

Remembering Pema Tseden as a Filmmaker

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Abstract: This essay counters the frequent assessment that *Old Dog* and *Tharlo* mark the high point of Pema Tseden's filmic career. Instead, it argues that his later films, such as *Jinpa* and *Balloon*, mark the beginnings of a second phase. Whereas his first phase emphasized social realism, journey films, and male protagonists, his second phase is characterized by the expression of character interiority through dreams, imagination sequences, memories and so forth, blurring the lines between reality and the imagined. Pema's early films countered both Hollywood and Chinese exotic images of Tibet with a quotidian modernizing Tibet from the Tibetan perspective. His later films convey the inner lives of Tibetans, and not just Tibetan men, but also Tibetan women.

Keywords: Pema Tseden, Amdo, cinematic career, new image of Tibet, inner worlds, female roles

As I write this in September 2023, several months have passed since I woke up one morning to the terrible news about the sudden death of Pema Tseden (པད་མ་ཚེ་བརྟན།, known in Chinese as 万玛才旦) at the age of only 53. I still cannot quite believe it. He performed the seemingly impossible feat of being loved and admired by Tibetans,

Chinese—including the Chinese authorities—and cinephiles the world over. His talents went beyond cinema. He was also known for his prolific output of short stories and novellas in both Chinese and Tibetan. But in this brief tribute, I want to focus on his films, because that is the area of his work that I am most familiar with. As is widely known, he was the first Tibetan filmmaker to work consistently inside the People's Republic of China, the first Tibetan graduate in directing from the famous Beijing Film Academy and the first PRC filmmaker to make films predominantly in the Tibetan language.

In the wake of Pema's death, I heard various conversations about his oeuvre. More than once, people expressed the belief that *Old Dog* (ཁྱི་གནམ།; 老狗, 2011) and *Tharlo* (རཱ་ལོ།; 塔洛, 2015) were his greatest works. At first, I agreed. But then, as I thought things over, I began to form a slightly different understanding. I have come to think that *Old Dog* and *Tharlo* indeed marked the culmination of the first phase of his aesthetic career. However, I have also come to believe that *Jinpa* (ལག་དམར།; 撞死了一只羊, 2018) and *Balloon* (དབུགས་མཁོ།; 气球, 2019) launched a new and equally exciting second phase. It is this argument that I will try to begin developing here. Sadly, if my argument holds up, it only underlines the magnitude of our loss.

So, what are these two phases that I am perceiving in Pema's film career? The first phase was marked by a realist impulse. When asked about why he wanted to make films, Pema often expressed a dissatisfaction with existing images of Tibet. Pema was born in 1969 into a herder's family in Guide County, Qinghai Province, which is outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region but part of the larger Tibetan cultural area and known in Tibetan as Amdo. He did not recognize his

Amdo in either the Shangri-la fantasies of Hollywood or the feudal theocracy of Mao-era Chinese films. The films of the first phase of his screen career are marked by the inscription of a different screen image of Tibet's physical and social space, with different motifs. This is an Amdo at once Tibetan and modernizing.

The films that I am arguing mark a second phase in Pema's career, *Jinpa* and *Balloon*, strike the viewer as different from his earlier realist work immediately, because both feature scenes of interior memory and imagination. One could say that with these films he launched a project of exploring the internal Tibetan world just as his earlier films explored the external world. Furthermore, his early films are, as I have argued elsewhere, road movies in which male characters traverse contemporary Tibet as though surveying their patrimony. Although he had already begun to create larger roles for women, in *Jinpa* and *Balloon*, female characters are as important as men.⁸⁰ Furthermore, not only do they have more significant speaking roles, but they are also among the characters whose subjective vision we share. Now let me try to flesh this argument out a bit more.

All of Pema's films are set in everyday and modern or

⁸⁰ Since writing this tribute, I have had a chance to see *Snow Leopard*. It does not continue the development of women characters or give us access to their interiority. The only female character is a quiet and subservient wife. However, what it does do is give us access to the interiority and visions of the snow leopard itself. So, while not as diverse in its gendered roles as *Jinpa* and *Balloon*, the film continues Pema's new emphasis on interiority and diversifies his range of characters out from the human world to other sentient beings. For my review of the film, see *Snow Leopard* (Pema Tseden, 2023): Beyond the Human-Animal Divide," <https://www.unicornscreening.com/media-and-blogs/snow-leopard-pema-tseden-2023-beyond-the-human-animal-divide>. 20 January 2023. [Shelly, I do not know if this should go into Works cited? I have not put it there]

contemporary Amdo settings. Chinese characters are few and far between. Examples include the man who wants to buy the Tibetan mastiff in *Old Dog*—ironically, played by a Tibetan actor—or the balloon seller at the end of *Balloon*. As well as all the main characters, all the figures who embody officialdom, such as the policemen in *Tharlo* and the doctors helping to enforce birth control policies in *Balloon*, are also Tibetans. Of course, depicting interactions between Chinese and Tibetans in detail and in a way that would be convincingly realistic and at the same time pass censorship in the PRC would be very difficult; the topic of relationships among the ethnic groups in China is very sensitive. However, when challenged at public events about the absence of Chinese in his films as not reflecting the reality of the Tibetan world today, I have heard Pema respond variously that his films are set in areas where Chinese migrants are rarely found and that precisely when they take place is not clear, meaning that the stories might predate the influx of ethnic Chinese. Whatever the reasons, their absence marks his films as representations of Tibet and contemporary Tibetan life and culture.

Pema's Tibet is far removed from the either denigrating or idealist exoticism he disliked so much in both other films made in China and foreign films. Instead of depictions of either nightmarish serfdom or Shangri-la mysticism, his Tibet is a contemporary environment marked by the steady arrival of modernity and frictions between it and established practices, including the religious customs of everyday life. In *The Silent Holy Stones* (ལྷིང་འཇགས་གྲི་མ་ཐེ་རྫོ་འབུམ།; 静静的嘛呢石, 2005), the mani stones stand in sharp contrast to the *Monkey King* VCD set that the little monk values so highly. In *The Search* (འཛོལ།; 寻找智美更登, 2009), the Drimé Kunden tale that the director wants to

stage a performance of is an ancient cultural text, but he drives around in an SUV to find the right actors. In *Old Dog*, the Tibetan mastiff is valued as a farm dog and almost part of the family by the father, but it is also valued as a fashionable commodity on the pet market. In *Tharlo*, the contrasts between the mountain life of the shepherd and the city life that leads to his ruin are clearly staged as a contrast between the old and the new. This focus on the vicissitudes and contradictions of modernization continues in what I am calling the second phase of his cinematic career. The eponymous Jinpa is a truck driver concerned about the soul of a sheep he accidentally runs over. *Balloon* intersects condoms and birth control with sky burials and reincarnation.

In all the films, travelling across the Tibetan landscape is an important narrative trope. However, they all also avoid the kind of swooping drone shots of the mountains that communicate otherworldly qualities in orientalizing films about Tibet. Instead, the protagonists travel by motorbike, truck, SUV, or whatever other vehicle makes sense, and the films are mostly shot from their point of view, immersing us in their daily experience rather than communicating some transcendent perspective by dwarfing them in the landscape. The shape of the journey tends to be circular, as in *The Search*, or back-and-forth, as in *The Silent Holy Stones*, *Old Dog*, and *Tharlo*. In this way, the films in the first phase map a lived territory that can perhaps also be understood as a patrimony, given that these protagonists are male. In the case of the back-and-forth movements, they mark an oscillation and a tension between older lifestyles and more modern ones: the monastery and the home with the television set in *The Silent Holy Stones*, the farm and the city in *Old Dog*, and the mountain pasture for the sheep and the town in *Tharlo*. In process, Pema inscribes a new image of Tibet.

If this first realist phase observes external and visible Tibet, his second phase begins exploring the inner worlds of Tibetans. This occurs first in *Jinpa*. The first half of the film is still in the realist mode. Jinpa is a truckdriver, so, in a sense this is another road movie. But after some opening shots that place the truck on the road in a windy and rainy landscape, we find ourselves in the cab of the truck listening to *O Sole Mio* with Jinpa, taking us into his headspace. When he picks up a hitchhiker, our focus is on the interactions between the two of them. This occurs on the same day Jinpa has accidentally run over a sheep, and when he gathers the hitchhiker is on the way to seek revenge for his father's murder, the possibility of a second death troubles him.

After he has dropped off the hitchhiker, consulted a lama about the soul of the sheep and spent the night with an old lover, Jinpa sets out to find the hitchhiker, who turns out to also be called Jinpa. Arriving at a tavern where Jinpa the hitchhiker was the day before, Jinpa the truck driver asks the innkeeper to tell him what happened. When she does so, a sort of flashback begins. But it is complicated by the presence in the flashback of the current customers of the inn. It becomes difficult to know whose memory we are watching, and whether it is the past or the past and present jumbled up. The boundaries between individual beings become as blurred as those between past and present, and between the two Jinpas.

Furthermore, the woman innkeeper initiates and anchors the flashback. Indeed, she is also part of blurred identities, so that it encompasses not only the two Jinpas but her as well. In the second half of the film, she is as significant as the two men who dominate the first half. And her triangulation of the situation inscribes a distanced,

perhaps questioning, perspective on the two men that suggests the position of the filmmaker and encourages us into a similar stance. Her role amplifies those of women in Pema's earlier films. Audience members had noticed that in his early films, women were onlookers or, as in the case of the actress who travels around with the men in the SUV in *The Search*, silent. When quizzed about this gender imbalance in public events, I often heard Pema give a pragmatic answer: historically, acting had not been seen as a respectable activity for Tibetan women and there was a shortage of Tibetan actresses who could take on speaking roles.

However, even in *The Search*, the actress's role is significant. Not only is her refusal to perform unless they can help her find her former boyfriend the trigger for the whole journey, but also her position as silent observer anchors the camerawork and helps us to observe the men in the car with some distance, even skepticism. By the time he made *Tharlo*, Pema had found a professional actor, Yangshik Tso to take on his first significant female speaking role. She had appeared previously in a minor role in *The Silent Holy Stones*, developed a singing career, and started acting in between. In *Tharlo*, she takes on the role of the barber Yangtso, who is also the femme fatale who leads Tharlo into ruin. Again, the film achieves a greater level of nuance and complication by anchoring a number of shots of *Tharlo* in the town with her perspective, encouraging us to distance ourselves from Tharlo a bit, even if it is unlikely that we align ourselves with her or identify with her, especially given what happens in the rest of the narrative.

The innkeeper's role in *Jinpa* continues Pema's transition from films with male protagonists to films with groups of protagonists,

including women. But it is *Balloon* that takes this tendency even further. The critical responses to *Jinpa* were mixed, especially to the second part. Perhaps because it was not what audiences had come to expect from Pema, many expressed both surprise and confusion. But I believe that *Balloon* builds on the new foundations that Pema had begun with *Jinpa*. It increases the number of significant speaking female roles to three, creates an ensemble cast of characters of both genders, narrates the story from multiple perspectives, and dives deeper into the intersubjective and subjective world of these characters with sequences that render their interiority through dreams, flashbacks, and other visions that communicate their emotional experience.

Balloon focuses on a Tibetan family that already has three boys, in accordance with the birth control policy that allowed minority ethnicities to have more than one child. However, they are not permitted a fourth. The title refers to the condoms that are part of their effort to prevent pregnancy, but which their youngest children mistake for toy balloons and keep stealing from under the pillow. The same actor who played the truck driver Jinpa in *Jinpa* (incidentally going by the name of Jinpa in real life) appears again as the husband in *Balloon*, Dargye. The three female roles are his wife, Drolkar, played by Sonam Wangmo, who played the innkeeper in *Jinpa*, her sister, played by Yangshik Tso from *Tharlo*, and her family planning doctor, played by Kangchen Tsering.



Actor Jinpa (left), Sonam Wangmo (right) rehearsing her lines in *Balloon*, under the guidance of language instructor Loden (middle), August 2018 @Françoise Robin

Where the wife tended to be silent and housebound in Pema's earliest films, in *Balloon*, Drolkar is making journeys on a motorbike back and forth between the farm and the town where the family planning clinic is. But, as in *Jinpa*, we do not spend so much time on the journey or focusing on the landscape and surroundings. Inevitably, Drolkar does get pregnant. Her husband is eager to keep the baby, thinking it must be the reincarnation of his recently deceased father. Drolkar is more pragmatic, knowing that they cannot afford the fines that would follow.

Dargye the husband has the one sustained interior vision in the film. This occurs after his father dies and on the dawn journey to cremate him—rather than the 'sky burial' with vultures so beloved of films that exoticize Tibet. Blurry reflections in puddles and eerie music

in the half-light capture someone walking upside down. Could it be his father's soul departing? When the camera lifts from the puddle and the figure is upright, it turns out to be Dargye's oldest son, Jamyang. This seeming rational explanation is undermined when Jamyang calls out after "grandfather."

However, it is Drolkar who invokes the interior world twice. First, she tells her husband about an odd dream she has concerning a barren ewe and the ram they borrowed to impregnate the ewes in their flock. This resonates strangely with her own situation. Second comes a blurry sequence, all in one long take, with her sister coming up behind her. It seems Drolkar is looking at her own reflection in a window, and panning round to say goodbye to her sister, who says she is dedicated to religion as she leaves. Although we never learn the details, it seems the sister has had a disastrous affair with a schoolteacher and author. Is this Drolkar's memory of her sister's first departure, or her departure now after her return visit?

Without giving away too many plot spoilers, the film traces a series of complicated interactions between the cold rationality of government policy and the moral obligations of Tibetan culture, communicated through the inner thoughts and imaginations of the characters. This is embodied most noticeably in the possibility that the fetus in Drolkar's womb could be the reincarnation of Dargye's father. With the parallel strands of the sister's story, the sons and the balloon-condoms, and the sheep that does not get pregnant, the film is an at turns humorous and deadly serious depiction of the lived emotions, imagination, and personal crises of contemporary Tibetan people as they grapple with modernity.

In retrospect, *Balloon* may be more multi-layered and nuanced than any other film Pema Tseden made. This achievement indicates that far from being a mistake or an aberration, *Jinpa* and *Balloon* had opened a new pathway towards a second career peak that Pema was well embarked on at the time of his tragic death. He had already completed one more film, *The Snow Leopard* (གསལ་མེད་; 雪豹, 2023) which we now eagerly await, more aware than ever that he had so much more to give us when his time was so cruelly cut short.

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