

Pema Tseden, A Tibetan Spiritual Artist at the Confluence of Eastern and Western Cinema⁸³

Xu Feng (Translated from Chinese by Wei Duan⁸⁴)

Abstract: The historical research of the French Annales School provides a suitable method for studying Pema Tseden's films. His art emerges from the *longue durée* historical structure and cultural context of Tibet within China, becoming part of the second wave of Eastern cinema's influence on Western cinema. His work profoundly reflects Tibetan cultural traditions and modernity, portraying human tragedy in an intensely materialistic society while seeking to preserve the essence of Tibetan practices in the modern world. Pema Tseden's style has evolved from richly documentary realism to Spiritual Realism. Inspired by filmmakers like Kenji Mizogushi, Pema Tseden developed a film language rooted in Spiritual Realism, using his understanding of suffering (Tibetan and Sanskrit: *dukkha*) as a guiding path in his exploration of happiness and truth.

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“The perspective of the Holy Father” (Braudel, 1986, p. 7) was used by the French Annales historian Fernand Braudel to describe his concept of *longue durée* history. This exceedingly slow and nearly static historical perspective is “the history of the relationship between humans and their surrounding environment,”⁸⁵ (Braudel, 1998, p. 416) largely dictated by geographical and climatic conditions. In this *longue durée* history, change is almost synonymous with cycles of changes, because the characteristics of the natural world and the practices of human civilization continue to coalesce in a heterogeneous symbiosis. Over thousands of years (or more), the *longue durée* history has formed the cultural framework ingrained in the deep levels, and in collective unconsciousness (often manifested as ethnic unconsciousness). The framework is reflected in all humanistic phenomena, including food culture, linguistic systems, modes of production, political practices, religious beliefs, and norms of daily life, etc. Therefore, this essay defines *longue durée* history as the history of “geography, climate and humanities,” with the latter functioning as a linkage between *longue durée* history and social/event history. Social history examines the overarching fate and general trends of human communities, focusing on the socio-institutional conditions over decades. In contrast, event history concentrates on describing historical events with significant consequences and far-reaching influence during shorter periods. These events “may be well-known events that have gained consensus, or

⁸⁵ All the translations from French to Chinese have been done by the author.

they may be seemingly small but illustrative historical occurrences.” They can all bring evidence, illuminating a certain corner of history, and sometimes even illuminating a broad and deep scene of history. The references to Fernand Braudel’s *longue durée* historiography and tripartite history writing are not so much a methodological endeavor but a perspective through which to study Pema Tseden’s literary and cinematic texts as well as the new wave of Tibetan cinemas.

The Tripartite History of Tibet and Pema Tseden’s Texts

In the *longue durée* historiographical sense, Pema Tseden’s films lead us to the unique and internally diverse Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Starting from the short film *Silent Holy Stones*, he frequently returns to his hometown Tsolho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province. Among them, the films *The Silent Holy Stones* and *Tharlo* were filmed in his birthplace, Guide County.

The Tibetan name for Guide is Trika. Tibetan writer and scholar Lung Rinchen explains to me the Tibetan name for Guide as follows: “One interpretation is that the Buddhist king Tri Ralpachan (802-838) came to Trika to give teachings, and a throne was built for him (Tibetan: tri). Guide is the place where the throne is located. In another explanation, it may mean ‘by the river’ or ‘by the water.’”⁸⁶ These two possible etymologies of the place name, one linked to its geographical features and the other narrating a historical event, suggest its cultural heritage spanning millennia.

⁸⁶ Lung Rinchen. Correspondence with Xu Feng on October 10, 2023.

In the vast Tibetan regions, Trika stands out as areas an area with a relatively low average altitude (the county seat is only at an elevation of 2,200 meters, approximately 1.37 miles), a mild climate, abundant water resources, and rich agricultural produce. It is renowned for the saying, “The Yellow River in Guide is the clearest under heaven,” and is often referred to as the “Plateau’s Little Jiangnan.”⁸⁷ While animal husbandry is the mainstay on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the existence of agricultural, semi-agricultural, and semi-pastoral areas is common. But regions like Guide, known for wheat production, are rare. The clear Yellow River flows through the village of Dzona in Lazewa township, where Pema Tseden grew up. In this place, there is an extensive cultivation of spring wheat, a staple food, and corn, used for livestock feed. And the mountain grasslands serve as ideal grazing grounds. Guide is like a small warm haven nestled in the plateau valley, where the weather remains relatively mild even in severe winters.

[...] ⁸⁸

This sense of warmth from Pema Tseden’s homeland is most vividly portrayed in *The Silent Holy Stones*. In the feature-length version of *The Silent Holy Stones*, the filming is relocated to Chentsa County in Malho Prefecture; however, the shooting sites, Gulang Dike and Ko’u Monastery, are both perched at elevations ranging from 2100 to 2300 meters, bearing striking geographical similarities to Guide County.

⁸⁷ Jiangnan is one of the most prosperous areas in China in the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, including the southern part of its delta. The region includes Shanghai, as well as parts of Jiangsu, Anhui, Jiangxi, and Zhejiang provinces.”

⁸⁸ Some parts of the essay have been omitted for length.

This resemblance imbues the village, celebrating the Tibetan New Year with a warm and comforting ambiance. In another example, *Tharlo* too conveys a profound sense of solitude. It was filmed in the surroundings of Dzona village in Lazewa township, where Pema Tsenden lived during his childhood. Most of his films are shot in the Amdo region, occasionally featuring other Tibetan areas. His film text itself functions as a historical event, and illuminates the internally diverse history of everyday life, aesthetics, society, and culture in Tibetan regions. It also sheds light into the geographical and climatic depths of field of the *longue durée* history.

The more significant interpretation of the Tibetan name for Trika is the place where Tri Ralpachan⁸⁹ built a pagoda to propagate the Dharma. The flourishing Nyingma tradition in the Trika region is precisely rooted in the teachings of Padmasambhava, upon which the emperor Tri Ralpachan subsequently relied. The pronunciation of “Wanma Tsenden” is derived from the Amdo Tibetan language of his hometown. If pronounced according to the Lhasa region’s U-Tsang Tibetan dialect, it would be “Bema Tsenden” (Pema Tsenden). “Wanma” (Pema) means “lotus flower,” and “Tsenden” means “lasting life.” The translated name chosen by Mr. Xu Xiaodong, “A Lotus with Tenacious Vitality,” (Xu, 2017, p. 42) may vividly capture his description, embodying the profound influence of Tibetan Buddhism, the lineage of Padmasambhava, and even the significance of his name on Pema Tsenden. Reflecting on his childhood, Pema Tsenden mentioned:

⁸⁹ Tri Ralpachan (ཁྲི་རལ་པ་ཅན། 806-841 AD) was the eighth ruler of the Tibetan empire.

My grandfather was a very devout Buddhist. He was the first person in our village to erect prayer flags at our home. He was skilled in various handicrafts, including printing scriptures and making prayer flags. When I was in the fourth or fifth grade, the school started reintroducing Tibetan language courses, and we began learning to read and write in Tibetan. My grandfather tasked me to transcribe some borrowed Tibetan scriptures. In those times, printed scriptures were quite scarce, and most were painstakingly transcribed by hand. I distinctly remember transcribing relatively thin scriptures such as the “Padmasambhava’s Condensed Biography.” Following the transcription, I had to memorize them, which was quite a painful process. (Pema Tseden, Xu Feng, 2017, p. 42)

In 2006, Pema Tseden collaborated with Tibetan writer and poet Wangchuk Tseten (དབང་བུ་ཆེ་བརྟན།) on the book *The Master in Tibet*. They utilized the *Biography of Padmasambhava* (Yeshe Tsogyal, 1990), primarily grounded in the recorded, compiled, and discovered termas by Yeshe Tsogyal (757/777-817, ཡེ་ཤེས་མཆོག་ཀྱུ་ལ།), Padmasambhava’s consort, as their main foundational reference. This was complemented by their in-depth study of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*,⁹⁰ allowing them to retell the story of Padmasambhava in thirteen chapters (Pema Tseden and Wangxiu Caidan, 2006). The number thirteen, which is often considered ominous in Western culture, symbolizes the state of great perfection in Tibetan esotericism. Thus, even in the mere count of

⁹⁰ Wangxiu Caidan (དབང་བུ་ཆེ་བརྟན།), correspondence with Xu Feng, 13 October 2023.

chapters, one can discern the underlying script of the Tibetan Buddhist cultural tradition. In 2007, he filmed the documentary “Kathok Grand Ritual” about the ritual ceremonies of Padmasambhava at Kathok Monastery in Palyul County, Kandze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. In the same year, he directed a documentary film titled *Samye Monastery*, which focuses on Padmasambhava’s propagation of Buddhism in Tibet.

For thousands of years, from the Tibetan calendar to the core Tibetan medical treatise *Gyushi* (རྩུ་བཞི།), Buddhism has permeated every aspect of Tibetan life. But to Pema Tsenden, the cultural identity shaped by *longue durée* historical development is not to simply accept and believe. As a contemporary Tibetan intellectual, his study and dissemination of Tibetan Buddhist culture present a trajectory of exploration and reflection. This is partly attributed to his 53-year life experience, a social history full of fission. Since the new era,⁹¹ Tibetan Buddhism, which had suffered catastrophic events, has experienced a revival. However, this period of Tibetan cultural renaissance is also an era of simultaneous advancement in Sinicization, modernization, and globalization. All of Pema Tsenden’s films deal with profound cultural conflicts and complexities as his inquiries and self-reflection became global.

The Cinematography of Tibetan Modernity amidst the Impact of Eastern Cinema on the West

From the late 20th century to the early 21st century, filmmakers

⁹¹ The “new era” refers to the end of the Cultural Revolution and the opening of China.

from Iran, China, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and other countries continued to reshape the vision of global cinema. This marked a distinctive period in the history of filmmaking, signifying that, at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, Eastern films exerted a second reverse influence on Western films (the first being in the 1950s). Pema Tseden was active in this trend.

Certainly, the driving force behind the continuous evolution of Chinese cinema, the authorial strategies and spiritual aspirations of Abbas Kiarostami (1940-2016) and the whole Iranian film industry, the profound integration of experimental filmmaking and Buddhist undertones in avant-garde practices by the Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul (b. 1957), and the emergence of oversea Tibetan language films by the Tibetan/Bhutanese lama and filmmaker Khyentse Norbu (b. 1961) have collectively become the paratextual backdrop for the productions by Pema Tseden. In this context of the progress of Eastern cinema's influence on the West, Pema gradually made his mark. However, he had to confront the misunderstandings and prejudices stemming from the Han ethnic-centric viewpoint towards Tibetan culture, the political instrumentalization of the Tibet issue, and the fascination with exoticized Tibet by the West, as well as a series of cultural taboos within Tibetan culture itself. The challenges he faced in his filmmaking journey strengthened Pema's affinity with Iranian cinema, especially the works of Abbas Kiarostami.

Abbas was the earliest renowned filmmaker to recognize Pema Tseden's talent and is acknowledged as his mentor. Amidst the strict cinema censorship system in Iran and Abbas's film texts, we find the tension between ideological taboos and the exploration of spiritual life,

along with aesthetic sublimation pathways between them. Partly due to the constraints of the filmmaking environment, Pema Tseden's films in the first half of his creative career exhibit a distinct documentary style. However, the insightful Kiarostami, while serving as the chairman of the jury at the Busan International Film Festival in 2005, did not categorize Pema Tseden's style as purely documentary. Instead, he placed it within "the tradition of Robert Bresson and Yasujirō Ozu" (Asia Society, 2005). This indicates that, for both Kiarostami and Pema Tseden, documentary aesthetics were evidently only the initial conditions of their art, while the essential goal lies in the spiritual insights possessed by the gaze behind the camera.

In general, Pema Tseden significantly differs from Bresson's anti-theatrical concepts in cinematography (*cinématographe*) and modeling (*modèle*). Wan Chuanfa believes that Pema Tseden's film, involving "the construction of repetitive scenes, a focus on the use of zero visual narrative perspective, and the application of threshold composition," (Wan Chuanfa, 2017, p. 55) demonstrates, to a certain extent, its potential resonance with Bresson's cinematography and spiritual exploration. *The Silent Holy Stones* is a scene of children participating in Tibetan opera rehearsals shot in the documentary style of Kiarostami. By employing the silent observation effect of zero visual narrative perspective, camera positioning, and the repetition of Tibetan opera melody, it disseminates the nurturing of compassion that circulates through daily life, extending even into the constant state of Buddha nature.

Pema Tseden's early films are similar to the works of Yasujirō Ozu, as both delve into the contemplation of time alongside the anguish of traditional ethical loss. However, Pema Tseden's understanding

of modernity and time differs significantly from Yasujiro Ozu's forbearing and contented works. In his cinematography of Tibetan modernity, exemplified in *The Silent Holy Stones*, Pema Tseden captures a young monk's fascination with the TV series *Journey to the West* and his perplexity towards the chaotic singing and dancing scenes. The structural contradiction evident in his earlier works has evolved into profound confusion in *The Search*, reminiscent of the depth found in the *Taste of Cherry* (Kiarostami, 1997). It's not individual fate but a question of cultural survival.

One of Pema Tseden's most documentary-style films, *The Search*, was filmed in southern Gansu and the Malho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai Province, where the Amdo dialect of the Tibetan language is spoken. But it represents a transformation that the entire Tibetan region experiences. Utilizing a consciously polyphonic structure, the film takes the search for the lead actor of "Drime Kunden" (འཇིགས་ཀྱི་ལྷ་མོ།, one of the Eight Great Tibetan Operas) by the film crew as its main narrative thread, traversing through the Tibetan region. It introduces four parallel 'love stories': the love recounted by a businessman, a girl's search for her boyfriend, the love of the fictional director, and the compassionate love of Drime Kunden that everyone seeks.

Drime Kunden was a prince practicing *paramita*⁹² before he was

⁹² "Paramita" means "perfection" in Sanskrit. In Mahayana Buddhism, there are six *paramitas* (patience, virtuous conduct, wisdom, etc.) and they must be practiced by the practitioner aspiring to Enlightenment (or Buddhahood). Drime Kunden is famous for practicing the perfection of generosity.

reborn as the Buddha. With unparalleled compassion, he selflessly gave away his kingdom, wife, children, and even his eyes. Of course, all of this ultimately returned to his life as a result of his practice. The film not only showcases the evolution and crisis of Tibetan opera art but also reveals the internal tremors of faith and even everyday emotions. The search for the ‘performer’ of Drime Kunden highlights the absence of unconditional love. In contrast, various worldly loves portrayed exhibit impermanence, disturbance, and anguish. On their journey, the group not only encounters forgetfulness, abandonment, and questioning of the story of Drime Kunden but also confronts criticism and mockery of worldly love. Modernity is no longer the emotional turmoil caused by a television set but the irreversible reality of contemporary survival. The film, adopting a basic shooting style emphasizing ‘distance,’ meticulously captures and structures various ‘micro-storms’ of cultural reality, allowing us to witness the fundamental erosion of seemingly unchanging cultural traditions on the plateau.

The expression discussed above has also been noticed by film critics. In 2009, a special report from the Locarno International Film Festival by the French newspaper *Le Monde* considered *The Search* to be one of the two best films of the festival:

Director Pema Tsenden often films from a great distance to showcase only silhouettes, a moving car, and villages that seem to barely mark the immensity of the landscapes. Subsequently, the film unfolds in a tiny theater or within the car’s interior. At the conclusion of *The Search* (which is not the conclusion of the characters’ quest), one gets the impression of having shared the mourning of a country

witnessing its cultural transformation, under the obvious impact of historical upheavals, at the same time, quite simply, due to the passage of time. (Sotinel, 2009)

However, the director has not entertained the fantasy of reverting to the past, as that obviously is not how he addresses this challenge. What he offers us is an open-ended search without a conclusion, yet gaining a certain understanding, precisely in line with the Tibetan original title རྫོག་པ། (which means “to search”). The name Drime Kunden translates to a pure monk symbolizing the soul-searching of a dedicated practitioner. At the end of the film, the director’s perplexity is a genuine self-inquiry: How to adapt and maintain the essence of tradition within the context of modernity?

We can consider all of Pema Tseden’s films thereafter as a repeated contemplation and a certain response to this question.

Twelve of Pema Tseden’s seventeen films are feature films, and eleven among these, including two short films, are in Tibetan. We observe a gradual decline of Buddhist themes from the beginning, reaching its lowest point in the films *Old Dog* and *Tharlo*. Then they returned and ascended to a new height. *Old Dog* and *Tharlo* are his two most despairing works, reflecting an extremely dark tone to the extent that Abbas Kiarostami’s meaningful documentary style is no longer suitable for his vision. While there has been considerable research on these two works, this essay emphasizes their critical consideration of modernity, corresponding to two seemingly continuous but actually separate stylistic tendencies.

Old Dog presents a rugged and vigorous documentary style, reminiscent of the assessment by the renowned French director Olivier Assayas of Hou Hsiao-hsien's *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1983):

Hou Hsiao-hsien's style is simultaneously intuitive, powerful, and contemplative, shedding all studies of glamor and moving towards essence in an exceptionally vigorous manner. This is not only of great significance to Chinese cinema; through starting from scratch in every aspect, he accomplished a true revolution, capturing the world and observing it in his own way... At that time, there was no work in Chinese cinema that came close to this unpolished reality... and the emotions he redeems are precisely this kind of clear understanding. (Assayas, 2009, p. 350)

While Chinese cinema has had a tradition of documentary aesthetics since the "Fourth Generation," in my view, the only work that comes close to this 'unpolished reality' is Jia Zhangke's *Pickpocket* (*Xiao Wu*, 1997). The imagery of *Old Dog* is situated within the stylistic series of *The Boys from Fengkuei* and *Pickpocket*. Some critics exclaim, "The entire film consists of only 111 shots! ... averagely it is 1.08 minutes per shot!" (Zheng, 2018, p. 5). In *Old Dog*, what confronts us is the violently materialistic reality and the desperate struggles of the elderly, blending the unpolished sense of extreme documentary realism with a fable of cultural predicament.

In *Tharlo*, the film systematically incorporates the language discovered by Wan Chuanfa, with a particularly notable emphasis on visual framing. It utilizes closed, incomplete images to highlight

the protagonist's secluded personal life and marginal social identity. However, after engaging in love, the closed frames suddenly open up, as if the world has poured into Tharlo's heart, yet this only reinforces his lonely situation. In this film, Pema Tseden exhibits stronger characteristics of a language of Robert Bresson's style and abstract power. His expression establishes a clear intertextual relationship with the late Bresson's: Bresson's *Money* focuses on a world where everything is commodified, and the protagonist transforms from a victim into a true criminal. This is remarkably similar to Pema Tseden's expression in *Tharlo*, where he portrays the psychological disintegration and loss of beliefs among Tibetan herders in the drastic materialistic transformation of modern society. Similar to Brecht, Pema Tseden pours the fullest emotions into these characters.

In this abstract manner, *Tharlo* undergoes a transformation from the language of extreme documentary realism to the expressive language of cinema. *Tharlo* is also Pema Tseden's final work that comprehensively secularizes and critiques modernity. Starting with the self-consciously commercial film *Sacred Arrow* and officially with *Jinpa*, elements from Tibetan traditional spiritual life once again rise in his films and in the face of the dilemma between cultural tradition and modernity, a more courageous "resilient expression" is progressively strengthened. In a structural symmetry, opposite the narrative of killing in *Old Dog*, there appears the narrative of releasing in *Snow Leopard*.

The Filmic Tibetan Language Towards Spiritual Realism

Wang Xiaolu once introduced the concept of "filmic Tibetan

language.” In a conversation with Pema Tsenden, he remarked, “You have emphasized that the use of [filmic] language in your films should be closely tied to the subject matter and setting. It is impossible to develop something that is unique but without roots, and in your case, those roots are embedded in Tibetan culture and the spiritual world.” (Pema Tsenden, Wang Xiaolu, 2019, p. 14) The geographical and climatic environment, along with the *longue durée* historical accumulation of national culture, has shaped a specific space and a unique perspective on this space, creating a distinctive humanistic form and a way of perceiving people and life. In the presentation of space and time, as well as the relationship between sound, image, and meaning, they contribute to a Tibetan filmic language.

The contrast in artistic expression between Pema Tsenden’s film and fiction is striking. For example, the documentary-style film *Silent Holy Stones* and the surrealistic short story “Holy Stones, Quietly Engraved” share nothing in common. In the story, the old man carving holy stones fulfills his promise, imbuing the narrative with a mysterious quality not only in the dimension of events but also in the atmosphere crafted by the use of simple language (Pema Tsenden, 2014). When discussing the prevalent avant-garde surrealistic style in his own work and even in contemporary Tibetan literature, Pema Tsenden alludes to the influence of Tibetan culture and classical Tibetan literary traditions, which is more common in contemporary Tibetan literature than in contemporary Chinese literature:

In pre-1950s Tibet, or even in some literary works from the early modern era of Tibetan literature, there are many avant-garde, experimental, absurd, and even elements of

so-called magical realism. This continuity may be related to the cultural foundation of the Tibetan region and even influenced by its high-altitude geographical context. (Pema Tseden, Du Qingchun, 2019, p. 19)

And this style, commonly referred to as surrealism, emerged in the later works of Pema Tseden's filmography, including *Jinpa*, *Balloon*, *Snow Leopard*, and *Stranger*.

However, I prefer to replace *Surréalisme* and Magical Realism with a new concept to describe Pema Tseden's style—Spiritual Realism with a broader meaning or Divine Realism with a narrower meaning. The reason for using this concept is that, for a nation with traditional spiritual beliefs (such as the Tibetan people, who universally practice Buddhism), culture and faith are integral parts of the daily reality of its people. Many situations that may seem imaginative or dreamlike to readers or viewers without religious beliefs are not mere imagination and fantasy for believers; instead, they are part of the latter's real world. Therefore, for them, the style genres like surrealism, which juxtaposes dreams and the unconscious with external material reality, or magical realism, which integrates magical elements into realistic descriptions, cannot adequately explain the abundant everyday scenarios and film language phenomena found in works like *Balloon*. For them, these phenomena exist in different dimensions and layers of reality, representing spiritual phenomena, mental images, and spiritual realities. For example, the phenomena of the *bardo*⁹³ and the cycle of

⁹³ Bardo is a Tibetan term referring to “the state of existence from the moment immediately after death until the moment immediately before conception.” (Source: Alexander Berzin's *English-*

reincarnation, for the Tibetan people, are absolute realities, rather than surreal, supernatural, or magical phenomena. Therefore, at least for the Tibetan people and Tibetan artists, in their cultural environment, daily life, and artistic perception, it is not surrealism, not magical realism (they use these concepts more as part of a conventional habit), but a form of spiritual realism where religious beliefs and spiritual culture are fully integrated into everyday life.

In *Jinpa*, the driver Jinpa encounters a man from Kham named Jinpa, an illusory manifestation of his revenge desire, parallel to the Buddhist principle that ‘appearance arises from the mind.’ The spiritual realism in *Balloon* is even more distinct. Pema Tseden’s interpretations of these two scenes contribute to understanding this issue.

In the scene where the nevus representing reincarnation is removed from the elder brother Jamyang in the dream, the two younger brothers take it and run towards the desert. This scene is generally interpreted as a dream, but Pema Tseden sees it as a natural life scene, stating, “In fact, this scene doesn’t really count as a dream; the characters in the story naturally enter such a state of mind” (Pema Tseden, Suo Yabin 2020, p. 92).

In the “spirit in the water” scene, discussed by scholars such as Dai Jinhua, Sha Dan, Suo Yabin, etc., Pema Tseden orchestrates a “surreal” scene with a single shot: the shot begins with the grandson, Jamyang, searching by the water, the camera then shakes down to the

water's surface, projecting an image of the grandfather slowly moving forward with a prayer wheel on the water surface. The camera moves slowly, gradually rising, and then reveals Jamyang walking by the water. This represents what Dai Jinhua referred to as the “Pema Tseden-style long take,” (Dai Jinhua, 2023) showcasing a frigid yet incredibly magnificent play of light and tones. It portrays an atmosphere of *bardo* that is inspired by the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (བར་དོ་སྐོས་སྒྲུབ་ཆེན་མོ།) and links it to the perspective of Jamyang, who is confirmed as the reincarnation of his grandmother in the household.

Pema Tseden's explanation of this scene is self-contradictory:

It's the dream of Jamyang, the eldest son, after his grandfather's death. There was a foreshadowing in the previous plot, saying that his grandfather took care of him the best, and he couldn't let go of his grandfather. After the grandfather's death, on the way to the funeral, this child enters a scene that seems to be a dream” (Pema Tseden, Suo Yabin, 2020, p. 92).

Here, it is initially referred to as a dream, but later, it is described as seeming to be a dream. This difference in interpretation arises because this scene is a detailed depiction based on the philosophy of *bardo*, filled with imagination yet entirely grounded. The intermediate state of death (*bardo*) and dreams share similarities, and images from the intermediate state can be seen in dreams. Therefore, although Pema Tseden uses the common term “surreal,” it cannot be truly called surreal, as it is entirely rooted in the foundational knowledge guiding his everyday life.

This kind of spiritual realism certainly has examples in Western cinema, but the most significant example comes from Eastern cinema, as in the legacy of Kenji Mizoguchi to Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Weerasethakul played an influence on Pema Tseden with his films *Tropical Malady* (2004) and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Life* (2010), which found a perfect form of spiritual realism within the realm of experimental film, the New Wave, and Eastern cinema. However, let me discuss Kenji Mizoguchi. In the 1950s, when Eastern cinema first influenced Western cinema, his films provided a global demonstration of the language of *mise-en-scène* in this spiritual realism.

In the genesis of the French New Wave in 1959, Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* ranked first in the annual top ten list by *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and *Yang Kwei Fei* secured the ninth position. This admiration is evident as two films by Kenji Mizoguchi made it to the top ten of the year in *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Jean-Luc Godard particularly delved into a specific scene from *Ugetsu*:

After killing the female ghost, Genjūrō returned to his home. Unaware that his gentle wife, Miyagi, had already been killed by robbers, he entered his house and walked through the entire room. The camera followed him with a tracking shot, capturing his movement from one room to another. He left the house, disappearing from the camera's view, and then returned. As he re-entered the room, the flesh-and-blood Miyagi appeared in the frame at the same moment. Like us, he discovered and felt as if he had seen something wrong; his gentle wife was still alive, beautiful, and healthy. (Godard, 1998, p. 124).

Kenji Mizoguchi juxtaposes the actual presence of Genjūrō with the vivid image of his deceased wife in the same frame. In the Western cinematic aesthetic system, this is considered a surrealistic vocabulary, while in Eastern Buddhist philosophy, it represents the manifestation of the *bardo* phenomenon, entirely distinct from André Bazin's image ontology and *mise-en-scène* theory based on the supremacy of the material world.

The artistic form of Eastern cinema has significantly challenged the established boundaries of Western cinema, granting Western directors an unprecedented space for imagination and a new understanding that transcends the binary of reality and illusion. The profound influence of Eastern cinema on Western cinema in the 1950s not only bridged the essential transition between Neorealism and the New Wave but also made the *mise-en-scène* methods from the East a new common language in world cinema. It undoubtedly served as the wellspring for the spiritual realism of Eastern filmmakers. The composition of the scene depicting the ritualistic release of the grandfather in *Balloon*, in the scene of the 'spirit in the water' sequence, resonates with Godard's analysis of similar scenes. Whether in terms of visual form or expression, they share a common lineage.

Pema Tseden embraced this style of spiritual realism in his later works. However, this style might have been present in Pema's film conception at an earlier stage as well. Starting in 2005, he and I, along with Professor Ma Xiuwen from the Beijing Film Academy, initiated the adaptation project for *Le Lama aux cinq sagesse* (*The Lama with Five Wisdoms*). The novel was co-authored by the renowned French woman traveler, novelist, and early promoter of Tibetan Buddhism in France, Alexandra David-Néel (1868-1969), and her adopted son

Lama Yongden (1899-1955). From 2006 to 2015, Pema Tseden worked on three script versions of *Mipham* (Mipham is the secular name of the Five Wisdom Lama before he became a monk.) This story about the reincarnation of a Buddhist person, which he couldn't implement during his lifetime, is a typical example of spiritual realism writing. In 2009, when *The Search* competed at the Locarno International Film Festival, Pema Tseden participated in the project competition "Open Doors" with [the script for] "An Everlasting Day."⁹⁴ In the same year, the plans for *Jinpa* (then titled *The Killer*) and *Balloon* were both approved.⁹⁵ Hence, the stylistic differences between the early and later periods of Pema Tseden's films are majorly influenced by the production conditions. *Mipham* may have preceded films before *Soul Searching*, and *An Everlasting Day* might have come later, both possessing the style of spiritual realism where daily life and dreams intertwine, and literature and poetry are inseparable.

During Pema Tseden's life, which ended so suddenly and too soon, he instilled confidence in the future. Over the past twenty years, through his films, be they documentary-style films or works of spiritual realism, he keenly observed the spiritual lives of Tibetan people, providing nuanced and individualized expressions. In this process, confronting severe real-world challenges and internal struggles, his film texts transform into spiritual portrayals of individuals, contemplating and understanding themselves amidst adversity, resistance, and

⁹⁴ Pema wrote the script but never got to film *An Everlasting Day*. Jigme Trinley, his son, is contemplating pursuing his father's project.

⁹⁵ By being "approved," the author means that both scripts were okayed by the China Film Administration, which is a requisite before filming a movie in China.

anguish. Because he avoids offering universal solutions, his film texts, overall, adopt an open-ended narrative where the experience of suffering unfolds continuously.

Pema Tseden often remarked, “The path down to the mountain is also the way up to the top.” Art evolves through experiencing, observing, expressing, comforting, and reflecting on pain, the agony of vanishing happiness, and the uncertainty of joy and sorrow. It articulates the suffering (*dukkha*) (Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, 2007) and is inherently connected to the suffering. Yet, as we progressively comprehend the struggles in life, consistently ponder the origins of pain, and explore methods to alleviate suffering, we may discover a path to liberation, transforming into a wellspring of happiness through the nurturance of life. This represents the fundamental teachings of Buddha within the spiritual tradition familiar to Pema Tseden. It entails a form of spiritual guidance that more or less transcends our common experiential understanding. As British Buddhist historian Warder aptly summarized:

Its principles are neither vague nor mysterious. Extracted from the early Tipitaka now available, a subset of arguments is derived from the most crucial evidence concerning what is essential. These are mere drops in the ocean, yet we are informed that the taste is not different—that’s the flavor of freedom. (Warder, 1987, p. 486)



Pema Tsenden (left) and Xu Feng (right), Locarno Film Festival, 2009 ©Xu Feng

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