

An Excerpt from ཡལ་མེད་རྟག་པའི་བད་མ། The Immortal Pema Gangzhun

(Translated from Tibetan by Stanzin Lhaskyabs)

Abstract: This text is excerpted from Chapter 2 of Pema Tseden's forthcoming biography in the Tibetan language ཡལ་མེད་རྟག་པའི་བད་མ། (*The Immortal Pema*) by Gangzhun. He recalls a discussion on filmmaking with Pema Tseden in the dormitory of the Northwest University of Nationalities, Lanzhou (PRC), where the two were students in 2001. Gangzhun reveals to us how Pema Tseden came to define his goal of filmmaking, finally enrolling himself in Beijing Film Academy.

Keywords: literature, filmmaking, Northwest University of Nationalities, Beijing Film Academy

Filmmaking: Resolution and Study

On a day in the fourth month of the year 2001, at around 2:00 p.m., an intense discussion on filmmaking took place between two young Tibetan men in room number 301 of master students' dorm at the Northwest University of Nationalities located in the city of Lanzhou,

Gansu province. On this day the sprout of a full-fledged Tibetan cinema started to bloom.

Those two young men were Pema Tseden and myself. We were just thirty years old then. When I was in third year, writing my master's dissertation, Pema was a first-year student.

That afternoon, Pema visited my room and asked, "Do you have any free time? If so, I would like to have a chat with you as I don't have afternoon class." "I don't have any specific work, except writing my dissertation. I surely have time for a chat", I replied, while getting up, and I offered him a seat. As both of us were interested in literature, first we spoke about that topic. We discussed at ease about our experiences, feeling and impressions of reading various foreign literatures, our evaluation of these works, and also about various fundamental sources. Then we had a short discussion about literature in China. In the end, we exchanged about Tibetan literature: we started with literature of Tibet, literature in Tibetan, authors from Tibet, and authors who wrote in Tibetan, among other topics. We also discussed about the past accomplishments of Tibetan literature, its present condition, and analyzed and compared the direction it could take in the future. After that, Pema said, "In present times, it is difficult to depict rapid social changes through the art of writing alone. Even if it does, people speaking different languages [other than Tibetan] cannot read them, so this creates a major limitation. If we want to introduce truthful and thorough representations of Tibet to the world, then movies are the best medium to do so." He continued, "Movie is a powerful medium that unites sound, image, and words, and which is not limited by any particular race or language. So, I cannot refrain my desire to make

films.” Pema’s admission to university the previous autumn meant that we had had the good fortune to both meet for regular interactions and, time allowing, we always discussed about culture, but mostly about literature. In our exchanges, he would reiterate time and again his desire to make films, so that one day I was not so much surprised to discuss about filmmaking as moved by his determination. I said, resolutely: “What you said is really true. If you engage in filmmaking in the future, I will also contribute at my best.” At that time two of my dormmates Thawa Tadon and Dolha too arrived.

Thawa Tadon joined our conversation and said, “If we can introduce our community through the medium of movies, it will bring lots of advantages internationally.” Dolha further added, “That way we can challenge numerous representations that do not accord to reality.” Witnessing our high esteem for filmmaking, Pema was delighted and said, “I will definitely learn filmmaking.”

This is how Pema thus clearly defined his objective of striving towards filmmaking. In retrospect, I wonder if, on that day, Pema did not take on his shoulders a responsibility too heavy for an ordinary person to commit to! We were young men then, so we could not imagine the incoming obstacles. But maybe Pema had already thought about them.

In the seventh month of that year, after graduation, I worked as a teacher at Southwest University for Nationalities, Chengdu. After a few months, I left my position as I landed a job in an American foundation. Meanwhile, both Pema and I continued our discussion either on the phone or in-person. One day, in the year of 2002, Pema

called me from Lanzhou and informed me, “All my classes are over. I am free for a while now. I am planning to go soon to Beijing to inquire about film schools.” I replied, “Okay, if you need any help, do let me know.”

After a few days, Pema came to see me and shared how he could pursue further studies at Beijing Film Academy. I was elated and I sincerely wished him the best of success: “Your dream has come true now, wish you all the best!” Later that evening we had a small party.

In the ninth month of that year, Sir Pema Tseden-la officially enrolled himself in the Department of Scenario and Direction, at the Beijing Film Academy. I gifted him an amount of five thousand Yuan.



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