

I am Tharlo

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(Translated from Chinese by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani)

Abstract: This prose essay is Baima Nazhen's (Pema Nordrön) personal reflection on Pema Tseden's film *Tharlo* (2015) after she watched the film and feeling stupified for long time until the film unravels to her as a catalyst, helping grasp social changes affecting Tibet and Tibetans.

Keywords: *Tharlo*, ID, cheating, Lhasa, 1980s

1.

After watching Pema Tseden's movie *Tharlo*, everything began to appear confusing. The bright noon sunlight in Lhasa seemed like the reflection of light in a mirror. Despair silently spread in the depths of my heart. I wanted to cry but had no tears; I wanted to leave but had no way out...

I quietly reminisced about Pema's previous movies. Humorous and witty, exulting the beauty of the Tibetan spirit and heart, deeply rooted in Tibetan culture, the characters in his films were lively, pure, and innocent. True and full of details, his early films gave the world

the vastness and fragrance of the Himalayas, the roof of the world. His movies, vividly and thoroughly, conveyed Tibetan traditional culture, popular customs, wisdom, bravery, and compassion. They made me feel that Pema Tsenden epitomized Tibetan cinema. He was the pride of Tibetans and the splendor of world cinema.

It was, however, still impossible to wipe out *Tharlo* from my mind. I came out of the cinema, walked through the noisy Shenli Square, and crossed the street carefully, subconsciously clutching my purse tight. It contained money and the most precious of all, my ID. If I were to lose it, I would be like Tharlo. In that moment, the national pride that Pema's previous movies had given me, had abandoned me. Vigilant, I brought my purse in front of my body and covered it with my hand. I warned myself to be careful at all times, never trust love... All of a sudden, a car honked. In fear, I fell back several steps to let the luxury car speed up. A bunch of people behind me also stepped back letting the car pass by.

In that split second, in shock, I realized that I, we, are all Tharlos.

But at the beginning, I thought I wasn't.

The day before watching the movie, I had read "Tharlo," Pema's short story. It made me smile. It is short, just 7,000 characters or so. Lying down on the warm bed in the bedroom, I contentedly enjoyed Pema's unique writing style: concise, unadorned, and humorous. Almost in every story, he wrote about alcohol. Yeah, how can Tibetans, such joyful people, reject the help of the 'alcohol god' to liven things up!

I smiled again thinking that Pema was a refined man who never drank in excess. Maybe writing about drinking in so many stories was a way for him to experience what would be like to be a man who loved to drink...I effortlessly read several of his short stories, including “The Ninth Man.” No one of them could undermine my relaxed mood until I finished reading “Tharlo.” I decided to read it again, and I felt a bit uncomfortable. I closed the book and thought: Tharlo had an outstanding memory since he was a child; he should have memorized how to recite Chairman Mao’s quotations during the 1960s. Then, he must have met Yangtso, the girl from the hair saloon in the 1980s, just when the reform and opening up [in China] had started. Thinking about this, I felt a bit relieved. The Lhasa of the 1980s has always been remembered fondly by self-loving scholars; so with time, without even noticing it, I also began to believe that it was indeed an era of honesty, where girls like Yangtso would have not existed.

“Maybe those cheating affairs only happened in Amdo, where Pema comes from.” I found a thousand reasons [to convince myself]:

1. The Central Tibetan girls who left agricultural and pastoral areas to work in towns should have felt like they had met a relative the moment they met Tharlo. After all, their own parents, siblings, and fellow villagers were like Tharlo. They were all still back in their native places. Seeing him, they should have felt close to him; they should have looked after him.
2. Tharlo could recite Chairman’s Mao quotations by heart, and he seemed to understand them thoroughly.

The quotations were a norm of conduct, a way of life, even a conviction. But he lived in the grasslands; he should have had his own aesthetic traditions. The appearance of a modern working girl should not have evoked romantic fantasies in him; rather, it should have caused disgust.

3. Most Tibetan farmers and herdsmen in the 1960s in Central Tibet were illiterate, they didn't have the opportunity to attend school. It is impossible they could have known Chinese to be able to memorize, recite, and understand Chairman Mao's quotations. Therefore, those things that happened to Tharlo could only occur in the multi-ethnic Amdo region.
4. In the Lhasa of the 1980s, there was not a single thief. How could there be Tibetan girls tricking one of their own?
5. Even if cheating was possible, the cheater must have been an outsider who had sneaked into Central Tibet, for it's impossible for Tibetans to trick each other.
6. Maybe the short story "Tharlo" was just Pema's prophecy, a way to warn Tibetans that if they continued worshipping money, they would one day harm one another.

Having contemplated all this, I felt those matters were far away

from life and reality and thus drifted into a peaceful sleep.

2.

Early the next morning, I calmly walked into the cinema in Lhasa's Shenli Square. *Tharlo* began to play while I was drinking the cheap fruit juice this movie theater always gives as a promotion.

It was an early show, so there wasn't much audience. After watching it just for a while, everybody was laughing with ease. I also thought this movie would have Pema's consistent style. The moment Tharlo spoke and Yangtso sang, I also began to laugh without giving it much thought. But after half an hour, no one was making a sound. In a daze, I was also staring at the screen: Yangtso was a genuine Tibetan girl! Although she was drinking, smoking, and wearing jeans, her kind face was as familiar as that of any other Tibetan girl! And that Tharlo was not stupid; it could be possible for him to fall in love with Yangtso.

The plot unfolded. The new details and scenes in *Tharlo* that were not in the short story were overwhelming to the point that I was left stupefied. One is written in words, the other is cinematic art. After years of directing, Pema had truly taken the art of cinema to perfection. Every sound and every unremarkable background were seemingly careless but in fact unique in craftsmanship. For example, the husband and wife who went to the studio for a photoshoot: Dekyi, the female photographer whose face is never shown, arranged every single one of the pictures' backgrounds (be it the Potala Palace, Tiananmen Square, or the Statue of Liberty), as well as the clothing, posture, and even the expressions on the spouses' faces. Later on, in Tharlo's simple world of

a shepherd, there were no longer just stars, moons, wolf howls, and the longing *layi* songs. In the lonely black night, when the butter lamp in front of the Buddha flickered dimly, there was a huge electricity tower, standing tall and upright behind Tharlo...

However, electricity and light cannot simply be equated to the luminous moment when Tharlo met Yangtso and fell in love.

But the former shepherdess who came out of the mountains to work in the small county town wanted to travel even farther away...

At this time, I was in awe of every little detail. The hairdryer in the barber shop, the microphone with a wire, the paintings on the wall, the people walking outside, the thermos in the hands of the head of the police station, the lyrics sung by the singer...all flowing continuously like tides.

The storyline was not really complicated, but I felt completely caught up in it... Finally, the movie ended. Yangtso disappeared; Tharlo had to apply for his ID again because he had changed his hairstyle; however, shattered by life and love, he was unable to recite “To Serve the People” fluently any longer.

Tharlo didn’t have an ID, but he was still alive. On the way home or to the county town, his motorbike broke down; he could not go any further. He stopped to catch his breath. Drinking no longer made sense. He took in his hands the double string of the firecrackers he used to scare away wolves and lighted them up: did a shepherd without sheep still need to drive away a wolf pack?

The sound of Tharlo reciting Chairman Mao's quotations echoed like a prayer in the rolling end credits.

3

In a daze, I walked out of the theater. My girlfriend and I walked towards Lhasa's bright noon sunlight, crossed the crowded streets, and headed towards Lukhang Park

At a street corner not far away, women from the countryside were hawking goods at their stalls. In the plastic bags displayed on the ground, there were piles of apples, bought in bulk from mainland traders.

"Brother, I swear to the Three Jewels of Buddhism that these apples were picked from my family's trees."

But that "brother" did not buy them. Turning to the girl on the side who was selling eggs, he asked: "Are these eggs from Tibet?"

The girl selling eggs, similar in age to *Tharlo's* Yangtso, was an authentic Tibetan girl. Her head was wrapped in the typical pink checked headscarf from the countryside. Black sparkling eyes, rosy cheeks, teeth white as snow. She was wearing a thick black woolen Tibetan gown. From the straw frame, she picked up a chicken egg that had a smeared black mark the size of a bird's egg. She then said: "I swear to the Three Jewels and my parents that this is a Tibetan egg laid by a hen of ours that was fed with barley. Look, my grandmother made marks on all our eggs."

The man laughed skeptically, “Does your family grow barley without pesticides and fertilizers?”

The girl looked distracted, as if unable to understand the relationship between Tibetan eggs, pesticides, and fertilizers.

At this moment, my girlfriend and I passed by them, walking at the feet of the Potala Palace by the gate of Lukhang Park. We wanted to go to Lukhang Park to relax for a while. After watching *Tharlo*, both of us felt as if under a spell, confused and uneasy.

“Those Tibetan eggs are fake too; they’re small eggs bought in bulk from mainland peddlers; I’ve seen them with my own eyes!” said my girlfriend angrily. Pointing to the stall keepers selling butter and yogurt outside Lukhang she added, “That butter is fake too, made with potatoes and pork skin. The cream on top of the yogurt is just low-quality mineral oil poured on it!”

“The Lhasa of the 1980s was better!” I said trying to comfort myself. In front of my eyes appeared the image of a *Tharlo* from the era of 80s. My heart skipped a beat.

“Haha, have you forgotten those Lhasa girls in the 1980s who used to run behind Khampa businessmen on motorcycles? Didn’t you write about it in your novels? Who dares to say they didn’t cheat some men of their money?!”

I could not reply to her. I’ve written about it, not only about Khampa businessmen with motorcycles but also those with bulky old

cell phones. I have also written about those Tibetans who in the early 1980s returned to Lhasa from abroad, all of whom were chased by Lhasa girls for their money. After all these years, I had forgotten, until just now, in the cinema, when Tharlo's sheep were bitten to death by wolves, and another grassland Tibetan ruthlessly slapped Tharlo in the face. It felt like I was slapped on my own face, and I remembered everything.

I didn't say anything. Reality had already long changed. I don't say anything because I can deceive myself and be infatuated with the ancient past of my nation.

But I watched *Tharlo*. As if waking up from a dream, as if looking in a mirror, I saw myself.

I am the former Tharlo.

It was when I was four years old, not knowing how to speak a single word of Chinese, wearing a Tibetan robe, suddenly being picked up by my father, my feet leaving the ground, and when my father put me down, I was already among a group of children wearing skirts in Chengdu, Sichuan. From that moment on, it felt like when Tharlo left the grassland. I came to another world made up of photo studios, hair salons, and nightclubs.

When I grew up, I met male Yangtsos, one, or two, worse than Tharlo. I didn't learn my bitter lesson, twice, thrice...

Tharlo's sheep were gone; he did not have an ID; his love and

convictions had vanished. My world was also black and white. That former me, from the former Tharlo developed into the synthesis of Tharlo and Yangtso. Human nature was even more complex, life could not break away from the monochrome.

There are many cables, but not a cultural, so-called, shock. Only a cover. At this moment, I am not only the former Tharlo but also Yangtso, and also the married couple who took photos in the photo studio, living in a totality already fixed, covered, like tiny ants, completely unable to prove my existence.

Sometimes I also fantasize about the future of *Tharlo*. I look in the mirror, and I see the present me, whose head has been shaved by life so many times.

Author's note: The film *Tharlo* was adapted from the short story of the same name by director Pema Tseden. It tells the tale of broken dreams of the lonely shepherd Tharlo, who amidst the twists and turns of trying to get an ID, runs into love. This film adapted from is set in Tibetan areas and shot entirely in the Tibetan language. *Tharlo* in one go has won 12 international film awards.

("I am Tharlo" was originally published in 2015 in Baima Nazhen's personal blog, which is not accessible any longer.)