

The features of cinematic language on Tibetan films directed by Pema Tseden

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe the development of Tibetan film in China and introduce the works of the best and first Tibetan film directors. Pema Tseden is one of the best film directors in China in recent years, as the first Tibetan director to appear in Chinese films, in his short life, he created seven very outstanding Tibetan language films. In the early morning of May 8, 2023, he died in Tibet due to a sudden illness, and his life was frozen in the journey of “carving time”. His films have a strong minority style, and the audio-visual language in the films has Tibetan nationality. This paper attempts to use semiotic theory to find the characteristics of film language in relation to several of his representative Tibetan films. This article has two purposes: 1) To sort out the development of Tibetan films in three periods; 2) Analyze the unique cinematic language in the 7 works of Tibetan director Pema.

In order to better analyze the linguistic features in Tibetan films, we use some theoretical concepts, including film semiotics, and Italian neorealism theory to analyze the representative works of Tibetan director Pema Tseden. Based on the collected literature and related data, the research results show that the themes in all these works show the authorial intention of the directors and deeply reflect the spiritual situation of Tibetans nowadays as well as the real state of existence of everyone in the predicament through the realist movie language. This has a great effect on understanding the real Tibetan life in modern times and promoting the development of Tibetan native language films.

Keywords: Tibetan films Pema Tseden Cinematic language

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Introduction

Tibetan film is one of the most influential in the development history of Chinese minority films. In Tibetan film production, Mandarin, the official language of China, has been used as the main language to tell film stories. It was not until the birth of the film “The Silent holy Stone” in 2005 that Tibetan native language films really began, which was created by young Tibetan director Pema Tseden.

A large number of balanced compositions, documentary and calm long shots and panoramic shots, and Tibetan sounds full of metaphorical meanings in the films have become important means to write Tibetan culture in his films. As of 2022, director Pema has produced seven feature films: “The Silent holy Stone” (2005), “The Soul Searching “ (2009), “Old Dog” (2011), “The Sacred Arrow” (2014), “Tharlo” (2015), “JinPa” (2019), and “Balloon” (2020). The above works have won many film awards at home and abroad, and by 2020, the film “Balloon” was released at home and abroad, and was nominated for the best film of the Venice Film Festival Horizon unit. Director Pema Tseden formed a wave with the appearance of opening mountains, and he is also known as the leader of the “Tibetan New Wave”.

1.1 Research Significance

These seven films are different from the previous Tibetan films. These Tibetan films, which take the Tibetan people themselves as the main body, reflect the Tibetan culture and use the dialogue of the Tibetan language, are very different from the previous third person perspective films and Putonghua translated films. They are the unique writings of Tibetan filmmakers on their own ethnic geography, culture and humanity, which enrich the grand narrative of Tibetan films. It presents an ecological and cultural landscape that is completely different from the Han perspective.

1.2 Aim of the research: The following are the main objectives of this study:

- To study To study the development of Tibetan cinema from the beginning to the present, in three different periods, and the corresponding cinematic language.
- To study the current Tibetan cinema, especially the New Wave Cinema in Tibet , and the features of the cinematic language of the seven works of director Pema in A Semiotic Approach.

1.3 Research hypotheses

Find a checklist for design that the director can depends on to produce cinematic language achieving the following research hypotheses:

- Using a semiotic approach, the authorship of film can be found in the language of film, in Pema's work;
- Using a semiotic approach, the cinematic style of the long shot can be found in the cinematic language, in Pema's works;
- Using a semiotic approach, photographic color styles can be found in the language of cinema, in Pema's work;
- Using a semiotic approach, the metaphors of film music can be found in the language of film, in Pema's work

1.4 Research tools and methods

Qualitative research methodology was employed in this study with the literature of Tibetan films by Pema .Mainly using Pema's seven films and CNKI's related thesis materials as data, we analyze Tibetan cinema by combining film semiotics and the creative theory of Italian neorealism.

The researcher depends on choosing an intentional sample of cinematic language that achieve the effects of Tibetaness of Pema works in unconventional methods, based on the semiotic analysis (Signifier and signified , Articulation, Connotation, Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic axis).

1.5 Literature review

In previous studies, there is a relatively large body of literature on Tibetan cinema, with the majority of papers examining Tibetan films that were produced under the auspices of the government and that expressed the theme of the great unity of all ethnic groups. However, there are fewer papers, about 20, focusing on Tibetan mother tongue films and director Pema Tsetan, with the main arguments discussing the national significance represented by several of the director's early works, the new Tibetan ethnicity, as well as anecdotes about the director's life, and fewer papers discussing the origins of the language of Tibetan cinema and the features of the cinematic language of Tibetan films .

Due to China's political control, studies of Tibetan culture are generally divided into two parts, those that conform to the ideology of the Chinese government and those that do not. Among them, the research topic of Tibetan film as a part of Chinese film has always been concerned by Chinese scholars. In my opinion, it can be divided into three periods, the two time points dividing the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the beginning of the new wave

of Tibetan film in 2005. Before 2005, there were about 40 articles on Tibetan film literature, which were completed to safeguard the ideological rule of the central government. The main academic significance was to show the acceptance of Han culture by Tibetan people and the great cultural integration of Han and Tibetan people. For example, “40 Years of Tibetan Film Distribution and Screening” from Peng (Journal of Tibetan Art Studies), the purpose of the article is to show the Communist Party’s screening of translated films (non-Tibetan Tibetan films) in Tibetan areas, and to show the central government’s relations and rule over ethnic minority areas.

Since 2005, after Pema made The first Tibetan language film “The Silent Holy Stone,” about 200 journal articles were published in China, and scholars began to frantically explore the independence and authoritativeness of the Tibetan director, and how his films differed from previous Tibetan films. In the field of ethnic minority films in China, the research on Pema and his works has become a hot spot. At the same time, many international scholars also began to study Tibetan films centered on Pema. These studies focused on the following: Contested Tibetan landscapes in the films of Pema Tsenden. Pema Tsenden and the Tibetan road movie: Space and identity beyond the ‘minority nationality film’. Articulating for Tibetan Experiences in the Contemporary World. Some of the above articles are about Tibetan culture and identity, while this article will focus more on the cinematic language and symbol in the film for analysis and interpretation.

Three stages of Tibetan film development

In the past hundred years, the development of Tibetan films has been closely related to foreign explorers, Chinese history and Chinese films, and the characteristics displayed in different stages are different.

(1) Exploration of Tibetan Culture by Foreigners (1903-1949)

In addition to the South Pole and the North Pole, Tibet, as the third pole in the world, is a place that all explorers around the world yearn for, where there are more than 10,000 years of glaciers and snow-capped mountains, vast grasslands, and mysterious Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan culture. At this stage, Tibetan films were mainly shot by some explorers from Germany, Italy, and Australia, which mainly reflected the curiosity survey from the western perspective, such as the German explorer Wilhelm Felch’s Exploration of Eastern Tibet, which focused on Tibet’s magnificent natural landscape and religious and humanistic feelings. In 1938, the German expedition team filmed the Mysterious Tibet. But these films cannot be called Tibetan films, they can only be called documentary films with Tibetan subjects.



Figure : Tibet's Secret by German director H.A. Lettow / Ernst Schäfer

(2) The Chinese Government's cultural rule and management of Tibet (1949-2004)

1949 The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China was established in Beijing. Then, on May 23, 1951, the Agreement between the Central People's Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet was officially signed in Beijing, declaring the peaceful liberation of Tibet. Since then, Tibet has been under the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China, and since 1953, feature films about Tibet have been produced by companies such as Shanghai Film Studio and Changchun Film Studio, and since then almost all Tibetan films have been produced mainly in Mandarin.

The themes and cinematic language of these films mainly focus on national liberation and political propaganda, expressing the national will and political policies at that time. Later, Han directors with vanguard consciousness began to reflect on the political propaganda means of the film and began to tell the Tibetan story from the perspective of the common people, but always only from the perspective of an observer. In these film languages, the director deliberately interspersed many cultural symbols, such as temples, prayer wheels, murals, sky burial ceremonies, etc., to reflect the unique Tibetan culture.

(3) Tibetan Directors Shooting Their Own Stories (2005-2022)

When Tibetans themselves began to take their own culture seriously in a cinematic way, Tibetans began to wake up culturally. Beginning with director Pema Tseden, Tibetan directors began to emerge, and Tibetan directors such as Sonthar Gyal began to direct native language films in Tibetan as their first language, exploring their own stories from within the Tibetan people. Gradually formed a "group of film directors", mainly composed of Pema Tsedan and Sonthar Gyal, Dorjee Tselang, Sidnima, Dolaga, Li Jiayad, Dege Tsering, Agang Yaalji, Dhanzheng Daojie, Dajie Dingzeng, Rahua Jia, Dezi Ji, Luo Dan and other three generations of old, middle-aged and young people.



Figure: Tibetan director Pema Tsedan (1969-2023) and The last movie Balloon :
The 76th Venice Film Festival (2019) Horizon Unit Award for Best Film (Nominated) The 23rd
Shanghai International Film Festival (2020)

The features of cinematic language

3.1 General cinematic language

According to information from Industrial Scripts ,cinematic language is the methods and conventions of cinema that are used to communicate with the audience. This is often also referred to as visual storytelling, although this is only one part of cinematic language. Emotions and ideas are expressed in cinema visually through all types of techniques such as lighting, performance, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing and more.Cinematic language in film can come in many different forms. Take the following examples:

- Camera framing: a camera angle and framing can tell us how to feel about a character. For example, if the camera is looking at a character from a low angle, it shows the character is important or powerful. If the camera is looking from a high angle, it can show the character is small and weak.

- Lighting and colour: a dark and dull setting can tell us that we should feel tense or scared. Or a light and colourful setting can tell us to feel happy and warm.

- Performance: an actor's performance is the key to understanding their emotions throughout a film. They can communicate this in a number of ways through facial expressions, body language, pace and tone. The writer might typically convey this intention through stage direction or a parenthetical.

- Mise-en-scène
- Colour and lighting.
- Editing techniques, such as montage.
- Use of dialogue.

- Narrative (the timings of scenes and the importance of their placement in the narrative timeline).
- Cinematography choices.
- Sound.

In addition, there are many Cinematic language, and they all have hidden semiotic meanings behind them.

3.2 General research theory on cinematic language

In the process of the development of film history, academics establish three kinds of theories. It is generally believed that the Soviet school of montage represented by Eisenstein is the first milestone in the history of world film theory, the theory of realism represented by Bazan is the second milestone, and film semiotics represented by Metz is the third milestone.

Film semiotics occupies a considerable position in the history of film theory and criticism. The French film semiotician Christian Metz proposed to apply the research method of structuralist linguistics to the study of film language, so as to reveal the mechanism of conveying meaning in films. He believes that a film is a series of sentences, and reveals the narrative function in different contexts by analyzing the order of shots, the way they are combined, and the connection of scenes. He treats the film as a text, and by analyzing the energetic references, he can find out what it refers to. In Tibetan cinema, there are many plots that contain a large number of symbols that can be interpreted, symbols of shot images, symbols of cinematic sounds and so on.

Another method of analysis: the Italian Neorealism movement is the second film aesthetic movement in the history of world cinema, which began in the 1940s. Italian directors were influenced by Bazan's long-shot documentary aesthetics, and showed the following four characteristics of the film language in their films: (1) the documentary nature of the story; (2) the use of real scenes to shoot the movie scenes; (3) the extensive use of long shots to shoot; (4) The use of non-professional actors instead of professional actors. These characteristics are more in line with the language style of the current Tibetan cinema, so comparing these two styles, we can conclude the characteristics of the New Wave of Tibetan Films.

3.3 The features of cinematic language in a semiotic approach.

From the past to the present of Tibetan cinema, the watershed of cinematic language lies in 2005, for it was in this year that the first independent film by a Tibetan director, The Silent holy Stone, was born, employing a full complement of Tibetan filmmakers, authentic sets, non-professional Tibetan actors, and a documentary-like narrative style. Pema Tsetan's cinematic

language is close to that of the Italian neo-realist period. But not all of it is the same, mainly in the following characteristics.

(1) Authorship

The term authorship can come from the idea of authorship cinema. French film director Francois Truffaut first put forward the “author theory” in his article “A Certain Tendency of French Film” published in 1954. He believed that “the true author of a film should be the director, and the director should, like the writer, express his view of life through all his works. Film has become a tool with a unique language that allows the free expression of ideas and emotions, just as a writer writes with a pen.

In the course of Pema Tsedan ‘s creation, the source and subject matter of the story reveal the true feelings of the original author. As a Chinese-Tibetan bilingual writer and literary translator, Pema Tsedan has published more than 40 novellas, among which “Tharlo”, “Killed a Sheep” and “Ugin’s Teeth” have been adapted into films. As for the characteristic of authorship, some correlations can be found in his work “ The Silent holy Stone “. Among films with an independent author’s style, The Silent holy Stone has many unique Tibetan characteristics, which is different from previous Tibetan films. In this work, the sacredness and mystery of “holy Tibet” in previous Tibetan films are deconstructed, and the snowy plateau is no longer an ideal space for resolving spiritual crises and recuperating the soul. The narrative of Tibet has moved into bungalows, roads and towns.

According to the book Authorship in Film Adaptation, Authoring a film adaptation of a literary source not only requires a media conversion but also a transformation as a result of the differing dramatic demands of cinema. The most critical central step in this transformation of a literary source to the screen is the writing of the screenplay.



Figure : The Silent holy Stone and Lama wearing a mask in the film
In the film, the little monk wearing a mask can be deeply interpreted.

In the story, the little monk, attracted by the Han myth of Journey to the West, goes to the small town to buy a mask to wear, which he thinks is just a toy to show his interest in new things. However, in the subconsciousness of the author, the mask of Sun Wukong is no longer a toy, but represents the culture of the Han nationality. This behavior is no longer a simple interest, but a kind of infiltration and change of Han culture into Tibetan culture. From the novel to the film, many literary languages can not be directly expressed in words, so a shot of the film language can show this kind of inherent conflict of authorship.

Authorship in cinematic language in Pema work The Silent holy Stone

signifier	Monkey mask and Tibetan opera mask TV and stone sutra Motorcycles and horses	signified	Modern objects and traditional objects in the film
connotation	The thoughts of director-author theory: the impact of modern science and technology on traditional culture, the penetration of Han culture into Tibetan culture	articulation	exist
paradigmatic	Not existed	syntagmatic	exist



Figure Screenshot of the movie The Silent holy Stone, source:

<https://movie.douban.com/photos/photo/2627798786/>

In the small temples, you can see not only the classic Tibetan operas, but also the daily life of the monks watching TV. These mysteries about religion and Tibet are not mysterious, but dispelled. At the same time, the conflict and integration of Tibetan culture and Han culture are also reflected in this very accurate. The Tibetan young Lama wearing the Monkey King mask of the Han nationality's Journey to the West is not only a reflection on the dissolution of the Tibetan cultural tiger, but also the tolerance of Han culture into Tibetan culture. These are the reproduction of the cinematic language with authorship.

(2) Documentary style with long shots

While studying at the Beijing Film Academy, the director was influenced by Andre Bazin, so his films pursue documentary. As Andre Bazin said: "The camera lens gets rid of our habitual views and prejudices on the object, clears away the spiritual rust on the object that I feel, and only this kind of cold-looking lens can return the world to a pure and true look, attract my attention, and thus arouse my attachment."

Only such a calm long shot allows the audience to see the real and pure Tibetan world. In the opening scene of the film "Tharlo", the audience can see an 11-minute long fixed shot of a Tibetan shepherd standing inside a police station run by Han Chinese and reciting the article "Serving the People" by the Han Chinese leader Mao Zedong, without any camera cut, as if a spectator is quietly watching the whole process.

This long shot vividly shows the personality of the protagonist, Talor, who is wooden and old-fashioned, echoing the plot at the end of the film where Talor is unable to recite it again. When his sheep are cheated by others and his feelings are deceived by the girl in the barber shop, the film gives a long shot of 3 minutes, Tharlo from riding a bike into the picture to the motorcycle breakdown in the middle of the road can only push the car to finish the road, a desolate and helpless feeling arises. Finally, Tharlo sat on the motorcycle smoking, looking at the mountain in front of him thoughtfully, and he was completely lost with nothing. This kind of lost emotion has a strong record aesthetics in the long shot, and this kind of film language is different from previous films, with its own unique charm.

Long shots in cinematic language in Pema work Tharlo

signifier	More than 5 minutes of film footage, in which Tibetan shepherds recite Chinese; Sitting in front of the mirror for a long time.	signified	Time is long, trivial, helpless
connotation	There is no way to be free in the frame of a painting, Eventually the shepherd had to cut off his hair, and he ended up with nothing	articulation	exist
paradigmatic	Not existed	syntagmatic	exist



Figure Screenshot of the Tharlo , source:

<https://movie.douban.com/photos/photo/2285980381/>

Tharlo is the representative of a group, a true portrayal of many Tibetan shepherds, and the director always focuses on the narrative of the individual Tibetan people. The characters in the film are located in the space between urban and rural areas, and the main plot is to search for a certain emotion and identity. In other words, the character of Tallow is created by the author in accordance with his imagination when writing. If the emotional expression of a work can not be the author's real feelings, then the work can not move the audience, when everyone in the cinema to follow Tharlo to experience a day of loss and pain, you can understand the truth: When Tibetans see their own stories, they will not be carried out from an external perspective, will not only describe the grandeur of nature, will not be mixed with political ideology, but more to express the confusion of ordinary Tibetans in the present. When the shepherd finally shaved off his head, it was as if he had lost his soul, and this change accurately showed the true mentality of the Tibetan people.

(3) The color style of the picture

In Tibetan culture, there is a saying about the religious colors of five or four colors. From the perspective of traditional Tibetan painting theory, “four colors” and “five colors” are the most basic colors. Among them, four colors are white, yellow, red and blue, and five colors are white, yellow, red, blue and green. Blue plus yellow gives green, so the two statements are essentially the same.

The early Tibetan color aesthetics should initially come from the inspiration of nature, endows colors with the most natural and primitive symbolic significance. Red symbolizes the sun, white symbolizes white clouds and snow, blue symbolizes the sky, green symbolizes rivers, lakes and so on .

In the movie “Balloon”, there are always one or two red balloons, which are colorful and have a characteristic meaning. After Zhuoga suspected that she was pregnant, she went to the female doctor for a pregnancy test. When she went out of the consultation room and walked outside, the picture used a panoramic shot to place Zhuoga and a chained sheep in the same picture, forming a strong metaphorical effect. Zhuoga for the sake of the family's livelihood, did not want to regenerate children, but at this time Zhuoga seems to have no choice. The sheep being tied up in the picture implies Zhuoga's situation at this time, and it is a metaphor that Zhuoga is bound by traditional thoughts and cannot escape despite efforts. At the end of the film, the father finally buys two red balloons for the children, the children play happily, one balloon burst, the other balloon floated into the sky. At this time, the picture uses a panoramic shot. The bright red balloons float away in the clear blue sky, and the characters in the film raise their heads to look at the balloons in the sky. This shot cleverly brings people from different places together in the same space.

Color style in cinematic language in Pema work “Balloon”

signifier	Red balloon White condom	signified	Pregnant woman
connotation	In the position of female fertility in Tibetan families, red represents blood and hope.	articulation	exist
paradigmatic	Not existed	syntagmatic	exist



Figure : Screenshot of the movie balloon, source:
<https://movie.douban.com/photos/photo/2623008066/>

Colors are the signifiers and their meanings are the signified, together they constitute the sign that forms in the mind of the viewer feelings. It is noticeable the color duality(signifier) according to its shade and using it in the movie changes the meaning of the sign (signified).

(4) Documentary and metaphor in sound

Pema Tseden's films always use Tibetan as the voice language, and he once said in an interview: "Like some Tibetan films made by other ethnic directors in the past, although he is talking about Tibetan themes, it is actually a Han thinking, in fact, Han people wearing Tibetan clothes are acting, speaking Chinese, and doing things with Han thinking." Pema Tseden's films use almost all Tibetan dialogue, which enhances the authenticity of the film and brings the audience into the atmosphere of Tibetan life. In the movie Jinpa, Jinpa killed a sheep on the road. He felt sorry for the sheep and went to the temple to find a monk to cross over for the sheep. In the film "The Silent holy Stone ", the young lama is sent to the monastery as a child, and he recites Buddhist sutras with his master every day, sometimes reciting the longevity sutras for the newborn in the village, the peace sutras for the dead, and the sutras for blessing during the Tibetan New Year. On the one hand, these episodes show the little lama's adherence to Tibetan culture, showing his inner piety, and on the other hand, let the audience further understand the real Tibetan culture.

Metaphor sound in cinematic language in Pema work Jinba

signifier	The song” My Sun” As film music	signified	An untimely bel canto from Pavarotti
connotation	An Avenger ends up killing himself in a dream, which is actually a metaphor for Jinba the driver, who didn’t kill anyone and was saved	articulation	exist
paradigmatic	Not existed	syntagmatic	exist



Figure A lot of music appears in the movie Jinpa ; source::
<https://movie.douban.com/photos/photo/2559506025/>

The film jinpa makes heavy use of the Tibetan-language music “O My Sun,” which is driver Jinpa’s favorite song. Wan Ma Caidan in the creation of the film intentionally let the song and the plot, “the driver Jinba’s wife has died, the only daughter left, for him, the daughter is like his sun, so he likes to listen to this song, like to sing this song, it echoes the plot, this connection continues to the final dream.” The driver and the killer are called Jinba, a metaphor for the two sides of a person’s inner contradiction, the driver of the car listening to music Jinba represents modern culture, the heart is concerned about the daughter, the killer Jinba who sticks to the tradition to avenge his father represents the traditional culture of Jinba Tibetan, they have a kind and compassionate heart in common. In reality, the killer Kimba saw the enemy in tears and chose to give up revenge, and then completed the revenge in the dream. When Kimba kills Mazar in the dream, the music is “My Sun” in Italian, adding a sense of surreal and absurd color to the dream. At the end of the dream, Jinba looks up at the sky, a plane flies past, the sun is particularly bright, and the picture realizes the transition between dream and reality with the help of music. Jinba listens to “My Sun” while driving a car, metaphorically implying the reconciliation between Jinba and himself. However, these film languages are impossible for Han directors to complete.

3.3 The features of cinematic language in 7 works by Pema Tsedan.

In all of Pema's works, we can find the unique characteristics of Tibetan films, which can be called Tibetaness. In his short life, he only completed these seven works, Through data collection and semiotic analysis, the statistics of cinematic language features are completed in the following table.

cinematic language	Films	Number of signifiers	Total semiotics
Authorship	The Silent holy Stone	10	The first feature, authorship : Appeared 27 times
	Old Dog	5	
	Tharlo	4	
	Balloon	8	
Long shots	Tharlo	5	Second feature Long shots Appeared 11 times
	The Soul Searching	3	
	The Silent holy Stone	3	
Colors style	Balloon	4	The third feature Colors style Appeared 10 times
	JinPa	2	
	The Silent holy Stone	3	
	Tharlo	1	
Metaphor sound	Balloon	3	The fourth feature Metaphor sound Appeared 6 times
	Old Dog	2	
	The Sacred Arrow	1	

Conclusion

The research hypotheses have been verified and the checklist has been approved by experts. In the audio-visual language of minority films, there are a lot of interpretable parts, and the Tibetan films directed by Pema Tsedan have multiple meanings. As the first director to promote Tibetan as a film language to the world, Pema Tseden's death is a loss for world cinema and will be remembered by all film lovers and film scholars.

cinematic language are tools for drawing attention and they are part of the codes, they play asignificant role in transferring the meaning (cinematic sign) so they are a sign of enriching the content. At that stage of thinking, a director of cinematography is required to deepen his readings around the social and psychological concepts and meanings of different cinematic language.

The wonderful film language in Pema Tibetan films will be remembered by the audience, and the seven films he left in the world will become the insurmountable peak of Tibetan films. These cinematic languages from the film author's theory, documentary aesthetics and long shots, rich color composition and wonderful film sound design and metaphor, make Tibetan films more brilliant, I believe that in the future Tibetan films will be more and more in the era and historical significance under his influence.

Discuss

In all the academic papers on pema's works, semiotics have been studied, but the accuracy of ranking has not been found in other papers. Most of the studies on semiotics are carried out in combination with communication studies and film criticism. In addition, some Asian scholars believe that there are more feminism and post-colonialism than semiotics in pema's films. Therefore, I plan to further study feminism and post-colonialism in Tibetan films and read related works more extensively to improve my academic research ability.

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