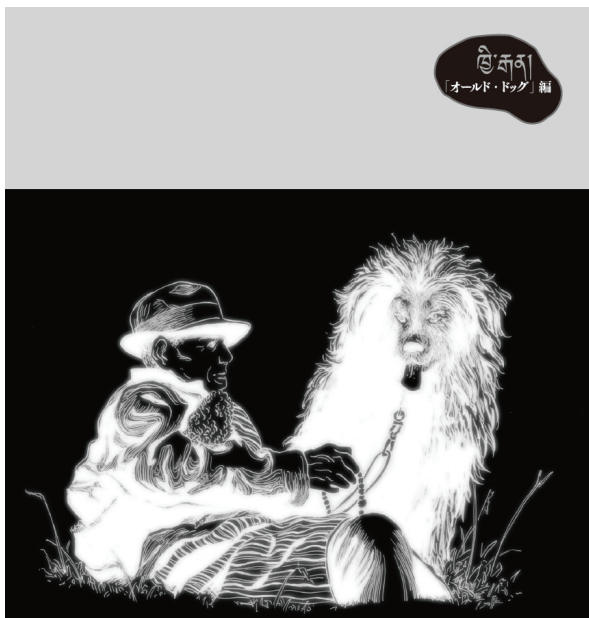


Two Red Balloons: Pema Tsenden and His Subjective Truths

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A scene from *Old Dog*, illustration by Kuranishi ©Sernya magazine

Abstract: This prose essay highlights Pema Tsenden's indispensable contribution to Tibetan cinema by foregrounding his films against the traditional depiction of Tibet in Western and Chinese imaginations. This is followed by brief thematic and formal analysis of his films.

Keywords: Tibetan cinema, subjective truth, Shangri-la, Hollywood, Chinese media, Pema Tseden

Some years ago, I interviewed an elderly Tibetan *ama-la* about her flight into exile for a documentary film. Through her responses, I got a general sense of the suffering people of her generation had endured. But when I tried to probe deeper for a more personal account, she became reticent. As a Tibetan, *ama-la*'s reluctance to talk about her personal suffering didn't surprise me. Putting others in the forefront and oneself in the background is considered good manners in our society. But what I was looking for in that documentary was a more personal, subjective truth rather than a general one, which is the case for most artistic creations. Through this perspective of subjective truth in art, I talk about the films of Pema Tseden in this essay.

One can say we Tibetans are a people victimized by history. And now we carry the heavy burden of telling the world our truth. It is a 'burden,' but we generally call it our duty. To this noble motivation, I want to raise some complications. It is important that in response to the Chinese distortion and revision of history, we must put our version of history forward or what we call in Tibetan 'spreading and raising awareness about the Tibetan cause'. Our cause is what we have worked on for years and are still working on. But art is not information, much less propaganda. Between the Chinese propaganda and our spreading of awareness is perhaps the neglected and somewhat lost voice of our artistic truth. Picking up this frail thread, I discuss the films of Pema Tseden.

Even though Tibetan cinema is relatively new, Tibet itself

is not completely new to the world of cinema. In broad terms, there existed the ‘Shangri-La’ Tibet in the West’s imagination and then the ‘feudal and barbaric’ Tibet as portrayed by our Chinese colonizers. Tibet as a Shangri-La can be seen in Hollywood movies as early as 1937 in *Lost Horizon* right down to 1997 in *Seven Years in Tibet*. The Chinese depictions of Tibet can vary from the early and downright propagandistic and film *Serfs* in 1963 to the more recent and romanticized *Kekexili* in 2004. Depicting the land and the people of Tibet with varying assumptions and accuracies, Western and Chinese films have continued to use well-known tropes and narratives to project breathless romanticism or pernicious propaganda.

What is the result of such projections? To answer concisely, the exaggerated projections of Tibet in films result in the loss of humanity of Tibetans. Instead of realistic portrayals, we are dealt with tiresome stereotypes or offensive caricatures. And because of the dominance of the western and Chinese media (Hollywood is far more pervasive), their ideas and tropes have influenced ordinary Tibetans as well as films made by Tibetans, who feel compelled to engage with these tropes to dismantle non-Tibetan ideas of Tibetan identity and sometimes, non-critically, internalise and perpetuate them as well. Keeping these points in mind, one can arrive at a critical assessment of Tibetan cinema. A filmmaker’s job is not to be the spokesperson of an establishment. They are also not in the business of disseminating information or correcting the ills of society. A personal truth, its search or envisioning—this is the starting of any artistic endeavour.

I have watched Pema Tseden’s early film *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005) on YouTube many times. Despite the subtitles in Chinese

and my scant grasp of the Amdo dialect, the film remains one of my favourites among Pema's works. There is something endearingly personal about the film and the gentle rhythm of life it depicts. It is a Tibetan film that is unapologetically itself and not trying to be something or tell something *to the world*. To me, this was very refreshing. By framing the story around a young monk's Losar (Tibetan for New Year) break at home—that is, a duration of time—Pema taps into the heart of what sets the art of cinema apart.

Then we come to *Old Dog* (2011), which I consider his best work. The film has a deceptive simplicity about its story and telling which is countered by its depth of meaning and scope for interpretation. The central conflict is established early on and gradually brought to a gut-wrenching, tragic resolution. It is impossible for any Tibetan to escape the deep emotional resonance this film brings about.

Tharlo (2015), *Jinpa* (2018), and *Balloon* (2019) are Pema Tseden's later works.⁸¹ In their themes, tones, and worldview, they are distinct from his early works. In *Tharlo* and *Balloon*, there is a sinister presence of an invisible antagonist which is the Chinese government. Although there are hardly any Chinese in his films, the forces of rapid change they have brought under the name of development and modernization are very much present. In the subtext of Pema's films, they are like the tentacle roots of a big tree. Pema's protagonists, like the eponymous Tharlo or Drolkar of *Balloon*, are tragic, solitary figures standing at the fault lines of these forced-upon tectonic shifts.

⁸¹ Of Pema Tseden's last two films, *Snow Leopard* (2023) has been screened in festivals while *Stranger* (forthcoming) is in post-production stage.

Thus, the world that emerges from these films is torn between the old and the new. Pema's sympathy obviously lies with the people who face this divide but their fate in his prognosis is a bleak one. This is a personal vision that I believe Pema arrived at in the course of his artistic career. Yet, in the final scene of *Balloon*, we see two red balloons flying up into the deep blue sky. I couldn't help but feel a tinge of wonder and optimism at this image. Perhaps this magical-realist twist was the start of a new artistic theme in his works.

Let us now look at some of the formal elements of his works. Two things that immediately strike us are his scant use of close-up shots and the slow editing. The deliberate distance that he maintains in his shots definitely corresponds to a distance the audience comes to keep with his characters. This distance complements his characters who are never verbose and always have a certain opacity about them. Pema is not the one to take us inside his characters' heads. This choice in framing his shots could also have been necessitated by the practical problem of having to work with largely non-professional actors.

In terms of editing his films, Pema Tseden is slow and sparse, sometimes deliberately so. To someone used to the fast-paced editing of commercial cinema, some of his long takes might be tedious to watch. But his stylistic choice is also an important aspect of his visual storytelling. Fast editing serves us a spectacle or a foregone conclusion on a platter whereas Pema's slow cinema extends an invitation. It requires us to accept and actively participate in his film. Let us look at an example: in *Old Dog* (spoilers ahead), the screen time between the old man refusing to sell the dog and his final desperate act of killing the animal is six minutes. Most of this duration consists of a single, silent scene of the man sitting and

smoking his pipe. The number of shots in these six minutes is six, making his shot a minute long on average. Now, the average shot length in films these days is about 2-3 seconds. So, why does Pema linger so long on his shots? More importantly, what effect does it have on the audience? I think this extended duration allows us to come to the realization of what the old man *might* be thinking about doing. This realization, the emotional response it evokes in us, is less from some visual spectacle than the time Pema allows for it through his editing.

Another effect of his slow editing and long takes is to allow time for something, which wasn't apparent initially, to emerge gradually. This emergent quality is not just a feature of his visual style but also his stories. In *Old Dog*, we initially think Gonpo is the protagonist, but it is his father who turns out to be the case. Similarly, in *Balloon*, we start with Dargye only to realize that it is his wife Drolkar who is at the film's center.

Thus, in both their form and content, Pema's films show a Tibetan artist from Tibet's artistic, aesthetic vision and philosophy. I am sure that in his characters and the world that they inhabit and face, many Tibetans would finally recognize themselves and appreciate the value of artistic truth. And by that very fact, his works also attain a universal value. One might call this the second coming of Tibetan cinema. With these thoughts, I remember the indelible legacy of Pema Tsedon.

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