13 Loga's *gau* in *Dreaming Lhasa*
Film objects as narrative devices in contemporary Tibetan cinema

Gokul K.S and Sonika Gupta

Abstract This chapter uses thing theory to analyse a *gau* (protective amulet box) as a narrative device in the Tibetan film *Dreaming Lhasa* (2005), directed by Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin. The film takes the viewer on a journey with the protagonists as they search for a missing fighter of the Tibetan guerrilla resistance force, Chushi Gangdruk, which operated from 1956 to 1974 with covert CIA support. The filmmakers centre the amulet box to drive the narrative of the film, an aesthetic choice that is located in a Tibetan politics of struggle and identity. We argue that the amulet box occupies a multidimensional affective and political space that intersects to reveal contested histories of the Tibetan armed struggle in exile. The chapter combines textual analysis with insights from interviews with the filmmakers to present an analysis that goes beyond the visual text to examine subject–object relationships in the personal, aesthetic and political choices that informed the making of the film.

Keywords film objects, thing theory, Tibetan cinema, narrative device

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Introduction

For thousands of Tibetans who fled Chinese persecution and oppression, objects they brought into exile have become material manifestations of their rupture from home and repositories of enduring ties with the homeland. Not everyone was privileged to carry beloved and revered objects with them. Tibetans who lived closer to the current borders of Nepal and India brought more things, including precious jewels, ornaments, religious articles and talismans, and identity documents. Others made it across the border with only the bare minimum for survival. As it became apparent to the Tibetan community that their exile would be protracted, their relationship with mundane objects began to transform. Objects carried from Tibet became an embodiment of the collective experience of displacement and a bridge to invoke and reconstruct the homeland in exile. Contemporary Tibetan cinema has a particular visual grammar that deploys these objects as narrative devices to project quintessential experiences of statelessness, struggle and identity crises in exile. Filmmaker Ritu Sarin explained this affective dimension of film objects in an interview with one of the authors. Noting how 'objects are such a key part of everyday life', kept in people's homes, she observed that their value has partly to do with the state of being an exile: 'You hang on to certain things. Those things have value more than just what they are. … It is the emotion attached to the object that speaks to us (Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin, interview with Gokul KS 2022: 35:46–36:17). As Mexican filmmaker and author Guillermo del Toro put it: "If you have a really great relationship with an object, if something happens to it, it is part of the story" (cited in Azevedo 2017: 3.33–3.37). In a visual narrative, the choice of a particular object and the stories and emotions woven around it register the voice of a community and have the potential to speak to a broader audience that extends beyond the film's immediate cultural-historical context.

This chapter focuses on a Tibetan *gau* (*ga'u*; protective amulet box) in the 2005 film *Dreaming Lhasa*, made by the Tibetan–Indian filmmaking duo Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin, which narrates the contested histories of the Tibetan armed struggle and exile. A gau contains sacred objects and serves as a protective talisman for good health and long life (Clark 2015: 277). These amulet boxes are integral to the sacral relationship that Tibetans have with protective deities. Specifically, during battle, the gau as a power object is revered and prized by

Figure 13.1 The introduction of the gau in *Dreaming Lhasa*, which is shown in Dhondup's hands in a close-up shot from above (Photo Courtesy: White Crane Films)

soldiers, since it is believed to provide them with a protective force. Documented instances of Tibetan soldiers using a gau as a protective talisman include the Younghusband invasion of Tibet (1903–1904) and the Tibetan uprising against Chinese occupation in the 1950s (Harris 2012: 60).

In *Dreaming Lhasa*, the gau is introduced as a revered object wrapped in a yellow cloth (Figure 13.1). Throughout the film, the characters handle the object with devotion. A portrait photograph of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama is visible from the outside, surrounded by intricate carvings that make the object visually appealing at first glance. The amulet box is attached to a yellow belt, which helps people keep the gau attached to their bodies during wars and arduous journeys. The protagonists in the film—Dhondup and Karma—are on a mission to trace a person named Loga to return this amulet box, which once belonged to him.

Loga is a former resistance fighter associated with the Tibetan guerrilla force called Chushi Gangdruk (chu bzhi sgang drug; Four Rivers, Six Ranges), which was active from 1956 to 1974. The gau becomes a catalytic object in the quest for Loga, gradually uncovering the history of Chushi Gangdruk and carrying the enduring memory of the Tibetan armed resistance. This object also drives the visual narrative by weaving in affective layers that speak to crises of belonging and prolonged exile and the hope of returning to the homeland, all of which are

integral to the Tibetan exile experience. We draw on Emma Hutchinson's work on 'affective communities' (Hutchinson 2016) to argue that political and emotional contexts have equal relevance in telling the story of Chushi Gangdruk. In *Dreaming Lhasa*, the aesthetic choices of the filmmakers reflect this mutually constitutive relationship in exile. The film does not present the history of armed resistance as a grand narrative. Instead, Sonam and Sarin adopt an approach that roots this history in memories, which are expressed through personal stories that represent the collective and everyday experience of the struggle. This storytelling choice subverts the linear narration of Tibetan history and provides the space to accommodate an iconography of individual experiences.

This chapter argues that by preserving and articulating Chushi Gangdruk history and revealing the complexities of exile experience in relation to belonging and identity, the amulet box in the film embodies the Tibetan nation, past and present. We unpack this argument using thing theory, developed by Bill Brown in literary studies (2001, 2003, 2015). Thing theory lays the conceptual foundation for our interpretation of the transition of the amulet box from a religious power object to an emotional thing within the film. The chapter begins with a historical sketch of Chushi Gangdruk to contextualize the text, followed by a brief exposition of thing theory. It then goes on to elaborate on the politics of the Chushi Gangdruk resistance as explored in the narrative through a close reading of the film as a visual text and by drawing on insights from conversations with the filmmakers. Finally, the chapter contextualizes the affective elements in the narrative within the larger Tibetan struggle, exploring the themes of identity, separation and belonging.

Chushi Gangdruk

In the mid-1950s, major revolts against Chinese policies and reforms spread across Kham (eastern Tibet) and Amdo (north-eastern Tibet) (Goldstein 2019; McGranahan 2010a; Shakya 1999; Weiner 2020). As the People's Liberation Army brutally suppressed this popular resistance, many Tibetans from these regions fled to Central Tibet, anticipating further crackdowns by the Chinese forces. Chinese officials in Lhasa pressured the Tibetan government to deport the Khampas and stop the influx of Tibetans from the east (Shakya 1999: 166–7). This resulted in Khampa leaders, traders and others moving to Lhokha,

located southeast of Lhasa. Tibetan historian Tsering Shakya notes that the 'gathering in Lhokha marked the birth of a pan-Khampa resistance movement called *Chu-zhi Gang-drug* (Four Rivers, Six Ranges) … the ancient name for Kham' (Shakya 1999: 167). Chushi Gangdruk received covert support, financial aid, arms and training from the US as part of the American policy to contain Communism in Asia. Under a programme code-named 'Operation Shadow Tibet Circus', more than two hundred and fifty Tibetans were trained in guerrilla warfare at a secret training facility at Camp Hale in Colorado. Of these, some were air-dropped onto the Tibetan plateau for covert operations. In the 1960s, the resistance movement was also supported by the Indian government, through its intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), and by the Tibetan government-in-exile (McGranahan 2006).

In 1959, Chushi Gangdruk played a crucial role in safely escorting the Dalai Lama into exile. Between 1960 and 1974, the resistance fighters operated from their military base in Mustang in north-western Nepal, bordering the Tibetan plateau (McGranahan 2010a: 135–8). In 1969, the Nixon administration withdrew support for the Tibetan resistance against the backdrop of Sino–US rapprochement. Without US aid, the Chushi Gangdruk fighters struggled to continue their operations. Meanwhile, the Chinese government pressured the Nepalese government to shut down the Chushi Gangdruk base in Mustang. In 1974, the political climate in Nepal turned hostile to the Tibetan fighters and the government publicly declared the soldiers 'bandits' (McGranahan 2006: 124). Building tensions with the Nepalese army further deteriorated the resistance group's efforts to continue its activities. Consequently, the Dalai Lama sent a recorded audio message to the fighters, asking them to surrender their weapons to the Nepalese army (McGranahan 2006). This officially marked the end of the Chushi Gangdruk resistance. While some of the fighters remained in Nepal, most moved to India, where they lived in exile until the end of their days.

In 1988, the Dalai Lama set forth the 'Middle Way Approach', dropping demands for Tibetan independence and instead calling for genuine autonomy for Tibet within the People's Republic of China (PRC). The following year, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. After this, the international community largely began to hail the Tibetan struggle as an example of a peaceful and non-violent movement. In their struggle for the homeland, the Tibetan government-in-exile—now known as the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA)—and the exile community

at large continued to privilege and strategize political activism built around the idea of non-violence. This shift in political approach towards the Tibet question has dominated public documentation of and official discourses relating to Tibetan histories of resistance, which effectively exclude 'the uncomfortable episodes from the past, especially stories from the early two decades in exile', including the history of Chushi Gangdruk (Choedup 2023: 501). Carole McGranahan argues that there were three reasons for the deliberate forgetting of the armed resistance.

> First, this was a guerrilla war, covertly supported by four governments—those of India, Nepal, Tibet, and the United States primarily through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Aspects of such wars are necessarily secret, and it follows that much about the Tibetan resistance remains a secret (and not just forgotten) today. Second, under the leadership of the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan struggle against the People's Republic of China (PRC) is a nonviolent one. Reconciling violence with a philosophy of nonviolence is not easy and is another reason the guerrilla war rests uneasily within current history. And, third, the guerrilla war did not succeed in regaining political control over Tibet for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government. Having failed, it has not been highlighted in Tibetan histories of this period. (McGranahan 2010a: 2)

Until very recently, within the Tibetan community in exile, memory of the armed resistance existed as a 'public secret', as McGranahan calls it, something known but not acknowledged (ibid.: 11). This has restricted the evolution of a public sociality around the Chushi Gangdruk resistance movement that can help process its simultaneously heroic and traumatic history. McGranahan conceptualizes this as an 'historical arrest', which she defines as 'the apprehension and detaining of particular pasts in anticipation of their eventual release' (McGranahan 2005: 571; see also McGranahan 2010a). The lack of official acknowledgement of Chushi Gangdruk history in national remembrance practices has marginalized the history of the armed struggle in collective memory. Against the backdrop of building a national history of the Tibetan struggle that conforms to the Middle Way policy and principle of non-violence, the Chushi Gangdruk episode remained absent from CTA discourse until its very recent incorporation into the 'Resistance' section of the new Tibet Museum in Dharamshala, which opened in 2022. This absence led to the political isolation of conflicting histories

of resistance. Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin foreground this discursive contestation as the main thematic element of *Dreaming Lhasa*. This feature film is part of their long-term commitment to document and give visibility to the personal stories of resistance fighters through audiovisual media.

Filmmaker Tenzing Sonam has a deep-rooted personal connection to the Chushi Gangdruk episode. The gau used in *Dreaming Lhasa* belonged to his father, Lhamo Tsering, who was a member of Chushi Gangdruk (Tenzing Sonam, pers. comm., 10 May 2022). Lhamo Tsering was the key liaison between the resistance army and the CIA. While serving as Chief of Operations, he documented every stage of the resistance movement with photographs, letters, maps and other materials. This personal archive inspired Sonam and Sarin to explore the history of Tibetan armed resistance. In 1998, they made a documentary titled *The Shadow Circus: The CIA in Tibet*. Since 2019, they have been curating the exhibition *Shadow Circus: A Personal Archive of Tibetan Resistance (1956–1974)* as a follow-up to the documentary. The first Indian edition of the exhibition, held in April 2022 at the India International Centre (IIC), Delhi, began with a note on Chushi Gangdruk stating:

> This chapter of Tibetan history has been largely forgotten, partly due to its clandestine nature and partly as an instinctive act of omission on the part of official Tibetan narratives, which, from the 1970s onwards, sought to highlight the essentially non-violent nature of the freedom struggle. (Sonam, Sarin and Ginwala 2022)

The creative process of *Dreaming Lhasa* is informed and underwritten by the filmmakers' experiences in bringing the *Shadow Circus* project to fruition. The plot of the film is based on the real-life instance of a missing Chushi Gangdruk fighter. In an interview, Sonam shared how the one-line plot of *Dreaming Lhasa* came to his mind.

> While doing our research for *Shadow Circus*, we heard the story of a CIA-trained Chushi Gangdruk fighter who went missing after some years in the late 1970s. He did not leave any trace so that we could track him. I knew that person from my childhood days. The thought of what could have happened to him resulted in the film *Dreaming Lhasa*. Of course, other narrative layers got added to the film later, reflecting the then state of the Tibetan struggle. (Tenzing Sonam, pers. comm., 10 May 2022)

The film has two intertwined discursive arcs, both driven by centring the gau and its trajectory. Firstly, the gau unravels the subliminal histories of armed resistance that seek acknowledgement in the public space. Secondly, the object's journey from Tibet to New York bears a poignant resemblance to the experiential realities of the Tibetan community. Long separated from the homeland, the Tibetan community has been forced to negotiate the trauma of rupture, complicated by protracted exile. This affective dimension is established in the film through the spatial mobility of the gau and implied in the evolving dialogic relationship between the characters and the object. Amidst dealing with this iterative inner turmoil, Tibetans perform resistance and keep the fight for the nation alive to sustain the aspiration for an eventual return to their homeland. *Dreaming Lhasa* presents a portrait of these distinct emotions that resonate universally and, at the same time, remain innately Tibetan. Before unfolding this in more detail, we first turn to thing theory, the interpretive lens we deploy to engage with the film and access the aesthetic politics of filmmaking.

Thing theory

Bill Brown, working primarily on American literature and culture, developed thing theory to foreground the interactive and dynamic nature of subject–object relationships as they unfold in all manner of texts (Brown 2001, 2003, 2015). Brown argues after Heidegger (1967) that an object becomes a thing when its intended use and purpose change due to its relationship with people in a particular time and space (Brown 2001). At that moment, either the object no longer serves its original purpose, or the meanings attached to it assume a new dimension. The transition from an object to a thing imbues the human–object relationship with a dynamic interpretive quality that Brown calls thingness.

> I would say that the thingness of objects becomes palpable or visible or in some sense knowable where there is an interruption … One way is certainly that they break. You go to pick up the glass, and it breaks in your hand. Suddenly, you notice it, and you notice lots about it. It is at that moment that the object becomes a thing. But if you are using a glass and you suddenly recognise this is a glass that your grandmother owned, it has a certain kind of value because of the genealogy of its use. That also, to me, would be a kind

> of thingness … So, on the one hand, something that's very physical, on the other hand, something that is very metaphysical. But in both instances, a real retardation of our interaction with the object. ('Big Think interview' 2012)

Objects do not exist in a vacuum; they exist, function and are used in specific socio-political environments in particular times and spaces. They have a history of their own to share, which Brown refers to as 'the historical ontology congealed within objects' (Brown 2015: 251). Thingness arises from the relationship built with a material object within an affective, historical, political or social context that acts on the object to produce new meanings for individuals and collectivities.

De-essentializing the subject–object binary, thing theory departs from the anthropocentric assumption that human engagement is the only decisive factor in subject–object relationships (Wasserman 2020). On the contrary, things exercise an agentic function in shaping lifeworlds, including the imaginations, understandings and perspectives inherent in socio-political processes. For example, Emily Sanders (2023), in her interpretation of the 2018 American miniseries *Sharp Objects*, highlights the use of high maintenance, expensive, imported ivory-coloured floor tiles in affluent white homes to narrate white supremacy. In the series, these tiles reveal multiple structures of oppression, including race and patriarchy, that condition the gendered domestic spaces of the deep South. Drawing on thing theory and object-oriented ontology, Sanders argues that 'as objects transformed through economic processes informed by white supremacy, the ivory tiles emerge as things that are able to speak back to white supremacy's structure' (Sanders 2013: 112–13). *Sharp Objects* demonstrates the centrality of objects as narrative devices in a visual text.

Visual storytelling intertwines film objects and characters to the extent that the separateness between the two vanishes completely, and narrative interpretations emanate from all elements in a frame. Elizabeth Ezra and Catherine Wheatley (2023: 1) note that: 'In occupying filmic space, objects are a key component of mise-en-scène, but they also have a narrative function and often carry symbolic or affective weight.' Films also curate a museum-like presence and absence of objects in order to delve into the cultural and political nuances of stories and locate them within specific spatial and temporal contexts. According to Olivia Landry, this is exemplified in the 2020 Turkish series *Bir Başkadır*, which she presents as a case for considering 'film as a museum' (Landry 2023: 116). *Bir Başkadır* captures the social

stratification in contemporary Istanbul at the cusp of the traditional and the modern. The series has a museal approach and centres on household objects, old photographs, archival film footage and souvenirs that evoke personal and collective memories of contemporary Turkey. The visual narrative provides scope for a parallel material reading of the series solely based on the carefully placed objects within and beyond the frames. For instance, an engagement ring covered in a chocolate foil wrapper, initially kept off screen in the opening sequence and later revealed at the end, signifies the series' central motif of the interaction and divide between tradition and modernity.

Thing theory, as deployed in analyses of visual texts like *Sharp Objects* and *Bir Başkadır*, thus highlights the inherent role of aesthetic choices in filmmaking that weave thingness into the thematic and subtextual layers of films. This chapter answers Ezra and Wheatley's (2023: 6) call to understand 'objects as the subjects of their own stories' and recognizes the role of filmmakers in imbuing objects with thingness in specific spatial and temporal contexts. Through a collaborative process of conceptualizing the aesthetic choices made by the filmmakers in creating *Dreaming Lhasa*, we offer an interpretation of the film that extends beyond the visual text. This approach, combined with our centring of a film object, offers a fresh contribution to the interpretation of Tibetan cinema.

Dreaming Lhasa and remembering Chushi Gangdruk

Dreaming Lhasa is set in the early 2000s when more than two thousand Tibetans crossed borders every year to take refuge in India as political exiles. Many who came into exile during this period were former political prisoners escaping Chinese persecution in Tibet. Dhondup, one of the main protagonists in the film, is a former monk and political prisoner. His life takes an unexpected turn when his mother, Yangkyi, entrusts him with a mission on her deathbed. Her last wish is for Dhondup to go to India to return a gau belonging to a person called Loga. Dhondup has seen this gau, which his mother fondly keeps close to her, since his childhood. Even though he does not wish to leave Tibet, Dhondup honours his mother's wish to find Loga in India and give him the gau. The other main protagonist in the film is Karma, a second-generation Tibetan exile filmmaker from New York. She is making

a documentary film, interviewing former Tibetan political prisoners in exile, and meets Dhondup in Dharamshala as part of this project. During their conversation, Dhondup shows her the gau and shares his mission to trace Loga in India. Karma is intrigued and decides to accompany him on this journey to fulfil his mother's last wish. This journey takes them to different Tibetan locations in India, including Majnu Ka Tilla in New Delhi, Jaipur, Clement Town in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand and, finally, back to McLeod Ganj, where they find Loga living as a hermit in the mountains. Once they have found Loga, Dhondup returns to Tibet and Karma to New York. *Dreaming Lhasa* portrays their quest through an engagement with the affective landscape of exile interwoven with its political trajectory.

Over the course of his journey, Dhondup discovers that Loga is his father and was a soldier in Chushi Gangdruk—these are not things that he has been informed about by his mother, Yangkyi. This omission is a narrative technique that allows the audience to travel with Dhondup on his elusive quest as he uncovers both his personal history and the associated history of armed struggle, which is entwined with the emotional arc of the protagonists. As Dhondup searches for Loga, the narrative reveals details about him incrementally and somewhat parsimoniously. This signals a simultaneous secret-keeping and revelation to bring to the fore both the sacrifices made by the fighters and the lack of acknowledgement of their heroism within the dominant narratives of the Tibetan struggle in exile.

Sonam and Sarin tell Loga's story by centring the gau, a religious and personal power object that has shared significance for Chushi Gangdruk fighters as a protective talisman. Tibetan soldiers and resistance fighters wore gau, believing they would protect them from harm in battle (McGranahan 2010b). In an interview with the Tibet Oral History Project (2007), Ngawang Lobsang, a former member of the Chushi Gangdruk force, attests that they wore protective amulets blessed by lamas, which they believed helped the fighters escape death at the hands of the People's Liberation Army. By choosing this particular object as a narrative device, Sonam and Sarin bring attention to the association between Chushi Gangdruk and the sacred, covert and perilous in their defence of the homeland.

The filmmakers cast the amulet box in a catalytic role in the film to build trust between characters as they traverse the unstated exile political landscape, fraught with the marginalization of Chushi Gangdruk's history. The people Karma and Dhondup meet during their journey agree to talk to them about Loga only after seeing the gau,

Figure 13.2 The gau as a catalytic object is at the centre of Dhondup's meetings with Tse Topgyal, Ghen Rabga and Loga (clockwise), and initiates the conversations between the characters by building a trust-based relationship. (Photo Courtesy: White Crane Films)

which establishes a material connection with the historical truth of the armed resistance movement. As each of these characters encounters the amulet box for the first time (see Figure 13.2), the narrative shifts from a tentative relationship with Dhondup to deeper engagements, unlocking memories and associations with the gau. This, in turn, allows the characters to share their personal associations with Chushi Gangdruk in a relationship of mutual trust. These scenes point to the inaccessibility of Chushi Gangdruk experience and history to members of the exile community who are not bound by such trust-based relationships.

Similarly, the gau facilitates access to Loga's story as a resistance fighter, even as his own son remains unaware that this is his own story. We learn from different characters that Loga was a former monk who joined Chushi Gangdruk, underwent training by the CIA at Camp Hale, was parachuted into Tibet and fought the Chinese. We also learn that after Chushi Gangdruk was disbanded, Loga was accused of committing a murder in the Tibetan settlement of Majnu Ka Tilla, from where he fled to a monastery in another Tibetan settlement, Clement Town. When Dhondup and Karma approach Loga at his isolated hermit hut in Dharamshala for a conversation, the scene begins like all the protagonists' earlier meetings with strangers from whom they are seeking leads. As soon as Dhondup shows the amulet box to Loga, their

conversation turns to moments of revelation, emotional exchange and recollection, culminating in the resolution to the quest. Through Dhondup's possession of the gau, Loga understands that Dhondup is his son and that he received the gau from Yangkyi. Here, the object is crucial in uniting father and son for the first time.

Earlier in the film, when the protagonists reach a dead end in their search for Loga, they open the amulet to see if its contents might reveal a clue. Along with a blessed *khatak* (*kha btags*; offering scarf) and an image of the Dalai Lama, they find a strange object inside the box that is not usually associated with protective amulets. This object turns out to be a cyanide capsule, presumably given to Loga by the CIA at Camp Hale (Figure 13.3). A former Chushi Gangdruk fighter confirms the

Figure 13.3 Opening the amulet box and revealing the cyanide capsule along with the white scarf and Dalai Lama portrait (Photo Courtesy: White Crane Films)

historicity of this detail in the documentary *Shadow Circus*. Sonam and Sarin also mention that some of the CIA-trained fighters who were parachuted into Tibet between 1957 and 1961 'died consuming the CIA-provided cyanide capsule' (Sonam and Sarin 2019: 19).

In the film, the cyanide capsule kept inside the gau as a precious object is an evocative lament for the emotional investment and faith Tibetans had in the resistance. Like the amulet box, the armed struggle was sacred, undertaken in defence of their deeply rooted religious faith and Tibetan identity. Elaborating on the significance of the cyanide contained inside the amulet, Tenzing Sonam explains: 'Even though it was poison, it was a precious object that they had saved and carried, and so that was also put inside the amulet [box]. The idea of transferring that [memory] from one generation down to another generation … comes down to this one object' (Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin, interview with Gokul KS 2022: 36:40–37:18). The cyanide, therefore, becomes a material representation of a struggle that demanded deep faith and a promise to sacrifice one's life for the homeland.

The gau has a final secret to be divulged. As the cyanide capsule is revealed, the ensuing conversation between Dhondup and Penjor, a friend of Loga's, unlocks the possibility that Loga is Dhondup's father.

Penjor:	When the CIA dropped them into Tibet, they gave them these capsules. This must be Loga's capsule… strange….
Dhondup:	What do you mean dropped into Tibet?
Penjor:	Loga and his team were trained by the CIA and parachuted into Tibet at a place called Chagra Pembar.
Dhondup:	That is where my father died.
Penjor:	Your father died at Chagra Pembar?
Dhondup:	Yes, he was killed by the Chinese. He was the member of a local resistance force.

At this juncture in the film, the amulet takes on the responsibility of narrating the sacrifice of the Chushi Gangdruk fighters and their families. Given its covert nature, families were often unaware of their members' involvement in the armed struggle. As mentioned above, Tenzing Sonam's personal background is part of this collective experience. When he was born, his father, Lhamo Tsering, was at Camp Hale in Colorado. However, his mother, who was in India, was unaware of this. Tenzing Sonam narrates this personal history in a book produced as part of the *Shadow Circus* exhibition.

> I was born in January 1959 in a hospital in Darjeeling, the Indian hill station located close to the border of Tibet from where my parents had come. My mother was alone when she gave birth. My father had suddenly left home a few months earlier and she had no idea where he had gone or when he would be back. He returned some months after my birth but did not divulge the details of his travels or the nature of his work. All my mother gleaned was that he was engaged in a secret activity that was connected to the worsening situation in Tibet, where a fragile truce between the Dalai Lama's government and the occupying forces of Communist China was deteriorating. It was only much later that I discovered that my father was a key figure in the Tibetan resistance and its main liaison with the CIA, which had supported the resistance from the late 1950s. (Sonam and Sarin 2019: 2)

These personal stories of loss and separation in the service of the nation suffered a collective erasure or historical arrest. In *Dreaming Lhasa*, Sonam and Sarin subtly deploy the amulet box to resist this erasure of Chushi Gangdruk history from collective memory. While carrying the memory of Chushi Gangdruk and Tibetan histories of resistance, the gau has its own affective trajectory in relation to the characters and their emotions at different times and in different spaces. As the amulet moves between different locations in the story, each character relates to it on different terms, thereby redefining its emotional significance. It is presented in the narrative as a malleable repository of truncated family bonds and alienation from the homeland.

Objects and affects: Separation, belonging and identity

The spatial trajectory of the amulet box in *Dreaming Lhasa* represents the metaphorical connection with the history of the Tibetan nation. The gau travels with the protagonists to Dharamshala, Delhi, Jaipur, Clement Town and, finally, New York. Its trajectory in exile narrates the life stories of members of the Tibetan community over the preceding two decades, from starting businesses in settlements such as Dharamshala and Majnu Ka Tilla, opening sweater-selling markets in different parts of India and joining exile monasteries, to migration to the West. These locations are representative exile spaces where the

hope for a free homeland waxes and wanes under varied circumstances and struggles. Sonam and Sarin present this emotionally complex and fractured story of the Tibetan exile community and its socio-political whirls through the journey of the gau as related to questions of identity.

The early 2000s was marked by deliberations within and beyond the Tibetan exile community on the question of Tibetan identity. The relationship to the homeland shared by recently arrived Tibetans was different to that of Tibetans born in exile whose parents had come from Tibet from 1959 onwards. Among the latter, those who migrated to and grew up the West felt disconnected from their language, traditions and politics. The film shows Karma, a New York-based second generation émigré, grappling with alienation from her Tibetan roots and starting to rediscover her Tibetan identity in India as she listens to the harrowing recollections of former political prisoners and spends time with the community, observing their everyday efforts to keep the Tibetan struggle alive. At the beginning of the film, when Karma sees the gau for the first time, it is merely a beautiful object to her, something to be admired for its aesthetic value. Towards the end, Dhondup entrusts Karma with the gau, which she will take back with her to New York as a treasured talisman. Here, the gau becomes a material manifestation of her Tibetan identity (see Figure 13.4).

Before bidding farewell, Dhondup gives Karma the gau, saying: 'It is in memory of what we went through.' Here, 'we' stands for the quintessence of the collective struggle of all Tibetans who fought for Tibet and all those in exile. As reflected in Karma's story, the character–object relationships in the film encompass different emotions central to the experience of being a Tibetan. In one scene, she says: 'The more I learn about Tibet, the more I feel like a complete stranger.' Karma's character is vocalizing a strain of alienation among many exile-born Tibetans, including Tenzing Sonam. According to Sonam, filmmaking is a meaningful gateway for him to rediscover his roots (pers. comm., 10 May 2022). Comprehending the larger emotional context of the visual narrative helps viewers understand the Tibetan community as united by historical experiences of exile and yet carrying diverse emotional and political arcs.

Separation is a dominant theme in contemporary Tibetan cinema due to its invasive and unmistakable presence in the lives of all Tibetans in exile. The amulet box in *Dreaming Lhasa* witnesses multiple separations and partings, from Loga bidding farewell to Yangkyi to the end of Karma and Dhondup's journey. Returning to the homeland and

Figure 13.4 The amulet box in Karma's hands at the beginning and end of the film, respectively, symbolically marking her changed relationship with the object. (Photo Courtesy: White Crane Films)

reuniting with family is a dream for many Tibetans. When it seems that the chances of realizing that dream are grim, this destabilizes individual and collective efforts to strengthen resistance. Uncertainties about the future and existential struggles in exile create a recurrent crisis of belonging. Separation from the homeland is then the beginning of a series of inner conflicts.

The film narrates this by circumventing any emotional closure as Dhondup and Loga meet and acknowledge each other as father and son. They do not celebrate this emotionally significant event as they do not imagine a future together. Loga continues to live in exile while Dhondup returns to Tibet. Dhondup and Loga's meeting symbolically represents the aspiration of the exile community to reunite with Tibet.

While political conditions forestall any such a reunion from happening soon, filmmaking opens a space for imagining and visualizing the emotional dimension of that dream becoming a reality. In addition, this narrative choice contributes to keeping the hope of an eventual return alive. Sonam and Sarin do not resort to a happy ending for the film, as the Tibetan struggle is heading in an uncertain direction. The gau, which travels to the West, reflects the state of outward migration of Tibetans from settlements in India, Nepal and Bhutan to other countries in different parts of the world since the 1990s. Many Tibetan filmmakers have chosen open endings for their visual storytelling to signify this political state. In an interview, filmmaker Sonam Tseten said:

> [M]y thought here is that we are still not done yet. We are still here. We have miles to go. I can't show a happy ending in this story if you think from the larger exile perspective. Why do we need a happy ending when the reality is different? (Tseten and KS 2021)

The absence of resolution and emotional closure is an exile condition. The affective landscape of contemporary Tibetan cinema embraces the structural conditions in and of exile to stay close to reality.

Conclusion

The gau in *Dreaming Lhasa* is a repository of the history of Chushi Gangdruk and its attendant politics of memory in the public domain. Instead of choosing a documentary approach to narrate the history of Tibetan armed resistance, Sonam and Sarin centre the amulet box as an object that facilitates storytelling. In the mid-2000s, when the film came out, Chushi Gangdruk history was still on the margins of public discourse. This is apparent in the narrative style of the film, in which both protagonists and viewers are initially kept at a distance from the history of the armed struggle and then drawn into a process of gradual discovery. This minimalist revelatory approach reflects how the discourse on Tibetan armed resistance exists in the public realm, distanced from the celebrated national narrative of a non-violent struggle for self-determination. Yet, despite its minimal presence in the conversations in the film, the armed struggle remains the focal point of the narrative at both surface and subtextual levels. The amulet box inextricably placed in the visual narrative facilitates this significant intervention by the filmmakers. As a medium of representation and

documentation, cinema allows Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin to reach relatively wide audiences within the Tibetan community and beyond, increasing the audibility of unheard voices.

Since *Dreaming Lhasa* was released in 2005, new spaces have opened up for the articulation and preservation of personal and collective memories of Chushi Gangdruk and for bringing these into public view, coinciding with greater democratization of the Tibetan exile polity. These include oral history collections, memoirs, extensive multi-volume writings detailing the experiences of resistance fighters, documentaries, exhibitions and installations. Notably, the recently inaugurated Tibet Museum, located inside the CTA complex in Dharamshala, foregrounds the Mustang resistance phase of the Chushi Gangdruk movement in its 'Resistance' section. Similarly, in his recent history of the Tibetan struggle, Tibetan writer Jamyang Norbu (2023) provides an extensive personal account of the Chushi Gangdruk movement that factors in the contested political legacy of armed resistance. Lhamo Tsering, quoted in the *Shadow Circus* exhibition, strongly voices the need for this remembering: 'I don't see our armed resistance as something that was useful only in the past. We should look at it as one chapter in our continuing struggle for freedom, one that still has some meaning.'

Note on the authors

Dr Gokul KS is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Amity University, Noida, India. He specialises in examining and interpreting socio-political issues and events through the lens of visual images & narratives. Gokul's doctoral thesis, titled *Visual Narratives of Resistance and Liminality in Tibetan Exile Cinema*, is the first comprehensive study of films and documentaries made by Tibetan exile filmmakers. The study uses close reading and practitioner interview methods to analyse two core aspects integral to the exile experience – resistance and liminality – to interpret Tibetan exile politics.

Prof Sonika Gupta teaches Global and Chinese Politics at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Madras. Her primary research interests are Chinese Foreign Policy, the Himalayan Borderlands, the Tibetan Exile Community in India and Minority Politics in China. Her current project is looking at the borderland communities in the Indian Himalayas.

ORCID®

Gokul KS https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2280-4686
Sonika Gupta https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4049-3615

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