

Dear Pema Tseden

Chen Danqing

(Translated from Chinese by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani)

Abstract: In this prose essay written in days after receiving the shocking news of Pema Tseden's untimely passing, Chen Danqing, a Chinese American painter and art critic, reflects on what made Pema's films different from those in the mainland China. Chen Danqing commends Pema's unparalleled understanding of films, people, and Tibet, while reminiscing his interactions with Pema.

Keywords: short stories, *Tharlo*, *Silent Holy Stones*, *The Search*, *Old Dog*, *Jinpa*, *Balloon*

Today at noon, I received a short video from a Pema Tseden's film on my phone. In the video, Tharlo, the shepherd who could not get a wife, was reciting Mao Zedong's essay "To Serve the People" in a Tibetan—accented Mandarin, muttering, as if praying, without missing a word. Occasionally, the camera focused on the lamb, sucking milk.

All men must die, but death can vary in its significance. The ancient Chinese literati Sima Qian said, "Though death befalls all men alike, it may be weightier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather."

The video was three minutes and seven seconds long. I watched it in silence and could not help but smile, and then I stopped immediately—Pema was no more. Yesterday at noon, we had all received a piece of news that nobody wanted to believe. It is evening now, and the actor Huang Xuan sent me a voice message. Just two months prior he was in Qinghai filming with Pema. Sobbingly, he said: “I have never met anybody as nice as him. He was like a father to me.” Tomorrow he would fly to Lhasa to bid farewell to his teacher Pema.

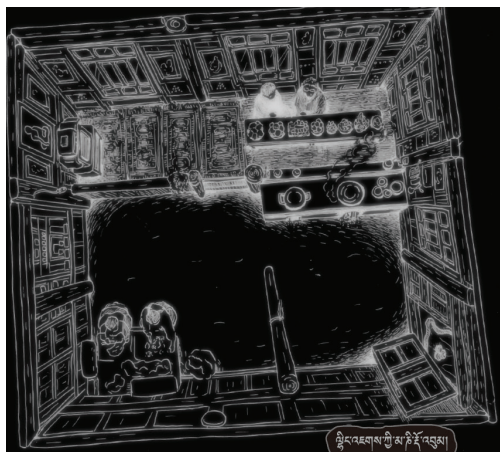
Last year Pema published an anthology of short stories, and he asked me to write the foreword. Even though I had never commented on novels, I did my best to write the foreword, because I love Pema Tseden’s movies, and his short stories were the precursor to his films. I was planning on publishing my miscellaneous writings soon, and when I was editing the files, including the foreword, Pema collapsed. They say that suddenly he felt undisposed due to lack of oxygen and died. He was fifty-three years old.

I love Pema’s films. I do not possess the academic qualifications to comment on them, but I have watched almost all his movies. I am willing to boldly say that Mainland China does not have filmmakers like him. None of the various techniques, tricks, and excitement used in Mainland China’s movies prevail in his films. So, what does he have instead? When I heard the devastating news yesterday, all his movies passed through my mind one by one, including *Tharlo*.

It is a black and white film that starts with a whole recitation from memory of a passage after which Pema starts narrating straightforwardly (why is it so difficult nowadays to find a movie that

honestly and simply tells a story!) until the simple-minded Tharlo ends up without a penny. Since one could ruin this kind of ending if one were not careful, I thought, “how will Pema bring it to a close?” Tharlo rides his worn-out country motorcycle into the mountains, rides and rides until he stops...for what purpose? No spoilers, please look for it and watch it yourself.

His first film, *Silent Holy Stones*, was too unadorned. I suppose no movie theaters would have shown it, but I personally wanted to watch it again just to observe how straightforward the narration was, like in Bresson’s *Mouchette*, Truffaut’s *Small Change*, or even in Olmi’s *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*. At the end, the protagonist, the young monk, runs from the mountain ridge (with the long shot following him from the left of the screen), trotting along, his silhouette sometimes blocked by trees, until he finally jumps and hurries into the temple; the temple buzzing with the sound of prayers. The boy is late. The movie ends.



A scene from *Silent Holy Stones*, illustration by Kuranishi ©Sernya magazine

The film expects an audience as pure and kindhearted as the child (the young monk was mesmerized by *Journey to the West*, the series he had watched on TV). I assume there must be spectators like these. I asked Pema for the audio of the boy's prayers that accompanied the credits at the end of the film—the boy's indistinct muttering. I still have this chanting on my phone. It was not because I had an interest in Tibetan Buddhism, but because when I heard it, I realized it had a brightness in the heart that I had lost long ago, something that was not in me any longer. Later, I listened to it a couple of times but no more. It can be scary when a child's voice like this in a moment can remind you that your innocence has been long lost.

The film *The Search* alludes to Drime Kunden, the prince in the old traditional Tibetan opera who gives his own eyes to a blind beggar. In Pema's story, a film production team finds a girl, who is supposed to be the most beautiful in the village, to play the female protagonist in a film based on this opera. The girl leans on the door and shyly, sings a few lines of a song, so beautifully that it surprises everybody. She says she would only agree to take the lead singer role if she can perform with the male singer with whom she used to work. They used to be lovers, but he ended the relationship and moved to another place to become a teacher. Now she is on her way to look for him and demand an explanation.

The production team does not understand the details of the situation well, but they decide to give her a ride. The man sitting in the front seat starts talking in depth about his own failed love story, while the girl in the back seat listens in silence, lost in her own thoughts.



A scene from *The Search*, illustration by Kuranishi ©Sernya Magazine

When they finally arrive, a young man sitting behind a desk rises to greet the visitors and realizes that she is behind them. After this, do you think that what follows is the impassionate conversation between the heart-broken girl and the heartless boy? No, Pema does not do that. The camera focuses on the school courtyard crowded with students. The lovers stand in the distance, underneath the basketball hoop.

Too many girls, boys too, have encountered similar experiences, but in the film, we never get to know what the two of them said; we don't know if the girl got the explanation; we have no idea if they will get to work together...In the next images, the girl returns without saying a word and leaves with the car.

Pema understood people, and in this scene, I realized that he also understood film.

Another movie that theaters would not consider is *Old Dog*. Did Pema ever read Turgenev's "Mumu"? Flaubert said "Mumu" was the most touching novella in the world, but the fate of the old dog is completely different from that of Mumu. It is not moving. When I saw the old man slowly tying the old dog to the wooden post, turning his face the other way, walking away from the dog, step by step, while pulling the rope tighter and tighter...I stood up from my seat not knowing what to do.



A scene from *Old Dog*, illustration by Kuranishi ©*Sernya* magazine

In *Jinpa*, when the leading male character, that formidable avenger, imagines himself branding his knife, Pema uses a series of fuzzy, slow-motion shots, but in the end, nothing happens. This is a technique that only a filmmaker who understands the classic novel,

who is a writer himself, could use. Remember the driver's girlfriend, the station owner? Pema really knew how to instruct actors. In his next movie, *Balloon*, this captivating actress suddenly becomes a timid peasant woman. If Pema hadn't told me, I would have never recognized her.

In the next one, *Balloon*, the heartbroken girl becomes a nun. She unexpectedly meets her former boyfriend, who has already made their love story into a novel. She so wishes to read this book, but her timid sister snatches it away and throws it into the furnace to burn (the glasses of the ashamed ex-boyfriend suddenly fell off when he replies to the reprimand of the sister). The temperament of Pema's previous works converges with this one to a greater extent and ambition. His narrative, however, remains equally calm. With the scenes where the child holding the balloon runs, disappearing on the other side of the hill, and we see the balloon ascending (such a successful camera movement!), Pema seemed to have found a new dimension in his films—a dimension that foretold the heights that his future films might reach, but he passed away.

Now, I am waiting to watch Huang Xuan's appearance in *Stranger*, Pema's posthumous work. Huang Xuan said that he shed tears during a series of shots filming a mountain range. Is he saying that maybe he was somehow crying in advance for Pema's demise? Today at noon, Huang Xuan sent a voice message saying that he saw Pema behind a cloth curtain (very peaceful, as if he were asleep). Starting tomorrow, a lot of people will crowd around Pema and after praying, they will circumambulate Lhasa. Tibetans think that to pass away in Lhasa represents the highest form of contentment.

Among all the film directors I have met, it was Pema's calm, introvert, and modest disposition as well as appearance that was most reminiscent of an intellectual. He poured into his films all his imagination and inner world, together with a vision of Tibet informed by what he had learned in the mainland. I saw him in every one of his characters. Many times, while seated from across him, I asked myself what his brain was thinking at that moment. After the public screening of *Balloon*, I asked him: "How did you manage to film the sheep mating? It must have been very difficult." He softly replied: "It was OK. I found a way." I asked him what books he read, and he said books that were not related to literature and film. I asked what movies he watched when he was a child in his village, and he mentioned Chaplin. Ah, Chaplin! I then realized why he understood and was so loyal to the soul of the common folk, and how he could render it not through the exaggeration of its sorrows, but in a way that made people smile with candor and kindness. The moments when I smiled in his films were those that permeated Pema's characteristic calm, introversion, and modesty.

Pema mentored several young people who have become film directors as well, including his successful son. This must be such a difficult time for them. And there will still be painful days ahead. It was Pema who let Tibet be heard and be seen. That half of the story he told will of course continue, but Pema will no longer narrate it.

His demeanor standing there, so kind, so good-looking. In 2021, Pema came all the way to the suburbs of Beijing to see my Tibetan group art exhibit. I did not feel honored; on the contrary, I felt ashamed. Those paintings are just but a mere glimpse of Tibet because

my knowledge of the Tibetan plateau is very superficial. Pema's films are the real flesh and blood of Tibet. A nation taking its own films to face the world with unspeakable countenance and dignity. Pema was the pioneer in embodying this dignity.

May 9-10, 2023.

(The Chinese version of the essay was published on the website of Tengxun Holdings Limited.)

Works Cited

Mao, Zedong. "To Serve the People." [Wei renmin fuwu]. *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*. Vol. III, Foreign Languages Press, 1967, pp. 227-237.

Turgenev, Ivan. "Mumu." Turgenev, Ivan. "Mumu." Translated by Richard Hare, The Project Gutenberg EBook, 2014, www.gutenberg.org/files/7027/7027-h/7027-h.htm. Accessed 24 April 2024.

Films Cited

Bresson, Robert, director. *Mouchette*, 1967.

Olmi, Ermanno, director. *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* [L'Albero degli zoccoli], 1978.

Pema Tsenden, 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. *Stranger* [Sing spang bkra], forthcoming.
- , director. *Tharlo* [Thar lo]. 2015.
- Truffaut, François, director. *Small Change* [L'Argent de poche], 1976.
- Yang Jie et al., director. *Journey to the West* [Xiyouji], 1986.