



Ritual and Faith: Constructing the Spiritual World of Tibetan Buddhist Pilgrims through the Film: *Paths of the Soul (Mount Kailash)*

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Abstract

Paths of the Soul (Mount Kailash), a film themed on Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage, records the entire journey of 11 villagers from Markam Village who embarked on a more-than-2500-kilometer prostration pilgrimage that lasted over a year. It demonstrates the profound connotations of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage rituals. From the theoretical perspective of interpretive anthropology, this paper analyzes how Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage rituals construct the spiritual world of believers through four dimensions: the sacred site complex, the sanctity of ritual behaviors, the diversity of pilgrimage motivations, and the perseverance and evolution of faith under the impact of modernity. It reveals the in-depth logic of the integration of faith and life, and explores the existential value and future direction of traditional faith in modern society.

Subject Areas

Art

Keywords

Paths of the Soul (Mount Kailash), Tibetan Buddhism, Pilgrimage Rituals, Spiritual World Construction

1. Introduction

Pilgrimage is an important manifestation of religious belief for Tibetan Buddhist followers. It is a spiritual practice process in which believers set off along fixed sacred routes toward recognized holy sites with strong emotions and complex

wishes. With a documentary-style approach, the film *Paths of the Soul (Mount Kailash)* tells the story of Nyima Drakpa, a villager from Markam Village in Tibet, who, to fulfill his father's last wish, led his uncle and 9 other fellow villagers on a prostration pilgrimage to Mount Kailash in the Tibetan Year of the Horse. The group included an octogenarian, a pregnant woman about to give birth, a butcher burdened with a sense of sin, villagers praying for the deceased, and an innocent child. During the more-than-one-year pilgrimage, they experienced trials of wind, frost, snow, rain, birth, old age, illness and death, yet they always practiced their faith with devout piety.

Paths of the Soul (Mount Kailash) is a feature film that records the spiritual world of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims. The repetitive pilgrimage rituals, simple daily details, and the psychological evolution of the believers depicted in the film provide rich textual materials for studying how Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage rituals construct the spiritual world of believers. Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage rituals are not only an external behavioral pattern but also a medium for believers to communicate with the sacred world, serving as a path for individuals to achieve self-redemption, spiritual purification and sublimation. By deconstructing the pilgrimage rituals in the film, this paper analyzes the interactive relationship between ritual behaviors and faith, and explores the internal mechanism of constructing the spiritual world of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims.

It is crucial to clarify the essential distinctions between *Paths of the Soul (Mount Kailash)*, a semi-scripted docudrama, and two related genres: pure documentaries and "visual ethnography". A pure documentary adheres to the core principle of "objective documentation", emphasizing unobtrusive recording of real-life scenarios to reproduce the authentic appearance of events without intentional intervention. In contrast, "visual ethnography" is academically oriented, with its core value lying in providing "raw visual materials that have not undergone excessive artistic processing", serving as verifiable fieldwork data for ethnographic research.

However, *Paths of the Soul (Mount Kailash)* is an artistically reconstructed work directed by Zhang Yang, based on Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage culture and real-life prototypes. Despite adopting a documentary-style visual language to present scenes, the film incorporates deliberate narrative construction, refinement of character relationships, and aesthetic expression intentions. Essentially, it is a subjective artistic representation shaped by the creator's intervention, rather than raw ethnographic data that can be directly utilized for academic research.

This distinction is particularly significant for the interpretive anthropological analysis in this paper: while the film's vivid portrayal of rituals and characters provides valuable textual materials for exploring the spiritual world of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims, its artistic nature requires us to avoid treating it as unmediated "field evidence". Instead, we should focus on deciphering the symbolic meanings of pilgrimage rituals embedded in the film's narrative, guided by the cultural context of Tibetan Buddhism.

2. Sacred Site Complex: The Ultimate Destination of the Spiritual World

2.1. The Sanctity of Mount Kailash: Dual Enchantment of Religion and Myth

Before Buddhism was introduced to Tibet in the 7th century, the Tibetans mainly believed in Bon, whose doctrine of revering mountains and rivers with animism fostered a nature-oriented philosophy. In Bon teachings, the Gangdise Mountains were established as the center of the three-realm cosmology and the “pillar connecting heaven and earth”. Bon named its own realm Olmo Lung Ring, believing that Bon originated here, with the nine-storied Yungdrung Mountain, namely the Gangdise Mountains, at its center. According to records, the Gangdise Mountains boast a beautiful ecological environment with thriving vitality: “Composed of precious treasures, it covers an area of 50 yojanas, surrounded by dense forests: the Clean Forest in the east, the Serene Forest in the south, the Wonderful Lotus Forest in the west, and the Jewel Forest in the north; it houses countless hidden treasures, with magnificent sacred mountains standing tall, clear ponds rippling with blue waves, wish-fulfilling peach trees flourishing with leaves and branches, and fat cows grazing leisurely.” [1] As one of the most famous and highest peaks in the Gangdise Mountains, Mount Kailash is revered as the “King of Sacred Mountains” and jointly regarded as the center of the world by Tibetan Buddhism, Bon, Hinduism and Jainism, making it a vital pilgrimage destination. In the belief system of Tibetan Buddhism, Mount Kailash is not an ordinary natural mountain but is endowed with profound sacred religious and mythological connotations. Bon practitioners venerate it as a sacred mountain and the king of all mountains, while Tibetan Buddhism identifies it as the center of the world.

The myths and legends surrounding Mount Kailash have shrouded the mountain in a veil of mystery. “It is said that over two thousand years ago, in the Year of the Horse when Sakyamuni Buddha was still in the human world, he gathered the gods guarding the ten directions, various bodhisattvas, celestial beings, humans, asuras and celestial musicians to assemble at Mount Kailash. Since then, the Year of the Horse has become the zodiac year of Mount Kailash.” [2] In 1042 AD, the first Rabjung Water Horse Year in the Tibetan calendar, it is said that when the Bengali monk Atisha made a foot pilgrimage to the sacred mountain, colorful clouds surged toward the peak in the sky, revealing the true form of the Buddha amid the clouds. The Life of Milarepa recounts how Milarepa, a great master of Tibetan Buddhism, achieved spiritual freedom, peace and transcendence through meditation, and ultimately reached the state of enlightenment where he merged with nature, demonstrating the profound heritage of traditional Tibetan culture: “The Gangdise Mountains are the great snow-capped mountains prophesied by the Buddha, the palace of Chakrasamvara, a place worthy of practice.” [3] The legendary story of Milarepa practicing and propagating Buddhism in the Gangdise Mountains and competing with Bon masters has further enhanced the sacredness of the mountain. These myths and legends, intertwined with religious

narratives, have endued Mount Kailash with transcendental sanctity, making it the spiritual holy land in the hearts of Tibetan Buddhist believers.

The sacred site is the object on which believers rely for a sense of security and fulfillment in their psychological world, and the core destination of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage rituals. In the context of Tibetan Buddhist belief, circumambulating the sacred mountain has clear karmic implications: “one circumambulation can wash away all sins of a lifetime; ten circumambulations can exempt one from falling into hell in five hundred reincarnations; and a hundred circumambulations can lead to Buddhahood and ascension to heaven”. [4] If one circumambulates the mountain in the Year of the Horse, one circumambulation is equivalent to thirteen circumambulations in ordinary years. This interpretation of religious doctrines has strengthened believers’ complex toward Mount Kailash, making pilgrimage the greatest wish and obligation in their lives. In the film, Nyima Drakpa and his group chose to set off in the Year of the Horse precisely out of their belief in such sacred merits, and Mount Kailash thus became the ultimate destination of their spiritual world.

2.2. The Psychological Comfort Function of the Sacred Site: Construction of a Sense of Security and Fulfillment

For Tibetan Buddhist believers, the sacred site is not only a geographical destination but also a spiritual anchor in their psychological space. In a real life full of uncertainties and sufferings, the sacred site serves as a spiritual sanctuary for believers, constructing their sense of security and fulfillment. Yangpei, the elderly man in the film, lived a life of celibacy without children, and his lifelong wish was to make a pilgrimage to Mount Kailash. In his view, even dying on the pilgrimage route would be a highly meritorious act. In the end, Yangpei passed away at the foot of Mount Kailash, and lamas performed a sky burial for him. In Yangpei’s spiritual world, Mount Kailash was the home of his soul, and reaching the sacred site meant the fulfillment of his life. The formation of this sacred site complex is closely related to the Tibetan Buddhist view of life and death. Tibetan Buddhism holds that the sufferings of this life are for the blessings of the next life, and pilgrimage, as a devout religious practice, can help believers transcend the bondage of life and death and achieve the sublimation of the soul. Thus, Mount Kailash has become an important carrier for believers to alleviate inner anxiety and construct spiritual security.

3. Ritual Behaviors: The Practical Path to Constructing the Spiritual World

3.1. The Sanctity of Daily Rituals: Family Shrines and the Sanctification of Life

Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage rituals do not exist in isolation but are closely connected with the daily lives of believers. Religious rituals in the family, as an extension of pilgrimage rituals, form the foundation for the construction of believers’

spiritual world. Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist, in Chapter 1 “Religious Phenomena and the Definition of Religion” of Volume 1 “Preliminary Questions” in his classic work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, distinguished two basic categories of religious phenomena—faith (a state of ideas) and ritual (a mode of behavior)—and emphasized that the essential characteristic of ritual lies in its sanctity, which is the fundamental mark distinguishing ritual from other human behaviors: “A ritual cannot exist without sanctity.” [5] Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage rituals have endured precisely because of their sanctity. This sanctity is first reflected in the daily family lives of believers.

As the iconic methodology of Geertz’s interpretive anthropology, “thick description” advocates that the analysis of human behavior must go beyond surface action recording. According to Dadze-Arthur, Abena, a widely accepted idea is: “The best way to do this, for Geertz, is via ‘thick description’: a way of recording things that explores context and surroundings, and articulates meaning within the web of culture.” [6] The task of thick description is precisely to penetrate the surface form of behavior, to unpack the layers of symbolic systems that underlie it, and to reveal how an action becomes an expression of meaning. For Tibetan Buddhist family rituals, thin description would only list observable actions such as “burning incense in the morning,” “refilling butter lamps,” or “kneeling and kowtowing to the family shrine,” while thick description enables us to penetrate the physical form of these rituals and decode the rich symbolic connotations embedded within them—connotations that are closely intertwined with Tibetan Buddhist doctrines, cultural traditions, and believers’ spiritual pursuits.

The film opens with a scene of daily life in Markam Village at dawn: after getting up, the villagers first burn incense, refill butter lamps and kowtow to the family shrine before starting their daily production and livelihood activities. In the evening, they light butter lamps, pray to the Three Jewels, and hold a group prayer before going to bed. In Tibetan households, a family shrine or altar is an indispensable space dedicated to worshipping Buddhas, bodhisattvas or Buddhist scriptures. Such rituals in the “private” domain of the family are the smallest unit of worship, bearing strong sanctity. They integrate religious faith into every aspect of daily life, enabling believers to live in a state where “life is faith, and faith is life”.

The sanctity of family rituals stems from the Tibetan Buddhist doctrine of merging the “body, speech and mind” with the Buddha. Through ritual behaviors such as burning incense, kowtowing and reciting scriptures, believers express their piety to the Buddha and achieve communication with the sacred world. This daily ritual practice continuously strengthens believers’ religious identity, laying a solid spiritual foundation for their participation in long-distance pilgrimages. As depicted in the film, both the elderly and children skillfully practice family religious rituals, with faith internalized as an instinct in their lives.

3.2. The Core of Pilgrimage Rituals: The Symbolic Meaning and Spiritual Cultivation of Prostration

Prostration is the most core behavior in Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage rituals and

the ultimate way for believers to express their piety. In the film, regardless of encountering snowstorms, puddles or muddy roads, the 11 villagers always move forward in a prostrate position with their entire bodies touching the ground. This seemingly mechanical and repetitive action contains profound symbolic meaning and serves as an important path for believers' spiritual cultivation.

The prostration ritual follows strict norms: believers hold palm protectors, wear long aprons, and press their palms together to indicate their understanding of the Buddha's teachings; they touch their foreheads, mouths and chests with their hands, symbolizing the integration of body, speech and mind with the Buddha; then they prostrate themselves with their five limbs touching the ground to complete one kowtow. This series of actions is not only a worship of the Buddha but also a process of self-cultivation for believers. Each kowtow is a tempering of the body and a purification of the spirit. The milestone numbers remind them of every step they have measured, and the group keeps walking for a whole year. From the heavy snowfall to the blooming peach blossoms and then to the lush green trees, they embrace every experience along the way with equanimity. On the more-than-2500-kilometer pilgrimage route, believers measure the land with their bodies, exchanging pain and exhaustion for inner peace.

3.3. The Synergistic Effect of Auxiliary Rituals: Spiritual Sustenance of Mani Piles and Wind Horse Flags

In addition to prostration, auxiliary rituals along the pilgrimage route such as piling mani stones and hanging wind horse flags are also important components of the construction of believers' spiritual world.

Mani stones are a unique cultural symbol of Tibet, regarded by believers as symbols of life and spirituality. "The themes and contents depicted on mani stone carvings are extremely rich. In the early period, they mainly included symbols reflecting Bon animism, such as dragons, fish, sun, moon, swastika symbols and various images of creatures with bird heads, animal bodies and human figures. Later, they mainly featured the Six-Syllable Mantra of Avalokiteshvara, Buddhist scriptures, aphorisms and prayers. In the long process of development and evolution, a large number of vivid and intuitive statues of Buddhist deities have emerged, such as Buddhas, bodhisattvas, devas, wisdom kings, spirits, patriarchs of various sects and other figures, as well as various Buddhist symbols, emblems and decorative patterns, forming a diverse system of categories and stylistic characteristics in terms of content and form." [2] In the film, whenever the pilgrimage group stops to rest, they pile up mani stones, with each stone carrying their wishes and piety. Mani piles are not only a medium for believers to communicate with the sacred world but also a condensation of their spiritual strength.

Wind horse flags are another important symbol of pilgrimage rituals. "Common contents on wind horse flags include images of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, stupas, mandalas, scriptures, mantras and other auspicious symbols, among which the image of a treasure horse carrying scriptures is the most prevalent. Generally,

around the treasure horse, there are often carved auspicious animals such as flying dragons, divine birds, fierce tigers and roaring lions, with various mantras and auspicious symbols arranged in an orderly manner among them. The ways of hanging can be divided into vertical pole type, hanging type, pagoda type, array type and so on. Hanging wind horse flags in different places is an ode to gods of all directions and a prayer for auspiciousness, peace and good harvests.” [2] Believers hang wind horse flags printed with scriptures on roadsides, mountain passes or mani piles. When the wind blows the flags, it is like reciting scriptures, which can accumulate merits for the believers. The rituals of piling mani stones and hanging wind horse flags complement prostration, together forming a complete system of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage rituals. These auxiliary rituals not only enrich the connotation of pilgrimage but also strengthen believers’ religious experience, enabling them to maintain spiritual motivation throughout the long pilgrimage journey.

4. Pilgrimage Motivations: The Diverse Expression of Spiritual Needs

4.1. Soul Belonging: The Spiritual Pursuit of Ultimate Concern

The motivations of Tibetan Buddhist believers for pilgrimage are diverse, with the most core one being the pursuit of soul belonging, namely the realization of ultimate concern. Yangpei, the elderly man in the film, was a devout Buddhist all his life, regarding the pilgrimage to Mount Kailash as his lifelong goal. In his spiritual world, pilgrimage was not only a religious obligation but also an essential path to achieve the sublimation of the soul. He believed that as long as he could reach Mount Kailash, even if he died on the pilgrimage route, his soul would return to the embrace of the Buddha. This persistent pursuit of soul belonging is the spiritual driving force for Tibetan Buddhist believers to transcend life and death.

Yangpei’s motivation for pilgrimage reflects the profound influence of the Tibetan Buddhist view of life and death on believers. Tibetan Buddhism holds that life and death are a process of reincarnation, and pilgrimage can help believers accumulate merits, break free from the suffering of reincarnation, and ultimately achieve the ultimate goal of Buddhahood and ascension to heaven. For Yangpei, every kowtow on the pilgrimage route paved the way for the destination of his soul. His passing away at the foot of Mount Kailash was not the end of life but the rebirth of the soul. This pursuit of ultimate concern constitutes the core pillar of believers’ spiritual world.

4.2. Self-Redemption: Dissolution of Guilt and Spiritual Purification

Some believers’ motivation for pilgrimage stems from a sense of inner guilt; they hope to achieve self-redemption and dissolve the shackles of their souls through pilgrimage rituals. Wangdu, the butcher, is a typical representative. As a butcher,

he made a living by slaughtering yaks, which are sacred symbols in Tibetan culture; meanwhile, he violated Buddhist precepts by drinking alcohol all year round. Such behaviors plunged him into deep guilt and anxiety. When he learned that Nyima Drakpa was organizing a pilgrimage group, he took the initiative to ask to join, hoping to atone for his sins through pilgrimage. On the pilgrimage route, Wangdu strictly abided by Buddhist precepts, gave up drinking, and devoted himself wholeheartedly to the prostration ritual. His transformation was reflected not only in his behavior but also in his psychology. When he encountered small insects while prostrating, he would take the initiative to stop and wait for them to pass. This reverence for life is an embodiment of his spiritual purification. Pilgrimage rituals became a path for Wangdu to dissolve his guilt, achieve self-redemption, help him reconstruct his spiritual world and gain inner peace.

4.3. Emotional Release: Alleviation of Psychological Pressure and Spiritual Comfort

In addition to soul belonging and self-redemption, emotional release and spiritual comfort are also important motivations for believers' pilgrimage.

Renqing Jinmei accidentally caused the death of two workers while building a house. In Tibetan belief, casualties at construction sites are not accidental events but punishments from the Buddha, which made him bear heavy psychological pressure. To alleviate his inner guilt, he embarked on the pilgrimage route with his wife and daughter, hoping to obtain comfort and achieve spiritual redemption by praying for the deceased. On the pilgrimage route, Renqing Jinmei was hit by falling rocks and injured his leg while protecting Zhazha. Faced with this predicament, he once doubted the fairness of fate: "When my grandfather was alive, he never did a single bad thing. My father never did a single bad thing either. And I really haven't done anything bad either, but I don't know why this happened... The three of us are here to kowtow and make a pilgrimage for the two deceased people, and also hope that more people can be safe and happy." Renqing Jinmei could not understand why he still had to suffer such misfortune. But with the comfort of Nyima Drakpa, he gradually realized the true meaning of pilgrimage—"Make the pilgrimage with a sincere heart, and keep the safety and happiness of all sentient beings in mind when kowtowing." This change of mindset enabled Renqing Jinmei to achieve emotional release and psychological adjustment. Pilgrimage rituals became an important way for him to alleviate psychological pressure and reconstruct his spiritual world.

Besides the devout pilgrimage journey, this big family also maintained the habit of chatting after dinner and reciting scriptures together before going to bed every day. In the relaxed conversations, they shared their respective experiences and inner confusion with each other. There were no rigid dogmas here, only patient listening and understanding. Finally, a gentle response to all topics was "Let us recite scriptures together". This daily sense of ritual brought a sense of steadiness to people's hearts.

4.4. Praying for Blessings and Auspiciousness: The Well-Being Aspirations of Family and All Sentient Beings

Some believers' motivation for pilgrimage stems from the aspiration for the well-being of their families and all sentient beings. Tsering Chodron, the pregnant woman, embarked on the pilgrimage route with her unborn child and gave birth to her son Dingtse Denda amid labor pains. She was rushed to the hospital and delivered the baby smoothly. Soon after, she returned to the group waiting at the original place. After a short rest, she continued the prostration pilgrimage with everyone else, while the baby slept quietly in the tractor that served as the logistics vehicle accompanying the group. Whenever the baby was hungry, they would stop to breastfeed him, and then resume their prostration journey. She hoped to pray for her newborn child through pilgrimage, blessing him with happiness and longevity.

Zhaxi Cuomu (Zhazha), the nine-year-old youngest daughter of Renqing Jinmei, chose to follow the adults on the pilgrimage instead of going to school at the age she should have. Her parents hoped to accumulate blessings for the child through pilgrimage and let her grow up under the influence of faith. The pilgrimage behaviors of these believers are not only related to individual spiritual pursuits but also carry responsibilities for their families and all sentient beings. Every kowtow they made on the pilgrimage route was filled with prayers for the safety of their families and the auspiciousness of all sentient beings. This aspiration for well-being has made pilgrimage rituals transcend individual spiritual practice, becoming a link connecting families, communities and the sacred world, and further enriching the connotation of believers' spiritual world.

On the way, they encountered an elderly couple who were also making a prostration pilgrimage. They had a donkey but refused to let it pull the cart. The elderly woman felt sorry for the donkey and only allowed it to pull the cart when the mountain road was too steep for her to handle. When they arrived at the Potala Palace, they planned to cut a lock of the donkey's hair and place it in front of the statue of Sakyamuni Buddha to pray for the donkey. The couple treated the donkey like a family member and shared joys and hardships with it. What we saw was not "others" opposed to modern civilization, but a concept of life that transcends utilitarianism—all sentient beings are equal, and all things have spirits.

5. Under the Impact of Modernity: Perseverance of Faith and Evolution of the Spiritual World

5.1. Collision between Tradition and Modernity: Symbols of Modern Civilization on the Pilgrimage Route

While presenting traditional pilgrimage rituals, the film *Paths of the Soul (Mount Kailash)* also shows the impact of modern civilization on traditional faith. The 318 National Highway along which the pilgrimage group traveled is a modern highway spanning the eastern, central and western parts of China, with large trucks and cars speeding past from time to time. The tractor driven by Nyima Drakpa is

printed with the words “Poverty Alleviation and Development”... In Lhasa, the pilgrimage group had to work at construction sites to raise travel expenses; the landlady of the inn invited them to perform 100,000 prostrations on her behalf in exchange for waiving their accommodation fees. This behavior of “faith substitution” reflects the infiltration of modern economic logic into traditional faith.

The emergence of these symbols of modern civilization has made traditional pilgrimage rituals no longer a closed spiritual practice but deeply interact with modern society. The young man washing his hair in a barbershop in Lhasa and flirting with girls—these scenes show the wavering of the younger generation between traditional faith and modern life. The collision between tradition and modernity has brought unprecedented challenges to the spiritual world of believers.

5.2. Perseverance of Faith: The Sanctity of Rituals and Spiritual Resolve

Faced with the impact of modernity, the believers in the film still adhere to traditional pilgrimage rituals, demonstrating strong spiritual resolve. They prostrate themselves with their whole bodies touching the ground, foreheads touching the earth, arms stretching forward, then stand up, take one step forward, and prostrate again. They kowtow thousands of times a day and walk more than ten kilometers. When encountering snowstorms, they kowtow in the wind and snow; when encountering puddles, they crawl in the mud. Their palms are worn out, their knees are scabbed, their clothes are torn, and their shoes are replaced one pair after another. Snowstorms, mud, altitude sickness, sudden car accidents... these are the realities they face daily.

After Renqing Jinmei was hit by falling rocks and injured his leg, the entire group decided to wait for his injury to heal before continuing the journey. Soon after, their tractor was hit and overturned by a pickup truck, with the front of the tractor severely damaged. Fortunately, the driver only suffered minor injuries. However, after learning about the situation, they found out that the other driver had made a driving mistake while rushing to send a patient to the hospital. So they generously let him go without claiming any compensation, telling him to hurry to the hospital. Due to the severe damage to the tractor’s front and the remote location of the repair shop, the men joined forces to pull the cart forward. They originally thought this would delay the journey, but after pulling the supply cart for a certain distance, they did not hesitate to turn back and make up for the prostrations they had missed, ensuring that every step was not perfunctory. They repeated this process until they successfully reached their destination. This adherence to rituals reflects the believers’ piety to their faith.

After arriving in Lhasa, the pilgrimage group ran out of money. The landlady of the inn where they stayed was unable to perform the 100,000 prostrations suggested by the lama due to poor health, so she proposed: let the group complete the 100,000 prostrations on her behalf in exchange for waiving all their accommodation fees (the group stayed here for about two months). Faced with the landlady’s

request for proxy prostrations, everyone readily agreed, regarding it as a sacred entrustment. Then they divided the work: during the day, the men went out to do odd jobs (car washing, working at construction sites, etc.) to save money for the trip to Mount Kailash; the women were responsible for laundry, cooking and logistics in the inn. Late at night, everyone went to the vicinity of Barkhor Street and Jokhang Temple to piously perform prostrations on behalf of the landlady, rain or shine. They completed the 100,000 prostrations meticulously, fulfilling their promise to the landlady and practicing their own faith. Finally, they saved enough money to continue their pilgrimage to Mount Kailash.

When the group reached Mount Kailash, Uncle Yangpei, who had been leading everyone in reciting scriptures during the journey, passed away in his sleep. Nyima Drakpa calmly handled his funeral affairs and led the group to continue their pilgrimage. Along the way, they experienced the alternation of the four seasons. Whether facing warm sunshine or the invasion of wind and snow, their pilgrimage journey never stopped.

5.3. Evolution of the Spiritual World: The Trend of Secularization and Dailyization of Faith

Although believers adhere to traditional pilgrimage rituals, the impact of modernity has still prompted subtle evolution in their spiritual world. During their work in Lhasa, the believers took off their pilgrimage clothes and returned to the state of ordinary people: young people fell in love, and children played and laughed. This switching of states reflects the gradual integration of faith and secular life.

On the pilgrimage route, Zhaxi Cuomu (Zhazha) caught a cold and had a headache. The fellow travelers suggested that she stop kowtowing and go to the town ahead to buy medicine. But her mother held her and comforted her: “No, let her kowtow. Kowtowing broadens one’s horizons”, and promised to buy medicine when they passed a pharmacy. For pilgrims, prostration is not only a form of faith but also a way to gain knowledge and experience. On the pilgrimage route, under the encouragement and care of her mother, the little girl learned to persevere. Although Zhazha’s parents rarely spoke in the film, their silent pilgrimage journey and the various ordinary moments they experienced in daily life became valuable resources for her learning. She witnessed how her parents faced birth, old age, illness and death with calmness and composure, and how they dealt with various challenges in life wisely. Whether it was repairing a broken cart, working hard to raise funds when short of money, or reciprocating kindness with kindness when encountering the goodwill of others, she witnessed it all and was deeply influenced. These vivid experiences are undoubtedly more profound than knowledge from books, giving her endless insights and enlightenment.

The emergence of the “faith substitution” behavior also indicates the trend of secularization of traditional faith. Unable to make the pilgrimage in person due to poor health, the inn landlady paid others to perform prostrations on her behalf. This behavior links faith with money, to a certain extent diluting the sanctity of

traditional pilgrimage rituals. After being exposed to modern life, the younger generation may also change their ways of expressing faith. Traditional prostration pilgrimages may gradually evolve into more diverse forms of spiritual practice.

Based on the data collected from interviews with 150 Tibetan pilgrims (75 urban residents and 75 agro-pastoral nomads; including 18 children, 22 adolescents, 34 young adults, 40 middle-aged adults, and 36 elderly people), Zhao Xingmin analyzed the main types of stressors faced by Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims during their religious pilgrimage (the stress of pilgrimage initiation, the stress during the pilgrimage journey, and the stress after the completion of pilgrimage). The study found that: “1) The psychological stress of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims is mainly manifested in two categories: one is religious belief stress, and the other is life and survival stress. The former includes three aspects: the sense of original sin, the consciousness of reincarnation, and religious and cultural experience; the latter consists of three types: deprivation, loss, and anticipation. 2) During the pilgrimage, the pilgrims’ stress mainly stems from three aspects: the harsh natural environment, economic shortage, and physical health issues. 3) There are differences in the psychological stress of pilgrims of different age groups.” [7]

5.4. The Future of Faith: The Path of Integration between Tradition and Modernity

At the end of the film, the pilgrimage group continues to move forward at the foot of Mount Kailash, with the snow-capped mountains in the distance shining brightly under the sunlight. This open ending implies the future direction of traditional faith in modern society—it is not a binary opposition of either/or, but a path of integration between tradition and modernity.

As a cultural heritage, the sanctity and spiritual value of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage rituals will not disappear due to the impact of modernity. On the contrary, in the interaction with modern society, faith may exist in a more daily and secular way. The younger generation may adopt more diverse ways to practice their faith while retaining the core of their beliefs, such as disseminating religious culture through the internet and participating in public welfare activities to accumulate merits. This integration can not only sustain the vitality of traditional faith but also enable it to adapt to the development needs of modern society, injecting new vitality into the spiritual world of believers.

6. Conclusion

Through recording the pilgrimage journey of an ordinary Tibetan group, the film *Paths of the Soul (Mount Kailash)* demonstrates the complete process of how Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage rituals construct the spiritual world of believers. Mount Kailash, as the sacred site, serves as the spiritual home for believers, providing them with a sense of security and fulfillment; ritual behaviors such as prostration, piling mani stones and hanging wind horse flags are the practical paths for believers to achieve spiritual cultivation and purification; the diverse motivations for pilgrim-

age reflect believers' spiritual needs for soul belonging, self-redemption, emotional release and well-being aspirations; and the impact of modernity has prompted believers to uphold traditional faith while promoting the evolution of their spiritual world.

Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage rituals are not abstract spiritual activities divorced from life but practical processes closely connected with the daily lives of believers. They construct the spiritual world of believers, shape their values and views on life and death, enabling them to maintain inner peace and resolve when facing sufferings and difficulties. In modern society, the collision and integration between traditional faith and modern civilization not only bring challenges to the development of Tibetan Buddhism but also provide new opportunities.

From a broader perspective, the faith and rituals presented in *Paths of the Soul (Mount Kailash)* transcend the scope of religion and possess universal philosophical significance. The perseverance of "doing one thing well in a lifetime" and the spiritual attitude of "focusing on the process rather than the result" depicted in the film provide spiritual enlightenment for modern people. In this era of anxiety and impetuosity, the spiritual world of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims, like the snow on the summit of Mount Kailash, is pure and firm, pointing out a path of returning to the soul for lost modern people.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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