

Tibet in Vision: In Memory of a Master Filmmaker—the Late Pema Tseden

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Abstract: This paper examines the significant impact of indigenous Tibetan filmmaker Pema Tseden within the context of contemporary media culture in the People's Republic of China. As an emblematic figure for his nuanced portrayal of Tibetan life and its implicit political stances in his films, Tseden's oeuvre has garnered substantial academic attention. This analysis delves into the diverse academic interpretations of Tseden's films, which range from viewing his work as a counter-narrative to the prevailing Sino-centric discourse to reflections of the existing state discourse. This paper intends to contribute to the discussion by incorporating personal insights gained from a rare direct encounter with Tseden, coupled with an in-depth review of his early short stories. By exploring his bilingual literary foundation and its influence on his cinematic projects, this study argues that Tseden's initial literary works were instrumental in shaping his filmmaking career, providing him with a unique platform to project authentic Tibetan narratives to a broader audience. Additionally, this paper highlights specific films directed by Tseden, analyzing their uniqueness and innovation, thereby underscoring his substantial contributions to Tibetan cinema. Through this multifaceted approach, the paper seeks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of Tseden's artistic legacy.

and its cultural and political resonances.

Keywords: Tibetan films, contemporary Tibetan regions, cultural tradition, modernist development and inward-exploration

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the Tibetan cinematic world has witnessed a significant increase in film production, improvements in technology, and greater Tibetan participation. Unlike many films about Tibet and Tibetans made by outsiders, including those produced by Chinese filmmakers, a rising generation of home-grown Tibetan filmmakers has successfully entered the mainstream cinematic scene within China and beyond (Hladikova 2016). These filmmakers, who are proficient in both Tibetan and Chinese, are redefining the Tibetan cinematic landscape. This shift in the Tibetan film industry has attracted interest and enthusiasm from both the general public and academia, from both within and outside China, in the form of publications, symposiums, and film festivals.

One of the leading stars in this new wave of Tibetan film production, to which this paper is dedicated, is the late Pema Tseden, who received numerous international and domestic awards for his films. He traveled widely across the world to attend film festivals, award ceremonies, and screenings of his feature films. Although academic studies of Tseden and his films are not large in number, they have analyzed his work extensively in terms of life in contemporary Tibet, socio-cultural change, ethnic identity, political control, and, above all, self-representation (see Robin 2008; Frangville 2016; Yau

2016; Hladikova 2016; Pecic 2023; Zhong 2023). In this regard, his films have been categorized under various labels including Tibetan Buddhist films and Chinese minority nationality films as well as seen in the same category as American road movies and European minor cinema. Also, the intellectual inspiration for Pema's films has been traced back to Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, Latin American magic realism, and the Root Seekers Movement (chin. *xungenpai*) in China (Zhong 2023).

Pema Tseden's intellectual endeavors prior to his career as a filmmaker have been however understudied, especially considering the numerous fictions he published before embarking on his filmmaking career. The objective of this article is not to study Tseden's films per se but to take a closer look at his earlier works of fiction and how they have played a critical role in shaping his later career as a filmmaker. The overarching questions, in this regard, are how and to what extent his fiction has defined the intellectual framework of his films. In a nutshell, this paper intends to explore his writings in relation to his films. In doing so, it hopes to achieve a better understanding of the late Pema Tseden as a filmmaker, writer, and above all, as a human being, as a tribute in honor on his first death anniversary. This will hopefully contribute to the general discussion and debate on the changing dynamics of contemporary Tibetan cinema.

The death of Pema Tseden in May 2023 in Lhasa sent shockwaves around the world. I first heard about his passing through Chinese social media WeChat on the day he died. A few days later, friends and fans carried his body around Barkhor in an open public outpouring of grief, loss, and admiration for his remarkable

contributions to the Tibetan cinematic world. For many, myself included, it was difficult to immediately digest the news of his sudden death at such a young age, especially with no public record of previous illness whatsoever. Initially, many of us, including his friends and fans in his WeChat circle, were skeptical about the credibility of the news and treated it as potential fake news. However, as the news about his death spread and was shared across Chinese social media, including among his own friends, only then did I begin to believe its authenticity. Pema Tseden and I were friends on WeChat, where he shared, among other things, his public engagements and film-related activities. As his WeChat friend, I also followed his professional movements. The loss of Pema Tseden represents a tremendous blow to Tibet and the Tibetan cinematic world.

First Encounter with Pema Tseden

The first time I met Pema Tseden was in Paris in 2019 during the Fifteenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, where his feature film *Old Dog* (ཁྱི་ལོ་དགུ།) was screened to an audience of approximately 450 seminar participants from around the world, primarily scholars and students of Tibetan Studies. A few years earlier, I had watched some of Tseden's films during a film festival in Oslo, where I met one of his closest colleagues. I had a lengthy conversation with this colleague about Tibetan films and Tseden's own works in particular. Back in Paris in 2019, after the screening of *Old Dog*, he was invited for a Q&A session. I immediately took the opportunity to express my admiration for his work, along with a question about the motifs and plot of *Old Dog* which later became the subject of our interaction. Coming from a background in development

studies, I was drawn to the symbolism and the storyline of *Old Dog*, which, in my opinion, reflects a Tibetan experience of top-down state development in the region.

Those few words of praise I conveyed to him, both in front of that large gathering and afterward in our conversation, have given me a measure of comfort since the tragic news of his death. As we continued our conversation about *Old Dog* while walking from the event hall, I discovered that he was a man of few words, which made me feel a bit awkward in leading the conversation. He was a man of integrity, sincerity, kindness, contemplation, and above all, true to his profession with a strong sense of mission. The first impression he left had, in fact, deepened my curiosity about his works. It was only after watching more of his films and reading most of his fiction that I was able to reconstruct a fuller image of the late Pema Tseden as a human being, author, and Tibetan filmmaker, better than when I first met him in Paris.

The Journey of a Writer: Pema Tseden

Pema Tseden was born in 1969 in Amdo Trika (ཁྲི་ཀ), Guide County of Tsolho (མཚོ་ལྗོངས་) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai province. He received his primary and junior middle school education in both Chinese and Tibetan languages and later attended a prefecture-level teachers' training (middle) school. During this period, the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution lingered, and the post-Mao reforms liberalizing minority education and languages had not yet begun. In 1979, ten years after his birth, minority language and cultural education finally began to breathe, and in his third year of primary school, he had

the opportunity to study Tibetan formally. Prior to that, his education was conducted solely in Chinese (see Zhong 2023).

Pema Tseden's home village endured significant social disruption due to the construction of a hydropower station. This upheaval altered the social fabric, introducing supermarkets, bathhouses, and other urban features, and profoundly impacted young Tseden. According to him, adapting to this transformed environment was challenging for the villagers (Zhong 2023). Yet, it was during this time that he had the opportunity to watch films in the assembly hall of the construction site. Following the completion of the project, the departure of the construction workers left a void in the community. Culturally and educationally, apart from studying Tibetan in the third grade, Tseden's appreciation for Tibetan culture and Buddhism stemmed largely from his grandfather, who believed he was the reincarnation of his uncle. Under his grandfather's guidance, he studied Tibetan and Buddhism more deeply.

In the early 1990s, after completing his teacher training, Pema Tseden worked as a teacher in his home county for four years before enrolling at Northwest Nationality University (Lanzhou) to study Tibetan literature. His journey as a writer began earnestly while he was a teacher but took a more serious turn during his studies at the university. In 2002, he received a scholarship to study at Beijing Film Academy, becoming the first Tibetan to do so.

The decade before becoming a filmmaker, Pema Tseden had already established himself as a passionate and prolific fiction writer and a Chinese-Tibetan translator. He published numerous short stories

in both Tibetan and Chinese, many of which later became films. In his 2014 Chinese-language essay titled “My Writing Journey,” Tsenden conveyed the sanctity he felt towards writing: “For me, writing is a noble act. It is like a Buddha sitting deep in your heart. The sincere words you write are a supreme offering to the Buddha within. Such words reflect not only your heart but also illuminate the hearts of others... they allow you to face life calmly, even years later” (Wanma Caidan 2014).⁸²

In public interviews, when asked to choose between filmmaking and fiction writing, Pema consistently expressed a preference for writing, citing the freedom and fewer concerns it offered him. Nevertheless, he recognized the powerful medium of film to reach a broader audience, which led him to embark on a filmmaking career. Over a decade later, his careers as both a filmmaker and a writer have successfully complemented each other. Films like *Tharlo* (ཐར་ལོ།) and *Balloon* (རྟ་པོ།) were scripted directly from his stories, often with little or no cinematic modification. Plans were also underway to adapt more of his short stories, including “Hard Candies (水果硬糖),” “Invited Guest Actor (特邀演员),” and “A Golden Ear (一只金耳朵),” into films. While Pema Tsenden is internationally renowned primarily for his films, it is clear that his novels are the foundational source of his cinematic achievements.

The Birth of a New Wave of Tibetan Films

Leading scholars of Tibetan cinema, including Robert

⁸² All translations from Tibetan or Chinese are by the author.

Barnett, Robin Francoise, and Kamila Hladikova, have argued that the cinematic representation of Tibet has been mythologized both in domestic media within China and in global mass media. A widely recognized consensus among scholars is that Pema Tseden has pioneered a new era of Tibet-themed films within the People's Republic of China (PRC) that can truly be classified as 'Tibetan films.' This genre, as opposed to merely Tibet-related films, encompasses productions primarily created by Tibetan crews including the writer, director, and production team.

Unlike earlier Tibet-related films where Tibetans were often passive subjects, Tseden's films have transformed this dynamic, bringing Tibetans as proactive agents and not just passive objects of cinematic representation. Robert Barnett (2002) distinguishes between Tibet-related films—made chiefly by non-Tibetans for primarily non-Tibetan audiences using Chinese production crews—and Tibetan films aimed predominantly at Tibetan audiences. Pema's works clearly fall into this latter category.

Pema Tseden's films are defined by two core features: the use of the Tibetan language and keen socio-cultural insights into contemporary Tibetan life within the PRC. The Tibetan language plays a central role; it is employed authentically, reflecting everyday conversations and remaining largely uninfluenced by cinematic staging. This has contributed to the realistic and grounded portrayal of rural Tibetan life, especially at a time when Mandarin increasingly dominates public spaces and educational institutions in Tibet. The second defining feature of Tseden's films is his socio-cultural insight into the life-worlds of contemporary Tibetans, explored deeply through

both his films and his fiction. Although scholarly discussion, apart from work by some notable figures mentioned above, has primarily centered around his filmography, these interpretations—ranging from Robin’s “Performing Compassion” to Frangville’s “Minor Movement”—recognize Pema’s films as conscious endeavors to counter both the dominant hegemonic narratives within China and mythic Western perceptions of Tibet. These films are seen as vehicles for Tibetan self-representation as a direct response to these discursive currents.

However, while Pema’s films do represent Tibetan life based on his fiction, I argue that his primary intent is to delve into contemporary Tibetan identity and experience from an inward perspective rather than to engage outwardly in representation. Here, self-representation serves more as an inevitable outcome rather than the initial point of departure. Furthermore, in the age of social media and digitalization, the urgency for cinematic self-representation has diminished, as individuals now possess the technology to share their own narratives and representation widely.

Thus, Pema’s films and fiction can be seen as part of a larger project to critique not only the state’s top-down social engineering but also to challenge socio-cultural norms and understandings within Tibetan society itself. This exploration, deeply embedded in his stories and narratives, investigates the cultural geography of the human mind, revealing a complex web of individual, ethnic, and human identities and experiences. It invites a reflexive consideration of self in a dynamically intertwined world.

Fictions Built on ‘Real’ Stories

The majority of the stories and characters in Pema Tseden’s fiction are based on either his own lived experiences or those of people in his region. Growing up and later working as a teacher in his native home provided him with a profound insight into contemporary Tibetan society and self within the PRC. His transition from writing fiction in Tibetan, and later in Chinese, to filmmaking seems less coincidental and more like a systematic contemplation of choices and personal sacrifices. His studies in Lanzhou and Beijing offered him a professional distance from his native home, enabling a reflective and professional look back.

Pema Tseden’s fiction tackles complex and multifaceted themes, including intergenerational conflict, the state of traditional culture, impermanence, modernity, displacement, rebirth, cause and effect, dignity, and kindness. By integrating traditional Tibetan folktale elements with modern cinematic storytelling techniques, Tseden has established himself as a sophisticated storyteller. Capturing the cultural geography of the human mind and emotions on film is challenging due to the intrinsic complexity of these elements, but through his use of elaborate literary devices in his fiction, Tseden presents a more authentic and comprehensive portrayal of these aspects than can often be achieved through the medium of film.

Pema Tseden himself has said that the main motifs of his works are to present an objective and authentic portrayal of contemporary Tibetan life within the PRC. In the preface of one of his fictional works, he writes “I long to tell the story of my hometown in my own way ...

a more authentic hometown that has been blown by the wind.” (Tseden 2019). Most of his films are shot in rural Amdo and feature stories of Tibetans from various walks of life. Unlike his films, his works of fiction—except for a few place names and regional language details—do not specifically denote any particular part of Tibet and could represent the lives of Tibetans from regions outside of Amdo.

The thematic correlation between his fiction and films is strong, even for films directly based on his stories. The foundation of many film storylines was laid in his fiction writing years, if not decades, before their cinematic releases. While his films often incorporate dramatization through twists and plot turns, it is his works of fiction that lay the intellectual groundwork, offering a more detailed and unconstrained exploration of themes. During an interview, Tseden mentioned that he finds fiction writing to be a more sincere and uncompromised act than filmmaking, indicating his natural preference for literature over cinema.

While Pema Tseden’s films have brought him broader recognition, it is his works of fiction that form the core of his oeuvre, offering creative, realistic, and imaginative reflections of contemporary Tibetan life. Both his fiction and films subtly approach socio-cultural, political, and ecological issues, carefully navigating the complex terrains of censorship and socio-cultural constraints. This strategic choice has allowed him to gain significant publicity without encountering serious hurdles.

In his fictional works, Pema employs simple and accessible language, whether in Tibetan or Chinese, with uncomplicated plots and

literary devices. This strategy helps depict the authentic life-worlds of his characters, ensuring that readers can engage with the cultural geography of contemporary Tibetans without getting lost in complex language.

His stories, though deeply rooted in the specific socio-cultural context of contemporary Tibet, resonate beyond cultural, regional, and national boundaries, universally exploring fundamental aspects of human nature and relationships. His masterful integration of traditional storytelling with modern cinematic narration techniques often includes multiple stories within a single narrative, reflecting the complex dimensions of contemporary Tibetan life. Additionally, the use of contrast—whether between generations, modernity and tradition, right and wrong, or among characters—is a notable literary device in his works.

Juxtaposing Modernity and Tradition: The Journey from Fiction to Films

At the heart of Pema Tseden's work is his meticulous character development and plot construction. In an interview (Tseden 2018: 222), he mentioned that the genesis of his characters often starts with a hint of their existence in real life, which he then enriches with his personal observations and experiences. His characters are uniquely crafted, often placed in diverse circumstances that reveal various facets of Tibetan identity. This deliberate characterization aims to explore the multiplicity of Tibetan selves across different contexts. For example, in *The Silent Holy Stones* (ལྷིང་འཇགས་ཀྱི་མ་ཉེན་འབྲུག་), the main character, a young monk, exhibits an unusual fixation with the Chinese TV soap

opera *Journey to the West*, a beloved series in China and Tibet since the 1980s. The film subtly breaks from traditional presumptions about monks, showing this protagonist as someone who, contrary to expected sanctity, is captivated by popular media and capable of lying. This nuanced portrayal underscores the clash between perception and reality, a recurring theme in Pema's works.

Similarly, the story of an old *mani* stone-carver is in contrast with his son, who after receiving a modern education chooses not to return home to continue the family craft. This narrative thread explores the tensions between traditional crafts and contemporary aspirations, highlighting generational divides and the impact of modern education.

The journey of the young monk from monastic life to his home village for the New Year celebration serves as a lens through which to view the encroachment of modernity on a remote community, reflecting broader socio-cultural shifts. However, the story presents a nuanced view of modern development, suggesting that the community's response is not wholly adverse but involves a dynamic process of negotiation and reinterpretation among its members.

In contrast, *Old Dog* portrays the darker consequences of modern development. The film tells the story of a father and son who are forced to confront their differing attitudes towards a Tibetan mastiff, traditionally a symbol of loyalty and dignity. Under the relentless pressure of a market-driven economy, the father takes a drastic step to end the mastiff's life, a metaphor for the erosion of traditional values under modern neoliberal forces.

This narrative not only reflects the theme of ‘a dying tradition’ prevalent in many of his fictional works but also vividly depicts the tensions between pastoral traditions and urban market forces. The intergenerational conflict and the stark choices faced by the protagonists—between adhering to traditional values or succumbing to market demands—highlight the complex dilemmas that confront Tibetans. The story culminates in the tragic decision by the father to kill the mastiff, an act to preserve the animal’s dignity, rather than allowing his son to sell it to a Chinese dealer for a substantial sum.

By moving between these narratives, Pema Tseden skillfully bridges his literary groundwork in fiction with his cinematic expressions, maintaining a profound dialogue on cultural integrity, identity, and change within the Tibetan context. Through both mediums, Tseden continues to offer insightful, often poignant reflections on the intersection of tradition and modernity in contemporary Tibetan life.

Exploring Contemporary Tibetan Self

Pema Tseden situates his characters and plots within a realm of struggle or contention, using these tensions to delve into the complexities of human relationships against a backdrop of cultural change and impermanence. His narratives frequently explore the friction between internal desires and external pressures from cultural changes, state authority, and neoliberal market forces. This reflective process in his work raises more questions than answers, notably through open-ended narratives that prompt profound contemplation about Tibetan culture and modern societal dynamics in China.

Tharlo's Experience of Modernity

In both *Tharlo* (ཐར་ལོ།) the film and “Tharlo” the short story, the protagonist is a rural herder, emblematic of contemporary Tibetans caught at the crossroads of time and conflicting ideologies. An orphan with minimal formal education, Tharlo is proficient in reciting Mao’s citations, reflecting the deep ideological imprint of his schooling, reminiscent of traditional monastic memorization techniques. This character highlights the stark reality for many Tibetans who navigate a life suspended between traditional rural upbringing and the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution.

As he steps into the post-Mao era, Tharlo becomes a stranger in his own land, grappling with profound socio-cultural, economic, and political shifts. His story escalates as he encounters betrayal by a Tibetan hairdresser, which metaphorically and literally strips him of his identity, pushing him to question his place within this rapidly transforming society. Despite the consistency in storyline between the fiction and its film adaptation, the narrative in the fiction offers a deeper, more comprehensive portrayal of Tharlo’s internal and external conflicts.

In discussing the beginnings of both the fiction and film adaptations related to Tharlo, it becomes evident that much of the fundamental background information from the fiction is omitted in the film (Tseden 2018: 298). The opening of the fiction unfolds as follows:

Tharlo usually braids his hair, which hangs down the back of his head, making him quite eye-catching. Eventually,

people started calling him ‘Little Braid,’ and even forgot his real name. At the start of the year, the township police station visited the village for ID card renewals and held a meeting with the villagers. The police chief called out ‘Tharlo’ repeatedly but received no response. Perplexed, he asked the village head, ‘Is there no one named Tharlo in your village?’ The village head laughed and replied, ‘Ah, police chief, everyone here only knows him as ‘Little Braid.’ That’s Tharlo!’ ...Finally realizing the confusion, the police chief called out for ‘Little Braid,’ and Tharlo, unaware that he was being called by his real name earlier, promptly stood up and acknowledged himself. ...(Tseden 2018: 298)

In the fiction, the opening describes Tharlo in detail, offering history and setting and a sense of atmosphere. The background information about Tharlo’s hair and ID card renewal serves as crucial elements that provide the plot with a starting point for better interpretations. On the other hand, the film begins with Tharlo uttering Mao’s famous speech called “Serve the People” in a state of perplexity and confusion. However, he successfully translated the short story “Tharlo” into a visually striking film using black-and-white imagery and a restrained composition. This visual adaptation intensified the theme of loneliness and the protagonist’s existential crisis, adding depth to the narrative.

Thematic Exploration in “I Ran Over a Sheep”

“I Ran Over a Sheep” (撞死了一只羊) is a first-person short

story where “I” accidentally kills a sheep while delivering goods and then embarks on a series of eccentric actions to alleviate guilt. The sense of absurdity in the story emanates from “I”’s unconventional reactions to the situation. Rather than fleeing or abandoning the dead sheep, “I” takes it to a temple for help, followed by arranging a sky burial with a beggar’s assistance. The narrative concludes with “I” buying half a mutton and heading to his lover, Dolma. Overall, the novel traverses a symbolic landscape where ethical dilemmas, spiritual redemption, and the consequences of moral compromise converge, underpinning a thought-provoking exploration of personal values, guilt, and the quest for inner peace. The film version introduces significant modifications, including subplots that enrich the narrative tapestry.

The fiction remains inward-looking, focusing on the protagonist-cum-narrator’s psychological and spiritual turmoil following an accident. This narrative examines themes of life, death, guilt, and redemption within the framework of Buddhist beliefs, which dictate the protagonist’s actions to secure a proper ritual for a deceased sheep, juxtaposing religious practices against his subsequent mundane actions that counter his earlier spiritual endeavors. The film *Jinpa*, adapted partly from that short story, omits much of the context of the story prior to the opening of the film, which includes the protagonist’s inner conflict, beliefs, as well as sense of frustration after the collision. The following excerpt captures this state of mind of the protagonist, in the short story:

After I sat down, I saw the guru in the photo staring at me again. His serious look made me feel guilty. I quickly lowered my head, put my hands together, and said, “You

saw it too, I hit the sheep to death, but I didn't do it on purpose." When I looked up, the guru in the photo still had the same expression. I complained in my heart, "You didn't remind me, hitting a sheep to death made me accumulate sins." The guru in the photo seemed to have a more serious expression. I was a little at a loss. I looked back at the dead sheep on the back seat. The dead sheep lay peacefully, motionless. I looked back at the guru, and his expression seemed to have changed, no longer so stern. Now I relaxed a little, shifted the gear, and started the car (Tseden 2019: 367).

The excerpt delves into the protagonist's internal turmoil and interaction with the guru (spiritual teacher) in the photo after an unfortunate incident of colliding with and killing a sheep. The protagonist's immediate response to the guru's serious gaze is guilt, compelled to confess the accidental death of the sheep and seek acknowledgment and absolution for their unintended actions. The internal dialogue reflects a sense of moral responsibility and remorse, as the protagonist's interactions with the guru symbolize a journey of inner redemption and moral reckoning. The shift in the guru's expression mirrors the protagonist's evolving emotional state, signifying a moment of internal reconciliation and acceptance towards resolution and inner peace.

Conflict and Dilemma in Balloon

Balloon (རྟ་ལྔ་མཁའ་ལྔ་ལྔ་) is a fiction turned film that revolves around a family of seven facing unexpected challenges and choices. The story

involves themes of reincarnation, family dynamics, religious beliefs, and the struggle between spiritual and worldly desires. The narrative explores complex relationships within the family, including the protagonist's wife considering abortion, the eldest son grappling with his identity, and the younger sister's contemplation of her life as a nun. The film uses symbolism, dream sequences, and visual techniques to present a thought-provoking narrative that delves into the intersection of tradition, belief, and modernity. The narrative centers on a couple, Dargye and Drolkar, facing severe familial and societal dilemmas. Forced to choose between the birth of a fourth child and the harsh penalties from state-enforced birth policies, they epitomize the acute conflicts between traditional beliefs and governmental dictates. Like his other works, Pema Tsenden uses their story to underscore the erosion of cultural norms and the tough choices Tibetan families must navigate within challenging contemporary socio-economic circumstances as well as the State's restrictive frameworks.

Cultural Preservation in Grassland

Grassland (རྩ་བརྩུག) is a film that depicts a simple yet powerful story of the same title by Pema Tsenden. The narrative follows mother Tsomo (མཚོ་མོ།), a septuagenarian nomad, as she embarks on a journey across the grassland with the village chief to find the thief who stole her yak. The film explores themes of trust, honor, and cultural values unique to the grassland environment. Through the characters' actions and interactions, the film subtly conveys the essence and complexities of life on the grassland. *Grassland* has garnered recognition and awards both locally and internationally for its portrayal of human relationships against the backdrop of the vast and captivating Tibetan landscape.

Tsomo has become a poignant symbol of cultural persistence and transformation. Her reaction to the theft of her liberated yak reflects deeper values of forgiveness and merit, conflicting sharply with community pressures and modern moral decay. Tseden uses this narrative to critique the erosion of Tibetan values, illustrating through vivid contrast the generational and ethical shifts impacting contemporary Tibetan society. Like the previous films discussed, the fictional version gives readers a more comprehensive narrative picture than the film, including a better picture of what mother Tsomo believes and wants concerning the theft of her “liberated” yak (ཆེ་བལ་). The following excerpt captures Tsomo’s attitude:

I am concerned about the yak thief. If the yak thief were to be arrested, he would be punished, and if he were to be punished, would not all my merits accumulated as a result of yak liberation be lost?... I do not want the [stolen] yak [back]. Let’s go back home (Tseden 2016: 8)

Mother Tsomo is concerned about the potential consequences of the yak thief being arrested and, as a result, is reluctant to go with Tsedrug (ཆེ་འབྲུག) to pursue the matter any further. This excerpt from the fiction highlights Mother Tsomo’s compassionate perspective towards the yak thief, rooted in her belief in cause and effect and the accumulation of merits. This portrayal of her reluctance to pursue the matter further due to concerns about the consequences of the thief’s arrest sheds light on her compassionate nature and deep understanding of the interconnectedness of actions and their repercussions. It is a poignant moment that delves into themes of forgiveness, empathy, and the complexities of moral decision-making.

Conclusion: A Luminary in Tibetan Cinema

As a pivotal figure in the burgeoning wave of Tibetan films in China, the late Pema Tsenden has made indelible contributions to the cinematic landscape. His works are distinguished by three key characteristics: the use of authentic, everyday Tibetan language; profound self-exploration and insight into contemporary Tibetan life-worlds; and an unembellished, grounded portrayal of life in modern Tibet. These distinctive elements stem from his upbringing and education in the Amdo region, as well as his formative years as a writer and a teacher. In essence, Pema has masterfully integrated his lived experiences and observations of contemporary Tibetan life with his dual roles as a fiction writer and filmmaker. His works of fiction particularly provide foundational texts from which his film manuscripts and storytelling styles are developed.

Pema Tsenden's fictional works offer an inward-looking exploration of the cultural geography of Tibetan life-worlds, reflecting multiple facets of contemporary Tibetan existence both superficially and in subtle depth. This suggests his lived experiences and extensive research into everyday life and the embedded socio-cultural rationales of the region. More than a mere reflection of Tibetan beliefs, his stories delve into the intellectual and emotional basis of Tibetan Buddhist beliefs, resonating with themes of impermanence, spiritual wisdom, karma, and kindness. Pema's engagement with Buddhist texts in his spare time has evidently enriched his worldviews, marking a Buddhist influence that, while profound, is not as widely acknowledged compared to other inspirations such as magic realism and contemporary cinematic currents. Unlike other magical realism

narratives in contemporary China, which often critique religious beliefs as superstitions or relics of backwardness, Tseden's stories celebrate Tibetan Buddhism for nurturing positive human qualities like kindness, honesty, and compassion. These virtues are typically embodied in his older characters, reinforcing his recurring theme of a fading traditional culture at odds with the values of the younger generation.

Pema Tseden does not blindly adhere to traditional cultural norms. Instead, he employs satire in his fiction to critique irrational aspects of traditional practices. His narratives also critically address the social changes instigated by neoliberal market policies and state-driven modernist development, which he views as culprits in the erosion of traditional Tibetan culture, whether it concerns stone carving or the performance of traditional Tibetan opera.

Exploring the contemporary plight of Tibetans and their cultural traditions under the current socio-political and economic conditions, Pema Tseden's works present a nuanced view of Tibetan culture as both endangered and enduring. His fictions dualistically portray the decline of traditional cultural institutions and the pervasive, albeit dwindling, influence of cultural practices among the young. Through his nuanced characters and their inherent virtues of kindness, Tseden imbues his stories with a sense of resilience and empowerment, enabling them to navigate and withstand a landscape marred by disappearance and despair. Through his profound contribution to literature and film, Pema Tseden has not only chronicled the transformation of Tibetan culture but has also fostered a greater understanding and appreciation of its enduring spirit and complexity.

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