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Ethnic Film Screenings: The Re-Nationalization of Chinese Cinema and Community Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of ethnic film screenings at the China Golden Rooster & Hundred Flowers Film Festival in recent years raises questions about the nationalization of Chinese cinema: What is the significance of these special screenings of ethnic minority films? What are the ethnic characteristics of films in China's New Era, and what are their cultural connotations? And, as the most prominent aspect of the nationalization of Chinese cinema, how do ethnic minority films practice re-nationalization in their creation and cultural expression? How can their inherent sense of community be expressed? From a perspective that combines film theory and ethnicity theory, this paper explores these questions using textual analysis and cultural research methods.

Keywords: Ethnic films; community aesthetics; minority films; re-nationalization; unity in diversity.

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1. Introduction

The program of the 2022 China Golden Rooster & Hundred Flowers Film Festival included the Colorful China section, which showcased films that portrayed the themes and lives of the country's ethnic minorities. Since the official launch of the China Ethnic Minority Film Project in 2013, the number of minority films produced has gradually increased. The number of ethnic films screened at the festival has risen from a few to a dozen each year, as has the number of ethnic groups involved in the subject matter. The implementation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Promotion of the Film Industry in 2017 opened up a broader path for Chinese films to go global, and some of the films screened in 2022—such as *Yangzhen's Journey* (2021), which premiered in Hong Kong in December that year, and attracted the attention of audiences, media and scholars—have won international awards.

The development of Chinese minority film can be divided into three distinctive stages: the seventeen-year period of the founding of the People's Republic of China; the new period, with fourth

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and fifth generation directors as its mainstay; and the 1990s onward. In Chinese cinema research, the term 'ethnic films' can be read in a broad or narrow sense. The former refers to nation-state films, i.e., films that target the entire Chinese nation, while the latter describes Chinese ethnic minority films, i.e., films that relate to specific ethnic groups and target ethnicities other than Han (Yuru, 2010). In this sense, minority films differ from those made about ethnic groups that mainly express Han cultural life; in the former category, ethnicity refers to the cultural spirit and psychological temperament that distinguishes the subjects from other ethnic groups (Xu-Guang & Yun, 2012). The Colorful China section at the China Golden Rooster & Hundred Flowers Film Festival comprises films that are ethnic in a narrow sense, i.e., ethnic minority films, which is also the subject of this paper. The title of the program, however, has a double meaning. On one hand, as a special section of the festival, it is a symbol of Chinese national identity, and appears as an overarching conceptual term that represents a national film characteristic, rather than a specific film reference; on the other, it is a unique part of Chinese cinema, which highlights the characteristics of minority groups outside films about the Han nationality.

The issues of nationalization and ethnicity are familiar throughout the world, in many countries and ethnic groups. The former is a common concern among researchers in various disciplines, including (such as this paper) film. As the term suggests, in China, the rise of re-nationalization is necessarily based on re-examining and re-thinking nationalization, and is a result of the country's historical background and the changes brought by the New Era. 'Re-nationalization' appears as a keyword in a Chinese academic paper in recent years in (Beijing Film Academy) Professor Wang Haizhou's 2020 article, 'Re-Nationalization of the Chinese Film: Path and Future of the Construction of Film Nationality in New China' (Haizhou, 2020). The article reviews the creative history of the nationalization of Chinese cinema, and uses the term 're-nationalization' to refer to the artistic exploration of the nationalization of Chinese cinema after the founding of New China, when the cinematic form changed from 'citizen cinema' to 'people's cinema'. The filmic practice of re-nationalization in this article therefore refers specifically to the seventeen-year period of the founding of the PRC (1949-1966). Then the new period of reform and opening up (from 1978), China continued its integration of global trends; this meant the issue of Chinese Cinema's nationalization was brought up again. Although the term 're-nationalization' is a relatively recent one, the concept it represents has been discussed for a long time and can be applied at every major turn of events, as it describes the emergence of new problems in each period that need to be solved. Although the term refers to Chinese films in a broad sense, minority films are the most prominent and ethnically diverse part of Chinese cinema, and are consequently the chief representatives of its nationalization. In addition, this paper points out that the project of re-nationalization is ongoing, and its completion in the arena of New Era Chinese Cinema is a significant challenge, at theoretical, practical, and talent levels. In this sense, it is therefore reasonable to cite re-nationalization to describe the phenomenon of minority films presented at the China Golden Rooster & Hundred Flowers Film Festival.

This paper considers the context of the renewed attention given to minority films in China's New Era, through the Film Festival's minority film screenings, and the content of the films on show. Instead of following the path of previous literature and exploring the historical issues of Chinese minority films, this paper will discuss how to practice re-nationalization in filmic works, and how to build a community aesthetic in the context of current national cultural policy and the strategic international deployment of national image building. It will do so from the combined perspective of film theory and ethnicity theory.

2. Literature review, theoretical background and research methods

Scholars of minority film in China have focused mainly on the history of such films (historical research); their creation rules and characteristics (film practice); ethnic art values (ethnic theory); cultural construction and dissemination (national and international contexts); and ethnic identity and identification issues. In their studies of the community aesthetics of minority films, Shuguang et al. (2019) have repeatedly proposed and advocated a specific 'community aesthetic' (which this paper also considers, in the context of the Festival's screenings). They believe that ethnic minority films should achieve this through 'community narratives', thereby contributing to the pattern of 'unity in diversity' and the communal consciousness of the Chinese nation, with a conscious and confident creative

attitude. Wenmin and Zuosheng (2022) strengthen the objective of this paper, pointing out that ethnic films and TV are an extensive artistic practice in the context of the ‘unity in diversity of the Chinese nation’. They assert that ethnic minority films and TV should embody both ethnicity and the Chinese community consciousness, thereby highlighting an issue of the times for film and television production and research.

There are not many international studies on Chinese minority films; research in this area has generally been published by Chinese scholars, most of whom use film to explore the issue of globalization in a historical context, or the theoretical differences between East and West. Neither are related to the content of this paper. In his analysis of the shooting and production process of two Tibetan films in which he participated, Huiqun (2019) explores the creative potential of integrating minority films into the mainstream. This paper agrees that at a time when minority films have almost lost their box-office competitiveness and ability to win the attention of mainstream audiences, an in-depth exploration of the cultural situation is one way to achieve identity, and soothe the pain of discretion in the globalized multicultural reality. Although Lu (2014) adopts a historical approach to examine Chinese minority films during the ‘seventeen-year period’ (mainly in terms of their political significance and the state film program), she provides a reference for this paper to consider national policy and image construction of minority film festival screenings in the present. This provides a new way of thinking about the practice of re-nationalization, by focusing on issues of performance and viewing in the narrative, and using case studies to demonstrate that minority films ultimately shape the spirit of civic fraternity that is essential to the creation of socialist subjectivity. Because Korean ethnic cultures have certain similarities to those in China, there has been a great deal of South Korean research into Chinese ethnic minority films, mainly in the form of case studies. Xiao-Ling (2010) explored the content of anthropological films at the Anthropology of Film and Television exhibition, and found that four films about the lives of ethnic groups in southwestern China revealed the impact of cultural globalization on youth, and the challenges it posed to the culture in ethnic regions. Choo-sung (2011) and Jin-sook (2009) examine the sense of (ethnic) identity in China’s ethnic minorities through a textual analysis of the work of Chinese Korean director Zhang Lu. These are ideas that this paper also explores.

Since many minority films have been presented at the China Golden Rooster & Hundred Flowers Film Festival in recent years, it is impossible to discuss them all. This paper selected two films from the 2022 festival: the opening film, *New Five Golden Flowers* (2022); and *In Search of Lost Time* (2022), which is based on historical events. This paper adopts a combination of textual and cultural research methods. First, it interprets the films’ contents and creative methods, then examines China’s renewed attention to minority films in the New Era. Subsequently, it explores the significance of minority films in national and international contexts, and the community aesthetic value of re-nationalization.

Christian Metz points out that film and cinema are distinct terms in film studies, which is primarily the study of the semiotics of film (Metz, 1974). ‘Cinema’ as a concept is the sum of the film itself and the phenomena that surround it—the accumulated features of its distinct ‘language system’. In what Cohen-Seat calls the filmic fact, the relationship between cinema and film is the same as that between literature and books, painting and paintings, or sculpture and sculptures, even at the heart of a filmic analysis cinema continues to be a notion which intrudes itself at every turn (Metz, 1974). In this sense, film refers to individual film texts, and cinema points to an ideal assemblage: the virtual sum of all films, i.e., the totality of films and their characteristics. In this paper, the discussion starts from the object of study (the specific films), and then considers the ethnic and cultural connotations behind the works, which rise to the level of ‘cinema’ when taken together.

Cinema is considered the seventh art form. It is created by filmmakers and analyzed by critics, both amateur and professional. This criticism allows us to reflect on individual films that we like or dislike, and illustrate their generalities. Through such aspects we gain insight into the art of the films as a whole (Metz, 1991). There are, however, other ways to gain insight into the art of a film besides criticizing it. First, every film, good or bad, is a slice of cinema, just as every song is a piece of music. Second, it is an anthropological fact that cinema has a certain configuration, a fixed structure and set of figures, which are worthy of direct study. It also possesses a vast array of themes, comprised of all that is said in a film and all the signifying organizations (perceptual, intellectual, iconological, ideological, symbolic) that influence the understanding of the whole. This suggests that cinema is a vast phenomenon, which raises questions of aesthetics, sociology, semiotics, and psychology. This is

evidence that the analysis of films is an extremely important undertaking (Metz, 1991). Inherited from semiotics, cultural studies is more interested in academic discourse than in film language, and consequently focuses its attention on texts and cultural practices. Its theory references a variety of sources, embedding the medium of film within the larger cultural and historical context, and is inclusive and open-ended. This approach represents a shift in the research interest from the text itself to the process by which it interacts with the audience, institutions and culture that surround it. Fredric R. Jameson argues that the 'culture' in cultural studies is both anthropological and artistic, and that all cultural phenomena are worthy of study. The study of culture stimulates the interest of classical semiotic research, a counterproductive study in the field of cinema that rejects both screen theory and quantitative mass communication research, and explores culture as a field for constructing subjectivity. This construction takes place in many kinds of differences, and in material conditions, ideologies, and social relations built on the basis of factors such as age, background, class, ethnic origin and race. As a result, it opens up space for voices and communities that have traditionally been ignored (Stam, 2000).

The analysis of the two films in this study is therefore part of the critical practice of film. To explore the cultural connotations of minority films through examples is to place them in the larger context of cinema, which is pluralistic in nature. Linking film studies to cultural studies is a way to place the textual analysis of films within a more open cultural phenomenon. This is an extension of film studies, and while some film theorists may accuse cultural studies of transcending the media nature of film, it is useful to understand it in terms of the cinematic event: i.e.,

all the activities, agents, institutions and texts that pertain to cinema. Both film production and reception open onto an infinite cultural space [...]. The cinema event is constituted by a continuing interchange, neither beginning nor ending at any specific point. The idea of 'interchange' here seems to include cause, effect, function, and purpose (Bordwell & Carroll, 1996).

3. Minority films: The art of cinema in China



Figure 1. Poster of the New Five Golden Flowers.



Figure 2. Poster of the In Search of Lost Time.

3.1 New five golden flowers, and in search of lost time

New Five Golden Flowers, the opening film of the ethnic film section of the 2022 China Golden Rooster & Hundred Flowers Film Festival, is not without political significance. The film portrays front-line workers in a real-life poverty alleviation project in Yunnan's Bai ethnic minority region. Instead of directly depicting characters who sacrifice themselves for this cause, however, the film integrates poverty alleviation into a modern love story, presented step by step through a series of encounters and events that occur when a musician travels to Dali, Yunnan, in search of his ideal musical composition. The musician, as the discoverer of the story's main theme, represents the eyes of the viewer, i.e., the eyes of the public who see the poverty alleviation project accomplished. The process of the musician's discovery and the pursuit of his creative inspiration is the vehicle by which the film's main events and the narrative of the central character (the sacrificial victim of the poverty alleviation cause) slowly come

to the surface. Director Wang Qiang avoids the flat chronologies in his narrative approach, and chooses six typical characters—five strong women who are revitalizing rural development, and a male rural elementary school teacher—as representatives on which to build the plot. The characters are connected emotionally through family, friendship and career. Liu says that it is the inner connection between them that forms a certain meaning for the characters. It is both real and imaged; it is both original and created (Douban Web, n.d.).

In recent years, the creative themes of Chinese films have distinctly reflected the national will of the country's New Era (such as ecological civilization and poverty alleviation, and fighting epidemics), and have dovetailed with the unique culture and history of ethnic minorities, giving a different expression to 'Chineseness'. *New Five Golden Flowers* is typical in this regard: it completes the artistic writing paradigm of nationalized images with the construction of national will and the distinct expression of Chinese emotions, and thereby presents the conscious construction of a community in line with the national destiny (Weifang, 2022). The artistic expression in ethnic minority films to date generally occurs on four levels: the continuation of the expression of the national will from previous works; the integration of artistic creation with New Era connotations; the export of the uniqueness of ethnic minorities; and the integration of the Chinese nation's common emotional value. Based on the progressive relationship of these four aspects, *New Five Golden Flowers* expresses nationality at the level of content, in the context of the national strategy of poverty alleviation. Liu describes the film's emotional relationship with the audience: The emotion of this film is intense, and the intensity may scare off some people. There is a bridge between the emotional intensity and the viewer, and that bridge is understanding (Douban Web, n.d.).

In Search of Lost Time is a historical film created by Hong Kong director Tung-shing Yee. It is based on the event of 3,000 orphans entering Inner Mongolia in the south of China, which was a consequence of natural disasters in the late 1950s. It is a story that has been told many times in Chinese cinema. In it, a large number of orphans from the south are transported to the grasslands and adopted by the kind and honest Mongolian herdsman. The children's anxiety and homesickness, kindled by their new environment and family, are gradually resolved by love. Like *New Five Golden Flowers*, the film takes its material from a true story, and its narrative strategy uses the same two threads—memoir and current narrative—side by side. If *New Five Golden Flowers* is a story about the integration of the Han nationality into the care of ethnic minorities, then *In Search of Lost Time* relates the simplicity with which the harmonious coexistence of ethnic minorities and the Han nationality can be achieved.

The whole work is placed in the context of a grand historical event. In this latest version of the film, director Derek Yee established a connection with that time in the present, by employing two 'turning big into small' narrative strategies to achieve emotional identification. The first was to transform the grand narrative into a micro-narrative, i.e., to present the inner emotions of the characters in the context of historical events; the second was to transform the film's social issues (being on welfare, being adopted) into an ethical family narrative, and mapping the human relationships in the new family environment: i.e., unfolding the plot from the perspective of a small family (Shuguang & Pengfei, 2022). Such a strategy creates empathy and sympathy between the work and the audience, so that the emotional community narrative is the core appeal and expression of the film. For Yee, love is the main theme of this work. It is expressed by the facts that the Inner Mongolian herdsman affectionately call the children from the south 'children of the country', and that [i]n Inner Mongolia, all the people who adopt children, they never call them 'orphans' (Zhen, 2022). To complete the emotional community narrative content is required, and this content must reflect the sense of community. In this case, the Shanghai and Inner Mongolian governments work together to bring orphans to Inner Mongolia under the unified national arrangement (a dialogue of real-life activities); the Inner Mongolian people work hard to learn Mandarin, and the adopted children grow up to learn Mongolian (a dialogue of language); two mothers raise the same daughter in succession (dialogue between time and space); and a Mongolian brother dies to save his Han sister, who thereafter takes his name (dialogue of emotions).

3.2 Characteristics and expressions of Chinese ethnic minority film creation

Both analyzed works have the strong strategic identity of emotional community narrative, and exemplify the innovation of minority films through the strong emotions shared by humans. China is a

large family with 56 ethnic groups (of which 55 are minorities). Whether through a great task like the poverty alleviation project, or the harmonious coexistence of ethnic minorities with the Han majority, unity and mutual assistance between ethnic groups is the essence of Chinese cinema, and of all discussions on nationalization. As previously mentioned, the term 'ethnic films' has both a narrow and broad meaning. In the latter, the works have their own national characteristics from content to form, the connotation of which is to create film art with distinctive national characteristics or ethnic features (Shaobai, 1989). Minority films are outstanding embodiments of distinctive national characteristics and ethnic features, and are therefore the most powerful artistic practice of nationalization in Chinese cinema. This is the greatest characteristic of their artistic creation, and Chinese cinema's most significant expression and achievement in the creation of ethnicity.

The characteristics of artistic creation in minority films are also reflected in manifestations of regional culture and natural scenery. Regional culture has multiple aspects, which are formed by the economy, politics, customs, rituals, religious beliefs and natural climate of a native ethnic region, and create social relations, ethnic psychology, and the characters' personalities. *New Five Golden Flowers* is a re-interpretation of the film *Five Golden Flowers* (1959), and the five heroines in the former sing the latter's iconic Yunnan folk song *By the Butterfly Spring*; and *In Search of Lost Time* shows a scene of a Mongolian marriage, with its own ethnic traditions, rituals and customs. These scenes establish the culture and style of the ethnic group, continued from ancient times to the present, and only considered authentic if it is realized within a certain region. Although the manifestation of regional culture can be accomplished across regions, it is performative in nature. The broad concept of regional culture is the cultural presentation of all regional characteristics, while in its narrow sense it refers to a regional culture that retains a distinct ethnic heritage. The regional culture of ethnic minorities is an important part of the Chinese nation's 'unity in diversity', because of its own uniqueness as a characteristic. The uniqueness of ethnic minorities lies in the richness of the national ideology, and the initiative of the nation's self-conscious survival. What can be shown to the world at a given time must not be simple popular culture that follows a trend, but the creation of the country's inimitable culture; this ensures its survival (Yan & Zing, 2015). The excavation of the original and unique regional cultural forms of China's ethnic groups is the most genuine expression of artistic creation in minority films. Further, the manifestation of the natural environment is universal to the artistic creation practice of Chinese minority films, because the geographical location of minority groups is China's greatest regional characteristic. The strange natural landscapes and beautiful scenery create contexts for film creation; they access shifts in time and space, which bring the audience to contemplation and reverie, change the narrative tone, create an emotional atmosphere, and portray particular ethnic characteristics. The artistic effect of natural scenery is therefore an important artistic creation method and resource.

4. Re-nationalization and community aesthetics

4.1 Re-nationalization: Perseverance and cultural consciousness

In the early 1990s China's financial system transformed from a planned to market economy, and consumer society and mass culture had a fundamental impact on the country's political economy, social psychology, and artistic creation. Faced with increasing globalization and the subtle influence of the Hollywood film industry production model, the market economy entered the film studios. Consequently, Chinese filmmaking began a period of comprehensive exploration and change from artistic interest and aesthetic pursuit to specific operation, production and distribution systems, as it actively catered to secular interests and visual pleasures (Yaping, 2005). As a result, Chinese minority films have rapidly grown in number since the beginning of the millennium.

It can be said that the economic, cultural and political forces of globalization have completely reconstructed Chinese cinema, whether it represents the image of globalization and imagines its self-identity in globalization, or it has accepted the constructive influence of globalization in various ways through capital, stars and texts, Chinese cinema, which is built on certain geographical and cultural boundaries, has demonstrated fluidity and dialogue. Accordingly, minority-themed films have, on the one hand, strengthened their own cultural identity to prevent the danger of losing their own cultural attributes; on the other hand, they have

accelerated the innovation of film language in order to cater to the interests of the film market and audiences (Guangxin, 2015).

Film is an important carrier of national cultural identity, and since the first decade of this century, when the intersection of subjectivity and modernity was explored, since many of the fifth generation of directors achieved fame and accolades abroad, and not lagging behind the rest of the world has become a legitimate aim for many Chinese filmmakers. Behind this is the pursuit of Hollywood, and the consequent admiration of high technology and submission to market audiences. This has led to the disappearance of unique local cultural images. Chinese scholars have observed the dissonance of Chinese minority films in the international arena, a fact that has not escaped Chinese film critics: What worries us is that while the film industry is growing rapidly in terms of industry, theaters, screens and box offices, a kind of ‘new pandering’ has grown at the cultural level, and the unique characteristics of Chinese cinema are becoming increasingly annihilated and hard to find (Xing, 2012).

Minority films have shifted in content from simple displays of folklore to cultural values, and in expression from representation to self-representation. However, no matter what the commercial motives and aesthetic requirements are, the main appeal and socio-cultural functions of films are basically ideological, and thus ethnic minority films’ narratives about national history and culture are still an indispensable part of the cohesion and centripetal force of nation-states (Schatz, 1992). As China enters the New Era, its re-nationalization requires an insistence on ethnic cultural identity, and a conscious awareness of local cultural images. The historical images reproduced in *In Search of Lost Time* are a historical situation of national unity, not only between Han Chinese and Mongolians, but of all ethnic groups in the country under the influence of the socialist state. At present, China is in the process of constructing a new discourse of national unity, and it is necessary for it to do so by using history as a reference (Puzhong, 2022). The two works analyzed are typical New Era minority films, and fully reflect the creative goals in the context of national image construction.

4.2 Community aesthetics

In an unprecedented move, *The Report on Chinese Film Art, 2022* identified three critical keywords/phrases for Chinese film theory, one of which was ‘community aesthetics’ (Report on Chinese film art, 2022).² As a basic sociological concept, ‘community’ can be traced back to German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies’ 1887 publication *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* (Community and Society), which separated the concept of community from that of society. In the early days of its conception community referred to a common life, but it has been greatly expanded in contemporary times, and today there is debate as to how it should be recognized and understood in different contexts and discourse systems. In general, however, common goals and a common identity and sense of belonging are the basic characteristics of a community, and the elements on which it is built (Zhimin et al., 2010). Scholars from different disciplines have gradually discovered the rich meaning of community, and extended its research tentacles to corresponding fields. Scholars of Chinese cinema have grafted the community of human destiny as a political discourse onto the idea of community at the aesthetic level, and consider moral ethics an aesthetic orientation of the community aesthetics of Chinese cinema. They have explored the latter from their initial macroscopic construction to their subsequent elaboration in genre films or individual film models, and have observed the significance of this theoretical proposition to Chinese film criticism (Xiaoxi, 2021). The history of Chinese national community consciousness cannot be separated from the nation’s inherent idea of ‘unity in diversity’, and is inseparable from the contributions of all ethnic groups. Minority films, as the most prominent aspect of Chinese cinema’s nationalization, are therefore diverse. Community aesthetics cannot be separated from the discussion of minority films, and minority films are indispensable to the study of community aesthetics in cinema.

5. Conclusion

The questions raised at the beginning of this paper can now be answered: 1. What is the significance of these special screenings of minority films? The screening of ethnic films at the China Golden Rooster & Hundred Flowers Film Festival is an important manifestation of China’s film and

² The three key words of Film Theory Focus are Chinese Film School, Community Aesthetics, and Metaverse.

television strategy to show the country in different historical periods, including the present New Era. It is also a new way to re-explore the nationalities of Chinese film art in the process of evolution, and in the international environment, with a new awareness of their issues. 2. What are the ethnic characteristics of films in China's New Era, and what are their cultural connotations? The narrative discourse of minority films is a practice of nationalization in the New Era, and is an important carrier and expression of national cultural identity; the expression of these films in the present context creates a tight link between minority groups and Chinese culture, and institutions and national strategies. This forms a 'community of national destiny' in the New Era, which embodies the cultural connotation of community aesthetics. 3. As the most prominent aspect of Chinese film nationalization, how do minority films practice re-nationalization in their creative and national cultural expression? How can their inherent sense of community be expressed? In the two works analyzed in the paper, 'emotional community narrative' is a strong strategic mark. This is a creative method adopted by many minority films in the New Era, and it depicts artistic characteristics through the manifestation of regional culture and natural scenery, creating a unique landscape that cannot be emulated. The sense of community is also displayed through re-nationalization: a consciousness of local cultural identity and cultural images, which is an aesthetic pursuit of film creation. To summarize: minority films should be an important part of Chinese cinema's nationalization strategy.

China is a multi-ethnic cultural community. Its minority films contain a specific category of subject matter, and are an essential element in the construction of both a national film and television system, and a consciousness of national culture. Funding and developing minority films is a demonstration of national cohesion and spirit, and a recognition of the need to maintain cultural diversity. This paper calls on scholars from all over the world to pay attention to Chinese ethnic images, to watch Chinese ethnic minority films, and to recognize the value of community aesthetics.

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