting Oppitz reading, in what specific way were these films using a certain filmic language. How is the relationship between commentary and visual image constructed? And how do these films adopt documentary conventions in order to give the audience the impression of filmic evidence or ethnographic authenticity? These are all questions, I have pursued in my research work on these early ethnographic films from China and which are now being published in German (Krueger: 2002).

### **The making of Scientific Documentary Films on National Minorities in the PRC-The Historical Background**

Recently a lot has been published on the history of feature film in China and on the films of the so-called Fifth Generation filmmakers (e.g. Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang and others), but until very recently little has been published dealing with the history of documentary filmmaking in China. Not to speak of the history of Ethnographic In order to come to terms with this situation, the main aim was to gather information by interviewing eye-witnesses i.e. ethnologists, who were acting as scientific advisors for the films' production and directors and cameramen, who were actively engaged with the production work on these films during that period of time. In addition to that, the gathering and translation of hitherto unpublished manuscripts, articles and monographies, which were published in Chinese for internal use only and not for a wider public, had to be done.

During the time of the films production, i.e. the 1950s and early 1960s the Chinese Communist Government initiated-through its scientific institutions like the Chinese Academy of Sciences-several so-called "Ethnic minority research-groups", whose main task was, to classify the numerous non-Han-Chinese ethnic groups in China. Several thousand researchers - anthropologists, linguists, historians and others-were sent out into the "field" to collect ethnographic data, such as genealogies, oral traditions, etc. and to investigate into the social and political structures of these ethnic groups.

It was decided that the ways of life of these ethnic minorities should be documented by using film as a visual medium. Under the guidance of the Institute of Nationality Studies (INS) in Beijing, it was one of the main aims to document all officially acknowledged fifty-five “National Minorities” on film. This very ambitious film-project was never completed. The “Cultural Revolution”, which began in 1966, brought all academic and scientific activities, not only documentary filmmaking, for more than a decade to an end. Only as late as the late 1970s it became possible again to continue that work which had been begun prior to 1966.

What can be said about these films on the Naxi, Mosuo, Li, Kucong, Wa, Jingpo, Dulong (Drung), Yao, Oroqen, Ewenki, Hezhe and Uygur, Dai and Yi? The quality of the films varies quite considerably. But if one leaves aside the explicit ideological overtones and takes a closer look at these films and their documented content through the eyes of a careful anthropological analyst one finds out that these films are indeed very important ethnographic source material. Many sequences in these films are unwittingly historical documents insofar, as they are preservations of something which has been lost forever not only because of the historical and cultural changes in China taking place today. For example, the film on „Naxi Arts and Culture from Lijiang“ in many parts documents the religious architecture and wall-paintings of the temple-buildings in Lijiang which have been destroyed by the Red Guards during the “Cultural Revolution”.

In order to give a vivid picture of the political and scientific atmosphere during the 1950s, the time of the launching of this biggest and hitherto unprecedented ethnographic film project in the PRC, I quote a lengthy paragraph from an article, written by Zhang Jianguo, anthropologist and former head of the Video Unit at the INS, which he originally published in a Chinese Anthropological Journal, called “Development in Anthropological Research (Minzu Yanjiu Dongtai) in 1993:

With the gradual development of the Democratic reform in the minority nationalities areas across the country, rapid changes took place in the social structure of these minority nationalities. Comrade Peng Zhen asked the deputy secretary-general of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, Zhang Su, to communicate the gist of a talk by Chairman Mao given at the beginning of “Liberation” to the relevant 30 comrades who were conducting “Nationalities Work” and research: Lose no time to “save” and investigate the social and historical conditions of the minority nationalities. Comrade Peng Zhen asked the Nationalities Commission of the National People’s Congress to take the initiative in organising an investigation group on the minority nationalities social history and to start with research work. Comrade Peng Zhen pointed out that the aim for this investigation was on one hand to get to know the real conditions for making guidelines and policies and, on the other, to conduct scientific research and to call on ethnologists/anthropologists to go deep among the masses of minority nationalities, in order to become a modern “Morgan”... Some old



academicians of noble character and high prestige suggested that documentary filming should be used to shoot on the spot the social life of the minority nationalities, which was actively supported by leaders from the relevant sectors“ (Zhang 1995[1993]:80-81).

In order to develop a concrete idea of what “to use documentary filming to shoot on the spot the social life of the minority nationalities” actually means, the film “The Oroqen” will be taken as an example. As it was already mentioned above, during the 1950s so-called “Ethnic minorities research groups” were established and took up their work all over China. One of these groups was headed by Prof. Qiu Pu (Vice-Director of the INS and famous anthropologist working on nomadic hunter and gatherer societies in North-East China). Together with colleagues from the Institute of Ethnology of the Social Science Academy of Inner Mongolia, he started to do research work in the late 1950s and early 1960s among the Oroqen. One member of this research group was Prof. Manduertu, who himself is a Dau´r and no Han-Chinese and who later became responsible for the ethnographic documentary films at the INS. Another one was Zhao Fuxing, who still is working in Inner Mongolia. Together they went several times to Oroqen territory and gathered a lot of data during their stay in the “field“. After returning to Beijing they decided to edit their field notes and data and to publish a book on “The Oroqen”. In 1961 director and cameraman Yang Guanghai undertook a journey into Oroqen area and met with this research group. After returning to Beijing he wrote up a first film treatment. Later that year he met with Qiu Pu in Beijing and discussed the film script for the film “The Oroqen”. At that time Yang, who formerly worked for the “First of August Film Studio”, a studio which belonged to the People’s Liberation Army, and for which he already shot several ethnographic documentaries, was already transferred to the “Beijing Scientific and Educational Film Studio” (BSEFS) in order to continue with his work there. The BSEFS was commissioned by the INS and it’s cooperation partners with the task of the film’s realization and post-production. After this initial meeting Yang and Qiu met again several times and discussed the film-script in detail. After the script was approved by the anthropologists, who were working on the Oroqen, Yang started out to write a scenario and to begin with preparations for the actual shooting. In 1962, together with three colleagues from the BSEFS (two assistants, one was the cameraman Yang Junxun (not related to Yang Guanghai K. K.), the other was the photographer Zhang Shimei, who graduated from the Beijing Film School and the film producer Wu Mingyue) and one colleague from the Academy of Inner Mongolia, who’s name was Cai Jiaqi, and who was responsible for all logistic and organizational work, Yang set out into the “field”. They took with them two 35mm film cameras, one a soviet EYMO, the other an Arriflex. Because the studio at that time did only have two Nagra sound-recording equipments, they had to start filming without sound equipment. Later, during the actual filming, two

sound-engineers joined them on the spot and they took sound recording as well, of course no synch-sound recording. They had 8 rolls of film (Agfa film material). Usually one roll of film, or “ben”, as it is called in Chinese, lasted ten minutes. The film ratio was 3:1 which was a very tight ratio indeed, due to the scarcity of film material in China during that time. All in all they spent 7 months with the Oroqen, from February until August 1962. They lived together with them in their hunting camps and in several small villages, which the Chinese Communist Government had already build for the Oroqen, in order to make them settle down, trying to change their traditional nomadic ways of life. After arriving in the Oroqen area, which is partly situated in Heilongjiang Province and in Inner Mongolia, with the help of Cai Jiaqi, they contacted the the clan headman of one group of the Oroqen, who usually also is acting as shaman. His personal name was Mankebu. Mankebu was the most important intermediary. Only with his help and general consent, it was possible for the film crew to start working with the Oroqen. They had to persuade him by telling him, that what they were doing was good for the Oroqen and was important for their descendants, because a lot of their traditions and ways of life would be object to change in the near future due to political decisions taken by the Central Communist Government. They started their „rescue work“ by using film as a tool of salvage anthropology and documented the daily life of the Oroqen, their seasonal hunting activities, material culture and religious customs.

After returning to Beijing, it took another four months of post-production at the BSEFS, before the film was officially completed in 1963.

During this phase, the commentary was written and the film was edited. This ethnographic film, as all the others, which the INS commissioned, used pre-arranged film-scenes, staging of events, re-enactment of activities and historical reconstruction of events, because it had to portray a situation “before Liberation” i.e. before the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. But of course it was shot after 1949. So in all of these films, there can be felt this peculiar ambiguity in dealing with historical time and filmic authenticity.

Reconstruction implies a conscious purpose which is bound to colour the result. Is it, as with Flaherty, to make a romantic story to entertain North American and British cinema audiences? Is it, as I understand to be the case with some Native American productions, to assert minority identity and encourage a younger generation to revive old customs within the emerging tradition of “indigenous filmmaking?” Is it to put into an archive as a historic record? The next question of course is, who devised the reconstruction - the filmmaker, the participants or was it negotiated? Is the reconstruction required because the action belongs to history or just because the camera was not there or because it was impractical or insensitive to film at the time?

Whatever the circumstances, the material is likely to yield some evidence about the participants. Under the influence of an anticolonial, anti-imperialist

cultural critique it has become common to be especially distrustful of material if the initiative for shooting appears to be primarily that of a filmmaker from outside. The only cases though in which it seems fair to assume that the participants were reluctant and powerless performers are those where the plan involving the filmed reconstruction was clearly against their interests. But that, in itself, might reveal much about the social and political conditions at the time of filming.

### **Salvage Anthropology and the Ethnic Other on film-A Tentative Theoretical Appraisal of the Films Content and their Filmic Structure**

A quotation from a paper, that Yang Guanghai delivered on the the First International Conference on Visual Anthropology which was organized by INS and IWF in Beijing, April 1995 echoes the words of Zhang Jianghua, his former colleague at the INS, which I cited above:

“Chairman Mao Zidong and comrade Peng Zhen indicated in 1956 that putting the old situation of various nationalities of our country on record was especially important to scientific research and could also provide scientific evidence for making the minority policies” (Yang 1995: 1).

So it seems, that right from the beginning there was this typical blending of science and politics which was so characteristic for Anthropology/Ethnology as an applied social science in China in general. Social Sciences, especially Anthropology/Ethnology, had to serve politics and were always functionalized as a political tool providing arguments for the political implementation of a Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist ideology with special Chinese features i.e. Maoism. Ethnology or Anthropology was not free of a general evolutionist reading of the development of Mankind. It therefore classified the non-Han Chinese minorities as belonging to a distant societal stage, where at the same time, it positioned these minorities also according to the unwittingly orientalist scheme of a Marxist-Leninist trajectory. Or again in the words of Yang Guanghai:

At the same time (that is when the categorization work started) it had been decided to shoot films on the minority nationalities. We were asked to record the social state and historical features of the social system and social life, since they were changing quickly. Due to the rapid changing of all social and economic factors, some of the original forms, traditional customs and culture would disappear gradually. So we were required to start our “rescuing” work as soon as possible (Yang 1995: 1).

These arguments sound all too familiar to recent critics of salvage anthropology and the narration of disappearance. Thus Rosalind C. Morris in a book on film, ethnography and the representation of Northwest Coast Cultures writes:

One discerns here the symptoms of that direct but complex relationship between the experience of modernity as change and the desire for authenticity and purity, invariably understood as stasis. Indeed, these two temporal orientations imply each other. The

pursuit of authenticity emerges from the experience of loss, of incoherence, even of progress” (Morris 1994: 5).

Thus the Chinese ethnographic filmmakers together with their scientific advisors (anthropologists) had to

“shot the nationalities which were still at the end of primitive society and the nationalities who lived in remote thickly forested mountains and were seldom known to people around” (Yang 1995:4).

Ethnic Minorities who later became “National Minorities” were treated as living fossils being an exemplary representation of the general class structure in question, be it primitive society, slave society or feudal society. The general problem the early Chinese ethnographic filmmakers had to face, was again the paradox of time. They were asked to document on film the ways of life of these exotic people prior to the liberation or founding of the P. R. of China. But the films were of course shot after 1949 starting with those on the Wa, Li and Kucong in 1957. Although in some areas the Non-Han Chinese ethnic groups kept their ways of traditional living well into the 1950s, in most cases the filmmaker and the film team had to turn to the filmic device of historical reconstruction or re-enactment of events. Cultural reconstruction or restoration is an issue in almost all of these films.

It is not employed to resurrect an endangered authenticity, although the filmmakers and scientific advisors might have aimed at that more or less unwittingly. The material was used by the scientific and political authorities in order to show to the present and posterior audiences a past that due to the socialist development of society was inevitably to disappear and to vanish completely. There is no nostalgia or rhetorical longing inscribed into a narrative of disappearance thus regretting this development as a loss, as it was familiar with certain western documentary films or ethnographic documentaries starting from the 1930s well up into 1960s. But I wish not to end on this rather negative note.

On the contrary, it is true for these early Chinese ethnographic films on minority nationalities, as well as those films on the North-west Coast cultures:

“But contrary to this ideological inclinations which of course were best expressed within the authoritative and ideological commentary the very visual persistence of film as such gives way to different kind of readings: How odd, how utterly magical, that we can see this past in the present- as though we were privy to the Tsimshian mind’s eye. The film performs for us what the ideology of cinema claims for itself: providing us, that is, with the very residue of time, its presence arrested in a past to which we are now fantastically permitted entry. That possibility is, of course the possibility of preservation and re-creation, carried out by the dominant culture in the pursuit of pristine origins. The tensions between past and present that lie at the heart of modernity’s nostalgia for a vanishing authenticity also lie at the heart of cinema“(Morris 1994: 71).

## **Conclusion**

In my current and future research I will start reading former and recent Chinese ethnographic films against their overt ideological intention. In order of doing so, the relationship between the traditional Chinese arts (landscape painting and different Opera forms) and Documentary film, as a western medium, soon adopted in China and „sinicized“, is of foremost importance in this context. The impact of non-filmic arts and aesthetics on the development of filmic narratives and the construction of a mise-on-scene, the relationship between commentary, music and additional sound and the filmic structure of images and sequences of images, is one aspect I wish to follow in my future work on the history of Chinese ethnographic film. Much more could be added about strategies of visual representation of the Ethnic Other and about the ways authenticity was fabricated in these early Chinese ethnographic film and how strategies of filmic authentication were adopted, altered and creatively manipulated in later productions. This work, I am afraid, demands a continuous theoretical engagement and the results will hopefully very soon reach a wider readership which for one is not only interested in the history of Chinese Ethnographic Film but also fascinated by more recent productions of this underrepresented and marginalized genre in general film studies and film theories. To conclude I wish to recall what one of today's most inspiring Scholars on the history of Chinese film had to say, of course in a completely different context:

“Although this project may be ultimately unfinishable it is also unfinished. To put it another way, although there may be no end in sight, there is surely a visible outline of further work” (Berry 1994: 110).

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