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Grasslands as transitional spaces of play: Mongol children’s reimagination of the world in cinematic representation

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ABSTRACT
This article examines children’s geographies in cinematic representation. It argues that cinematic landscape that intimates what D. W. Winnicott conceives as ‘transitional space’ contributes to a cinematic rendering of the otherness of childhood. Taking the Chinese movie Mongolian Ping-Pong (2005, dir. Ning Hao) as a case study, this article illustrates how the cinematic space of the grasslands is transformed into multiple transitional spaces of play for the Mongol child protagonists owing to the filmmaker’s employment of cinematic landscape, while a ping-pong ball discovered by one of the children becomes their ‘transitional object’. In transitional spaces, the children safely and creatively manipulate cultural resources of diverse scales to understand the social-cultural identity of the ball. Consequently, their unique vision of the world unfolds. The filmmaker’s cinematic treatment reveals his celebration of the children’s creativity. He sympathises that they cannot escape from acculturation once they start formal schooling in a Han-dominated society.

Introduction
At the end of the last century, some geographers made conscious attempts to link geography with film studies (Zonn 1984; Aitken 1991; Aitken and Zonn 1994). In the new millennium, film geography, as an interdisciplinary research area that ‘links the spatiality of cinema with the social and cultural geographies of everyday life’ (Lukinbeal and Zimmermann 2006, 316), continues to gain momentum (Cresswell and Dixon 2002; Craine and Aitken 2004; Curti 2008, 2009). While landscape, space, mobility, scale, and network are all key concepts under scrutiny by film geography (Aitken and Dixon 2006), landscape is considered ‘central in the formation of cinematic space’ owing to the property it shares with film of underlining ‘vision and perception for their very definition’ (Lukinbeal 2005, 3). Cinematic landscape, ‘a filmic representation of an actual or imagined environment viewed by a spectator’ (Hopkins 1994, 49), is highly regarded by film and cultural critics as well. By providing a full view of the character-environment interaction, cinematic landscape facilitates character construction and cinematic expression of various meanings, affect, sentiment, and imagination (Harper and Rayner 2010).

While attention to screen representation of children’s geographies is rather recent and sporadic (Nicholson 2001; Jones 2007, 2013; Lury 2010), the dialectically constitutive relationship between ‘lived’ childhoods and ‘imaginative’ childhoods has been fully recognised (Jones 2000, 30). This article takes cinematic landscape as a cinematic version of children’s geographies and explores an intriguing question raised by children’s geographer Owain Jones, ‘how film can show the child[‘s] body in motion and in relation to place and landscape’, which is ‘critical to its possible witnessing
of child otherness in action (2013, 8, original emphasis). This article argues that cinematic landscape, when employed to insinuate what D. W. Winnicott (1971) configures as ‘transitional space’ contributes to cinematic exhibition of ‘child otherness’.

Transitional space, which is interchangeably termed by Winnicott (1971) as ‘an intermediate state’, ‘an intermediate area of experiencing’, or ‘potential space’ (3, 2, 53, original emphasis), is the ‘third area’ (102) of human life contrasted with ‘inner reality’ (2) and the actual world. Winnicott (1971) defines it as ‘illusory experience’ (3) situated ‘on the theoretical line between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived’ (50). As the film medium shares with transitional space the property of being illusory and prompts the audience to make inferences about a character’s feelings and emotions based on frame composition, shot combination, or other cinematic devices, I suggest that film, particularly with cinematic landscape, is capable of exhibiting transitional space. On the other hand, transitional space is only ‘allowed’ to the infant and the child, or in art, religion, and philosophy, as ‘imaginative living’ or ‘creative scientific work’, but not as normal adult life (Winnicott 1971, 3, 14). Thus, it is integral to the world of children that is wild, strange, different, and separate from the world of adults – ‘the otherness of childhood’ as set out by Jones (2002, 2007, 2013).

In this article, I take Mongolian Ping-Pong (2005, dir. Ning Hao), a Chinese movie set in Inner Mongolia about Mongol children, as a case study. I start with a brief introduction to real-life geographies and cinematic representation of Mongol children in China. I then set up my theoretical framework, followed by a detailed reading of key geographies of the Mongol children in the movie.

**Mongol children’s geographies in life and on screen**

Inner Mongolia is situated in the north of mainland China. It is an area inhabited by Mongols for centuries. Historically, although Mongols founded the nation-wide Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), they have been subject to the rulings of Han and Manchus ever since. After the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, Inner Mongolia became one of the five ethnic autonomous regions in the Han-dominated nation. To its north, Inner Mongolia borders Mongolia and Russia; to its south, it is close to Beijing, the nation’s capital. Yet the world-famous Great Wall of China symbolically marks the boundary between Han civilisation and northern nomads (Williams 2002). In the current era, while grasslands remain a dominant landscape in the region (Wu et al. 2015), an increasing number of towns have emerged owing to China’s modernisation and urbanisation processes. More urban Mongols live in the region than herdsmen (Bulag 2003). Moreover, Han settlers far outnumber Mongols because of waves of Han migrants under the government policy of ‘constructing the frontier’ (Williams 2002, 65).

This geo-political situation of Inner Mongolia has profound impacts on the life of Mongol children in the region. For example, because of the expansive, sparsely populated grasslands and the reduced population of Mongol children as a result of China’s family plan policy, few childcare facilities or preschool programmes are available to the Mongol children in pastoral areas (Si 2012). While their parents are busy making a living, these children roam the open spaces doing chores or playing without parental supervision. Like rural children in other developing countries (Katz 1994; Punch 2000), they are good at merging work and leisure so that ‘their work is also fun and allows them the social freedom to play’ (Punch 2000, 57). Only when they reach school age will they migrate to neighbouring towns to receive formal education. Studying alongside predominantly Han children, these Mongol children’s school education predicates a process of cultural assimilation fraught with challenges (Li 2005).

So far, few feature films have focused on this group of Mongol children and reflected on their early childhood on the grasslands and later transition to urban space. For the international audience, the most well-known movie depicting Mongol children on the grasslands is probably The Cave of the Yellow Dog (2005, dir. Byambasuren Davaa), a coproduction of Mongolia and Germany on the Mongol children in Mongolia (Macnab 2006). In Chinese cinema, despite many movies set in Inner
Mongolia, few feature Mongol children as leading characters. During Mao’s socialist era, the animation *Caoyuan yingxiong xiao jiemei/Two Little Heroic Sisters on the Grasslands* (1965) was the only production centring on Mongol children. Based on a real event with ideological manipulation (Bulag 1999), the animation tells the story of two Mongol sisters heroically protecting the sheep of their commune against a fierce storm under the call of Chairman Mao. In post-socialist China, despite less political imperatives, Mongol children remain on the margin of the screen, acting as silent witnesses to the transformations in adult life. They did not become protagonists until the 2000s. *Mongolian Ping-Pong* is probably the most significant Chinese movie representing the Mongol children.

The movie tells the story of a seven-year-old Mongol boy, Bilike, who finds a white plastic ball floating down a creek on the Inner Mongolian grasslands. Not knowing what the object is, Bilike and his friends, Dawa and Erguotou, embark on a quest to identify it. They discover through access to media that the ball is a ping-pong ball, a ‘national ball’, and they logically decide to return the ball to the nation. However, their adventure through the Gobi Desert ends in failure. Soon afterwards, Bilike leaves for town to attend a primary school. The film ends at the moment when Bilike opens the door of a school stadium and discovers the truth about the ball. Much of the film features the grasslands prominently in which the three protagonists move freely and play independently. Andrea Barnes (2007, n.p.) states in a review that the film’s charm lies in ‘watching these boys in early childhood, living with extraordinary freedom and safety and able to embark fearlessly on childhood adventures’.

This article examines the children’s play on the grasslands in cinematic representation. Drawing on concepts of transitional space, transitional objects, and the otherness of childhood, it claims that the cinematic space of the grasslands plays a significant role in constructing transitional spaces of play for the Mongol children, while the ping-pong ball serves as their transitional object. The transitional spaces are created because the filmmaker employs cinematic landscapes to unveil the delicate interactions between the children’s subjective world and the objective world. Significantly, these spaces provide the children with safe environments to experiment with a diversity of cultural practices and traditions, and encourage their creative understanding of the ball and the world. Consequently, the otherness of childhood is exhibited on screen.

**The transitional space of play, the transitional object, and the otherness of childhood**

Winnicott (1971) asserts that a child’s life is ‘an example of creative living’ (101), and play is an essential part of this. With regard to what constitutes play, Winnicott states that ‘playing has a place and a time’ (41, original emphasis). Here, the ‘place’ refers to transitional space specifically, which is neither purely psychic reality nor fully recognised world but a psychological state that turns play into ‘a creative experience’ (50).

Transitional space is further developed by Aitken and Herman as ‘an interplay between the internal and the external’, and ‘the psychic environment within which interpretations are formed and used’ (1997, 74). They summarise three characteristics of transitional space. It is where children experiment with their culture and environment. It is a safe space for children’s experimentation, immune from the consequences of adult society. Most importantly, the space allows children to incorporate part of their inner selves into their understanding of the external world. Thus, it is a psychic environment in which meanings are open for negotiations, and creative interpretations are encouraged. To facilitate the creation of transitional space, researchers suggest that children might as well be engaged in a type of free play or ‘thick play’ (Aitken 2001). The play should be ‘child-initiated’, and ‘spontaneous and voluntary’ (Holt et al. 2015, 73), to allow for ‘unmitigated potential, creativity and imagination’ (Aitken 2001, 177).

The children in *Mongolian Ping-Pong* apparently enjoy the privilege of ‘thick play’. Their play is independent and unsupervised. When they play, the grasslands are turned into many transitional spaces in which they manipulate cultural resources of diverse scales to promote their understanding of the world. Creativity and imagination are deployed in their interpretations, as this article will demonstrate.
Play also requires something to play with. Winnicott (1971) names the ‘something’ a ‘transitional object’. It can be a teddy, a doll, a hard toy, a blanket, or the mother. He lists seven ‘special qualities’ in a child’s relationship with his or her transitional object (5). In particular, he highlights a paradox in this child-object relationship as indicated in the first quality: the child ‘assumes rights over the object’, but ‘some abrogation of omnipotence is a feature from the start’ (5). In Winnicott’s view, an infant starts to recognise an object/the mother as ‘not-me’ through its ‘destructive drive’ (93). Because the child cannot annihilate the object, he or she is forced to form a new relationship with it. It is through this relationality that the child is changed but so too is the object. This idea has influenced emotional geographies (Bondi 2005), media studies (Curti, Aitken, and Bosco 2016), and social sciences (Berlant 2016). A central argument of the British object-relations tradition of psychoanalysis is that human beings ‘develop in a matrix of relationship’ and ‘first and foremost [are] seeker[s] not of pleasure but of relationship[s]’ (Gomez 2017, 4).

In Mongolian Ping-Pong, the ball discovered by Bilike is the children’s transitional object. They cannot annihilate it and therefore have to confront it and relate to it. The children’s quest for the ball’s identity (its physical attributes and social-cultural meanings) is their act of playing with the ball. In the process, the children are changed in terms of their vison of the world. The ball is also changed in terms of its assumed identity in the eyes of the children and the consequences acted upon it. The children’s relationship with the ball conforms to the qualities in Winnicott’s list.

By transforming the grasslands into transitional spaces of play and the ping-pong ball into a transitional object, the filmmaker of Mongolian Ping-Pong manages to uncover the unique world of childhood at work on screen. The children’s quest undertaken in various geographies of the grasslands echoes Jones’s remark that the otherness of childhood is conducted ‘within adult orders, spaces and systems’ but seeks to ‘build their own spatialities’ in ways that are not ‘easily knowable by adults’ (2013, 4). The otherness of ethnic minority children doubles. Their world is not only separate from the world of ethnic minority adults but also from the world of the Han Chinese. While the social-cultural identity of a ping-pong ball is a common sense to the Han Chinese, that knowledge is not there, a priori, for ethnic minority children.

A ping-pong ball, in the dominant Chinese discourse, is more than a ball used for playing table tennis. It is associated with a sport that has been acclaimed as a ‘national sport’ in China since the 1960s because of the national pride generated by Chinese athletes in international games, the game’s great popularity among the masses, and its political influence as exemplified by ‘ping-pong diplomacy’, such as the establishment of a formal relationship between China and the United States in 1972 (Chen 2009).

While table tennis is famous in the Han-dominated nation, ethnic minority children may not possess this knowledge owing to their physical location and social environment. When the Mongol children in Mongolian Ping-Pong first lay hands on a ping-pong ball without any knowledge of table tennis, the ball is no more than a small light plastic white ball. This is the same with a Pokémon card or a Harry Potter wand, which are no more than a paper card or a stick to those who are unaware of their sociocultural meanings (Horton 2010). Until the very end of the film, the children have not identified the difference between a ping-pong ball and its social-cultural identity as a ‘national sport’.

In the next section, I explain in detail how the grasslands are turned into the children’s transitional spaces of play and how the ball shapes their understanding of the world as a transitional object. I focus on a few geographies on the grasslands and highlight cinematic landscapes, as a vehicle to unveil the dynamic interactions between the children and their environments.

The grasslands

Dawa’s home

Dawa’s home near a creek features prominently in the film. As nomadic herders, Dawa’s family have just arrived at the area in the opening credits. This location becomes a key geography where several
transitional spaces are created. In particular, the film highlights the moment when Bilike spots the ball in the creek.

While fetching water for Dawa’s father, Bilike suddenly stands still and stares at something off-screen. An ensuing long static shot reveals a tiny white object floating down the creek before him. A close shot shows the object is a ball. Then, in a carefully framed high-angle shot, the ball passes through the reflection of Bilike in the water. When Bilike puts down his pail and walks into the creek after a sustained moment of standing motionless, a close shot is edited in focusing on his silent gaze while the ball is kept offscreen. This shot is then cut directly to a view of the three children squatting on the grass and staring at the ball floating on a pail of water.

In this sequence, transitional space is created through a series of gazes instead of actions. An action is often a result of a decision, indicating a temporary resolution of thoughts, while a silent gaze implies concurrent thinking processes that have not been sorted out. Bilike’s ‘inaction’ and his silent gazes signify the emergence of transitional space, while the shot on the ball floating over Bilike’s shadow graphically illustrates the essence of a transitional space: a space of in-between, a space of interaction between the internal (embodied in Bilike’s shadow), and the external (the ball).

The three children later conduct a primary investigation into the ball’s physical attributes. They undertake a type of sensorimotor play (Änggård 2016, 77), making direct communication with the object through their bodies. In the process, transitional spaces are also created. The investigation starts with Dawa pressing the ball down with a finger under the curious gaze of all the children only to find that the ball rebounds and keeps floating. Erguotou grabs the ball and stands up. He stares at the ball while turning it in his hands. The other two children stand up accordingly. When Erguotou starts to knock the ball against his teeth, Dawa grabs the ball and scratches it with his fingers. Erguotou soon regains the ball and starts to lick it with his tongue. While he licks, Dawa leans his cheek on one hand, looking puzzled and seemingly thinking hard. He takes back the ball and starts to lick it himself. Then a static long shot frames the children engaging in a discussion on the ball’s identity in the milieu of the grasslands. At the end of their discussion, the children all turn their heads in the direction of the camera. Their action is followed by a landscape shot of the creek, which ends the sequence.

The children’s eagerness to communicate with the ball with hands, teeth, nails, and tongues resembles a child’s destructive impulse with an object in the early stage. Because the ball survives the children’s ‘instinctual loving’, ‘hating’, or ‘pure aggression’, as in Winnicott’s description of a child’s relationship with a transitional object (1971, 5), the ball becomes the children’s transitional object. There is no ‘anger in the destruction of the object’, as Winnicott stresses, but ‘joy at the object’s survival’ (1971, 93). Transitional spaces are created at the moment when each of the children is watching and thinking silently, while their peers are handling and experimenting with the ball.

Their subsequent discussion in the static long shot reveals the result of their thinking. Meanwhile, their conversation gives rise to another transitional space when all three of them turn their eyes to the creek offscreen. This occurs in the context that their discussion guides them to an ethnic tale they heard about the creek and gods living in its upper reaches. They suspect that the ball may be the gods’ treasure. In the progression from a former moment of transitional space to the latter one, the environment of the grasslands shifts from being non-relevant to essential. The whole sequence illustrates how the children aptly employ both their bodies and cultural resources, especially environmental factors, to enhance their understanding of the ball.

Interestingly, the children’s investigation conducted in Dawa’s ‘home range’ (Moore 1986, 17–18) has not been interrupted by Dawa’s parents. The children take time to experiment with the ball, while the film also takes time to showcase their exploration. It appears that a complete, independent world of the children is presented on screen. Later in the film when Bilike’s father is also interested in the ball, his wife laughs at him for acting like a child. When both of them dismiss the ball as insignificant, the quest for the ball’s identity legitimately becomes the children’s enterprise. The film continues to show the otherness of childhood through the children’s subsequent exploration, much of which is carried out on a stone heap – a geography exclusive to them.
The stone heap

The stone heap repeatedly appears in the film. Comprised of huge stones of different sizes and shapes, the heap is an ideal location for both prospects and hideouts. However, apart from that, it possesses no utility because of its isolation. While such a location can easily be neglected by adults, the three protagonists have practically ‘colonised’ (Ward 1978) the place to serve their own purposes. As the film shows, the children play games, drink wine, look out, chat, sleep, and tease in this location. The filmmaker also constructs transitional spaces in this location to showcase the creative experiences of the children’s play.

For example, when the children finish their enquiry about the ball with local lamas, they have a brief discussion on what the lamas said about the ball on the stone heap. The film shows Erguotou and Dawa playing a game with goat joints. When they play, one of them says, ‘Lamas are the closest to gods! If lamas don’t know, it can’t be gods’ treasure.’ The other replies, ‘Young lamas don’t know. Old lamas said it will glow if you have faith.’ At the end of their conversation, the camera cuts to Bilike who is sitting alone a few steps away on the edge of a huge stone, looking ahead with a telescope away from the camera. Without putting down his telescope, he cuts in, ‘So let’s go and pray!’ When Erguotou expresses his reluctance from ofscreen owing to the approaching dusk, Bilike puts down his telescope and sits quietly for a moment before the film cuts to the scene of aobao – a site of worship for Mongols.

Transitional space is created when the film shows Bilike sitting apart in silent observation. Bilike’s personality (he does not say much but observes and meditates) contributes to the film’s construction of transitional spaces. It seems that transitional space, as a psychic environment in which a child interprets the external world with a strong sense of subjectivity and self-consciousness, is more likely to happen to an introverted child. Moreover, among the three leading child characters, Bilike is key. He is the child who discovers the ball and thus claims rights over the ball against Dawa and Erguotou; the ball is more a transitional object to him than to his friends. He is also the mastermind behind a series of experiments on the ball. This reflects a key quality in a child’s relationship with a transitional object – ‘it must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own’ (Winnicott 1971, 5). In a word, it must have some use. Bilike’s immediate follow-up to his friends’ comments is not based on a solid religious belief but an eagerness to find out the ball’s identity – its function(s). While Bilike sits away, an unimpeded vision of the grasslands afforded by the stone heap symbolises a thinking space in which Bilike reflects on how he might use the ball.

Another transitional space created on the stone heap occurs when the children discuss what the ‘national ball’ is and where the nation is. Previously, a film projectionist at a state-sponsored film carnival held on the grasslands had told them that the ball is a ping-pong ball, but they mistook its function as that of a golf ball shown in a movie. Seeing no use in it, Bilike dropped the ball into a rat hole in despair. When the children later learn that the ball is a ‘national ball’ from a television newly purchased by Dawa’s family, they retrieve the ball and excitedly pass it around on the stone heap. In particular, the shift of scenes starts with a close shot of Bilike delightedly examining the ball under his telescope. Evidently, the children, especially Bilike, are emotionally attached to the ball. Their moods are changeable and largely shaped by the type of information they obtain about the ball. This corresponds to Winnicott’s description of the child-object relationship, ‘The object is affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated’ (1971, 5).

While the children learn that the ball is a ‘national ball’, they find it difficult to comprehend both its literal meaning and its symbolic meaning. Owing to the poor electrical signals of the television, the children can only hear a sports programme say, ‘ping-pong is a strong sport … of our nation … and ping-pong is regarded as our national ball (game)’, without seeing any images on screen. They cannot believe the ball can be used to play a sport, because, as one of them says, ‘It’s too light to be a sport! Wrestling is the real sport!’ Then, what does a ‘national ball’ mean? The children discuss this question on the stone heap and come to three conclusions.
First, a ‘national ball’ is the ball of the nation. This is based on Dawa’s creative analogy between pandas as ‘national treasure’ (in his words) and the ball as a ‘national ball’. Second, they should return the ball to the nation because they have found what the nation lost. Third, they agree that the ball should be returned to Beijing, the heart of the nation. This conclusion is a follow-up to the analogy between pandas and the ball. They mistakenly assume pandas are living in Beijing, and thus the ball belongs to Beijing; but, ‘where is Beijing?’ When Dawa raises this question, the camera shifts from a position in front of Bilike to one behind him. From this perspective, the space of the grasslands in the distance is revealed. Within this shot, Bilike replies, ‘On the Golden Mountain, the place where the sun rises. My grandma told me that.’ Erguotou cuts in, ‘How can she know? She may be lying again!’ Their conversation ends with the children lowering their heads and resuming their play.

Erguotou’s comment is understandable as the children fail to see the ball glow in any circumstances while Bilike’s grandma asserts that the ball is a ‘glowing pearl’. Despite Erguotou’s disbelief in her words, the shift in the camera’s position reveals that there is significance in Bilike’s claim. The moment in which the children return to their silent play in a static frame after the shift of the camera’s position is a transitional space worthy of attention. This transitional space is set against a physical background where there is a hill in the distance echoing ‘the Golden Mountain’ in Bilike’s claim. An unrestrained view of the grasslands from the new perspective is probably symbolic of the psychic environment in which the children silently digest what they have discussed. A consequence of this moment of contemplation is the children’s decision to return the ball to Beijing by traversing the vast terrain of the grasslands, as implied by the landscape shot. Their decision is not expressed with words but hinted at through the filmmaker’s construction of the transitional space.

The Gobi Desert

The children’s biggest experiment with the ball occurs when they set out on a journey to Beijing. The whole adventure turns the grasslands into a transitional space in which the children play with both tradition and invention. The children are creative in the sense that they not only regard the ball as a precious possession of the nation, but also assume that Beijing is not far away and can be reached on horseback. In their imagination, Beijing lies right beyond a Gobi Desert they heard about. Their adventure is built on tradition in the sense that besides the traditional practice of ‘lost and found’, they may follow the loyalty of Mongols to the nation as manifested in the song ‘Upon the Golden Mountain of Beijing’ sung repeatedly by Bilike’s grandma.

The song was popular in socialist China. Its lyrics were originally written by a Tibetan artist to express his admiration for Chairman Mao for liberating Tibet; the song was later revised and used to convey the loyalty of not only Tibetans but also people of all ethnic groups to the leadership of Chairman Mao (Zhang 2013). The filmmaker’s construction of the Mongol children’s allegiance to the nation reveals the film’s ideological appropriateness in a Han-dominated nation-state. However, Bilike’s subsequent contemplation in the face of endless grasslands before stopping the journey creates a transitional space in which he re-evaluates the distance between Mongols and the nation.

This occurs when Bilike and Dawa have passed through a bleak Gobi Desert, while Erguotou has taken a different path due to insufficient fuel in his motor scooter. Facing hunger and exhaustion, Bilike and Dawa decide to make the last effort to find out whether the grasslands finish beyond a hill ahead. The film then focuses on Bilike’s silent gaze on the top of the hill. When Dawa also reaches the top, an unpeopled shot of the grasslands from their high-angle perspective unfolds. As both of them gaze at the distance, they talk about the consequence of their adventure – they assume no more than a beating by their parents, and they agree to find shelter before dusk to avoid wolves.

The prolonged gaze of Bilike at the endless grasslands creates a specific transitional space in which he reconsidered his relationship to Beijing. Although the endless grasslands do not change his perception of the ball as a treasure of the nation, he does realise that he cannot reach Beijing or get out of the grasslands on his own by riding a horse. The physical distance between him and Beijing, which
frustrates his loyalty to the nation, is probably symbolic and ironic. In the context of rapid economic development in contemporary Chinese cities, the geographical and economic marginality of the Mongols can only exacerbate their insignificance in national concerns. Thus, the children’s faithfulness becomes misguided, albeit sympathetic.

When Bilike and Dawa are rescued by the police with the help of Erguotou, they are informed that they have travelled in the wrong direction and almost reached Russia where a visa is needed for legal entry in the adult world. The otherness of their vision of the world is hinted at. Moreover, the consequences they face are more serious than what they expected, exposing the limit of children’s agency in creatively playing with cultural tradition. As Jones indicates, the otherness of childhood is subject to ‘violence, disdain and corruption within the adult world’ (2013, 5). These disruptive forces, as shown in Mongolian Ping-Pong, result in the children’s loss of both transitional space and transitional object, as well as their friendship.

When the children return from the adventure, Bilike’s mother disfigures the ball after beating him. After that, the image of the grasslands is devoid of the children’s active play and imbued with a gloomy atmosphere. Bilike is often shown sitting alone outside his family’s yurts. When Bilike discovers that Dawa has traded the ball in his temporary custody for an iron loop, he breaks up with him out of anger. After that, a long-distance shot frames Bilike sitting on a fence before a splendid view of a rainbow. Nonetheless, the horizontal panning of the shot to capture the full range of the rainbow intensifies the boy’s loneliness in the expansive environment. When the ball is finally retrieved, it is further cut into halves by Bilike’s father who intends to teach his son a lesson about sharing. His act completely destroys the hearts of the two children. Before Bilike reconciles with Dawa, Dawa’s family has moved to another area of the grasslands.

These episodes showcase the violence the adults impose on the children as well as the contradiction between the children’s world and the adults’ world. The series of distressing events also illustrates another special quality in a child’s relationship with a transitional object – ‘It must never change, unless changed by the infant’ (Winnicott 1971, 5). Because the damage to the ball is directly caused by the adults and the children are forced to react, the behaviours of the adults constitute what are in Winnicott’s eyes ‘persecutory elements’ (1971, 103) that jeopardise the creativity of transitional space.

Nonetheless, the children’s safe return from the adventure shows that the grasslands, as an overarching transitional space of play for the Mongol children, are still relatively safe and exempt from social obligations. However, Bilike’s subsequent experiences at a town school reveal that the children’s creative imagination of the world is soon to be challenged. The Han-dominated social-cultural discourse prescribes the only feasible way to understand the ball.

**Formal education in town and the ‘truth’**

Near the end of the film, Bilike leaves the grasslands for a town school. The filmmaker allocates ample screen time and space to unfold the journey he takes on the way to town. Despite the bright sunshine on the day of the trip, Bilike looks dismal. The sideboard frame of the truck in which he sits casts stripes of shadow on his Mongolian robe. He turns his head to the side and starts to look at the grasslands attentively as it gradually fades away. Then he turns his eyes to the rear of the truck. Following his vision, there is an image of a rusty door and its broken windows in the frame of the carriage, as well as a view of two earthy parallel tracks made out in the grasslands. This subjective shot is cut to a distant shot from the camera’s perspective that shows the truck running through the expansive grasslands. After that, the camera returns to Bilike’s perspective. It shows a view of an asphalt road in the direction of the truck’s movement. Then Bilike looks back, giving rise to a view of the road fading gradually into the distance. The whole journey does not contain any dialogue but is accompanied by non-diegetic singing of a Mongol man from the depths of his throat.

The entire journey on the road may be viewed as a transitional space in which Bilike silently observes the shift of the roads and ponders its implications for him. There is evident melancholy
in his eyes, which is reinforced by the background music. His emotion is probably due to his loss of transitional spaces of play and transitional objects (the ping-pong ball is conceivably not the only one but the last one) on the grasslands. However, he is also attracted by the asphalt road. Despite being ordinary in the eyes of modern viewers, for Bilike, the asphalt road is probably a spectacle that is significant in taking him out of the grasslands given his previous experiences in the Gobi Desert. The road metaphorically plays several of the dichotomies in his life: past and future, childhood and growth, home and school, rural and urban. Bilike’s lingering and meditative gaze at the road in two directions conveys the inevitable tension in these relationships.

What is also involved in these relationships is Bilike’s vision of the world. The road will open up a different way of thinking that shatters many of his presumptions and the imaginings produced on the grasslands, including the connotation of a ‘national ball’. School education plays a significant role in irreversibly ‘colonising’ (Gibbons 2002) a child’s creative mind with the dominant way of thinking. The so-called ‘scientific knowledge’ disseminated at school is socially ‘constructed’ instead of being ‘found’ or ‘proved’ (Haraway 1991). Power is implicated in the production of knowledge, which is essentially about ‘empowering the group who sees the world in that way and disabling the arguments of other groups’ (Crang 1998, 180). Thus, the road and Bilike’s melancholy on the road may be interpreted as a type of agony at the inevitable prospect of disappointment when Bilike discovers the truth about the ball in a Han-dominated society.

As the film represents, Bilike’s school is dominated by Han Chinese and Han ideologies. In an opening distant shot, the central landscapes of the school are two modern buildings – landmarks of modern education – and the national flag on the top of a pole. A crowd of students are sitting on a playground, watching some Mongolian dances and recitals performed on a stage. The film then focuses on Bilike sitting among a group of Mongol children dressed in either blue or pink robes according to gender. In the background of the shot are Han children wearing uniform jackets. Referring back to the opening shot, one sees that the number of Han students far exceeds that of Mongol students. The composition of the student population, coupled with the national flag and the entertaining role of the Mongol children on stage, epitomises the ethnic and political structure of the nation.

Sitting uncomfortably in the crowd, Bilike stands up and asks a nearby teacher for permission to go to the washroom. When he passes by the school’s stadium, he pauses in his steps outside the building and tries to peek in through the windows before he turns around to search for its entrance. The film ends with a close-up of Bilike’s face when he opens the door of the stadium. The shot is not followed by any image of ping-pong balls but accompanied by amplified sounds of many ping-pong balls hitting the ground from offscreen.

Bilike’s face (silent gaze) gives rise to the last transitional space in the film. Unlike previously on the grasslands, no discussion among peers or follow-up actions can be employed to infer what might be in his mind. Because the film ends here, it is left to the viewers to figure out how he might interpret what he perceives in the stadium. What is certain is that from this moment on, the ball as his transitional object is ‘allowed to be decathected’ (Winnicott 1971, 5). As Winnicott explains, the transitional object ‘loses meaning’ when ‘the transitional phenomena have become diffused’, such as in the case of spreading over ‘the whole cultural field’ (1971, 5). The ping-pong ball loses its transformative effect because its identity has been fixed by the mainstream culture.

Bilike has found out at the stadium how a ping-pong ball is used in a sport and will soon learn why it is labelled as a ‘national sport’ through school education. However, what is lost – perhaps more valuable and precious than this taken-for-granted knowledge and understanding – is the three children’s original quest for the ball’s identity in the many transitional spaces of play constructed on the grasslands because, as Winnicott (1971) highlights, that is creative living.

**Conclusion**

This article argues that cinematic landscape contributes to the construction of transitional space; coupled with the depiction of the child character’s relationship with a transitional object, the
cinematic landscape leads to the exhibition of the otherness of childhood on screen. In Mongolian Ping-Pong, the filmmaker has cinematically constructed many transitional spaces of play on the grasslands in which the Mongol children safely experiment with various cultural traditions and invest their creativity in their understanding of the ball and the world.

Noticeably, Mongolian Ping-Pong differs from empirical research as well as The Cave of the Yellow Dog in terms of its general omission of the labour in children’s life. What is highlighted instead are the children’s free play and a rather idyllic vision of rural childhood, although with its ending the film does reveal the life ‘behind the “façade” of idyll’ (Jones 2007, 178–179), raising issues of inequality and domination in response to social reality. Such cinematic treatment is of course traceable to the filmmaker’s own ‘ideas and ideals’ (Donald 2005, 23). Despite being a Han Chinese, the filmmaker shares with his child characters the endorsement of creativity. His next movie Fengkuang de shitou/ Crazy Stone (2006), a critical and commercial success, is characterised by the film’s unusual narrative.

Despite his personal intention, which is indeed common among film/media constructions of childhood by adults, the filmmaker deserves credit for empathetically presenting the otherness of childhood on screen. Cinematic landscape proves to be capable of unveiling the dynamic interaction between the child character’s inner world and the outside world. The audience can gain more insights into the unique world of childhood. They are prompted to rethink their attitude to children’s play in the direction of appreciating it as creative living in transitional space with transitional object.

Notes

1. Besides the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, there are the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Tibet Autonomous Region, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Altogether, there are 55 non-Han ethnic groups in China. They comprise less than ten per cent of the nation’s population but take up over 60 per cent of its territory, mostly in the north, south, and west (Wang 2004).
2. From the late 1970s to 2016, China implemented the single-child family policy. Although rural families could apply for a second child and ethnic minorities could enjoy even looser regulations, ethnic minorities seemed to refrain from having too many children because of the government’s successful propaganda on the benefit of fewer children (Yu 2008). Urga (1991, dir. Nikita Mikhailov), a Russia/France coproduction set in Inner Mongolia, touches on this issue.
3. ‘Lama’ is a term in Tibetan Buddhism, referring to a spiritual leader or by extension any respectable monk. As the majority of Mongols have converted to Tibetan Buddhism since the 16th century, lamas enjoy high socio-cultural status in Mongolian communities (Na 2006).
4. This and other English translations of dialogue in this article come from the English-Chinese bilingual subtitles of the movie. This translation hints at the potential confusion between the ‘ball’ and the ‘game’. In standard Chinese, both the sport of table tennis and the ball used in the sport are known as ‘ping-pong qiú’. Confusion can occur when linguistic translation is involved. It is possible that in Mongolian (the characters speak Mongolian in the movie), there are different words for ‘ball’ and ‘sport’, like in English. Thus, the children’s confusion is understandable.

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