

Wandering Original Mind: An Interpretation of the Return of Human Nature in Pema Tseden's Balloon

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Abstract: Centered on Marx's theory of the return of human nature, this paper conducts an in-depth interpretation of *Balloon* directed by Pema Tseden. Revolving around the unintended pregnancy of Zhuoga, a pastoral Tibetan woman, the film depicts how her authentic personality suffers spiritual fragmentation and human alienation under external forces including the religious concept of reincarnation, patriarchal oppression, ideological constraints and policy intervention. Through the core symbolic image of the balloon, handheld cinematography and compositional language, this paper analyzes the inner torment endured by the female protagonist in the process of alienation. Drawing on the theory of the return of human nature and feminism, it elaborates on the survival and reproductive dilemmas faced by ethnic minority women. Meanwhile, a textual analysis of the cinematic language reveals that cultural imbalance in the film obstructs the return of human nature, making it difficult for individuals to achieve a fulfilling spiritual pursuit. By reflecting on the predicament of an individual woman, director Pema Tseden contemplates the spiritual wandering of indigenous ethnic groups amid the advancement of modernization. This film serves as a typical case for the visual research of Tibetan New Wave cinema.

Keywords: Theory of the return of human nature, balloon, human nature, alienation, Tibetan Films.

1. Introduction.

1.1. Theoretical Basis and Research Background

In Marx's Concept of Man, Erich Fromm pointed out that "Alienation essentially means that man, as a subject separated from objects, passively experiences the world and himself"(Erich Fromm,1983) [1] . When human beings submit to forces external to their own essential powers, they gradually drift away from their inherent essence, and alienation emerges accordingly. Fromm further argued that Marx was essentially fighting against such alienation, holding that "Man can return to himself, take hold of the world with his own powers, and thereby achieve unity with the world." Only by clearly recognizing their genuine needs can people become masters of their own lives and attain authentic individual freedom.

Women have to break through more shackles in pursuit of freedom, especially ethnic minority women. In *Balloon*, directed by Tibetan filmmaker Pema Tseden, this intensely agonizing process of human return is vividly presented. Centered on the reproductive dilemma triggered by the unintended pregnancy of the Tibetan woman Zhuoga, the film profoundly exposes the precarious living conditions of traditional Tibetan women trapped in the cracks between religious doctrines, patriarchy and modernity. By depicting such predicaments, the film explores the alienation of human nature and the paths toward its restoration.

1.2. Theoretical Basis and Research Background

Most of Pema Tseden's films centre on male characters and religious themes, with few featuring female protagonists. By contrast, *Balloon* casts the Tibetan woman Dolma as the leading character, rendering it a rare feminist film among

ethnic minority-themed motion pictures. This study addresses three research questions: RQ1. What are the primary sources of predicaments faced by Tibetan women? RQ2. How does female alienation unfold within the film? RQ3. How does the film employ cinematic language to realise the restoration of female humanity in the narrative?

2. Alienation Reflected and The Return of Human Nature in the Film

2.1. Alienation Reflected in the Film

In Erich Fromm's original interpretation, alienation means that human beings, defined as the ensemble of social relations, are alienated from objects. Human social relations are complex and fluid. Likewise, the alienation imposed upon Zhuoga, the female protagonist in *Balloon*, is multifaceted and shifting. Multiple plots in the film demonstrate that Zhuoga is suppressed and alienated by ideological constraints, patriarchal structures and religious doctrines when confronted with reproductive issues.

The film bears the title *Balloon*, a pivotal prop that appears in both the opening and closing sequences and carries rich symbolic implications concerning reproduction. The director metaphorically equates the balloon with condoms. In the narrative, condoms are framed as medically prescribed yet awkward objects distributed by clinics symbolizing modern medical systems. They have to be hidden, and their use is accompanied by secrecy and anxiety. Condoms embody the coercive intervention of the family planning policy over Zhuoga's body, representing the disciplinary power of state authority intruding into private spheres and reproductive rights. Instead of bringing pleasure or autonomy, they entail burdens, shame and constant anxiety over unintended pregnancy. As alienated artifacts forcibly implanted into traditional pastoral life, condoms appear incompatible and incomprehensible. They symbolize the invasion and control

exerted by modernity over conventional lifestyles, as well as the alienation of Zhuoga's human nature brought about by reproductive policies and ideology.

Furthermore, the episode in which Dajie assaults a neighbor out of embarrassment over the condom reveals how patriarchy internalizes sexual repression into the collective unconscious through physical violence (Carl Gustav Jung, 2018) [2]. Power constructs a system of taboos by dictating what can be verbalized and what must remain unspoken. As a symbolic marker of modern civilization, the condom is stigmatized as something shameful within the traditional Tibetan community. Dajie's violent outburst essentially transforms his individual sexual anxiety into public punishment for those who transgress normative boundaries, so as to sanctify and uphold patriarchal order. He regards the exposed condom as a challenge to patriarchal authority and resorts to physical force to redraw the boundaries of legitimate discourse. As a modern symbol, the condom exposes how the functions and connotations of contemporary commodities are easily misinterpreted and downgraded by indigenous cognitive frameworks. Rather than being recognized as a technological tool empowering individual bodily choice, it is reduced to an embarrassing foreign object unfit for serious public discussion. Within the film's narrative framework, the intervention of modern commodities cannot be simplistically equated with emancipation and progress; on the contrary, it lays bare their profound limitations.

Within the patriarchal system, women are frequently reduced to their biological functions, their existential value tethered exclusively to the mission of childbearing. No longer autonomous subjects endowed with freedom and transcendence, they are degraded into objects, mere vessels for reproduction. The predicament of Tibetan women constitutes a localized manifestation of global gender oppression. As Chizuko Ueno argues: "Misogyny lies at the core mechanism of patriarchy, which demands women to become objects of desire, reproductive tools and carriers of social discipline. Within such a structure, women are not granted an identity, but imposed a fixed positional role." (Chizuko Ueno, 2015) [3]. Her words expose the structured predicament systematically assigned to women, who are subjected to institutional pressures including the male gaze and the motherhood penalty. Having already given birth three times, Zhuoga falls pregnant unexpectedly once more. Her husband Dajie compels her to carry the baby to term by invoking the lama's prophecy of ancestral reincarnation, reducing her body to nothing more than a carrier of religious symbolism. Upon discovering the new pregnancy, Dajie shows no regard for Zhuoga's physical health, her willingness to give birth, or the family's overburdened financial conditions. Instead, he interprets the conception as an auspicious sign marking the reincarnation of his grandfather's soul, insisting that his wife deliver the child and even resorting to domestic violence when she resists. In this context, Zhuoga's bodily worth is simplified into a sacred container: on the one hand, it fulfills her husband's desire for patrilineal continuity; on the other, it bears the family's religious expectations. Her personal anxieties about the future are rendered insignificant before these grand collective narratives. Her body ceases to belong to herself and becomes a vessel appropriated jointly by the family and religion.

Additionally, alienation operates through a third-party agent in the narrative. Zhuoma, Zhuoga's younger sister and

the only female nun in the story, embodies the intertwined complexities of religious dogma and secular desires. When Zhuoga discovers the novel Balloon treasured by Zhuoma, she burns it in the fire. This episode echoes Michel Foucault's assertion that "Power disciplines the body through the production of taboos". (Michel Foucault, 2016) [4]. First and foremost, the exercise of power relies on establishing prohibitions governing bodily behaviors and emotional expressions. Within the patriarchal and religious cultural system depicted in the film, female affective desires are rigorously disciplined. Zhuoma's lingering longing for her former lover is deemed an impure and dangerous transgression. Her private preservation of the novel Balloon, which embodies past carnal passion and free romantic love, already violates invisible social taboos. The book thus becomes a symbolic taboo and tangible evidence of her perceived bodily and emotional impurity. By instituting such prohibitions, power demarcates the legitimate and illegitimate boundaries of women's physicality and emotions. Zhuoga's act of discovering and incinerating the novel materializes the enforcement of power: destroying the token carrying forbidden affections stands for the brutal negation of Zhuoma's bodily autonomy and emotional memories. Beyond her role as an elder sister, Zhuoga functions as an internalized adherent and executor of patriarchal rules. Ultimately, women are gradually alienated through their compliance with such institutional power.

2.2. The Return of Human Nature in the Film

As a work with distinct feminist overtones, director Pema Tseden shows profound empathy for the plight of oppressed ethnic minority women, conveying a powerful spirit of resistance and empowerment through narrative and visual language, which constitutes a vivid artistic manifestation of the return of human nature. Theoretically, Fromm defines human return as the restoration of integral human essence and the achievement of harmonious unity between humanity and nature. In *Balloon*, through the symbolic transformation from condoms to balloons and the plot arc of Zhuoga's consideration of abortion and eventual departure, the director depicts how she gradually breaks free from the shackles of ideology, patriarchal structures and religious dogma to strive for the recovery of her authentic and free humanity.

The symbolic shift from condoms to balloons is constructed primarily through the innocent perspective of children, who blow up condoms and play with them as ordinary balloons. For the young protagonists, the balloon is a precious treasure symbolizing purity, joy, imagination and unrestrained freedom. Their tussling over the toys, playful interactions and releasing balloons into the air evoke the unadulterated delight of childhood, standing in stark contrast to the stifling connotations attached to condoms in the adult world. Condoms are rejected by the patriarchal order of traditional Tibetan communities for their function of interrupting the cycle of reincarnation, yet they are wholeheartedly accepted as children's playthings. This contrast strips away the moral stigma imposed by adult society and hints at the primordial starting point of human restoration: a non-instrumental attitude toward the essence of life.

In designing the heroine's awakening and pursuit of self-return, Pema Tseden endows Zhuoga's plan for abortion with two interwoven motivations. The first is the overwhelming financial strain brought by repeated childbearing and

childcare; the second stems from her rising self-awareness and rejection of being reduced to a mere reproductive tool. When female doctor Tsho remarks that “We women are not born into this world just to bear children for men”, Zhuoga begins to develop a subjective consciousness and re-examines her existential value as an independent individual. The most revolutionary scene takes place in the hospital operating room: when her husband and sons burst in to halt the abortion, Zhuoga gazes back at them through tearful eyes with unwavering resolve. This gesture transcends economic concerns, representing the reclamation of dominion over her own womb and a solemn declaration defending bodily autonomy. The failed abortion becomes the pivotal turning point for her awakening to bodily sovereignty.

The emotional climax of the thematic return arrives in the final sequence. Having long been confined to prescriptive female roles such as wife and mother, Zhuoga ultimately awakens to her intrinsic individual value as a human being and makes the courageous decision to leave home, breaking the multi-layered fetters imposed on women by traditional patriarchy, marital authority and theocracy. The balloon floating freely in the sky at the closing shot symbolizes her liberated soul and the yearning to transcend worldly constraints, marking the sublimation of her spiritual self-worth. In this way, the balloon evolves from a source of shame into an emblem of hope and spiritual sustenance, completing its transformation from an alienated object to an embodiment of inner selfhood. The floating balloon in the ending serves as the most powerful wordless expression of her longing for self-liberation.

3. Alienation and the Return of Human Nature in Cinematic Language

3.1. Visual Imagery

In terms of visual techniques, Pema Tseden conducts an in-depth dissection of Zhuoga’s alienation and spiritual restoration through the sophisticated deployment of core symbols and audio-visual rhetoric. First and foremost, the balloon-the central motif of the film-undergoes a symbolic evolution from childlike original mind to drifting confusion in Figure 1. Initially brought back from the town by the children, the bright, lightweight balloon symbolizes unspoiled innocence untouched by worldly secularity, corresponding to the pure and undisturbed authentic human nature rooted in the primitive grassland environment. Shots of children chasing and gazing upward at the balloon mirror Zhuoga’s initial state of existence free from spiritual torment. At this stage, the balloon stands for a genuine self imbued with freedom and purity, unshackled by realistic constraints, carrying no metaphor of confusion or inner fragmentation.



Figure 1. Daje bought two red balloons. The image from the website: <https://www.1905.com/mdb/film/2249980/>

In the later half of the film, the connotation of the balloon shifts. On one hand, its upward floating embodies Zhuoga’s spiritual aspiration to break free from material bondage and revert to her pristine inner self; on the other hand, its fragility and drifting state foreshadow the ease with which the original mind can be shattered by reality, highlighting the inner torment triggered by the alienation of human nature. Every time Zhuoga catches sight of a balloon, she simultaneously falls into tangled contemplation over the fetus and the karmic cycle of reincarnation, rendering the balloon a visual carrier of her internal contradictions. The final frame fixes on Zhuoga standing on a grassland highway, staring into the distance at a solitary balloon drifting in the sky. Released from human hands and wandering aimlessly with the wind, the balloon serves as the ultimate metaphor for her wandering original mind. Suspended mid-air with no landing point or final destination, it echoes Zhuoga’s incomplete return of human nature: she has not made a definitive choice, and her spirit drifts endlessly like the untethered balloon with nowhere to settle. By employing the rootless state of the balloon, Pema Tseden visualizes the spiritual disorientation of Tibetan individuals caught between two civilizations, laying bare the arduousness of retrieving one’s authentic self amid modernization.

3.2. Photography Composition

Secondly, the Photography composition of power relations manifested through frame composition also points to alienation. The film frequently adopts split framing to intuitively visualize ideological oppositions and gender power imbalance. When Zhuoga informs her husband Dajie of her new pregnancy, the camera captures a cramped frame through a fractured windowpane: Zhuoga is squeezed into the bottom-left quarter of the window lattice, while Dajie dominates the rest of the frame. This compositional arrangement powerfully visualizes the patriarchal domination imposed on women in traditional society. It is not merely a microcosm of domestic power dynamics, but a concrete representation of the patriarchal order in traditional Tibetan communities. The window muntins partition the two characters, embodying their diametrically opposed attitudes toward childbirth. As a vulnerable female suppressed by marital authority, Zhuoga is stripped of bodily autonomy and denied the right to govern her own physical body.



Figure 2. Zhuoga is asking the doctor at the hospital. The image from the website: <https://www.1905.com/mdb/film/2249980/>

In the scene where Zhuoga first consults Doctor Tsho about sterilization, iron window bars split the frame into two separate spaces in Figure 2 : on one side stands a traditional Tibetan woman in a Tibetan robe, and on the other a modern female physician in a white coat. This partition not only

implies their divergent views on reproduction, but also symbolizes the estrangement between old and new worldviews. Doctor Tsho's remark that "We women are not born into this world just to bear children for men" delivers a modern feminist declaration that strikes a profound psychological blow to Zhuoga, becoming the catalyst for the awakening of her self-consciousness.

3.3. Handheld Cinematography

Furthermore, the director repeatedly applies handheld cinematography to suggest the inner restlessness and spiritual tremors experienced in the process of human restoration. Handheld camerawork endows the footage with a turbulent, unsettling texture, precisely conveying the protagonist's inner turmoil. In the scene of ram mating, low-angle tracking shots paired with drastic camera shakes closely follow the ram chasing the ewe, amplifying primal animalistic instinct. Dajie smirks complacently after commenting that "ewes incapable of lambing are useless", forming a jarring contrast with Zhuoga's embarrassment. This sequence lays bare male dominance and female aphasia in reproductive discourse. As Simone de Beauvoir argued: "Woman is defined as a womb, and her worth is measured by her reproductive capacity." (Simone de Beauvoir, 2011) [5]. Her words articulate the existential logic imposed on women under patriarchy: their existential value is entirely determined by fertility.

Handheld shots paired with surreal imagery dismantle absolute dogma, hinting at the ambiguity and protracted journey of achieving human restoration. A typical example lies in the dream sequence of picking off the mole by the lakeside. Under psychedelic blue lighting, the two younger children pluck the nevus on their elder brother's back—a religiously sanctified token symbolizing their grandmother's reincarnation—and treat it as a playful toy. The mole, originally revered as a solemn proof of the deceased soul's transmigration in religious doctrine, is deconstructed into a detachable plaything through the innocent games of children within the dream. The clear lake surface in the closing segment of the dream metaphorizes spiritual liberation after casting off the fetters of prescribed social identities.

3.4. Surreal Metaphors

Surreal metaphors are cleverly used in the film's language to show the characters' struggles and confusion. Another surreal sequence unfolds following the grandfather's funeral. In the dream, the lake water reflects a stooped monk walking slowly while twirling prayer beads. As the camera pans sideways, the image provokes profound reflection on religion and the cycle of reincarnation. Subsequently, the children chase the grandfather's wandering soul, only to spot a white horse grazing by the lakeshore. In Tibetan culture, white horses are widely regarded as vessels carrying departed souls. The horse's leisurely departure symbolizes the gradual decline of traditional religious faith amid modernization. These surreal dream sequences constitute a covert feminist manifesto: if reincarnation tokens can be casually torn off by children and soul carriers are destined to fade away, then the appropriation of women's bodies in the name of spiritual transmigration is nothing but an illusory fallacy.

4. Discussion: Enlightenments Drawn from the Return of Human Nature

The open-ended narrative adopted at the conclusion of

Balloon aims to convey that the return of human nature and spiritual pursuit for Tibetan individuals constitute a prolonged and ongoing journey. In interviews, director Pema Tsenden remarked: "I do not reject modernity, nor do my works intend to depict a binary opposition between modernity and tradition; what I present is merely a realistic state of affairs." (Pema Tsenden, 2017) [6]. In this film, he objectively demonstrates the rationality inherent to both value systems: the belief in reincarnation carries the millennial spiritual sustenance of Tibetan people, while modern reproductive concepts adapt to living realities under the market economy. Neither side holds absolute rightness or wrongness, which explains why the film refuses to deliver a simplistic black-and-white conclusive choice.

Furthermore, the open ending reflects the universal spiritual predicaments emerging amid societal transformation toward modernity. The long take tracking the ascending red balloon pans over all major characters in sequence and finally freezes on children gazing upward at the sky, accompanied by a sustained whistling sound, delivering an ultimate interrogation of life and the soul. This metaphor indicates that the ultimate goal of human emancipation lies not in one-sided victory through gender confrontation, but in constructing a communal ethics that reveres the value of life. The spiritual wandering suffered by Tibetan people torn between the inner essence of indigenous culture and the pragmatic logic of modern survival represents a common challenge for ethnic minorities undergoing modernization. The return of human nature has no definitive endpoint and can only be continuously advanced through constant negotiation and hesitation between two civilizations. Such an ambiguous open ending also reserves room for audience reflection, provoking public contemplation on how to strike a balance between modern development and the inheritance of local native cultures.

5. Conclusion

As a representative work of Tibetan New Wave Cinema, Balloon breaks free from the clichéd narrative traps of exoticization and superficial spectacle that plague many ethnic minority films. Stepping outside the perspective of external gaze, it grounds its storytelling in the authentic living experiences of individual Tibetans and centers on the fragmentation of humanity and spiritual dilemmas triggered by clashes of civilizations. All manifestations of alienation depicted in the film converge toward the ultimate return to humanity's authentic self. With its distinctive human-centered narrative, the film fills the research gap regarding humanistic exploration in Tibetan-language cinema, offering an excellent localized paradigm for ethnic minority film creation as well as academic research on the relationship between modernity and indigenous cultures.

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Figure 1. Daje bought two red balloons. The image of "Balloon" is sourced from China Film Channel website: <https://www.1905.com/mdb/film/2249980/>

Figure 2. Zhuoga is asking the doctor at the hospital. The image of "Balloon" is sourced from China Film Channel website: <https://www.1905.com/mdb/film/2249980/>

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