Note on Dorje Tsering’s “Reflections on Tibetan Film”

Chenaktshang Dorje Tsering, better known as Jangbu (Ljang bu), is widely recognised in Tibet as a poet who is noted for his free verse and, after the 1986 publication of Sog rus las mched pa’i rnam shes (“Consciousness drawn from a shoulder-blade”), for his short stories in magic realist style. Since 2003 he has turned his attention increasingly to film and other media, becoming with his presentation at the 2003 IATS Seminar in Oxford one of the first Tibetan intellectuals to offer a public opinion about films produced in China which feature Tibet as their main subject. His Oxford presentation constituted an important moment in the discussion of these films and in the debate over the representation of Tibetans within Chinese art and literature.

The issue of Tibet-related films in China had been raised some ten years earlier by the Xining-based television director and writer Phagmo Tashi (Phag mo Bkra shis), who wrote, produced and directed the first Tibetan-language feature-length film—Khren zhen (“Longing”, also known as Nyi ma Tshe ring dang Zla ba Sgrol ma after its main characters), a poetic lament for the loss of love, family and tradition experienced by a former Tibetan nomad who has taken a clerical job in the city of Xining. The film was shot on video and was broadcast by Qinghai Television Station in 1993, but was never shown in cinemas. Phagmo Tashi’s views of Chinese cinematic representations of Tibetans had been published in the Tibetan literary journal Sbrang char in 1993, but that piece had been accessible only to readers of Tibetan.

Dorje Tsering’s comments on film, made ten years later, focus on cinema rather than on the efforts of Phagmo Tashi and others to

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1 This paper was kindly translated from the Tibetan by Heather Stoddard. It was edited by Robert Barnett (RB), who added the footnotes and references.

develop Tibetan forms of television drama. Broader in their scope and were addressed to a wider audience, they assert with unusual boldness a direct continuity between the Tibet and the Tibetans shown in the propaganda films of the Maoist era and the representations of Tibet and Tibetan culture in the work of Chinese artists and writers since the 1980s. He names Chen Danqing, Ma Yuan and others as complicit in such uses of the Tibetan—artists who after living for some time in Tibet went on to become major figures in China and in the international artworld, their careers launched largely by their earlier, widely praised representations of Tibetans. Dorje Tsering connects those artists’ rendering of their Tibetan experiences with a cultural movement that had spread from the West—the ‘return to nature’—rather than with the Chinese movement usually invoked in this context, that of ‘root-seeking’ (Chinese: xungen yundong), a term used to describe a relatively brief phase in Chinese art and film in the early 1980s.

Dorje Tsering has increasingly involved himself in film and television production. In 2004, while working in Paris as a University lecturer, he produced a documentary about a group of lay tantricists (sngags pa) in the Rebkong area of Amdo, following their journey to attend a ceremony in nearby valley. He then worked on the script for the film Hi ma la ya’i rgyal sras (Chinese: Ximalaya wangzi, “Prince of the Himalayas”), a re-setting of Shakespeare’s Hamlet in the time of the early Tibetan king Drigum Tsenpo (Dri gum btsan po), which was released as a feature film under the direction of Sherwood Hu (Hu Xuehua) in 2006.

The situation of Tibetan film has developed considerably since this paper was presented, with a number of other Tibetan artists and writers now engaging discreetly with the same concerns raised explicitly by Dorje Tsering in his remarks at Oxford on the limited representations of Tibet and Tibetans on the screen. In 2005 another young Tibetan writer from Amdo, Pema Tseten (Padma Rtse brtan; Chinese: Wanma Caidan or Baima Caidan) became the first Tibetan to graduate from the Beijing Film Academy. He directed and wrote two important films—a short called Rtsa’i thang (Chinese: Caoyuan, “Grassland”, 2004), and a full length feature film, Lhing jags kyi ma Ni rdo ’bum (Chinese: Jingjing de mani shi, “The Silent Mani Stone”, 2005), which won China’s most prestigious award for new directors. In 2006, Mi la ras pa (“Milarepa”) appeared, a feature-length film directed, written and filmed by Sonam (Gsod rnams), a young lama from Gongjo in eastern Kham; it dramatised the live of the Tibetan yogi and poet Milarepa, with farmers and nomads from a community in Gonjo acting all the parts.3 In the same year Rigdan Gyamtso (Rigs

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3 A feature film with the same title was directed by the Bhutanese-Tibetan lama Neten Chokling and released in India in 2006.