

## Love Song of the Foreign Liberator: Teaching Tibetan History to American Students in the PRC

Adam Cathcart

**Abstract:** This article takes as its point of departure *Love Song of Kangding* (康定情歌), a romantic film from fall 2010 which propagandizes the positive consequences of the liberation of Tibetan cultural areas by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1950-51. The article describes how the film fit into a semester-long course on contemporary Tibet taught to American students in Chengdu, Sichuan, and the particular sensitivities and difficulties relating to learning about Tibetan history in China.

**Keywords** Tibet; movie; Kangding; propaganda; serf

Since the uprising (or, depending on the rhetorical orthodoxy being employed, the “riot”/*dongluan*) in Lhasa of March 14, 2008, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda has gone into overdrive to churn out a great deal of information seeking to reinforce CCP claims to Tibet. In addition to producing films, television programs, and websites, the printing presses in Beijing have been extremely busy. Treatments of the “serf liberation” of 1959 have been particularly prominent, emphasizing and enumerating the evils of the Tibetan aristocracy prior to 1959. For a Party searching for some sense of coherence in the aftermath of the uprising in Lhasa, the trope of “serf liberation” has now grown sufficiently self-convincing that in 2009 the CCP retroactively declared March 11 an annual commemoration of “serf liberation day” across China.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the standard range of social science and religious research, newly published texts on Tibet include historical treatments of the Tibetan aristocracy prior to 1951 along with healthy helpings of photos from the Tibetan archives.<sup>2</sup>

The appearance of new texts adds a slightly more subtle layer to the already massive drive to educate both foreigners and the Chinese public about Tibet; the new influx of funds for Tibet-related propaganda since 2008 evidences the CCP's desire to diffuse some new sources, if not wholly new points of view, about Tibetan history in the pre-1959 era. In other words, rather than sitting on its historical laurels and relying only on old slogans and familiar photographs, the CCP has mobilized a wave of scholarship and documentary energy in the service of documenting and demonizing the old system while at the same time emphasizing the high respect with which Chinese bureaucrats from “the center” have always regarded Tibetans and Tibetan culture.

### LOVE SONG OF KANGDING

In November 2010, I aimed my teaching centrally into the headwinds of this discourse by leading a group twenty rambunctious American students to a screening of the film *Love Song of Kangding* (康定情歌) in Chengdu, Sichuan. For the purposes of teaching, the film's release and its heavy-handed emphasis on the CCP's historical efficacy in Tibet could hardly

**Adam Cathcart** is Assistant Professor of Chinese History at Pacific Lutheran University, and chief editor of SinoNK.com.

have been better timed. The students were enrolled in a semester-long course on contemporary Tibet and the PRC; by late October, they had finished reading Melvyn Goldstein's summary of Tibet's historical relations with China (*The Snow Lion and the Dragon*, University of California Press, 1997) and were primed for some informed discussion of the Chinese Communist Party outlook on both political and ethnographic Tibet. *Love Song of Kangding*, a romantic film that propagandizes the positive consequences of the liberation of Tibetan cultural areas by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1950-51, provided an entry point for this discussion.

The release of the film in the autumn of 2010 coincided perfectly with two overarching administrative imperatives. First was the need of the CCP to commemorate the potentially sensitive sixtieth anniversary of the PLA's entry into Kangding (and Chamdo/eastern Tibet) in October 1950. The second administrative imperative was not the state's, but rather mine: leading my university's semester program in Chengdu, I was seeking ways to feed diverse student interests and keep my class motivated about Tibet a full six weeks after my group and I had taken an extended trip to the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) in October. We had quite literally come down from the high of the trip and, in spite of the fact that Tibet was continually in the news (the Dalai Lama's announcement of "retirement" set off a texting frenzy), overall interest in the course was falling off even as some individual students were charging deeper into specialized research topics. The CCP and I were therefore in oddly similar straits: the elation of initial progress among the young intellectuals had faded, diverse interests were threatening to split the monolithic interpretation of our united front, and morale was wavering. Galvanizing doses of propaganda would, at the very least, focus everyone on Tibet-related issues and remind them of the center's benevolence. For me, spending a few hundred of the university's yuan on group tickets for *The Love Song of Kangding*—a film that had the added advantages of English subtitles over Mandarin and some exquisite Chengdu dialect—was an easy choice.

#### MOVIEGOING IN CHENGDU

As we congregated at the theater near Sichuan University's "Little North Gate," distributing tickets, it immediately became apparent that Harry Potter was a far greater draw for Chinese moviegoers than *Love Song of Kangding*, in spite of the fact that the male lead in the latter film was a famous and somewhat chiseled Hong Kong star. Having paid for the propaganda film, the American students, replicating their classroom habits, clustered in the back rows and quickly outnumbered the Chinese audience. The boisterous prefilm atmosphere, however, was quickly overtaken by the familiar enticements of an orchestral score and unfurling credits.

Chinese film directors have clearly studied carefully, and learned their lessons from, successful commemoration films like Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* and the Korean War epic *Tae Guk Ki (Brotherhood of War)*. Like both of these models, the *Love Song of Kangding* leans heavily on a narrative structure based in the contemporary world and does its historical work via use of heavy and extended flashbacks. The film is therefore essentially formulated as the memory of a patriotic old man, a stand-in for any materially satisfied grandfather figure watching his revolutionary offspring in China, but one whose memories are cinematic.

After a flash of wintery marching by PLA troops with machine guns in the 1950s, the picture begins in earnest in contemporary Hangzhou, where Li Xiaoxing is enjoying his retirement with his granddaughter. Tibetan cultural areas could not be farther away. Life is good, the apartments are large, and, as Richard Kraus would remind us, nothing says

middle-class prosperity like a piano. Li's granddaughter has been assigned a piano piece that evokes the plateau, namely, the famous 1946 "Love Song of Kangding." But the young Han Chinese girl lacks an emotional connection to this music and all that it is supposed to represent in official culture: China's vastness, the open spaces of the plateau, the eastern edges of cultural Tibet, and the freedom to love whomever one pleases in the exotic outlying edges of the Chinese frontier.<sup>3</sup>

In order to gain a better feel for the music and the breadth of the Chinese experience, the girl's mother suggests that she spend some time in far-off Kangding looking after her suddenly emotional grandfather. Not only would the proposed trip allow the granddaughter her first real contact with China's most mysterious minority groups, it would allow the grandfather to push forward in his life quest to find his long-lost Tibetan love. As the mother earnestly laid out the tasks ahead, my students chortled quietly at the naked telegraphing of the film's propaganda intent. Where was the appropriate cynicism toward the state, the acknowledgement that Tibet was under occupation of the PLA, the implicit understanding of the Han-dominated racism of the 1950s? While the Americans squirmed in their seats, the young and urban Han Chinese, as well as one high school graduate with a Tibetan mother and a Han father, seemed much more used to such openly patriotic and neat narrative devices; none of them batted an eyelid. Of course young Han Chinese should take tours to Tibetan areas! There was nothing with which to disagree. The intergenerational duo are whisked to Kangding's new airport.

In one early scene on the highway outside Kangding, the grandfather-granddaughter duo pass a convoy of Chinese army trucks. On our own Pacific Lutheran University trip, we had run across such a convoy of probably more than 150 trucks on its way to the border with India. In the movie, the sight of the Army trucks sends the old man pinwheeling back into the past; it is a neat narrative device. My students guffawed collectively: to Americans, the assumption is that the trucks are in fact there to suppress a rebellion of people who want to be free, "occupy" Tibet. For their part, the Chinese in the audience were totally mystified by the American reaction to this scene. "What is there to laugh about?" their facial expressions seemed to say, "of course the army helps the Tibetans!" In neither case did the students seem to grasp that by tacitly linking the 1950 invasion to an aid convoy, the CCP film bureau had created precisely the inversion of the reality at the time, when the PLA was actually forced to procure grain along the way.

Grandpa's story then begins to unfold in earnest: underneath the soft exterior of an ordinary retiree, he is a former PLA engineer who helped to push New China's integration and modernization by building the highway between Chengdu and Lhasa. He was also a forerunner in racial integration (or *minzu ronghe*, in the Chinese parlance) by gaining a Tibetan girlfriend along the way. "Dawa," he names her and sighs out the car window as they drive through gorgeous mountain roads.<sup>4</sup> How he and Dawa met, and why they parted, is of course unfolded over the course of the film.

#### CULTURES OF MODERNIZATION AND CONVERSION

In the film, certain realities of the present are made clear: life is good for PLA veterans, Chinese kids studying classical music in wealthy cities still need to understand the sacrifices of the revolution, and Kangding is a great place to consider for your next family vacation. Above and beyond that, pains are taken to reveal how the Tibetans have great roads, a reasonably high living standard, and the freedom to sing and dance for adoring audiences.

There is also a conversion scene where the Tibetan heroine expresses her longing to follow the communist armies. In some fundamental ways, the whole ambience of the Chinese

salvation of Tibetans mirrors that of the western Christian missionaries who preceded the CCP. Take, as an example, the writing of one Swedish-American missionary describing refugees from the Hui rebellion:

It was also in God's province that the fire and sword of merciless Moslems should drive an entire family from the City of Destruction to the House of the Interpreter....But one day the story of the sufferings of the Son of God touched and broke hearts already seamed with the pangs and scars of suffering and sorrow, and the stolid mother of the family, a valiant should who had dauntlessly lived a life of suffering, wept tears the like of which she had now known for years. To think that the Son of God should suffer so for her! Her hearts all was the willing fig she professed to requite such love...these were the first Christians on the Kansu-Tibetan border.<sup>5</sup>

The filmmakers in Beijing and Chengdu today are no longer so bound by such outmoded things as tracts, however: they have statistics. By firmly establishing the excellence of the present day in this salient of the PRC, the film's directors can encounter various knotty issues with more confidence. Such issues broached in this film include the anger some Tibetan youth feel toward the Han, the negative impact of China's violent swing leftward in the late 1950s, and discrepancies between ethnic groups in areas of social welfare such as education and health care.

Ultimately, the connection that my students drew—namely that any discussion of Tibet in China is bound to larger Chinese discourses—is, for better or worse, an inescapable part of teaching about modern-day Tibet. The imperative toward unity demands that Tibetans are seen as members of a harmonious family who, although occasionally disruptive, inevitably return to the fold, often thanks to generous Chinese aid. Furthermore, some of the most critical episodes in twentieth-century Tibetan history are situated in China's larger blind spot regarding its own political ventures in the 1950s and 1960s. The failure, then, of the PRC to discuss the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution and the radicalism of the Great Leap Forward is extended to Tibet.

The one potentially self-critical point in *Love Song of Kangding*, when the Han hero becomes a victim of the 1957 anti-Rightist campaign, is a key point for student discussion. China's failures in Tibet are implicit; in spite of heavy-handed propaganda on the subject, there are few Chinese scholars who would argue that the subsequent Cultural Revolution was an unmitigated good. Thus, the Warren Smith approach—whereby the Tibetans are simply an oppressed and colonized people, a prototypical nation-state in all but legality—remains somewhat marginal for students observing Tibet and Tibetan cultural areas in China today.

The second avenue that students can take is, perhaps, less courageous, but it is also far more pragmatic: to recognize where Tibet is today—firmly in the Chinese discourse—and attempt to penetrate the “mysteries” of the plateau from Sichuan. After all, should Tibet ever through some act of God or Xi Jinping become “free,” a more complete understanding of the region's place in the maelstrom of Chinese history, and the impact of the encounter with China upon Tibet, will be critical. In the meantime, the PLA will continue its patrols in Lhasa and the Tibetan quarter of Chengdu, the students will go back to their campuses, and the film studios will grind on in search of the next Party epic.

**NOTES**

1. Zhongguo Xizang Zazhishi, eds., [中国西藏杂志社编], *Xizang minzu de xinsheng: minzhu gaige xin lishi* [西藏民族的新生:民主改革亲历史 / *New Life for Tibetans: Personal Histories of the Democratic Reforms*] (Beijing: Zhongguo Zangxue chubanshe, March 2009), x.
2. Tsering Yangdzom, *The Aristocratic Families in Tibetan History, 1900-1951* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2006) [originally published as 次仁央宗著, 西藏贵族世家: 1900-1951 (北京:五洲传播出版社)]. For a memoir in English by one such aristocrat that paints a similarly innocuous view of old society customs, see Dorje Yudon Yuthok, *House of the Turquoise Roof*, trans. and ed. Michael Harlin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Press, 1990).
3. On the notion of Chinese minority areas as repositories of Orientalist and sexualized fantasies of the Han majority, see Dru Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities," *Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (February 1994): 92-123.
4. Dawa is a frequent name in Chinese propaganda for Tibetan "slaves" of both genders, as discussed in Woesser's takedown of the 1963 propaganda film focusing on Tibet, entitled "Serf." See Woesser, "Replaying the Film 'Serf' Won't Brainwash Anyone!" April 12, 2011, [http://blog.studentsforafreetibet.org/2011/04/replaying-the-film-\"serf\"-won't-brainwash-anyone-by-woesser/](http://blog.studentsforafreetibet.org/2011/04/replaying-the-film-\).
5. Robert B. Ekvall, *Gateway to Tibet: The Kansu-Tibetan Border*, (Harrisburg, Penn.: Christian Publications, 1938), 33.