

A Network of Kindred Souls: Pema Tsenden as Producer and Art Director

Brigitte Duzan

Abstract: Pema Tsenden was mostly known in the West as a film director and as a writer. But starting from 2015, when *Tharlo* attracted worldwide attention, he also played an important part that has gone mostly unnoticed until now: that of producer and art director not only for aspiring Tibetan filmmakers, but also for young Han Chinese directors. This paper traces the trajectory of Pema Tsenden's contributions towards renewing the Chinese 'cinema d'auteur,' ushering in new aesthetics and themes largely ignored in more mainstream Chinese cinema.

Keywords: Pema Tsenden, film producer, art director, Chinese cinema, Tibetan cinema

When Pema Tsenden's short but intense career is discussed, he is most often referred to as a groundbreaking filmmaker who created a space for Tibetan films in the People's Republic of China, and as a bilingual writer and translator. But there is a part of his wide array of activities that seldom receives attention, at least in the Western world: that of a producer and/or art director not only of aspiring Tibetan filmmakers but also of other emerging non-mainstream Chinese

directors. In this way, he has exerted an increasing influence on a specific portion of Chinese contemporary cinema, a cinema that would have been dubbed ‘independent’ some ten years ago, but nowadays would better be defined as ‘cinema d’auteur’—in other words, cinema as art, not ‘industry.’ This means a cinema that longs for the best achievements in terms of aesthetics, and not necessarily in terms of box office. As a result, it is a cinema that survives in China at the margin of the official system, in especially difficult conditions in view of screening opportunities, still more than censorship. In the last eight years of his life, and in parallel to his own and busy career as a filmmaker, Pema Tsenden gradually appeared as a mentor of this young and sophisticated cinema d’auteur on Chinese soil.

2015: Landmark Year

Pema Tsenden’s activities in the field of film production started in 2015, the very year *Tharlo* (ཐར་ལོ།) was selected and screened at the Venice Film Festival. In that sense, *Tharlo* appears as a real turning point in Pema Tsenden’s career: not only because that film represents a new departure in his own cinematography, but also because it marks a starting point in his recognition as a transnational artist, thanks to his own films, but also thanks to the films he helped to conceive and produce.

He started with the films made by Sonthar Gyal (སོན་མར་རྒྱལ།), initially his director of photography.⁹⁹ He had been the art director of

⁹⁹ Sonthar Gyal was the director of photography for Pema Tsenden’s *The Silent Holy Stones* (སྒྲིང་འཇགས་ཀྱི་མ་ཆེན་འབྲུག།) (2005), *The Search* (འཆོལ།) (2009), and *Old Dog* (བློ་ནན།) (2011). In 2011, he

Sonthar Gyal's first film, *The Sun Beaten Path* (དབུས་ལམ་གྱི་ཉི་མ།), released in March 2011, but in 2015 endorsed the role of a producer, since he coproduced Sonthar Gyal's second film, *River* (གཙང་ལོ།), which was in competition at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2015.



Poster of the film River

Later, in 2020, Pema Tsenden worked as the executive producer of Dukar Tserang's (གདུགས་དཀར་ཆེ་མེད།) first film: *A Song for You* (ཁོ་དང་ཁྱེ་ཡི་གཏེར།)—a film coproduced among others by Xstream Pictures, Jia Zhangke's production company.¹⁰⁰

started his own career as director.

¹⁰⁰ Dukar Tserang was Pema Tsenden's sound director; he teamed up with Sonthar Gyal and worked with him for Pema Tsenden's first feature films as mentioned above but continued to work on the sound of *Tharlo* (2015) and *Jinpa* (2018).

By this time, Pema Tseden had developed as a producer and art director and had already become an advisor to young promising Chinese filmmakers, most often helping them make their first films, as we will now turn to see.

2016-2017: Mentor of Young Filmmakers

Pema Tseden was one of the executive producers of the first feature film made by Wang Xuebo (王学博): *Knife in the Clear Water* (《清水里的刀子》), released in October 2016 at the Busan Film Festival (South Korea), where it was awarded the first prize (ex aequo) in the New Currents section. It is worth noting that Wang Xuebo had himself been one of the producers of *Tharlo*.

Knife in the Clear Water was adapted from a short story of the same title by Shi Shuqing (石舒清), a Hui writer from the Northwestern province of Ningxia whose stories reflect his Muslim culture. The particular story chosen by Wang Xuebo is that of an old man who has lost his wife; to celebrate her death's anniversary, his son wants him to sacrifice the old ox which has been his life companion. The film is a series of austere still-life pictures as a kind of mirror of the old man's simple life and environment. It reflects, in subdued colors, the local culture and way of life which are gradually disappearing, and in that sense can be considered similar to Pema's films, in content and form.



A still of father and son from the film *Knife in the Clear Water*

In July of that same year 2016, Zhang Dalei (张磊)'s first film, *The Summer is Gone* (《八月》), was in competition at the Xining FIRST Film Festival.¹⁰¹ Zhang Dalei's film was awarded a double prize at the Golden Horse Film Festival in Taipei in November and was selected at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2017. Pema was the executive producer of this film, and more than that: it is a black-and-white film and can thus be considered as one of the many films inspired by *Tharlo*. *The Summer is Gone* has the aesthetic feel of a souvenir album or a scrapbook of pictures of the last summer of a boy's childhood.

¹⁰¹ That festival is located in the capital city of Qinghai province, on the fringes of the Amdo Tibetan region. It is the last survivor of the festivals of Chinese 'independent' cinema of the past and has become over the years one of the most important promoter of young filmmakers in China.



A still depicting the last stroll of the summer in *The Summer is Gone*

The cinematographer of Zhang Dalei's film was none other than Lü Songye (吕松野), that is, the director of photography who had just filmed *Tharlo*. But, in *The Summer is Gone*, the black-and-white is different, with various tints and shades: it has a sepia tinge to allude to the memory of the 1990s, a greyish hue like mist for daily remembrances, and even expressionist tones for night scenes. The actors are non-professional, which gives a further impression of being close to Pema Tseden's film universe.¹⁰²

Pema Tseden then helped produce a Tibetan documentary: *Daughter of the Light* (འདྲ་གྱི་བྱ་མོ།, 《光之子》), second documentary of Khashem Gyal (མཁའ་བྱམས་རྒྱལ།, 卡先加).¹⁰³ This *Daughter of the Light* is

¹⁰² See Clarence Tsui's review, see <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/summer-is-gone-ba-yue-914912/>

¹⁰³ Khashem Gyal is one of the first Tibetan documentary filmmakers. See introduction by Françoise Robin for the Jean Rouch festival: <https://www.comitedufilmethnographique.com/>

a young 13-year-old Tibetan girl whose parents are divorced and have remarried; she lives in an orphanage, spends her holidays with her grand-parents, but since she has hardly ever seen her father, she decides to go and look for him. The film was awarded the *Colors of Asia* prize at the Tokyo Docs festival in 2017.



Poster of the film *Daughter of the Light*

Khashem Gyal made another documentary about the same little girl, which was in competition at the Xining FIRST Film Festival in 2019. Meanwhile Pema Tseden made *Jinpa* (ལག་དམར།, 《撞死了一只羊》) and *Balloon* (དབུགས་ལྗང་།, 《气球》), which were released respectively in 2018 and 2019, both at the Venice Film Festival.



Khashem Gyal (left) in the office of Osong Media (the company he created with his two partners in Xining), August 2019, ©Françoise Robin

Pema Tseden went back to production thereafter, as executive producer of two quite exceptional first films by Chinese directors released in 2020, in addition to Dukar Tserang's own film.

2020: Executive Producer of Two Chinese Films

The Land in the River (《河洲》) was the first film of a young filmmaker, Zeng Jiangui (曾建贵), born in 1992. The film has been selected by the Film Lab of the FIRST Film Festival of Xining in July 2020, and then in September of the same year, was awarded a Creative Award in the Venture Capital section of the 4th Pingyao Film Festival.

The title of the film refers to the name of the district of the Gansu province where Zeng Jiangui was born: the autonomous

Dongxiang district (甘肃东乡族自治县) which is the home of the Dongxiang people, one of the fifty-six official ethnic groups of China and, according to official statistics, one of the poorest and least literate. This film is the first one to depict a group of women and children from this ethnic group, with all the dialogues in their specific language, which belongs to the family of the Mongolic languages.¹⁰⁴ As such, this film was intended and conceived as a way to defend and promote the Dongxiang people's culture and language. In this way, Pema Tseden's role as executive producer of *The Land in the River* appears as a move to help defend a minority culture and language threatened by the dominant culture and language in contemporary China, in an approach similar to his defense, in his own films, of the Tibetan culture and language.



Poster of the film *The Land in the River*

¹⁰⁴ See https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_LS_141_0071--new-linguistic-practices-in-dongxiang.htm#:~:text=The%20Dongxiang%20language%20is%20regarded,Field%201997%3B%20Bao%202008

Damp Season (《回南天》), which Pema Tsenden produced that year too, was the first feature film of another young Chinese filmmaker: Gao Ming (高鸣). The idea was here to help a young beginner. The film was produced by Factory Gate, a production company created by veteran film lovers in 2017 which has also produced *Balloon*. It is to be noted that the executive producer of *Damp Season* was Geng Jun (耿军), a very subtle filmmaker who is noted for his specific type of humour noir. In 2016, Geng Jun was also the executive producer of the film made by Wang Xuebo. They all appear as a kind of artistic family, related by similar aesthetic objectives and criteria.



Poster of the film *Damp Season*

2021: Four Productions

In 2021, Pema Tsenden had diversified his production activities, starting with another debut film by a Tibetan filmmaker, Loden (ལོད་ནང་ལྷ་མོ་),

洛旦): *Lost* (དཀྱུན་ལམ་ཐིམ་མོ།, 《迷路》), released in April that year.¹⁰⁵ Pema was the producer of this film, and it was coproduced by Mani Stone Pictures, the production company that was created for *Balloon*. The story of *Lost*—two shepherd families fighting to save their herds of yaks from a snowstorm—is typical of Pema’s film universe and is also a black-and-white film. It was presented at the Hong Kong Film Festival as a “breathless survival thriller and heartbreaking eulogy to a disappearing way of life.”¹⁰⁶



Loden in his motel during the shooting of Lhapal Gyal’s *The Great Distance Delivers Crane*, Amdo, August 2019, ©Françoise Robin

Loden had played a small part in *Balloon*, that of a rickshaw driver who takes the nun to see her relatives during a summer break. He

¹⁰⁵ That initial version was redone on Pema Tsenden’s advice, which shows that his role extended far beyond that of producer in the stricter sense of the term. In August 2023, that second version was still in postproduction stage (personal communication from Françoise Robin, 15 April 2024, after a conversation she had with Loden in August 2023 in Xining).

¹⁰⁶ Françoise Robin, personal communication, September 2023.

was also involved in the shooting of *The Great Distance Delivers Crane* by Lhapal Gyal (on which see below), Pema Tseden's assistant, as he rented out his motel to the crew for the duration of the shooting.



Poster of the film *Lost*

The three other films produced that year with Pema's help are films by young Chinese directors. First, he was the executive producer of *One Man Funeral* (《一个人的葬礼》), first feature film by Chao Fan (超凡), born in 1992. *One Man Funeral* was released at Xining FIRST Film Festival in July 2021. The main character in the film is a forest ranger, who, while patrolling the forest, prepares the funeral of his recently deceased father, meticulously following the precise stages of the ancient rituals. Pema's influence can be felt in the demanding and original aesthetics of the film: it is not only a black-and-white film but also without dialogues, a purely meditative film.



Poster of the film *One Man Funeral*

Before his first feature film, Chao Fan had previously made a short film called *Cattle* (《牲口》) which might as well be one of Pema's stories: an old man has a donkey and a son; the son is studying and borrows money to buy a computer. Years later, the lender wants his money back, so the old man offers his donkey, but he is told the donkey is so old that it can only be given away to the slaughterhouse.

Beyond the Skies (《云霄之上》) by Liu Zhihai (刘智海) is the second Chinese film released in 2021 where the name of Pema Tseden appears in the end credits as producer. This is at first amazing since it appears to be a war movie, not the type of film you would normally associate with Pema Tseden: the story takes place during the war against Japan, as a small group of soldiers of the Chinese army has been ordered to go and blow up an ammunition depot of the enemy within forty-eight hours. The film has been screened in the main official Chinese film festivals, the Shanghai Film Festival in June, and the

Beijing International Film Festival in September. But *Beyond the Sky* is no ordinary mainstream Chinese-style war movie; it is a low-budget film that does not even qualify to be a real war movie. The author of the script is a female scriptwriter, Zhou Jiali (周佳鹂), who wrote a Ph.D thesis on Deleuze.

Liu Zhihai, for his part, claims a “poetical aesthetics” in his filmmaking: the conflict between desire to live and sense of duty, but as a meditation between real and surreal, and again in black-and-white, with images of pure beauty as in a Chinese landscape painting. Pema Tsenden was not only a producer but has also been the advisor for the film’s visual aspects. And again, as in any film by Pema Tsenden, every detail of *Beyond the Skies* has been carefully planned, including the dialogues in the local dialects spoken where the story unfolds (Hunan, Hubei, Southwest of Zhejiang). Liu Zhihai has proposed to call his film a “literary war movie.”



Still of the film *Beyond the Skies*

Among the films coproduced by Pema Tsenden which were released in 2021 must also be mentioned the first feature film made by his son Jigme Trinley (འཇིགས་མེད་འབྲིན་ལས།): *One and Four* (མི་གཅིག་དང་མི་

བཞི།, 《一个和四个》) was presented at the Tokyo Film Festival in November, and was then in competition in Xining FIRST Film Festival in July 2022. The four characters in the film are played by his father's recurring actors, including Jinpa (ཐྱིན་པ།); and the cinematographer is Lü Songye, who was also the director of photography for *Tharlo*. The film is a terse huis-clos which is more or less in line with the present trend in China's cinema, especially among the filmmakers formed at the Beijing Film Academy like Jigme himself. It can be considered as a sub-genre of the present Chinese *film noir*, with technical aspects perfected under his father's advice.



Poster of the film *One and Four*

Jigme Trinley's debut film can also be considered a sort of experimental trial in terms of production. From then on, Pema Tseden's activities have been oriented more specifically towards films made by young emerging Tibetan directors.

2022: Support of Tibetan Directors

Pema Tseden was the art director of *Kong and Jigme* (ཁོ་ཁྱེད་དང་འཇིགས་མེད།, 《回西藏》), a film codirected by Chen Guoxing (陈国星) and Lhapal Gyal (ལྷ་དཔལ་རྒྱལ།, 拉华加), the latter one known for his excellent debut feature, *Wangdrak's Rain Boots* (ཐུ་ལྷ་མ་རྩུང་རྩུང།, 旺扎的雨靴), selected at the Berlin Film Festival in 2018. *Kong and Jigme* tells the story of a Chinese who went to Tibet to work and his Tibetan 'translator'-turned-friend (the script is based on a true story). Two of the actors, Jinpa and the actress Sonam Wangmo (བསོད་ནམས་དབང་མོ།), are familiar faces. Lhapal Gyal has himself served as Pema's assistant for *Tharlo* and *Balloon* as well as executive director of *Knife in a Clean Water*.



Poster of the film *Kong and Jigme*

Pema Tseden was again the executive producer of the next film made by Lhapal Gyal: *The Great Distance Delivers Crane* (《千里送鹤》), released in Xining in July 2022.



Pema Tseden and Lhapal Gyal during the shooting of *The Great Distance Delivers Crane* on the shores of the Kokonor Lake. August 2019 ©Françoise Robin

At the same time, Pema Tseden had developed close relationships with the small production studios which appeared in China in the 2010s and operated like film incubators outside the official circuits (but entirely ‘above ground’), cinema greenhouses like Heaven Pictures which coproduced *Tharlo*, or Factory Gate which coproduced *Balloon* as well as Zhang Dalei’s second film. One should of course make a special mention of Garuda Films, launched in September 2016 by Sonthar Gyal in Badzong (ch. Tongde, Qinghai Province).¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ For a short overview of Garuda Films, see <https://highpeakspureearth.com/poem-this-is-how-we-quietly-work-by-gangshun-with-accompanying-essay-by-francoise-robin/>

Pema Tseden had thus gradually established a network of interconnected, wide-ranging relationships, which contributed to his authority as an influential filmmaker beyond the scope of Tibetan cinema per se; and in return, this authority and these ties helped him find the means to produce his own films. As time went by, Pema Tseden's image as a producer emerged as a complement of his image as a director: the image of a filmmaker determined to promote Chinese as well as Tibetan films, based on the same fundamental quality requirements, with a focus on Tibetan films in the last year of his terribly brief career, as if suddenly came to life the Tibetan films he had been working all along to support and promote.

Works Cited

- Lefort, Julie. "New Linguistic Practices in Dongxiang: Moving toward the Categorization of Youth Language?" *Langage et société*, vol. 141, no. 3, 2012, pp 71-98.
- Robin, Françoise. "Poem: 'This is How We Quietly Work' By Gangshun with Accompanying Essay."
<https://highpeakspureearth.com/poem-this-is-how-we-quietly-work-by-gangshun-with-accompanying-essay-by-francoise-robin/>
- Robin, Françoise. "Regards Comparés: Tibet". *Jean Rouch Festival*, 26-29 Nov. 2012, <https://www.comitedufilmethnographique.com/>
- Shi, Shuqing. *A Knife in Clear Water and Other Stories*. Long River Press, 2011.
- Tsui, Clarence. "'The Summer is Gone' ('Ba Yue'): Film Review." *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 29, 2016.

Films Cited

- Chao, Fan, director. *Cattle*, 2016.
- , director. *One Man Funeral*, 2021.
- Chen, Guoxing and Lhapal Gyal, directors. *Kong and Jigme* [Khong dang 'jigs med], 2022.
- Dukar Tserang, director. *A Song for You* [Kho dang blo yi gter], 2020.
- Gao, Ming, director. *Damp Season*, 2020.
- Jigme Trinley, director. *One and Four* [Gcig dang bzhi], 2021.
- Khashem Gyal, director. *Daughter of the Light* [Me tog dkar po], 2020.
- Lhapal Gyal, director. *The Great Distance Delivers Crane*, 2022.
- , director. *Wangdrak's Rain Boots* [Chu lham chung chung], 2018.
- Liu, Zhihai, director. *Beyond the Skies*, 2021.
- Loden, director. *Lost* [Dgun lam ring mo], forthcoming.
- Pema Tseden, director. *Balloon* [dbugs lgang], 2019.
- , director. *Jinpa* [Sbyin pa], 2018.
- , director. *Old Dog*. [Khyi rgan], 2011.
- , director. *The Search* ['Tshol], 2009.
- , director. *Silent Holy Stones* [Lhing 'jags kyi ma Ni rdo 'bum], 2005.
- , director. *Tharlo* [Thar lo], 2015.
- Sonthar Gyal, director. *River* [Gtsang po], 2015.
- , director. *The Sun Beaten Path* [Dbus lam gyi nyi ma], 2011.
- Wang, Xuebo, director. *Knife in the Clear Water*, 2016.
- Zeng, Jiangui, director. *The Land in the River*, 2020.
- Zhang Dalei, director. *The Summer is Gone*, 2016.



Pema Tsenden and Brigitte Duzan, Paris, February 2019 ©Françoise Robin