


The Myth of Nothing in Classics and Asian Indigenous Films

Sheng-mei Ma
Michigan State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

Recommended Citation

Ma, Sheng-mei. "The Myth of Nothing in Classics and Asian Indigenous Films." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.2 (2013): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2223>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2223)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 15 Issue 2 (June 2013) Article 13

Sheng-mei Ma,

"The Myth of Nothing in Classics and Asian Indigenous Films"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss2/13>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.2 (2013)**

Thematic Issue **Asian Culture(s) and Globalization**

Ed. I-Chun Wang and Li Guo

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss2/>>

Abstract: In his article "The Myth of Nothing in Classics and Asian Indigenous Films" Sheng-mei Ma discusses how the desert and the permafrost region are *terra incognita*, except nomads and Indigenous peoples. Given the extreme conditions of these forbidding places, Western modernity sees its own shadow cast on such black holes on earth. Since the 1960s, classic Hollywood or art house films by David Lean, Akira Kurosawa, Hiroshi Teshigahara, Anthony Minghella, and Sergei Bodrov romanticize and/or mythologize what is perceived as modernity's mirror image. Indie films in recent decades, particularly by Asian Indigenous filmmakers Byambasuren Davaa, Zacharias Kunuk, and Khyentse Norbu trained in or collaborated with the West, seek to tell their own stories. Despite different perspectives and modes of representation, both mainstream and alternative film-making agree on the task of myth-making, self-forging out of nothing, and the barrenness and voidness of the land.

Sheng-mei MA

The Myth of Nothing in Classics and Asian Indigenous Films

The desert and the permafrost region are not habitat friendly, except to the hardiest nomads and Indigenous peoples. Two of the most inhospitable and forbidding places on earth, they are characterized by the lack of water and materials for basic sustenance, not to mention extreme conditions of heat and cold, with sandstorms and ice storms present. Out of this apparent nothingness — a black hole of human experience — a romantic imaginary arises to create the opposite, a mythology out of non-existence. Emptiness and void turn out to inspire imagination, tinged with spiritual, even religious, longing. Banished from secularized modernity, god or religiosity is made to dwell with the premodern in our midst. Hence, Western modernity casts its own shadow on and "casts away" its old gods to these forgotten corners.

Since the 1960s, classic Hollywood or art house films by David Lean, Akira Kurosawa, Hiroshi Teshigahara, Anthony Minghella, and Sergei Bodrov romanticize and mythologize what we may see as modernity's doppelgänger. Indie films in recent decades, particularly by Indigenous filmmakers Zacharias Kunuk, Byambasuren Davaa, and Khyentse Norbu trained in or collaborating with the West, seek to tell their own stories. Despite different perspectives and modes of representation, both mainstream and alternative filmmaking agree on the tasks of myth-making and self-forging out of nothing, and on the sterility of the land. A shared romantic impulse to transcend the human condition motivates both camps; consequently, physical and psychological deprivations amidst a sand sea and atop a frozen eyeball (a blinding ice ball) metamorphose into trances of life-sustaining water in an oasis or underground, on the one hand, and, on the other, into visions of all-seeing, omniscient eyes. Romanticism is but "a displaced and reconstituted theology, or else a secularized form of devotional experience" (Abrams 65). These filmmakers' elegiac and lyrical mode renders the desolate lands nearly sacred.

Also linking both attempts is the triangular relationship among nature, whites, and natives. One or even two in this *ménage à trois* may well be minimal or non-existent on-screen in a Hegelian dialectic of the Self defined against the Other. Lean's camera focuses nostalgically on the afterlife of the British Empire, whether in Alec Guinness on the River Kwai, Peter O'Toole of Arabia, or reincarnated in Omar Sharif of Czarist Siberia. Yet the "last stand" of Englishness does not come about without the canvas of foreign lands and props of foreign men. Likewise, Indigenous filmmakers capture the unmaking of their culture, hence remaking it by ejecting white presence, although the crew behind the Euro-American-Japanese brand camera invariably includes non-Natives, underwritten in part by the West — start-up and production capital, technology of film-making, and box office returns. Like transnational capitalism, global cinema has a way of incorporating Indigenous cultures. Despite the alleged Indigenous focus, these films stem squarely from the global market, oftentimes documenting ethnographically, *à la* the neorealist tradition, the wasteland inhabited by marginalized peoples. These films seek to construct a myth for the modern world that has become secularized and technologized, governed by logic and rationality instead of passion and mystery. Retrieving the premodern Other is to retrieve what the modern Self has lost.

Modernity's need for transcendent myth is made possible, ironically, by the "filthy lucre" of global capital. Not to mention Lean's Hollywood classics, art house and Indigenous films are all financed by national and international capital. Kurosawa's *Dersu Uzala* (1974) was financed by the Soviet Union, Kunuk's *The Fast Runner* (2003) received support from the Canadian government, Davaa was trained in the München Film School and teamed up with Italians for *The Story of the Weeping Camel* (2003), and the Tibetan-Bhutan lama-filmmaker Norbu used to work with Bernardo Bertolucci. These films juxtapose a neorealist, documentary chronicle of the Indigenous and marginalized lifestyle with transcendent moments or "trances" set against and as a result of the Siberian snow and tundra, the Arctic ice, the Gobi sand, and the Himalayan exile. These moments of spiritual uplift emanate from "God-forsaken" corners of the world, bleak yet eerily beautiful, providing a mysticism that fills the emotional and psychological void within our new millennium. As such, these stories are essentially about healing, the cure always arriving from tradition and ritualization. Evil plaguing a community is exorcized in *The Fast Runner* through age-old Inuit chants and magic. A camel rebuffing her newborn

is moved and restored to motherhood by a Mongolian string instrument that echoes the Gobi wind in *Weeping Camel*. The most religious of the indie films, Norbu's *The Cup*, can be read in a Freudian way revolving around the fetish of loss — the Motherland of Tibet, the womb of femininity, the concavity of the soccer trophy, and the womb holding the monks' desire. Just as the novice monks thirst for the soccer cup and the Western world, their elderly Abbot yearns for Tibet on the other side of the Himalayas. Even in the tragic and fatalist *Dersu*, the film leaves a legacy of the hunter Dersu, like a purifying and miraculous breath of snow.

Desolate landscapes dot classics and art house films — including Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), Hiroshi Tshigahara's *Woman in the Dunes* (1964), Kurosawa's *Dersu Uzala*, Minghella's *The English Patient* (1996), and Bodrov's *Mongol* (2007) — and nurture a nostalgic yearning for what has vanished. All these films use voiceover and flashback to reminisce about traditional heroes or historical figures resulting in meta-narratives or story-within-the-story structures. While loss signifies absence, representing it gives shape or presence to the loss. The myth and aesthetics of nothing resembles film negatives, whose transparency and silence transform into images and sounds via the film projector. Revealingly, all five films open with the hero's demise — T.E. Lawrence's suicide, the woman entrapping a Kafkaesque sand-burrowing male in the sand dunes, Dersu's murder, a dying patient and his dead lover, and the rise and fall of Mongolia's Genghis Khan — followed by their life stories. Lean thus begins with the eponymous Lawrence's questionable death, possibly a suicide, and retraces his daring feats in Arabia, Lawrence figuring as practically a white God embodying the British Empire on the verge of collapse. Idiosyncratically, Lean's establishing shot is a high angle shot nearly directly above Lawrence polishing the chrome of his motorcycle in preparation for a joy ride. Speeding along a country road, Lawrence is killed when he dodges a bicyclist. While this may be an accident, Lawrence's funeral is attended by acquaintances who disavow Lawrence, arousing suspicion that Lawrence throws away his life in a world that has turned against his brand of romanticism. Lawrence's valor does come with a dark streak of self-destructiveness and even masochism. As the film flashes back to Cairo, the young British officer Lawrence is so discontent with life that he performs a match-extinguishing stunt as the flame singes his fingertips, a trick purportedly demonstrating mind over body, yet one bordering on self-flagellation. When the Arabian Desert is described as a "burning, fiery furnace," Lawrence repeats his match trick. The film then cuts from the match to a sunrise in the horizon, as the soaring symphonic music presents two lone camel riders in the wide expanse of the desert — Lawrence and his Arab guide. The implication of the crosscut is ambiguous: as the match fizzles, the sun rises; as the hero ascends, he is doomed to be pilloried by public opinion.

The subsequent slow pan delineates the horizontal spread of the desert and the minuscule characters in its midst, a style that ultimately highlights the white protagonist's heroism against nature. The childlike Native guide drinking from another tribe's well is mercilessly killed by a Bedouin: the Bedouin's approach to the well from the distance takes a long while, shot with deep focus to underline the immensity of the desert. If there is one feature that differentiates Indigenous filmmaking from such Hollywood classics as Lean's epics, it would be this: Indigenous films tend not to treat slow pans and landscape shots as "narrative blanks" silhouetting heroes; rather, native characters are interwoven into the landscape, their stories part of the stories of nature. Using a method similar to Lean's, Kurosawa begins with the Russian Far East explorer Arseniev mourning his indigenous guide Dersu, followed by a flashback to his encounters with Dersu in the forest. True to their times, both auteurs use 70 mm film for an epic, larger-than-life aura. Although Minghella's and Bodrov's turn-of-the-century films no longer resort to 70 mm films, the panoramic, romanticized landscape remains, as does the elegiac tone in a dying English patient's account of his lover in a desert cave and Genghis Khan's past glory.

Kurosawa's *Dersu Uzala* stays fairly closely to V.K. Arseniev's autobiographical *Dersu the Trapper* (1941) in recounting the personal friendship between the explorer and the noble savage of the Goldi tribe "related to the Manchus and Tungus" (9). Peter Matthiessen confirms that description in *Tigers in the Snow* (2000) in that Dersu is "an indigenous hunter-trapper of the Tungus-Manchu tribes (Altaic Tatar peoples related to the Tibetans and Mongolians)" (5). Structurally, Kurosawa's *Dersu* follows exactly the narrative of tragic absence. It opens with the Russian explorer's sigh and whisper of Dersu's name at a site in 1910 where Dersu's grave had been obliterated by new construction. The

film then flashes back to 1902 on the "rise" of Dersu, and jumps to 1907 on his "fall." Called "Kapitan" by the illiterate but wise Dersu, the historical Arseniev played a key role in surveying and mapping the Russian Far East, the vanguard for modernization to invade the virgin forest and spelling the demise of tribal hunters like Dersu. It is a fraught ending when Dersu is murdered for the latest model of rifle Arseniev gave him as a parting gift in 1907. The rifle was such a coveted treasure that, the police officer speculated, robbery and murder were committed to obtain it. Bringing progress and industrialization into the forests, Arseniev is indirectly responsible for the decimation of a hunting and gathering tribal lifestyle. Whereas Russian soldiers behave like children in the forest, chided by Dersu, Dersu would become himself a child in the city of Vladivostok at the end of the film when he is compelled to live with Kapitan and his family due to his failing eyesight.

Before the collapse of his world, however, Dersu imbues the forest with meaning via his lifelong experience and traditional animism, like all the other ethnographic films. He memorializes his dead family, half debarking a stick of wood and finger flicking drink into a campfire while chanting. The entire scene of Dersu's mourning by the fire is backlit, as if in silhouette, bringing out the spectral, animistic nature of the ritual. This ceremony endows simple gestures with significance, the first of many rituals of severance throughout the film: the Chinese old man bids farewell to Kapitan and Dersu in the forest, the two protagonists hail each other as they part their ways by the railroad tracks in 1902: the day before they sit in silence in a tent sad over their imminent leave-taking despite their host's urging of second helpings of deliciously grilled fish. The film itself is also a tribute to the lost innocence and nobility Dersu epitomizes. Kurosawa indeed tries to do justice to Arseniev's memoir in that "The book ends with this melancholy farewell not only to Dersu, but also to Dersu's natural habitat, the *taiga*, which is vanishing under the advance of towns, railroads and highways" (Solovieva 64). Dersu symbolizes the good that modern technology eradicates, which, with its guns and land grabbing, breeds destruction. When Kapitan and Dersu are trapped on a frozen lake as the sun sets and the temperatures drop precipitously, Kapitan's compass and signal flares cannot save them. Only through Dersu's instruction of cutting and gathering reed to build a hut do they survive the long night on the frozen tundra. True to a Soviet filmic style of long shots and panorama, accompanied by searing, tense music punctuated by frantic grass-slashing sounds and Kapitan's heavy breathing and gasping, the scene captures not so much humanity over nature in the vein of Lean's *Lawrence* as man following the course of nature in order to survive. From that lofty position, Dersu falls when he transgresses against kanga, the tiger spirit of the forest; his poor eyesight leads to misfiring at a tiger. Even as an allegory of aging and self-disintegration, Kurosawa's tragic sensibility may have resulted in the internalization of socioeconomic pressures. Instead of modernity encroaching on and disenfranchising Dersu from without, Kurosawa portrays a tragic figure imploding. As Olga Solovieva puts it, "Arseniev interprets this night-time incident of agitation about the *amba*, the devilish tiger, as a projection of Dersu's animistic imagination deranged by old age and fear of the *taiga*" (70). Failing eyesight is blamed for Dersu's quandary, glossing over the fact that a developed forest would leave little room for tigers and hunters alike.

Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto contends in *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (2000) that "even at the end of the film, the narrative never comes back to the opening scene of Arseniev's visit to Dersu's grave site in 1910; instead, it concludes with the scene of the burial of Dersu in 1907 . . . Thus, never reaching a resolution, the film is permanently suspended between the two moments of grief over Dersu's death" (345). Indeed, while the opening shows Arseniev unable to locate Dersu's grave amidst the construction site, the ending closes with Arseniev losing Dersu to robbers. Contrary to narratives that achieve a sense of closure by finding the remains of the dead, Kurosawa compounds the loss: not only is a dear friend gone but also gone is any trace of his ever having existed. The grave is the last marker of the departed, a place where the living could congregate in commemoration.

Both Arseniev and Dersu are played by Russian theater performers (Solovieva 73). Bodrov's *Mongol* takes this one step further, with a cast hailing from Japan, China, Russia, and elsewhere in a film on historical Mongolians. From the outset, Bodrov injects a primitivist, Russian Orientalist energy into the film. Modern Russians join modernity's quest for premodern mythology elsewhere, in Russia's proxy state of Mongolia in Bodrov's case. The Russian effort is parallel to their Chinese neighbors' representation of minorities in the Wild West of China, spanning Zhuangzhuang Tian's *Horse Thief*

(1987), Xiaogang Feng's *A World Without Thieves* (2004), Chuan Lu's *Kekexili* (Mountain Patrol 2004), and Quan'an Wang's *Tuya's Marriage* (2006), all set in or near Tibet. Daniel Fried likens these Chinese "Western" films to the genre of Westerns: "Everything was nativized for this genre, renamed the 'Chinese western': the arid scrublands of China's northwest — and their indigenous ethnic groups— were substituted for those of Texas and Wyoming, and the chaos of the 1930s and 1960s was substituted for the lawlessness of the nineteenth-century High Plains" (1483). Fried continues on the shared style and theme: "Cameras pan more lovingly across the landscapes, which are drier and more canyon-dotted. Traditionally western [Hollywood Western] plot drivers, such as stolen livestock (*The Horse Thief* [*Daomazei*]) or water rights (*The Old Well* [*Lao jing*]), emerge as primary sources of conflict" (1490). *Mongol's* soundtrack features a thrilling Tibetan chordal chant to further mystify the images of dreary, near black-and-white grainy visual effect. As the chant rises in crescendo, the prisoner Temudgin, later called Genghis Khan, emerges from the dark, a mask-like face with pits and a rough surface like the scarred yet unyielding earth, with slits of eyes of the Japanese actor. The face abruptly comes into view, almost a petrified death mask somehow still alive. The film consistently plays with life and death: the Mongolian chief is invincible and immune to pain and suffering. A touch of mysticism colors the child Temudgin escaping with his cangue. He kneels and begs Tengri (the wolf spirit) to free him. In slow motion and mesmerizing music, Temudgin's cangue drops **off and a storied life begins**. What was once the yellow peril is now embraced as a chic cinematic celebrity.

Whenever trashing the desert and the frozen tundra, writers tend to give vent to a poetic, even apocalyptic style that serves the exact opposite purpose. In "The North in Canadian Historiography," for instance, W.L. Morton dismissively asks "How indeed can something which is after all only a freezing emptiness, an arctic void, a blizzard swept desert, a silent space, dark as the other side of the moon half of each year, mean anything at all?" (111). Ironically, Morton's refrain of metaphors already accrues something out of nothing, particularly through the superlative degree and the absolute tone with which the North is described. As Canadian writers happen to turn north, they seem to rhapsodize in a similar reverie. Al Purdy quotes Jacques Cartier in "Streetlights on the St. Lawrence," calling Canada "The land that God gave to Cain" (192). Margaret Atwood in "True North" notes that "Turning to face north, face the north, we enter our own unconscious. Always, in retrospect, the journey north has the quality of dream" (304). Cinematographically, that void motivates what many critics have described as the typical "slow pans of the landscape" (1177), which Michelle Raheja calls the "boring parts" (1178) and Jerry White dubs "narrative inefficiency that gives it a certain lyrical quality" (59). More than just a touch of lyricism, such gazes by the camera at "inert," "passive" sand and ice are most efficient in crystallizing an aesthetics beyond what is normally defined as humanity in the Western tradition. Raheja finds "visual sovereignty" in Indigenous films such as *The Fast Runner* as opposed to ethnographic representation of the Inuit as "Primitive Everyman." In Raheja's view, visual sovereignty constitutes Indigenous revisions of ethnography for the following reason: "By appealing to a mass, intergenerational, and transnational indigenous audience, visual sovereignty permits the flow of indigenous knowledge about such key issues as land rights, language acquisition, and preservation by narrativizing local and international struggles. Visual sovereignty, as expressed by indigenous filmmakers, also involves employing editing technologies that permit filmmakers to stage performances of oral narrative and indigenous notions of time and space that are not possible through print alone" (1163).

Despite political activism advocated by Raheja, Kunuk's *The Fast Runner* intends a far more mythical narrative. Stemming from Inuit folklore, an Indigenous community somewhere near the Arctic at an unspecified time is plagued by Tungajuak, an evil stranger from up north. This is one of a number of places where the critic's politics intrudes into the reading of text. Raheja uses the film to support Indigenous rights against Western incursion, so much so that the demonic shaman from the north is taken to be a "precursor to the incursion of Europeans" (1177) from Western Europe. Insofar as the directions from which invaders originate, Raheja's contention is a bit forced. A political reading evidently downplays the part of the film that points away from politics, such as animistic reincarnations in the Inuit belief system. The virtuous young woman Atuat is called "Little Mother" by an elderly woman who sees her own mother's spirit in Atuat. Atuat's son is called my "Little Husband"

by the elderly woman, once again based on reincarnation. Generational growth is folded into a communal mythology where characters are less individuals than vessels of spirits and natural forces.

In fact, *Runner* resembles a Genesis story in its explication of evil and the fall in a timeless past. The props and sets contribute to a bygone era prior to modern amenities and technology. Inuits hunt seals and caribous with whalebone spears and arrows. Transportation relies solely on dogsleds and lighting comes from whale oil stone bowls. Thrust into this prelapsarian world is the wicked Tungajuak with a disquieting presence, emitting a shrill, ghostly laugh. He casts a spell on Sauri and then his son Oki. Oki is driven to murder the protagonist Atanarjuat's older brother in his sleep. Atanarjuat, however, escapes the bloodbath, jumping out of the crushed tent and running across the frozen land nude and bare-footed. The climax of the legend of the fast runner, nudity symbolizes vulnerability as well as purity, even sacred sacrifice, as we witness Atanarjuat's unabashed frontal nudity in his flight. Running and skipping on the ice, Atanarjuat leaves a trail of blood on the crystal, pristine land. Saved by a good shaman, Atanarjuat returns to exorcize the evil spirit and to restore harmony. It is noteworthy that Atanarjuat, with supernatural help, outwits much stronger foes, but refrains from shedding more blood. Instead of avenging his older brother, he stops before taking Oki's life, breaking the cycle of violence between clans.

Although *Runner* features multiple Siberian huskies, the nonhuman star is certainly the landscape, stunningly beautiful in blinding sunlight, totally untouched that the viewers feel they can taste the chill in the air. By contrast, the nonhuman characters or the mother camel and her white calf in *The Story of the Weeping Camel* are included in the list of characters in the closing credits. Nor is *Camel* set in a timeless era where Western incursions have to be inferred from and associated with the evil shaman descending from the north. Rather, *Camel* juxtaposes traditional Mongolian ways with modern progress and Western-style technology. Nonetheless, there is something mysterious in the notion that a camel's postpartum depression and refusal to nurse her newborn can be cured by traditional Mongolian music. Similarly, *Camel* resembles *Runner* in its transgenerational narratives. At first, viewers would be lost in trying to identify the older generation of the family in *Camel*: the great-grandparents and grandparents. The younger generations—the father, mother Odgoo, their sons Dude and Uгна, and a toddler daughter—are of course distinguishable.

Full of ethnographic materials of nomadic Mongolian lifestyles, foodstuffs, rituals, and beliefs, *Camel* opens with the great-grandfather gathering firewood from the scrubland and telling the story of how camels come to lose their antlers, having been cheated by a rogue deer. Looking straight into the camera and addressing "my children," the great-grandfather continues the oral tradition, except one is never quite sure what to make of cultural habits—that is, traditions—other than the fact that they are what they are. (What would camels need antlers for in the desert anyway?) But that folkloric initiation gives mixed messages: the old source of energy in firewood coexists with electricity that powers the camera. Moreover, the humorous, whimsical twist comes about halfway through the film when one of his children, Uгна, stops the great-grandfather from repeating the same old story, demanding something different. The great-grandfather's slightly embarrassed smile contrasts with Uгна's naïve, bored expression, a raconteur's refrain of tradition meeting with the young's desire for new stimulations. The nomadic family is much too mild-mannered and harmonious as a unit to justify describing this moment as conflict or generational gap. *Camel* in effect threads tradition with modernity in a seamless and practically symbiotic fashion. To cure a recurring, apparently age-old problem of an un-maternal mother camel, the preschooler Uгна and his teenage brother Dude are dispatched to the Aimak Center to fetch a traditional violinist in hope of a healing ceremony of music. Riding their camels, the brothers are advised to follow the electric poles to locate the Center. Traditional musicians, or tradition, for that matter, gather at a site where modern amenities are available, not to mention motorcycles and other contraptions, including ice cream, at the Center.

Out on the road and exposed to the outside world, Uгна is captivated by television. Uгна watches television twice. It is at a large yurt with children arrayed in rows in front of the TV and adults sitting on the side that the direction to follow the electric poles is given to Dude. Uгна watches TV again at a yurt at the Aimak Center. This time, they are sitting down to eat at a table, while Uгна turns backwards in order to watch the screen in the back. The host tells Uгна to "sit properly at the table," despite the fact that the seductive TV is not switched off during the meal. The circle of protection and

life, whether around the warmth and sustenance of a stove or a table in the yurt, is broken and disrupted by the positioning of the TV, which replaces the fire as the center of camp life. No longer a circle, modernity advances in a linear fashion, both in the unidirectional sitting arrangement facing the screen and in the "modern sentinels" of electric poles. As Uгна remarks that their family should buy a TV, Dude reminds him that each TV costs about twenty to thirty sheep, whereas to get electricity at all, it would cost a whole flock. Modernity, the film implies, displaces their way of life. The herd of sheep also forms a circle, which must vanish for the tentacles of electricity to extend into the Gobi Desert. While Dude explains in terms of barter economy (sheep for television), children at play in the desert already emulate the market economy since they not so much barter and exchange goods for goods as they purchase toys with fake money.

In addition to a violinist from the Center, the brothers are supposed to buy batteries for the grandfather's radio, yet another modern source of energy and of information. Upon return, Uгна does ask his father to buy a TV, the great-grandfather issues perhaps the sternest rebuke: he calls the TV "devil" of "glass images," making "kids watch[ing] glass images," which, ironically, is what films like *Camel* entail. His reservations are further neutralized in the last scene of the film when the brothers install and adjust a new satellite dish outside the family yurt. Not only is the mother camel cured by a dosage of tradition and modernity, Uгна is also appeased. Whereas Uгна seeks the trance of glass images of cartoons and the like, adult viewers of *Camel* seek the myth of nothing amidst the sand of the Gobi Desert. The musician arrives on a motorcycle, hanging the string instrument on the camel's hump, its echo chamber magnifying the desert wind. Even Odgoo's traditional song has a whooshing, gale-like quality, followed by the violin and the duet of song and music. Partaking of this ritual, both the on-screen family spectators and the off-screen global audience witness the camel visibly calming down, and the gradual misting of her eyes in close-ups. Cinematography in this scene allows for maximum readability; no special effects or deceptive editing intrude into this long take. Her eyes brimming with tears, the mother camel suckles the calf for the first time, willingly. Indeed, she did suckle her newborn before, but only in bondage when Odgoo tied her up. Once released, the mother camel spits at and shoves off the calf. Perhaps this is the ultimate lesson of *Camel*: the inextricability of bondage and freedom. The calf's bridle is made by kneading into one single rein both the mother's and the calf's long mane hairs. The calf would begin her life in subjugation to human owners through the bridle with a bit across her nostrils, a beautiful twine lovingly made by her owners, containing both her mother's and her own body hairs. By the same token, a traditional folktale is preserved and presented to global cinema by means of and in collaboration with devilish "glass images," albeit in a mindful, self-reflexive manner.

Figuratively, maternal wombs lurk behind both the mother camel's milk and the concave satellite dish receiving signals for Uгна. These are unwitting connections with Norbu's *The Cup* (1999), the first feature film by any Tibetan lama and the first hailing from Bhutan. The World Cup awarded to the champion soccer team, needless to say, is also hollow inside and can hold liquid as well as fans' passion, so to speak. Those fans include novices at a Tibetan Bhutanese monastery so devoted to soccer that they petition the Abbot and the taskmaster Geko to view the championship game. With Norbu's film script chock full of humorous, whimsical, irreverent, and thought-provoking dialogues, the film humanizes and demystifies Tibetan Buddhism from an insider perspective. The leader of the soccer fans, Orgyen, wears his saffron robe to hide the Brazilian player Ronaldo's jersey. A supposedly clairvoyant Oracle stinks, washes his hair with powder detergent, and uses coke cans as candleholders on his makeshift altar. Given permission to rent from an Indian shopkeeper a TV and a satellite dish to watch the game, Orgyen is fifty US dollars short. He uses as deposit a fellow novice Nyima's pocket watch, which the Indian would sell the next day by midday, if unclaimed. All the young monks go into a frenzy when the satellite dish arrives. Described as a "precious jewel" with connotations of the three jewels of Buddhism — Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha; or the body, mind, and soul of Buddha — the dish is hoisted on to the roof and set up. Throughout the game, however, Orgyen finds himself distracted, for Nyima grieves his lost watch, his mother's parting gift before he flees Tibet. Orgyen is about to pawn his sole possessions, including the sword which is a memento of his own mother, to buy back the watch, when Geko comes to his rescue. Orgyen's wish fulfillment — watching the game — is thwarted by his guilty conscience of abusing Nyima's trust. Orgyen is prepared to part with his

most prized possessions, the sword and memories of his mother; therefore, egotistic pursuit has matured into a selfless act.

On a symbolic level, however, these turns of events point to the fundamental Buddhist teaching of the illusory nature of human desires and the only release available through non-attachment. Nyima's watch, most likely, no longer keeps time, yet he clings onto it as the "living" link to his lost mother. The watch is frozen in time to sustain the bereaved Nyima. Likewise, Orgyen and other novices escape the drudgery of the monastery by fantasizing about soccer and glossy Western magazines. In addition, the central trope of cup that they covet takes the shape of a vessel or an archetypal womb, which these young monks away from family and mothers fetishize as a maternal substitute. The Abbot himself dreams of returning to his motherland of Tibet before he dies, having his trunks packed and ready. He even collects peacock feathers and photographs of skyscrapers in hope of convincing fellow Tibetans who may find his tales of such birds and buildings outlandish. All suffer from attachment: Nyima to the watch and his mother, Orgyen to soccer and the mother substitute of the World Cup, and the Abbot to the motherland.

During the broadcast of the championship game, Orgyen is troubled not only by Nyima's sorrow but also by a power outage. In total darkness, young monks begin to entertain themselves with shadow plays cast by a flashlight on the screen. First, it is a nightmare of one's own making, the dreamer creating his or her own monster, which thwarted attachment can turn into readily. Then, adroit hands cast various animal shapes on the screen to illustrate a narrative of metamorphosis. As electricity is restored and the soccer game resumes, one is left wondering: What exactly is real—glass images or shadow play? Which is the story and which the story-within-the-story—monks watching soccer watching silhouettes or we watching monks watching our game of soccer? Why are we as enamored with otherworldly Tibetan monks as they are with this world of ours, its sports and its skyscrapers? Who is the shadow puppeteer and who the shadow? The television screen is as blank as the desert or the permafrost region. Sand and ice constitute a vast nothingness on which we reenact our repetitious compulsion for mythology, lost and found.

Works Cited

- Abrams, M.H. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: Norton, 1971.
- Arseniev, V.K. *Dersu the Trapper*. Trans. Malcolm Burr. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1941.
- Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*. Dir. Zacharias Kunuk. Los Angeles: Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2003.
- Atwood, Margaret. "True North." *The Canadian Essay*. Selected and Introduced Gerald Lynch and David Rampton. Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1991. 303-13.
- The Cup*. Dir. Khyentse Norbu. Los Angeles: Miramax, 1999.
- Dersu Uzala*. Dir. Akira Kurosawa. New York: Kino International, 1974.
- The English Patient*. Dir. Anthony Minghella. Santa Monica: Miramax 1996.
- Fried, Daniel. "Riding Off into the Sunrise: Genre Contingency and the Origin of the Chinese Western." *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 122.5 (2007): 1482-98.
- Horse Thief*. Dir. Zhuangzhuang Tian. New York: Kino Video 1987.
- Jae, Hyun Yoo. "Tiger Saves Taiga: Saving the Siberian Ecosystem from Hyundai's Logging Operations." *Constructive Conflict Management: Asia-Pacific Cases*. Ed. Fred E. Jandt and Paul B. Pedersen. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996. 145-51.
- Lawrence of Arabia*. Dir. David Lean. Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1962.
- Matthiessen, Peter. *Tigers in the Snow*. New York: North Point P, 2000.
- Mongol*. Dir. Sergei Bodrov. Los Angeles: New Line Home Video, 2007.
- Morton, W.L. "The North in Canadian Historiography." *The Canadian Essay*. Ed. Gerald Lynch and David Rampton. Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1991. 104-12.
- Purdy, Al. "Streetlights on the St. Lawrence." *The Canadian Essay*. Ed. Gerald Lynch and David Rampton. Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1991. 192-99.
- Raheja, Michelle. "Reading Nanook's Smile: Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*." *American Quarterly* 59.4 (2007): 1159-185.
- Solovieva, Olga. "The Erased Grave of *Dersu Uzala*: Kurosawa's Cinema of Memory and Mourning." *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 2.1 (2010): 63-79.
- The Story of the Weeping Camel*. Dir. Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falorni. Los Angeles: MMV New Line Home Entertainment 2003.
- Tuya's Marriage*. Dir. Quan'an Wang. Chicago: Music Box, 2006.
- White, Jerry. "Frozen but Always in Motion: Arctic Film, Video, and Broadcast." *The Velvet Light Trap* 55 (2005): 52-64.
- Woman in the Dunes*. Dir. Hiroshi Tshigahara. New York: Criterion 1964.
- Yoshimoto, Mitsuhiro. *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.

Author's profile: Sheng-mei Ma teaches English literature at Michigan State University. His interests in research include Asian diaspora/Asian American studies and East-West comparative studies. In addition to numerous articles, Ma's books include *Alienglish: Eastern Diasporas in Anglo-American Tongues* (forthcoming), *Asian Diaspora and East-West Modernity* (2012), and *Diaspora Literature and Visual Culture: Asia in Flight* (2011). E-mail: <mash@msu.edu>