

# The Karma of Chicken Curry

## Tibetan Masala Films and Youth Narratives of Exile

Mara Matta  
(Sapienza Università di Roma, Italia)

**Abstract** This essay offers a preliminary study of the cultural translation practices by young Tibetan exilic filmmakers in India, whose films, rather than rejecting the *masala* formula offered by Bollywood, have tentatively adapted it to the expectations of a Tibetan diasporic audience looking for a cinema capable of attending to the escapist needs of their minds while simultaneously catering to the intimate dreams of their hearts. I contend that Tashi Wangchuk and Tsultrim Dorjee's first long feature *Phun Anu Thanu* (*Two Exiled Brothers*, 2006) is as an original film that presents a new offer on the menu of Tibetan diasporic films, a kind of spicy curry that has been advocated as a timely necessity and a yet-to-be-fulfilled desire.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Filmmaking Practices by Tibetans in Exile. – 3 In Between the Local and the Global: Tibetan *masala* Films and the Politics of Cinematic Pleasure. – 4 *Phun Anu Thanu* (India 2006): The First Instance of a *Thinglish* Film. – 5 Conclusions.

**Keywords** Tibetan diaspora. Hindi cinema. Exilic filmmaking. Cultural identity. Hybridity.

### 1 Introduction

The exile mix of Tibetan, Hindi, and English is something I like to call 'Thinglish' untraditional, but it works. This is a key to Tibetan survival beyond the land of snows – we approach what is around us and combine it with what we need and know to define a space uniquely ours. (Rabgay 2002)<sup>1</sup>

The term 'diasporic' in relation to the wor(l)d 'Tibet' poses quite a few serious theoretical problems, since it is susceptible of misunderstandings and misappropriations. In this essay, I use the words 'diaspora', 'exile', 'refugee' and 'diasporic/exilic' as part of a multilayered and contested vocabulary of negotiation, appropriation and resistance. Each of these terms, inside the Tibetan community living outside Tibet, has been undergoing a change in its signifying practices. Since there is no space to provide an in-depth explanation of these terms in the context of Tibet and filmmaking practices, I refer to the works of Anand 2003 and to the concept of 'accented films' developed by Naficy 2001.

1 Rabgay is an exile Tibetan whose statement is reported in Basu 2008.

If the movies can help attain some purpose of education or enlightenment, then the recent Tibetan films may be regarded as another dimension of Tibet's spiritual culture. (Khortsas 2004)

In 2013, Tsering Namgyal Khortsas, a Tibetan writer born and brought up in India and recently relocated to the US after many years of studying and working as a journalist in Taiwan, published his first novel: *The Tibetan Suitcase*.<sup>2</sup> The novel's prologue brings together some stereotypical images of meditating Tibetans, high Himalayan peaks, Americans committed to 'the cause', and the most common setting for a Tibetan refugee's narrative: India, namely Dharamsala, the seat of the Tibetan Government in Exile and present home to the XIV Dalai Lama. Describing his first meeting with Dawa, the writer Tsering Namgyal, whose suitcase full of letters will become the nostalgic subtext of this semi-autobiographical novel, offers a presentation of himself which further blurs the distinction between creative and diarist writing:

As I gazed into the high mountains of the Himalayas, I told him about my background. That I had been a business journalist in Taipei, and how I also wrote about Tibet, my ancestral homeland, and how *the idea of Tibet, or the memory of the place which I had never seen*, had become such an important part of me. It defined me. "You are a Tibetan", he said, "regardless of whether you are born in India or Pakistan". (Khortsas 2013, 7; emphasis added)

Tsering, despite his acknowledgement that what sustains his identity is simply an "idea of Tibet", condescends to Dawa's faith in their unquestioned belonging to a land they have either left long time ago or never actually seen. As a way of reciprocating his reassuring comments on their fractured subjectivities, Tsering recommends Dawa to delve into Buddhism and spirituality. But Dawa offers yet another solution to pin down the emotional tent of their nomadic existence: "to start reading in Tibetan and even practice calligraphy" (Khortsas 2013, 8), although he is also quick to remark that his language skills in his mother tongue are far from good:

2 Tsering Namgyal Khortsas has been a journalist for more than 15 years. His fiction has appeared in various Asian cultural and literary journals such as *Dim Sum* (now *Asia Literary Review*), *Yellow Medicine Review: A Journal of Indigenous, Culture and Arts* and *Himal South Asia*. He attended University of Minnesota and University of Iowa, where he also studied creative writing. Beside a collection of essays and his first novel, *The Tibetan Suitcase*, Khortsas has also authored a biography of the 17th Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje. He currently works in New York.

"I call it 'Tibetan-Indian English'", he said, making me laugh. "*Benchod*<sup>3</sup> the interesting thing of being a Tibetan born in India is that your Tibetan is really not upto [*sic*] the mark and your Hindi is equally defective, if not worse. So what option do you have? Chinese? If we could write in Chinese, at least we would have the excuse to explain, like the Indians, that we are using the colonial language. But that is unfortunately not the case".

He left a deep impression on me. [...] I walked back to my home. 'A modern Tibetan, and a writer' I thought, as I walked down to my home. But he was sad, almost beyond repair. (Khortsa 2013, 8-9)

The prologue to this epistolary novel by a young Tibetan writer in exile offers us a good starting point to explore some of the pressing questions regarding the creative output of Tibetans living in exile in India. To begin with, the idiosyncratic situation that India presents for Tibetan refugees, who are confronted with the plurality of languages, cultural practices and religious traditions that India accommodates. In terms of language, for instance, the landscape of Tibetans in exile is quite peculiar, as Rabgay (2002) summarizes in the neologism *Thinglish*, elucidating how Tibetans need to combine what is around them and elaborate a new identity - in this case linguistic - that is notwithstanding 'theirs', that is, 'distinctively Tibetan'. The linguistic code-switching also becomes a metaphor of something quite hard to explain or theorize: it conveys in a simple word - *Thinglish* - the complexity of their condition, forced as they are to navigate the interstitial spaces bounded by an essentialist performance of authenticity, on one side, and a *mise-en-scène* of hybridised identity, on the other.

Since this paper takes as specific object of investigation the issue of Tibetan cinema in exile and the "burden of representation" (Mercer 1994) that appears to afflict many Tibetan filmmakers, I look at the questions of identity performativity and subjectivity construction from the perspective of film and cultural studies, positing exilic filmmaking practices by young Tibetans as instances of "reflections on exiled Tibet" (Khortsa 2006). I adopt this expression from the subtitle that Tsering Namgyal Khortsa has given to his collection of essays mostly set in Dharamsala, very aptly titled *Little Lhasa* (2006), published almost ten years ahead of his novel *The Tibetan Suitcase*. In this first publication, Tsering Namgyal commented on the condition of exiled Tibetans living in India as *de facto* citizens of a non-existing independent country called Tibet - a Utopia or, as Dibyesh Anand (2008) has called it, a "geopolitical exotica" - and *de jure* state-

3 This Hindi expression literally translates as 'sister-fucker'. As the *Urban Dictionary* explains: "it is used in most North-Indian languages [...]. Also used occasionally to indicate sheer delight, excitement, or anger. Increasingly common among non-Indians as well in countries and areas with large Indian populations (e.g. New Jersey, Toronto, England)". See <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=benchod>.

less people belonging to nowhere, bound to a cultural nationalism (Anand 2000)<sup>4</sup> which is carefully nurtured and constantly constructed. Discussing the cultural politics of Dharamsala, where the staging of Tibetan identity is prudently orchestrated by the Tibetan Government in Exile through its main cultural institutions (Tibetan schools, Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, etc.), Tsering Namgyal included in his book an article titled *Movie and Meditation*, where he affirmed that “time had certainly come for the smaller-budget, independent movies to inform and educate the world about Tibet, its culture, its people, and its religious philosophy. Film was the perfect medium [...] to tell the story of Tibet and its colourful and vibrant culture” (Khortsa 2006, 96). This short essay, rather than contradicting the mystified image of a spiritual Tibet, appears to reinforce an idea of cinema as a suitable site of “history-making” (Rosenstone 1988; 1995; 2017) or, as S. Brent Plate (2003) argued, “myth-making”. Discussing religion and film as “analogous in the first instance due to their activities of taking the world-as-it-is, and inventing a new world through the dual processes of ‘framing’ and ‘projecting’” (3), Plate elaborated on the “mediated nature” of these processes and finally asserted that “[f]ilm, like religious myth and ritual, offers windows onto other worlds” (3). In Tsering Namgyal’s opinion, the ‘other world of Tibet’, with its “colourful and vibrant culture” (Khortsa 2006, 96), perhaps could be better conveyed through a Bollywoodised cinematic frame where to perform Tibetan rituals of identity and subjectivity. What is truly interesting in his article, then, is not the sketchy discussion of some recently released Tibetan films, but his insightful thoughts on the relationship between Indian commercial cinema and Tibetan exiles as enthusiastic spectators, keen consumers and fervent fans of Bollywood. It is possible, as Rajadhyaksa (2003, 38) has argued, that “the Indian cinema’s modes of address have opened up a new category for spectatorial address that appears not to be accounted for by, say, the American cinema”. Much like the distinctive reception of Indian cinema by Nigerian spectators (Larkin 1997) or the Fijian Indians’ Hindi film productions in Australia (Ray 2000), Rajadhyaksa (2003, 38) points out that possibly “the cinema’s addresses are entering complex realms of identification in these places, which would definitely further argument around the nature of the cultural-political mediation that the Indian, or possibly the Hong Kong, cinemas continue to allow”. Bollywood, hence, engages Tibetan spectators into such “realms of identification” (Rajad-

4 The scholar of International Relations Dibyesh Anand has extensively discussed the construction of ‘Tibetanness’ among Tibetans exiles in South Asia. In his essay “(Re)imagining Nationalism: Identity and Representation in the Tibetan Diaspora of South Asia”, Anand posits that “it is not only Westerners who have exoticised Tibet and the Tibetans; the Tibetan diaspora too have invested heavily in such (neo)orientalist representation strategies for their own tactical purposes” (2000, 271).

hyaksa 2003, 38) and its rather ubiquitous place in the cultural, linguistic and sensory 'scapes' of Tibetan refugees in South Asia is once again well argued by Khortsa (2006, 98-9):

Hindi movies are an integral part of life in India and Tibetans living in India have also, quite naturally, developed an avid liking for these films. When I was young I watched them on television [...]. We also watched the Indian television serials [...]. Some of my friends were so addicted to movies that they could recite dialogues from the more famous Indian movies straight from memory. And then the teachers would yell at them: "So you have got nothing better to do than big mouth in Urdu. Go home and do your studies".

The actor Raj Kapoor provided us with the perfect exile's song: *Mera Joota Hai Japani*.

My shoes are Japanese  
My pants English  
On my head a red Russian cap  
Still my heart is Indian

My heart is still very much Tibetan but my taste buds, now used to three decades of curry, are definitely looking more Indian. Surely this could inspire another Tibetan film and add to the already growing list of Tibetan films made in India. We could perhaps call it *The Karma of Chicken Curry*.

This essay looks at the cultural translation practices by young Tibetan exilic filmmakers in India, whose films have tentatively adapted the *masala* formula offered by Bollywood to the desires of a Tibetan audience made not just of young dreamers, but also of *amalas*, *palas*<sup>5</sup> and a rather interesting cohort of Buddhist monks<sup>6</sup> who look for a Tibetan *masala* cinema ca-

5 In Tibetan language, the words *A ma* 'mother' and *Pha* 'father' are also employed to respectfully refer to elders. They are usually followed by the honorific suffix *lags* (pronounced 'la').

6 It is not the aim of this paper to provide a detailed and complete account of the Tibetan cinema history in South Asia. Here it may suffice to say that Bollywood has made accolades also among important Tibetan and Bhutanese Buddhist leaders, who have shown considerable interest in filmmaking, also experimenting with the formula of the *masala* films. Adopting certain aesthetics of filmmaking which entail "cultural diplomacy and use the genre of romance" (Dudrah 2011, 21), these films remind us of some Black British films of the 1990s, where the filmmakers employed certain conventions that reflected "Black British sensibilities and South Asian filmic conventions associated with the romantic couple" (21). As Dudrah, following Gopal and Moorti (2008), highlighted: "vibrant colours and music, suggesting merriment and togetherness, draw on a tradition in popular South Asian filmmaking where the same signs and codes are often used; not least in, say, Bollywood cinema"

pable of attending to the escapist needs of the mind while simultaneously catering to the intimate dreams of the heart. More specifically, I argue that Tashi Wangchuk and Tsultrim Dorjee's first long feature film – *Phun Anu Thanu* (English Title: *Two Exiled Brothers*, 2006) –, beside enriching Tibetan “mediascapes” (Appadurai 1996) through emic cinematic productions, also complicate the history of Tibetan filmmaking practices in exile. The film, in fact, experiments with the possibilities offered by Bollywood cinema to create an original work that is both educational and entertaining, hybrid in its format and yet distinctively Tibetan in its content. Ultimately, they present a new offer on the menu of South Asian diasporic cinemas, that *Karma of Chicken Curry* that Tsering Namgyal advocated as a timely necessity and a yet-to-be-fulfilled desire.

## 2 Filmmaking Practices by Tibetans in Exile

In 2004, when I arrived in Dharamsala to pursue further research among Tibetans living in McLeod Gunj, the hill station where the Tibetan Government in Exile (TGiE) has established its headquarters since 1959, I was quite fortunate to come across not just one major feature film in its pre-production phase, but two. As a matter of fact, the year 2004 marked a watershed in the history of Tibetan filmmaking in exile, since in that year both Tenzing Sonam, in collaboration with his wife and producer Ritu Sarin, and Pema Dondhup directed and released their first feature films: *Dreaming Lhasa* and *We're No Monks*.<sup>7</sup> The processes of writing the script, casting the actors and selecting the crew, together with the daunting task of coping with the logistics and the finances, brought to the forefront the difficulties of making a full-fledged feature film. These challenges were further complicated by the high expectations of the Tibetan community in India, not last the monks and the religious figures who represented the

(2011, 122). This has been the case also for Tibetan and Bhutanese films produced in recent years. The works by the renowned Bhutanese *tulku* (*sprul sku*) Khyentse Norbu Rinpoche, turned into an award-winning filmmaker after his collaboration to the making of *Little Buddha* by Bernardo Bertolucci (1993), have become quite famous and have attracted a good deal of attention. However, the few studies on his productions keep focusing more on the nexus between religion and cinema, looking at his films as instances of *Dharma* sermons conveyed through the dreamlike lenses of a videocamera. It would be important to inspect not just the director's alleged reasons for making films (*Dharma*) but also the audience's reception of them, especially the last ones, which overtly adopt a *masala* style of filmmaking, with alluring music and sensual dances to further spice up the scenes. See, for instance, *Vara: A Blessing* (2013) and *Hema Hema: Sing Me a Song While I Wait* (2016). The adoption of an Indian cinematic language in these two recent films by Khyentse Norbu is the topic of a forthcoming article by the author, hence they are not addressed in the present essay.

7 Since these two Tibetan films have been already discussed by the author in other publications, in the present article they are just scantily referred to and not analysed in detail.

image of Tibet on the global stage. Moreover, both filmmakers were troubled by the “burden of representation” (Mercer 1994) imposed on them, since any Tibetan film had to confront a plethora of mystified images of Tibet that during the last century dictated the way the country had been imagined and pictured (Dodin, Räther 2001; also Brauen 2004). Despite all the challenges, these first films revealed the talent and the commitment of a group of Tibetan authors who had identified in cinema and media an opportunity for appropriating strategies of narration to present personal and collective stories of exile and diaspora. More than creative writing and historical literature, films seemed to offer a suitable space for telling a different (hi)story, or perhaps it would be better to say a plurality of different life stories, bits of a very complex, ever modifying and unending jigsaw that never recomposed itself into a unique image of Tibet. If we abide by what the scholar Wimal Dissanayake has affirmed about cinema, “that it makes available to us semioticed space for the articulation of the global imaginary and its formations within the discursive practices of the local” (2003, 217), we can see how feature films as a mode of articulation and as a site of enunciation indeed offer an ideal “semioticed space” where Tibetans can inscribe their own “idea of Tibet” (Khortsas 2013), challenging the mythical representations of Tibet.<sup>8</sup> In their effort at reshuffling such “semioticed space”, thus, Tibetan filmmakers began engaging in a difficult and challenging work of debunking stereotypes (Author 2008; 2009), remaking imaginaries and “inventing traditions” (Hobsbawm 1983), in order to contradict some of those forged narratives that derived their truisms by colonial chronicles produced during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many of these narratives, however, proved hard to die, and became conducive to forms of distorted essentialism and otherising exoticism in the representation of Tibet around the world (Anand 2000; 2008; Dodin, Räther 2001; Brauen 2004). The Tibetans were often seen as intrinsically religious people, whose lives were infused by mysticism and mainly ruled by Buddhist values. Their dissenting voices were silenced and the Dalai Lama and other revered religious (mostly male) figures were elected as the only representatives of the ‘peaceful Tibetans’, disconnected from history and relegated to a mythical plane of “hyperreality” (Klieger 1997). While this idea of Tibet as a sacred land and Tibetans as deeply spiritual people is still common even in recent writings on Tibetan culture and its creative

8 It is important to point out that the practice of negotiating certain images of Tibet dates back almost a century, to the time of the British expeditions to Tibet in the 1920s when the first documentaries were produced. In 1924, Captain John Noel made a silent film titled *The Epic of Everest*. Certain images were deemed so improper that the Lhasa authorities got very upset and, following the scandal of the dancing lamas surreptitiously taken to London for the premiere of the film, decided to deny future permits of shooting films in Tibet. Cf. Hansen 2001. For an overview of cinema in Tibet, cf. Norbu, Jamyang 2004.

outputs,<sup>9</sup> the works of many Tibetan filmmakers – both in exile and inside the geopolitical boundaries of present-day Tibet – appear to contradict, at least partially, this de-historicised view and provide a more articulated and complex portrayal of the many Tibet(s) of the historical and cinematic “imagiNation” [*sic*] (Virdi 2003). Tibetan filmmakers operate through a transnational mode, which, as Ďurovičová (2010, x) has posited, offers both a geographical and a historical approach where the transnational has to be read as the “below-global/above-national” level. This mode of analysis zooms into those “contact zones” between world cinemas (Newman 2010) that compel both spectators and scholars to come to terms with hybridised cinematic languages. These transnational interactions constitute a way of “moving beyond any tendency to reduce the centers and peripheries of present-day capitalism to the past familiar binary of cultural imperialism” (Newman 2010, 9).

Looking at hybridity as a way of destabilising formerly conceived binary oppositions and of fruitfully displacing “our conception of clearly demarcated national/cultural boundaries” (Iwabuchi 2002, 51), Japanese scholar Koichi Iwabuchi argues that hybridity also “obliges us to re-read the binaries as forms of transculturation, of cultural translation, destined to trouble the here/there cultural binaries forever” (51). Discussing the issue of the transnational flow of material and immaterial goods, he also suggests how

transnationally circulated images and commodities [...] tend to become *culturally odorless* in the sense that origins are subsumed by the local transculturation process. By appropriating, hybridizing, indigenizing, and consuming images and commodities of ‘foreign’ origin in multiple unforeseen ways, even American culture is conceived as ‘ours’ in many places. (46; emphasis added)

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, the dissertation by Mona Harnden-Simpson 2011. In there she reclaims “the centrality and multidimensional features of Buddhism” in Tibetan culture, analysing Tibetan cinematic practices through four films that she deems relevant for an understanding of the nexus between Tibetan cinema and Buddhism: *The Cup (Phörpa)*, dir. Khyentse Norbu, India, 1999; *Travellers and Magicians* (dir. Khyentse Norbu, Bhutan, 2005); *Milarepa: Magician, Murderer, Saint* (dir. Neten Chokling, Bhutan, 2006), and *Kundun* (dir. Martin Scorsese, USA, 1997). Ignoring all the previous scholarship on Tibetan literature and cinema, she posits a very selective and limited reading of Tibetan cinema as better articulated through these “religious films”, arguing that “a Buddhist ethos forms the core of these films and informs how the language of cinema is used to convey Buddhist themes and principles” (2011, iii).

I am thankful to the anonymous reviewer of this article who also underlined the parallel with India and the narratives surrounding the anticolonial struggle, dominated by the Gandhian non-violence ethos. The figure of Gandhi in relation to the Dalai Lama, and the discourse of non-violence, are relevant factors which link Indians and Tibetans in their quest for freedom and form important rhetorical strategies of the image of Tibetans.



Iwabuchi's theory may offer us an important tool of analysis in the context of Tibetan filmmaking practices in India, as it is exactly this 'fear' of an odorless ingredient that may be 'surreptitiously' added to the cultural menu produced by Tibetans in diasporic settings that underlines – somehow ironically – the statement by Tsering Namgyal Khortsa of a 'coming soon' *Karma of Chicken Curry*. Irony, in this case, does not conceal but rather adds emphasis to the apprehension that Tibetans feel when faced with the imperatives of 'cultural preservation' imposed on them by the TGiE and its educational and cultural institutions, which keep a watchful eye on every cultural output that aims to be innovative and, as such, may be potentially destabilising. As Hamid Naficy has posited, "as artists who often make distressing and dystopian films, exilic filmmakers inhabit a realm of incredible tension and agony [...]" (2013, 142). But, he also points out, they also produce films that are "entertaining, even though ironically and parodically critical of both the host and home societies" (142).

This is often the case as, in such films, the issue of cultural nationalism emerges and takes central stage. It is so also in the productions by Tibetan filmmakers in India, since they work inside the ideological frame of the Tibetan authorities and fear the possibly harsh criticism and attacks by their own community for having 'misrepresented' history and jeopardised the battle for political rights. When Pema Dondhup presented his first film in Delhi in 2004, provocatively titled *We're No Monks*, many Buddhist lamas and various Tibetan and Western spectators expressed their sincere concern for the film, since it contradicted the widespread image of the peaceful Tibetan, projecting on screen the nightmare of a possible "Tibetan *Intifada*"<sup>10</sup> in the heart of India, with young Tibetans resorting to suicide bombings.<sup>11</sup> What interests us here, more than discussing the legitimacy or not of such ideas of violent struggle against China (or the question of self-immolation as a viable strategy of dissent, a favorite theme among Tibetan filmmakers living in the US), is the significant aesthetic and political discourse that a film like *We're No Monks* may help us to make: first, this sense of being trapped in exile responds to certain themes that have been recognised as characterising the "accented cinema" theorised by Hamid Naficy (2001; 2013); second, the low-budget form and the collective mode of production

**10** During the Napoli Film Festival in 2004, the filmmaker Pema Dondhup and the author had to confront a group of enraged 'Dharma practitioners' who claimed that the film was meant to undermine the credibility of Tibetans as peace-loving people and to bring forward the idea of a possible Tibetan 'Intifada'.

**11** The film was tolerated by the community due to the intercession of the Dalai Lama, but was badly received even at some International Film Festivals, where many felt outraged by the allegation that Tibetans could resort to violence, ignoring the fact that for many years they had indeed done so with the support of the CIA. On this historical chapter of the Tibetan struggle for independence, see the film produced by Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin (2000) *The Shadow Circus: The CIA in Tibet* (49 min. Color).

of the film qualify it as an example of “exilic filmmaking” produced at the margins of the studio system and outside national productions houses. Following this first experimental feature film and the success of Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin’s *Dreaming Lhasa* (2004), many other films produced in exile by young Tibetan filmmakers have followed, capitalising on the idea of a collective mode of production and experimenting with cinematic language to create an ‘authentic’ Tibetan cinema.<sup>12</sup> But what can be called ‘Tibetan cinema’? And what does it mean to preserve a degree of ‘authenticity’? While the films made by Tibetan filmmakers in exile certainly complicate and pluralise the images of Tibet, they do so pitting their representations against *the representation* of Tibetan culture that is deemed unquestionable, which is the official ‘idea of Tibet’ sustained by the official authorities of the Tibetan Government in Exile, nurtured and fuelled by local supporters and international donors as ‘fundamentally’ related to the religious traditions of Buddhism. The plurality of voices and the possible ways of expressing ‘Tibetanness’ have often been silenced and reduced to a univocal retelling of Tibet as a country of Buddhist people almost exclusively dedicated to religious practices. This discourse has been strategically deployed to reassure donors of the ‘apolitical’ nature of the Tibetan struggle and to distance present-day calls for genuine autonomy inside China by former (even violent) fights for an independent Tibet. The tension between the present political position of the Tibetan Government and the aspirations of many Tibetan refugees regarding the issue of independence is portrayed in various cinematic productions by filmmakers in exile, since the efforts of the government to ‘preserve’ culture as ‘authentically Tibetan’ appears

12 There is an ongoing debate on what it should be called ‘Tibetan cinema’ and who are its representatives. There have been hundreds of films made on Tibet during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, starting with the British documentaries of the 1920s up to the more recent productions by Western and Chinese filmmakers, the co-productions of Chinese and Tibetan artists, the ones that involve Indian, Nepali and Tibetan authors and filmmakers, and many others by directors and producers from all over the world interested in the *Tibetosphere* (which spans from Tibetan regions inside China to states of present-day India like Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Ladakh). Tibetan poet and documentarist Jangbu (alias, Dorje Tsering Chenaktsang 2009) calls most of these productions “Tibet-related films” and argues that a genuine Tibetan cinema has been developing only in the last fifteen years, with Tibetans increasingly coming to experiment with cinematic languages and with the possibility of accessing modes of production that may allow them to ‘own the gaze’.

The question of what can be called a Tibetan film is further complicated by issues of modes of productions, on one side, and distribution and intended spectators, on the other. The films I am taking into consideration in this article cannot be distributed inside China and most of the spectators of these low-budget films are Tibetans, Indians and Nepalis living in India or Nepal. Thanks to the creation of digital platforms, it has become easier for Tibetans who choose to make digital films to circulate them online. This has also become a way to reach possible producers and solicit forms of crowd-funding across the various Tibetan communities and Tibet-supporters around the world. These modes of production, however, have also an impact on the independent nature of the film, since many supporters are not keen to invest in a film which is not deemed ‘representative’ of the ‘Tibetan ethos’.

to conflict with their political standpoint that Tibet should not ask for independence. This tension is reflected also in the present debate around the acceptance of Indian citizenship: while the TGIE appears to discourage it, some Tibetans believe this to be a nonsensical stance by the Tibetan authorities, which only prevents Tibetans in India to be entitled to the same civic and political rights of the rest of India's citizens.<sup>13</sup>

Cinema offers a platform for voicing these concerns and make dissenting voices audible, and the concern with authenticity seems to preoccupy more the authorities and the Dharma practitioners than filmmakers and cultural practitioners. As Naficy (2001) has warned, it is almost impossible to strictly confine the cinematic works by exilic authors into the straitjacket of one label or a specific genre. Similarly, Tibetan diasporic films also travel in-between various genres and cinematic languages, making it difficult to pigeonhole them and opening venues for creolised aesthetics and hybridised filmmaking practices. Hence, we may wish to subscribe to the theoretical frame provided by Naficy, who reckons the existence of a cinema that can be identified by its "accented style", and yet remains so undefined and fluid that "encompasses characteristics common to the works of differently situated filmmakers involved in varied decentered social formations and cinematic practices across the globe, - all of whom are presumed to share the fact of displacement and deterritorialization" (21). We may perhaps call it a 'Thinglish cinema', as the aesthetics and the politics of cultural production are inflected by Western imaginaries, Indian *masala* formulas and Tibetan stories and values. Moreover, following the yet to be exhausted debates which have been triggered by the use of terms like "transnational cinema" and "diasporic filmmaking", we must constantly remind ourselves that these labels are contested and contestable and that a filmmaker may fall into various categories according to the film he authors, the conditions of the film's production and distribution, the site of film-making and the place where the film is released, consumed and marketed. Labels may reveal themselves as functional, but they may also be constraining or even misleading if taken for granted without looking at the contextual networks that shaped them. As Mette Hjort (2009) has proposed when discussing the danger of clubbing together different films and cinemas - even by authors belonging to the same community - it is always necessary to differentiate and avoid trusting the supposedly virtuous capacity of tags like 'transnational' to overcome the constraining of the national-international bipolar dichotomy that so much disturbs/disrupts the postcolonial condition of diasporic authors. Moreover, in the context of the Tibetan Diaspora, where a plurality of voices and a complex articulation of identities and belongings further problematises

13 On this sensitive theme, see, among others, the works by Fiona McConnell 2011, 2013 and Jayal 2013.

such theories, the idea put forward by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih of “minor transnationalism” (2005, 5) in the performance of cultures, in order to guarantee such performances without necessary mediation by the center, may be especially relevant when there is no clear center of reference and the filmmakers operate outside the studio system and beyond the borders of their (real or imagined) nation-state. “Minor transnationalism” as developed by Lionnet and Shih adds further complexity to the Foucauldian discourses of power dynamics and dismantles binaries like centre-margins and majority-minorities: it shifts the attention to the intersection of voices and the rhizomatic relations among them in an era of global flows. Complicating the question of “nomadic subjectivities” discussed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Lionnet and Shih also highlight the always rhizomatic nature of ‘minorities’, considering their creolisation – in the way conceived by Édouard Glissant in his *Poétique de la relation* (1990) – as the manifestation of an always already hybrid and relational culture (see also Britton 1999). As Glissant suggested, one of the elements of creolisation is a relational rhizomatic identity and the principle that “what supports us is not simply the definition of our identities, but also their relation to the whole set of possibilities: the mutual mutations generated by this play of relations” (1990, 103). The subject, then, is constituted within this fluid, plural, relational and related identifications that allow, to paraphrase Lionnet and Shih (2005, 7), those “micropractices of transnationality”<sup>14</sup> which emerge in interstitial and collective productions like *Phun Anu Thanu*, instances, we may call them, of minor cinemas in *Thinglish* language and *masala* style.

### 3 In Between the Local and the Global: Tibetan *masala* Films and the Politics of Cinematic Pleasure

You can't study a single film, nor even a national cinema, without understanding the interdependence of images, entertainment, and people all of which move with increasing regularity around the world. The movies are a model for the 'glocal'. (Andrew 2006, 26)

I begin to discuss what I have tentatively called Tibetan *masala* films, or *Thinglish* cinema, by considering the notion of a cinema world system devel-

14 “This conception of minor transnationality”, write Lionnet and Shih (2005, 8), “differs from the postnational, nomadic, and ‘flexible’ norms of citizenship (Appadurai; Joseph; Ong). [...] Flexible or nomadic subjects function as if they are free-floating signifiers without psychic and material investment in one or more given particular geopolitical spaces. By contrast, minor transnational subjects are inevitably invested in their respective geopolitical spaces, often waiting to be recognised as ‘citizens’ to receive the attendant privileges of full citizenship”.

oped by Dudley Andrew (2006), where transnational influences and critical approaches to filmmaking practices are apprehended and considered, as Deborah Shaw (2013) has highlighted, in the frame of intertextuality. As Shaw elaborated, a “world system approach is characterised [...] by waves of influence between national cinemas and from film to film in terms of approach, narrative and exchange and visual style” (58). Keeping in mind what we have argued about minor transnationalism and the creolisation of languages and aesthetics, I look at the rhizomatic cross-fertilisation between Bollywood and the productions by Tibetan filmmakers in India as a very important site of departure from a homogenised understanding of Tibetan filmmaking practices in exile. As it clearly appeared from the very beginnings of Tibetan cinema, each filmmaker struggled – and continuously struggles – to find his/her own distinct voice, aesthetic style, mode of production and what Rey Chow has evocatively called “sentimental fabulation” (2007).<sup>15</sup> Notwithstanding the difficulties of filmmaking in the diaspora, the tendency is to strive for productions that can be judged not only in pure ideological terms, but also on artistic and auterist levels, with many filmmakers determined to assure a good post-production process and keen to attend international film festivals, where their films may be able to carve a niche for Tibetan cinema on the global screens. This may be partially justified by their commitment to the Tibetan cause and the necessity of circulating Tibetan films in order to keep the struggle for independence alive, but it also hints to the necessity of creating multiple venues for sharing their films – which still represent a relatively new medium of expression for Tibetans – with other filmmakers who partake of the same challenges and look for international venues such as film festival to reach a broader audience and distributors for their films. While, so far, this has been possible only for few Tibetan directors, whose experience in filmmaking proved consolidated through work in the field and thanks to their privileged positionality as educated and cosmopolitan

15 In her book on Chinese cinema, titled *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (2007), scholar Rey Chow provides an interesting explanation for her choice of such an evocative title, which is worth quoting at length to understand my own adoption of such definition in discussing Tibetan diasporic cinema’s aesthetics and politics, also similarly and primarily characterised by a “sentimental fabulation” that brings together various elements that are “polyphonic and polyvalent”: “I have borrowed the notion of fabulation in part from Nietzsche, who wrote about ‘How the True World Finally Became a Fable’, and in part from Deleuze, who defined fabulation as a mythmaking function, central to minor cinemas, that brings together archaic and contemporary, as well as documentary and fictional, elements in the production of collective modes of storytelling, and that in turn constitutes the visionary basis for a people to come (or in the process of becoming). Amid the polyphonic and polyvalent claims to Chinese-ness – traversed by temporalities, languages, media, and diasporic routes or grounded in stable localities and prideful chauvinisms – the sentimental (in) contemporary Chinese films, with a worldwide accessibility unprecedented among Chinese cultural forms, may yet strike the most resonant chord” (Chow 1990, 25).

transnational subjects, for other aspiring filmmakers the whole process of writing, producing and directing their films is generally fraught with many challenges. Due to various social and economic factors, among which, just to mention a few, the high costs of film production and the constraints of being a refugee with hardly any chance to pursue a proper education in film studies or in media and communication technologies, most of the dreams of becoming film directors are often doomed to fail. This is not to say that India lacks excellent schools of cinema, as this is obviously not the case, nor I am stating that it is absolutely necessary to attend a prestigious film school to become a filmmaker: what I wish to underline is that for young Tibetans who wish to become filmmakers (or producers, cinematographers, actors, etc.) these paths may be foreclosed by certain difficulties to access not just schools or academies, but also practical training, filming equipment and financial support. This has not discouraged committed Tibetan filmmakers, who have often taken advantage of collaborative work with film directors (among whom also Bernardo Bertolucci) to learn technical skills and nurture their creative aspirations. Moreover, since Dharamsala offers a sort of readymade film set populated by many kind of national and international figures – some of them popular Hollywood and Bollywood personalities who are fascinated by the evergreen myth of Tibet and its “specialness” (Barnett 2001) – Tibetans in exile (at least in India) have had the possibility of meeting famous actors like Richard Gere, who regularly visits the hill station of McLeod Gunj and also acted as Executive Producer of *Dreaming Lhasa*.<sup>16</sup> This exposure to Hollywood, however, has also fostered a sort of American Dream that appears to loom in the backstage: many young Tibetans imagine the world of films as inflected by the Hollywood aesthetics and modes of production. This is also partly because the most famous film productions to date that revived the ‘fever for Tibet’ among Western supporters were two Hollywood productions (1997): *Kundun* by Martin Scorsese and *Seven Years in Tibet* by Jean-Jacques Annaud. Moreover, McLeod Gunj is a touristic hub for hundreds of American tourists who emotionally and financially feast on the Dream of Tibet while nurturing the American Dream among young Tibetans.

16 The role of Richard Gere and the impact he has had among Tibetan youths in India cannot be underestimated. The second film by Tashi Wangchuk and Tsultrim Dorjee was titled *Richard Gere is My Hero*, hinting at the centrality of this figure in the imaginary of Tibetans in India. Gere, beside his personal involvement with Buddhism and the Dalai Lama, has also contributed to support the movement for non-violent struggle and the cultural productions by Tibetans in exile. He also created a garbage-collection system and launched a clean-up operation in McLeod Gunj, showing his practical commitment to the well-being of Tibetans in exile.

Beside Gere, the main executive producer of the film was Jeremy Thomas, the acclaimed British producer of *The Last Emperor* and other films directed by Bernardo Bertolucci. For more information, see the official website of *Dreaming Lhasa*: <http://www.dreaminglhasa.com>.

Of lately, though, it is closer 'home' that some young filmmakers are looking for inspiration and support. The relative cheap costs of digital filmmaking and the possibility of processing the films through inexpensive editing software have given birth to a new trend of Tibetan cinema: a Bollywood inflected practice that uses songs, dances and a certain dose of humor and comedy to present the lives, loves and hopes of a new generation born and brought up in exile. This is going to be a rather different Tibetan cinema from the one of the cosmopolitan transnational filmmakers who made the very first films. This exilic "minor cinema"<sup>17</sup> represents the creative output of some young Tibetans born and brought up in India who had begun calling themselves the "India-born" (Chen 2012, 263). As Susan Chen posited, it is crucial to pay attention to "the sensory domains of these Tibetans' local/Indian experiences" and the way these young refugees "ambivalently feel for the place where they are at once native and exilic" (263). Feeling that they are both native subjects and exilic people, and thus accommodating in their social and cultural practices both Tibetan and Indian ways of thinking and performing as social beings, this group of young Tibetans does not shy away, as the elders did until very recently, from the influences of India's 'culture': from their familiarity with Hindi language, to the pleasure of consuming Indian food or cultural products like Bollywood films and TV series, many India-born Tibetans feel at home both in Indian and Tibetan cultures and strive to accommodate both of these dimensions in their quotidian life. As Timm Lau has pointed out,

Both normative Tibetan moral notions and aspirational Indian popular-cultural representations are appropriated by Tibetans born and raised in India. On the one hand, Tibetan moral notions of harmonious relationships present generally salient norms for Tibetans [...]. On the other hand, Indian popular film and television are ubiquitous in Tibetan everyday life. [...] Indian popular culture has helped to shape Tibetan diasporic aesthetics and historicity and provides an idiom for ideas and practices of love, romance and marriage for younger Tibetans in India. (2010, 967)

<sup>17</sup> The writings of Deleuze and Guattari on minor literature, minor cinema and their relation to a political agenda for the assertion of minority subjectivity have been amply discussed by many scholars and constitute a very useful theoretical frame to also discuss the developing of Tibetan diasporic cinema. David Martin-Jones (2006), offering a good summary of the writings on minor cinema, states: "minor cinema is a product of attempts made by marginalised or minority groups to create a new sense of identity. Minor cinema is 'revolutionary' in its appeal to colonised, minority, postcolonial, neocolonial, or otherwise marginalised peoples to establish a new sense of identity" (6).

Such definition is also very useful to understand the relation between politics, cinema, visual pleasures and the consolidation of a sense of identity in exile.

While the researches of Anna Morcom (2009) inside Tibet have highlighted the growing consumption of Bollywood films and Hindi songs among Tibetans in China, where such cultural products have come to be seen as an instance of the exotic/erotic Other across the border, on one side, and as a sort of 'sacred commodity' from the holy land of the Buddha (and present abode of the Dalai Lama) to be surreptitiously consumed inside China, on the other, very little has been written on the connection between the pleasure of watching Hindi language films among Tibetans in exile and the elaboration of Tibetan diasporic aesthetics and, we may add, of complex cinematic sensibilities. If inside Tibet the allure of Bollywood points to "the fluidity of cultural topographies and trajectories" (Morcom 2009, 145), linking the historical relationships between Tibet and South Asia to the contemporary plight of the Tibetan diaspora, it may be possible to look at the ties between India and Tibet not just in the frame of the nationalist project of China (hence reading the consumption of Bollywood in Tibet as some sort of counter-hegemonic cultural practice), but also at its aesthetic appreciation and performative appropriation among the Tibetans in exile as a creative way of coping with the emotional struggles faced by Tibetan refugees looking for 'modernity' and 'rootedness' closer to the place they have come to call home. As Keila Diehl (2002) has argued in her work on Tibetan music and songs in exile, where she has examined the development of new soundscapes by young Tibetan musicians in Dharamsala and the cultural politics which are bound to complicate such endeavors, the main problem that confronts young artists in exile is the challenge of satisfying their creativity and desire for innovation, while not rejecting their political commitment to the Tibetan cause. She states: "Despite a well-articulated academic curriculum and general commitment to cultural preservation, what is taught is not passed on unchanged, since Tibetan refugee youth are living undeniably displaced, fragile, and culturally hybrid lives" (18). This reminds us of the difficulties of researching among people on the move, who are constantly destabilised by many structural adjustments and cultural changes. Psychological traumas and feelings of nostalgia contribute to create a very slippery terrain where is difficult to pin down a stable sense of the Self. In this regard, in his considerations on the plight of exile, Edward Said (1984, 50) rightly cautioned those who were inclined to romanticize such painful dimension "as beneficial, as a spur to humanism or to creativity", warning that to do so was equivalent "to belittle its mutilations". Similarly, the feminist scholar Caren Kaplan has also pointed out the risks, for scholars who work at the perceived margins, to indulge into what she calls "a new poetics of the exotic" (1987, 191). Warning against a trivial use of the metaphor of the deterritorialisation of the nomad to signify empowerment, John K. Noyes (2004) has equally expressed his concern towards the uncritical praise of nomadic forms of being in the world, affirming: "It is a miserable plight to be a postmodern nomad, to be homeless, wandering, a



refugee, following not a dream of disembodied bliss but a slim hope for survival” (159). The mental shock and the physical strain of exile, experienced by Tibetans, is reinforced by their disillusionment in coming to terms with what was a chimeric dream. While nobody faces the journey towards exile light-heartedly, the condition of Tibetan refugees is somehow different: when individuals or families decide to make the dangerous journey across the Himalayas, or send their children alone to India, they do so with the hope that life in exile will be blessed by the proximity with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. For many Tibetans, then, exile can guarantee some form of ‘freedom’ in terms of social and cultural practices, and of ‘liberation’ in terms of spirituality, because the presence of their religious leader, revered by Tibetans as a manifestation of *Avalokiteśvara* (Tib. *Spyan ras gzigs*), can guarantee ‘real salvation’. Obviously, the suffering of exilic subjects is not obliterated by these spiritual practices and often Tibetans, especially the so-called ‘new comers’ who have arrived in recent years, decide to make the journey back to Tibet as cannot adjust to the ambiguous and uncertain dimensions of life in exile. As Tibetan poet Tenzin Tsundue (2002) touchingly expresses in his verses:

At every check-post and office,  
I am an “Indian-Tibetan”.  
My Registration Certificate,  
I renew every year, with a salaam.  
A foreigner born in India.<sup>18</sup>

In conveying this unwanted hyphenated identity, constricted by the quotation marks as to imply that for many Tibetans this is an imposed identity which signals the simultaneous belonging and un-belonging to a State ready to issue a Registration Certificate to testify that Tsundue is still a “foreigner”, albeit “born in India”, we can read all the plight of young Tibetan refugees who cannot actually ‘find refuge’ even in memories and nostalgia of the past, since their past is also a foreign land. Their linguistic and cultural hybridity is a result of that “pluralism that marks this more complex and specialized mode of existence” (Nowak 1980, 219). This pluralistic condition is distinct by a great deal of complexity, where the opposition between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ is politically and ideologically played on the minds of young Tibetans, who struggle to find a balance and to define their own “Tibetanness” (Tsundue 2002).<sup>19</sup> In this frame, it is im-

18 The entire poem is available online at <http://tibetwrites.in/IMG/pdf/kora.pdf>.

19 It may be interesting to point out that if, on one side, Tibetan families, schools and cultural institutions teach children to preserve ‘Tibetan culture’ in a state of artificial purity and strategic essentialism – since their *distinctiveness* is what justifies their mode of existence as refugees, as deterritorialised subjects who are keen to return home to a place called Tibet

portant to look at the ways Bollywood films and Hindi songs come to play an important role, filling an emotional vacuum that other Indian cinemas, Tibetan 'traditional' performances or Western forms of entertainment have only partially occupied. What Fareed Kazmi discusses as the "fetishisation of tradition" (1999, 62), theorised as one of the main ideological issues which underpin Indian film culture, becomes also crucial to an understanding of cultural productions by young Tibetans in India, as the duality between modernity and tradition is constantly enacted in their daily lives. Pressurised by the Tibetan authorities and their own families to preserve an essentialised form of Tibetan culture, almost exclusively constructed around customary laws and Buddhist religious practices, Tibetan youths (especially in McLeod Gunj) are simultaneously immersed in an intricate web of parallel realities, where Tibetan lives are affected by a multiplicity of actors that include, but is not limited to, tourists, NGO-workers, scholars and a quite conspicuous number of artists that travel to Dharamsala (and sometimes relocate) in search of a creative and mystical experience. The presence of a cohort of visitors and new settlers generates an anxiety among the elders and the religious authorities that exacerbates the idea of lack of control on the new generations, allegedly threatened in their identity by an array of non-Tibetan influences. Even the consumption of Hindi films and songs is steadily addressed and creatively exorcised through the interstitial production and collective consumption of what I have tentatively called Tibetan *masala* films. Despite the rather disempowering label of "superficial and entertaining" casted upon Hindi music and films (Diehl 2002, 27),<sup>20</sup> the appropriation and adaptation of Bollywood productions into a new Tibetan modern public culture is looked with apprehension by the elders and the leaders, pointing towards a more serious threat posed by this apparently trivial entertainment. As Timm Lau has pointed out in his discussion of Hindi films' consumption by young Tibetan exiles in India, Indian films' emotional content is far from irrelevant for this audience: "young Tibetans in India appropriate the romantic representations

-, on the other side, the fact that Tibetans arrived to India six decades ago and have since then renegotiated their space inside the Indian Republic need to be acknowledged. The older generations may still recollect the 'old world of Tibet', and nostalgically miss it, but the young generations may not be so keen to return to a country that they have never seen and of which they have an idealised image conveyed by both Tibetan and Western imaginaries on Tibet.

20 This may seem to be a rather Western-centric perspective, but it is a rather Tibetan-centric perspective, perhaps reinforced by a certain élite approach to cinema and entertainment, but also due to a certain moral evaluation of these media. Hindi songs, Bollywood films, melodramatic TV series, etc. are usually not much appreciated by Tibetans in exile, because they are deemed as improper entertainment and discouraged by the political and religious leaders. As Keila Diehl has pointed out, for Tibetans in exile "India is *mi yul*, the earthly realm of *samsara* and human mortality, in opposition to *lha yul*, the heavenly abode of the gods and, figuratively, a blessed country, paradise, Tibet" (2002, 113-4).

of melodramatic Hindi films, because they are relevant to their own lives amidst social changes, and because they induce strong emotions in them” (2010, 981). The raising of strong emotions and the anxiety they provoke have been the topic of contentious arguments among exile Tibetans, since, as Kay Milton (2002) has argued, those are exactly the things that elicit a strong emotional reaction which come to occupy an important place in our lives. Seen in this perspective, Tsering Namgyal’s wish to consume a Tibetan *masala* film aptly titled *The Karma of Chicken Curry* funnily, and yet seriously, conveys the emotional attachment to Indian food and films, an attachment which can be read as the karmic result of the exilic condition, but cannot be neither easily dismissed nor ignored.

Due to the limited scope of this article, there is only so much space that I can dedicate to the development of this *Thinglish* cinema. I will briefly discuss the first Tibetan film produced in India that has adopted a *masala* film formula, i.e. *Phun Anu Thanu (Two Exiled Brothers)*. With this film, screenwriters and directors Tashi Wangchuk and Tsultrim Dorjee have defined another cinematic idiom among Tibetans in exile, employing the genres of melodrama and slapstick comedy to simultaneously offer a mimic of the Hindi films’ romances and a parody of Bollywoodised ways of filmmaking. The film has proved remarkably successful among young Tibetans but has also received the appreciation of religious leaders and elder spectators. The reasons behind this success are far from simple and need to be evaluated. As Keila Diehl (2002) has argued,

Whereas playful (or sometimes unkind) mimicry of an ‘other’ can be a powerful tool for consolidating in-group identity, identification or the nonironic desire actually to become the ‘other’ threatens to foreground similarities over differences between groups, thereby blurring boundaries and weakening group solidarity. The ways in which Tibetans ‘use’ Hindi films as a source of entertainment, as a tool to underscore inter-group differences and tensions, and as a source of ideas about different ‘ways to be’ now need to be explored. (131)

Spicy films and romantic songs may turn even low-budget films into popular hits, without necessary enraging the custodians of cultural and moral integrity and even winning their praises. The efforts by Wangchuk and Dorjee to produce films that are a homage to Bollywood – and to India, at large – while also bearing the necessary “burden of representation” (Mercer 1994) of the Tibetan cause, have resulted into an entertaining spectacle and a humorous (albeit serious) take on life in exile, where many Tibetans, at least according to what reported on medias and blogs, have been able to identify.

#### 4 *Phun Anu Thanu* (India 2006): the First Instance of a *Thinglish* Film

*Phun Anu Thanu* (*Two Exiled Brothers*) is the first feature film made by a talented and creative duo, Tashi Wangchuk and Tsultrim Dorjee. They wrote and directed the film with the support of the Tibetan community, casting both non-professional and professional actors like the brilliant comedian Sonam Wangdue, who had already acted in both *We're No Monks* and *Dreaming Lhasa*. Mainly shot in the Tibetan colony of Dehradun (Uttaranchal State, India) *Phun Anu Thanu* is a romantic love story full of comedy and good sentiments. As the synopsis of the film elucidates:

A story of two good for nothing brothers, Anu and Thanu and their unconditional love for two beautiful and educated daughters, Yangzom and Dechen of Gyakpon la (a camp leader) of Dekiling Tibetan settlement, India. Anu and Thanu are known for their unruly characters while Yangzom and Dechen for their positive qualities. Much against the wishes of the respectable Gyakpon la, the two brothers strive hard to win the heart of his two daughters. The film takes off on the 10th March 2005 when every Tibetan goes to downtown, Dehra Dun, to commemorate the 1959 Tibetan Uprising in Lhasa. The two brothers, however, do not attend the march and lingers around with the two sisters. Since there is no one present at the colony, the time is also perfect for two thieves to do their business. However, love rules the heart of potbellied school cook, Machen la, as he is busy making love with the wine lady, Ama Changma. Apart from entertainment, the film touches social, political, moral and health issues.<sup>21</sup>

Writers and directors Tashi Wangchuk and Tsultrim Dorjee produced the film with the support of local Tibetan producers Dickyi Wangmo and Ugen Dolma and shot the film with the help of the Indian cinematographer Narinder Singh. The music and the editing was also done in collaboration with Indian friends, Arun Sharma and Mohit Kumar, and the film was released among great excitement, gaining good reviews and the deep admiration of the then Prime Minister Samdong Rinpoche, who reportedly expressed his congratulatory remarks to the filmmakers saying: "I didn't expect the film as it is. It is perfect" (Ugen 2006). Even the Chief Justice Namgyal Tsering rated the film as "Excellent and very beautifully made" (Ugen 2006), while other Tibetans who had the chance of watching the film during some of the screenings around India or in the US, expressed their delight on the *Phayul* blog with comments such as: "This is one of the best movies that

21 See: <http://seykharfilms.com/#films>.

Tibetan has ever made. It's funny, educational, romantic, family oriented and did I say funny. We loved it";<sup>22</sup> or less enthusiastic but still supportive statements like: "Its a good movie - not a 'Titanic' but given the budget its first class. This movie is made by Tibetans for Tibetans-plain and simple-not for Engees or stupid awards. EVERY TIBETAN SHOULD WATCH THIS FILM. Welldone everyone involved in the film - good music and acting and direction".

Indeed, as one of the directors, Tashi Wangchuk, has confirmed in an article published on *The Tibet Sun* (2015), the film was made to cater to the tastes of a Tibetan audience. And even if now, after more than ten years by its release, Tashi acknowledges that "their film was not even near the mark when it comes to a standard professional film" and "the story line [was] redundant, the editing rather sloppy, and many of the scenes [...] totally unnecessary" (2015), he also stresses that "many of the important persons at Dharamshala were impressed by their mediocre work and gave great reviews" and that truly helped marketing the film among the local audience, since "from the beginning their target audience were Tibetans, whom they would not be reaching through film festivals" (2015). So, as Tashi honestly reveals in his enjoyable piece titled "Sweet and Sour" (perhaps a hint that their next films may be inflected by more East Asian tastes of cinema?), "they started touring Tibetan settlements, schools, monasteries, and institutes in India with a DVD player and a rental digital projector to screen their film on a ticket basis" (2015). Writing for the popular online magazine *Phayul* at the time of the film's screening in Minnesota, journalist Jigme Ugen (2006) also commented:

Is *Phun Anu Thanu*, a Tibetan cult classic? Yes, is the answer as it has broken all standard conventions associated with the new wave of Tibetan films. With an emphasis on strong family values and a theme of love overcoming differences, this film also manages to touch on social, political, moral and health issues. It also throws light on the middle way stand of the Tibetan government-in-exile and its future.

Despite some unavoidable technical flaws and the rather simple plot, *Phun Anu Thanu* remains a 'Tibetan cult film'. The witty comedy and the mimicking of certain Bollywood scenes, like the one where comedian Sonam Wangdue sings and dances in the mountains for winning the heart of his rich and well educated lover, have become popular item songs and have been uploaded on YouTube as an instance of the most enjoyable performance of

<sup>22</sup> For all the reported comments, see: <http://www.phayul.com/news/discuss/view.aspx?id=12668#26463>.

the film.<sup>23</sup> If it is true that the film adheres to a certain moralistic ethos and conforms to the official political stances of the Tibetan Government, such 'educational' messages do not obscure the centrality of the main theme, which ultimately is concerned with love, emotion and marriage practices among Tibetan youths in exile. The film, thus, can be read as an expression of an aesthetics of emotionality that have made of Bollywood films, with their romantic stories and melodramatic style, a suitable formula for conveying the heartfelt need, among young Tibetans, to discuss love and intimacy beyond the boundaries of constraining 'traditions'. Paraphrasing what Brian Larkin (1997) has argued regarding the production of local love story books (*soyayya* books) and their relationship to Bollywood films' consumption by young Hausa people in Nigeria, we can also say that "the engagement with themes of romantic love [in Tibetan masala films] exemplifies precisely this desire to explore the limits of social norms during a period of rapid change" (415). As much as the "tension between arranged marriages and love marriages is not new to Hausa society, nor is the idea that romantic love may be subversive of the moral order" (415), comparably such topics are common among young Tibetans, who are equally affected by "the speed of contemporary social change that has placed the issues of love, marriage and sexuality squarely at the forefront of social concern" (415). As Timm Lau (2010, 981) has rightly observed, "young Tibetans in India appropriate the romantic representations of melodramatic Hindi films, because they are relevant to their own lives amidst social changes, and because they induce strong emotions in them".

Coming back to *Phun Anu Thanu*, the success of the film may partially be associated to the representation of the two male characters, the brothers Thanu and Anu, who strive to conquer the hearts of their beloved girls, two rich and beautiful sisters. In the process, as it is expected in a *masala* comedy, they face plenty of difficulties, mainly posed by the girls' father, and overcome issues of social class and economic status, communal problems that understandably strike a sympathetic chord among many young Tibetans living in diasporic enclaves. The pleasure born from enacting the roles of the hero and the heroine typically played in Bollywood films, where the threat is usually posed by Westernisation and lack of respect for 'Indian traditions',<sup>24</sup> in Tibetan films is reformulated through a mimicking parody

23 While it is very difficult to get hold of a copy of the film, which has been distributed only unofficially through DVDs sold at the screenings' venues, the main item song, which constitutes also the trailer of the film, is still available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EI0rQ6uhxJo>.

24 Since the liberalisation of the Indian economy, films have introduced new ways of being 'westernised' and 'traditional' at the same time. This is an interesting point to be made also in relation to what Bollywood may come to represent in different cultural settings, such as the ones analysed by Brian Larkin (1997) who has highlighted the ways Indian films provide

of Indian ways of romancing, on one side, and a more serious retake of the tradition-modernity paradigm, on the other. In these Tibetan films, tradition is uniquely identified with a carefully constructed and essentialised notion of Tibetan culture, with its religious principles and moral values, while the second term is ambiguously presented as a conflation of Indian and Western ways of being and doing, acceptable only insofar as such imitation is duly mocked and finally exorcised through humor and parody. Given the exilic setting of production (India) and the pleasure in consuming Indian films and soap operas, this preliminary statement may seem exaggerate. However, it confirms what has also been highlighted by Keila Diehl in her work *Echoes from Dharamsala*, where she has clearly posited how “[d]ifferentiation is generally played down and even considered regrettable in the Tibetan refugee community” (2002, 18). She further elaborates:

The key for the ethnographer in this situation is to move beyond a fascination with *formal* hybridity – the prayer beads entwined with digital watches, the country and rock music blaring at Himalayan dance parties – and pay attention instead to the ways in which the elements of this particular youth culture are chosen, reproduced, and even standardized. This attention to the motivations behind and feelings about the consumption of cultural elements from here and there reveals a generation of young people who are, for the most part, remarkably conservative and conventional in their beliefs and morals. (18-9)

Shortly, the apparent relaxed condition of life in exile conceals a world of tension and anxiety which has been kept under control by a tight educational diktat where all things non-Tibetan must be vigilantly adopted and craftily adapted for the sake of survival. Tibetan political leaders and religious authorities allow (even encourage) the use of Hindi and English languages, and the adoption of certain Indian foods and Western clothes, but they do so reminding Tibetans that these extras should be seen as occasional ‘pepper and salt’ to spice up a rather tasteless diasporic life, and should not become “culturally odorless” (Iwabuchi 2002), hence dangerously undistinguishable from what has to remain a distinctive Tibetan culture. “[A]ppropriating, hybridizing, indigenizing, and consuming images and commodities of ‘foreign’ origin in multiple unforeseen ways” (Iwabuchi 2002, 46) should not be translated into a deeper translation of *other* cultures into ‘ours’.

Hence, to adopt a different kind of metaphor, it is fine to inject some flesh and blood in the anemic corpse of Tibetan exilic culture, but due attention

viewers in Nigeria with a way of being modern that does not mean being westernised. This creation of what Larkin named “parallel modernities” is also relevant to Tibetans consuming and producing Bollywood-style films in exile.

should be paid not to turn the *masala* into staple food, and to prevent the devastating effects of what Ramirez-Berg has called the “vampire’s kiss” (1996, cited in Diehl 2002, 140). Such kiss, in fact, might succeed in revitalising a corpse, but it would do so only at the expenses of the subject’s consciousness, resulting into a complete possession of the victim’s body, mind and desires. Hence, if Western and Indian cultural products can be accessed and consumed by Tibetans in exile, such consumption must be prevented from turning into adoption of mores and habits that may jeopardize the survival of a carefully crafted authenticity, which must remain at the center of the cultural *mandala* of diasporic existence.<sup>25</sup> The effort at localising their films, keeping in mind a Tibetan audience who may appreciate the vernacular style of the diegetic and cinematic language, adds to the importance of Tashi and Dorjee’s films and to the felt necessity of developing a local industry that satisfies the Tibetan spectators in exile. The fact that such films look at Bollywood style of entertainment to discuss issues like identity, exile, love, alienation and political struggle also hints at the efforts by many Tibetans in the diaspora to find a suitable language to address such questions without indulging into some sort of disempowering exercise of imagination.

Tsultrim Dorjee and Tashi Wangchuk have recently relocated to the US but continue to make films, shorts and documentaries related to Tibet and Tibetans in exile. As the new location has perhaps inflected their way of film-making in new ways/waves, their recently released films are distant from their *masala* style comedies of ten years ago. This shifting in diasporic position and socio-cultural positionality may suggest new paths ahead for Tibetan diasporic cinema(s), where the pluralising forms of filmmaking practices point towards an increasing need to discuss these productions in a more complex, intersectional and transnational frame, with all the necessary cautions I have tentatively highlighted in this short essay.

## 5 Conclusions

Thanks to the work of some scholars who have begun looking at the dynamics of identity construction among Tibetans in exile, we have come a long way in understanding the issues that affect the lives of exiles and refugees from Tibet. Jessica Falcone and Tashi Wangchuk, among others, have addressed the “preoccupation of the exile community with the preservation of tradition”, which often “has resulted in a degree of ‘enclavement,’ or ‘emplacement’ from Indian society that has come with its own set of costs

25 In this regard, I have found the diagrams sketched by Keila Diehl (2002, 27) to discuss “Dharamsala’s soundscape” remarkably useful. Thus, I refer to her publication for further elucidations.



and benefits" (2008, 164). Despite all the efforts put forward by the Tibetan Government in Exile and the older generation of Tibetans "to hold on tightly to certain formulations of Tibetanness" (164), Falcone and Wangchuk conclude that there is an increasingly sense of "fluidity of citizenship, home, native and stranger through the experience of the displaced Tibetan community of India" (164). As Serin Houston and Richard Wright (2010) have also asserted, there is a dearth of individual voices emerging from the Tibetan diaspora that "shows how Tibetan diasporic identities are contested, complex and embedded in not one but multiple narratives of struggle" (217). Notions like 'tradition', 'ethnicity', and 'nation', as we know, are constantly shifting and Tibetans in exile continuously negotiate and re-adjust their sense of identity and belonging, perhaps learning to feel more at home in the world, as exilic subjects are expected to do. The film that I have briefly taken into exam has shown this effort at redefining cultural affinities and the way Bollywood cinema offer a template to narrate exiled Tibet and Tibetan youths' psychological and emotional journeys.

In the last fifteen years, the medium of cinema and the filmmaking practices by Tibetans in exile have grown at a steady and exponential rate, with many films being showcased in international film festivals, museums and other art and education venues. More and more Tibet-related film festivals are being organised around the world, and the success of Dharamsala International Film Festival (DIFF, directed by Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin) also points at another important development in the nurturing of cinema culture among Tibetans in exile. Cinema is seen by Tibetans as a global medium capable of crossing linguistic and geopolitical boundaries and hence a suitable channel that can be employed not just as a tool of advocacy or cultural preservation, but as a site of experimentation and a way to address issues that affect humanity at large. From documentaries on Miss Tibet in India to short videos on the first Tibetan transgender Mariko, from Bollywood-styled love stories to narrations of Tibetan social and economic disenfranchisement in Paris, there is a mushrooming of films by young Tibetan exiles which showcase a growing interest in the use of cinema and its potentialities to transmit a less stereotyped, polyphonic, even cacophonous, voice of Tibet(s). With Ritu and Tenzing presently working at the post-production of their second feature film (working title: *The Sweet Requiem*), Pema Dondhup striving to produce a plethora of new projects (from the story of *Gesar* to the *Search* for the next Dalai Lama) and with many other young - and less young - filmmakers busy at making their own films, we are left looking forward to a growing of this cinema-scape, beyond B/Hollywood aesthetic frames and Tibet-related politics and religion. New Tibetan filmmakers, while still making films on the plight of Tibetan refugees or on the spiritual dimensions of Tibetan culture, increasingly look at love and betrayal, sexuality and gender, life in the fortress of Europe and other global - or simply human - themes that do not contradict

the rising of a distinctive Tibetan cinema but rather contribute to the making of it as another instance of the complicated transnational, diasporic, accented ones. Tibetan diasporic filmmaking practices, multi-vocal and multi-perspectival, engage the spectator in the multi-layered and ever-complex dimension of being a diasporic subject caught in the interstices of globalised modes of living and shifting wor(l)ds.

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