

This Half of the Story Will be Remembered for a Long Time

Lung Rinchen

(Translated from Chinese by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani)

Abstract: In this six-tiered prose essay, Lung Rinchen writes about his disbelief and how the news of Pema Tseden's demise came to him, his trip to Hoh Xil with Pema Tseden highlighting the difficulties of altitude, their meeting with Dhondup Gyal and how this literary giant influenced Pema Tseden, the recurrent folk element in Pema films, his travel with the actress Yangshik Tso to Lhasa to pay their last respects to Pema Tseden, and the new generation filmmakers' responsibility to tell the rest half of the story.

Keywords: altitude, Hoh Xil trip, Dhondup Gyal, Tibetan popular culture, new generation

“I Also Think It Can't Be True”

The ANU group, which became popular on the internet with their song “Fly,” is originally from Nangchen, Yushu (Qinghai province). Zhang Yimou liked this song, and he featured it at the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics. As a result, they became famous and started to appear frequently in various talent shows.

Glory and failure, however, come and go. It is like riding a roller coaster: a succession of ups and downs, surprises and dangers. After years of much work, they realized that they were getting further and further away from their original musical dream. That is when they heard the call from their birthplace.

In 2022, Gongba, one of the members of ANU, returned to Nangchen to fund a culture and art school. They invited me to participate in the opening ceremony of the school on May 8, 2023. On the morning of May 8, I took a plane from Xining to Bathang Airport in Yushu. When the airplane landed and I had a phone signal again, dozens of missed calls popped up on my screen. It surprised me and I did not know what was going on until I read a WeChat message from a friend asking: “I heard something bad happened to Pema Tseden in Lhasa. Do you know something about it?” For a moment, I was petrified. My first reaction was to think it was fake news; an unscrupulous trick made up by an unethical blogger to gain internet attention. But then my mood turned bleak. I mechanically followed the crowd of people outside the airport. The friend who came to pick me up had brought a *khata* to greet me, but I was completely distracted so I don’t remember how the *khata* ended up around my neck or how I got into the car. When I realized where I was, the car was already in the middle of the vast wilderness, heading to Nangchen. I spoke to the driver: “It seems that something bad has happened to the film director Pema Tseden.” Then, realizing that I was talking to him in Amdo Tibetan, I made an effort to repeat the sentence in Kham Tibetan. The driver moved his head towards me abruptly and said in Chinese: “That’s not possible.” The driver’s words gave me some comfort. I nodded and answered: “I also think it can’t be.”

The cell phone signal was intermittent, but when we crossed a village, the phone gave notification alerts for missed calls and messages. I opened my WeChat friend groups and they were all full of images of Pema Tseden. I hastily closed WeChat. The little comfort I had felt earlier turned into anxiety again. I turned off the phone.

When we got to Nangchen, Gongba and other friends were waiting for us at the entrance of a Tibetan restaurant. Once I got off the car, I looked at Gongba and said: “Terrible news today. It seems that something bad happened to Pema Tseden.” He looked terrified for a moment but then said: “Let’s eat something first.” At the restaurant, I felt restless. I had to be a good guest, but a couple of times excused myself pretending to go to the restroom only to pace back and forth around the restaurant not daring to turn on my phone. They must have realized that I was anxious, because after the fourth or fifth time that I left the table, all stood up and asked me if I wanted to go to the hotel to rest.

At the hotel, after my friends had left, I closed the door and turned on the phone. More alerts of missed calls and messages beeped while a call was coming through. When I pressed the answer button, I could hear a real Amdo voice asking: “Teacher, where are you?”

“I am in Yushu,” I said.

“Did you see the news on the internet?”

“I saw them, but I did not have the courage to read them,” I answered, and as I was saying this my voice choked with sobs. I heard him crying loudly on the other end.

I laid down in the hotel room, my mind full of many memories of Pema and I. In those spotted and inconsequential memories, Pema

was either quietly seated in front of me or walking by my side silently with a smile.

The Trip to Hoh Xil

In 2018, when Pema was done filming *Jinpa*, he returned to Xining and met me at a Tibetan restaurant. That day, as I walked towards the Tibetan restaurant entrance, I saw Pema seated on a bench on the side of the road, quietly waiting for me. His grey hair unkept for a long time, his thin face darkened by the ultraviolet rays of the high plateau sun. As I approached, he stood up smiling, and gave me a handshake. Seeing his aged and meager look, my heart felt sorry for him. In a blaming tone, I solemnly said: “In future, you should not work at such high altitude!” As serene as before, he smilingly said: “Let’s eat first!”

Most of *Jinpa* was filmed on the edge of Hoh Xil, at an altitude of some 4,500 meters. At that time both of us were over half a century old and had been suffering from diabetes for many years. At dinner that day we talked about age and altitude, and we both agreed that from now on we should avoid going to altitudes above 4,000 meters.

Not long after that, I received an invitation from the Hoh Xil Forest Safety Department. They were hoping I could make a trip to Hoh Xil to collect local cultural materials and follow them while they were patrolling the mountains. The idea was to experience and write about their life and work. The Hoh Xil Safety Department originated from the Wild Yak Squadron of the 1980s, and they continue patrolling the mountains just as its founder Kesang Sonam Dargye did. They

have been carrying the tradition of protecting Hoh Xil until this day. I gladly accepted, but they also wanted me to extend the invitation to Pema Tseden, which made things a bit difficult for me. “I will try,” I told them.

That night, I called Pema and told him about the invitation from the Hoh Xil Forest Safety Department. He agreed without hesitation. I immediately told the news to them, and they were thrilled. I received the invitation in March or so. Two months later, Pema called me asking about the trip to Hoh Xil. As soon as I hung up the phone, I called the Hoh Xil Forest Safety Department, who immediately made arrangements. On May 16, our trip to Hoh Xil became a reality. In three pickup trucks, a group of eight of us, composed of five members of the mountain patrol, Pema, his assistant Tsedor, and I departed from Golmud toward the Sonam Dorje Protection Station, the first stop of the Hoh Xil Mountain Patrol. And thus, Pema and I together violated the mutual agreement that we had made not long ago.

On this trip to Hoh Xil, we encountered almost all the challenges and difficulties that a mountain patrol could face: rain and snow, muddy roads, cars getting stuck in the mud more than ten times a day...The worst day was the one we had to drive on a terrain that did not resemble a road at all. Jolting and moving around, one pickup truck getting stuck, the other pickup truck towing, continuously having to go back and forth to try to find a viable path. For a whole day, from 9:00 AM to 11:00 PM, we drove less than 20 kilometers. And of course, there were also camping on rainy and snowy days, eating instant noodles in cold water...We didn't want to throw away empty bottles of mineral water, so we filled them up again with any potable water we could find to use later.

We also saw Hoh Xil in all its magnificence: flocks of Tibetan antelopes rushing to Hoton Nor Lake to give birth; wild Tibetan donkeys walking leisurely, like gentlemen; and wild yaks, lonely and resolute, standing proudly on the snow.

During the trip to Hoh Xil, the life stories of these five mountain patrol members became for us a rich mine of creative source materials. When we had free time, we chatted with these rangers and listened to their vivid stories. We collected numerous audio recordings, videos, and interview notes. We realized that these men were no longer the ‘wild yak team’ of Sonam Dorje’s times. They were well-trained and strictly disciplined. In Hoh Xil, where almost no shots had been heard in more than ten years, they were not dealing with poachers and illegal miners any longer. They had a wider vision and a vast array of interests and hobbies. Among these mountain patrol rangers there were singers, poets, and calligraphers. In their conversations, Hoh Xil appeared broader and deeper. Pema and I decided that we had to facilitate creative opportunities for them, even if it was just writing song lyrics for the singers, recommending their poems to be published in literary magazines, or introducing a good calligraphy master to the rangers, who loved calligraphy.

However, the work had just started, as the story is only half told...²

² In this essay, the author frequently refers to stories that are “only half told” (故事只讲了一半) alluding to the title of one of the short-story anthologies that Pema Tsenden published in China. (CITIC Press Group, 2022).

Meeting with Teacher Dhondup Gyal

While we were collecting cultural materials in Hoh Xil, Pema and I often talked about the past. We had known each other for over forty years. When we were young, we had studied together at the Qinghai's Hainan Prefecture Nationalities Normal School. This school was located in Gonghe county, in the small town of Chabcha. Both of us were literature lovers, thus every weekend went to the county cultural center to read. The cultural center had a reading room with a subscription to literary magazines such as *People's Literature*, *Harvest*, *October*, and *Contemporary Era*. We were constantly flipping such magazines, and from them we became acquainted with many contemporary writers and their works. We visited the cultural center so frequently that all the staff members knew us. At that time, becoming a writer was our common dream.

As luck would have it and to our surprise, we found a professor who wrote novels at our own school. Professor Dhondup Gyal, who had started to write when he was a student, was suddenly transferred from the Central Nationalities Institute in Beijing (later renamed Central Nationalities University) to teach at our small town's school. We had already read in magazines many of the literary works he had penned or translated. His works created a new literary wave in the Tibetan literary milieu. People in the profession said that he was "the Tibetan Lü Xun," or that "until that moment no other writer writing in Tibetan could compare to him." He and his works had a great impact on both of us. Even though he was teaching other students back then, Pema and I would still sit in his classes. It was because of his influence that we went from merely reading literature

to relishing the writing of literature. It felt much like savoring the refreshing taste of new snow.

How deeply influenced by Dhondup Gyal was Pema Tseden? Pema's first movie, *Silent Holy Stones*, was filmed in a small village of Chentsa county, Dhondup Gyal's hometown. That year, the film won the Golden Rooster Award for First Debut Film. When journalists interviewed Pema asking the reason for the location, he answered: "It was to pay homage to Professor Dhondup Gyal, who brought me to this literary and artistic path."

After *Silent Holy Stones*, Pema proposed to adapt Dhondup Gyal's novels to the big screen. He had just graduated from the Pekin Film Academy and came to discuss this issue with me. He invited me to join him in translating into Chinese Dhondup Gyal's works. I immediately agreed and began the translation which took me a year or so to complete, a manuscript of some 20,000 Chinese characters. By that time, Pema was already working on new movies at the speed of a movie every one or two years, so he quickly made a name for himself with his Tibetan-language films and established his own unique identity within the Chinese film industry. Perhaps due to him being too busy, the project of taking Dhondup Gyal's works to the big screen got stranded, becoming "a story half told." My translation of the *Anthology of Dhondup Gyal's Novels* was published by the Qinghai Nationalities Publishing House and the Sichuan People's Publishing House.

The Recurrent Folk Element

From *Silent Many Stones* on, Pema's films traversed Tibetan

popular culture on their road to the world. However, his films have always been thoroughly characterized by a strong folk culture flavor.

In *Silent Many Stones*, this popular trait connecting the film from beginning to end is the story of *Journey to the West*. In the movie, the young monk brings the TV set and VCR player from his home to the monastery to share the series of *Journey to the West* with his master and the young tulku. *Journey to the West* is known to the Tibetan people as *The Biography of the Monk Tangseng*. In Tibet, it has a long history and has circulated widely as a folktale. The purpose of this story in the film is not only to be a thread but also to generate a warm affinity among Tibetans. People see themselves in his films: the kinds of stories, environment, and situations almost seamlessly linked to their real lives, so they feel that his movies are in part an extension of their lives. Each scene and each actor's line elicit from them a knowing smile. Watching Pema's movies make audiences reflect on their past, or maybe experience once again those familiar feelings of a dim and yet glimmering past life.

This disposition towards focusing on the people was perhaps learned from our teacher Dhondup Gyal. The folk character of Dhondup Gyal's novels is a subject always discussed by literary critics. Pema also very much treasured the popular. He made his works thread their way through people's earth, permeated by the scent of mud and grass. Pema even saw this creative endeavor as a kind of pilgrimage, a pilgrimage to the folk. We can see this cherished, pious pilgrimage in nearly all his films. But the popular character of this walk changes constantly in every film. If we say that *Silent Holy Stones* expresses his adherence to folk literature, in *The Search* folk culture is the old

inheritance that reality has discarded and needs to find. In this film, the traditional opera “Drimé Kunden” appears scattered and fragmented, simple and vague—a metaphor for the last refuge of a folk culture that is dying under the pressure of the contemporary discourse. When we get to *Old Dog*, the lonely and yet noisy Gesar epic storytelling becomes the movie’s soundtrack.

This folk trait shines in almost all of Pema’s movies. For example, in *The Sacred Arrow*, it is the story of King Langdarma’s assassination at the hands of Lhalung Pelgyi Dorje; in *Tharlo*, it is the *layi* traditional love songs the protagonist Tharlo constantly sings; in *Balloon*, it is the popular belief in reincarnation; in *Jinpa*, it is an inherited culture of assassination for revenge...

One After Another, Scenes from the Past

Maybe because of the high altitude or because of the sad news of Pema’s passing, I felt extremely anxious. The night I spent in Nangchen I could not sleep until dawn. In the early morning, I got up and opened the curtains. It was snowing outside. The fluttering, heavy snow was slowly purifying the county town. The mountain range in the distance was already covered by snow. In the streets, the thinly spread sprouted trees were already wrapped in silver. This expansive whiteness seemed to mirror the grief felt by heaven and earth for the passing of an outstanding Tibetan son. At this moment, I made a bold and extremely embarrassing decision. I would not take part in today’s opening ceremony. I would rush to Lhasa to see Pema and bid farewell to him.

The actress Yangshik Tso had also been invited to participate in today's opening ceremony. She had roles in many of Pema's films. In *Silent Holy Stones*, she played the role of the monk's sister. In *Tharlo*, she was the main female character. She gained wide recognition for playing the role of a Buddhist nun in *Balloon*. That morning, Yangshik Tso also made the difficult decision of withdrawing from the performance of the school's opening ceremony and coming with me to Lhasa. It is forbidden for Tibetans to amuse themselves in times of mourning, let alone if the departed is your mentor...The school administrators were very reasonable and completely understood how we felt, but Yangshik Tso and I still felt very sorry. In private, we discussed this issue and agreed that we had to repay in earnest the favor we owed to the school. We bought a plane ticket to Lhasa via Xining and left.

On the plane, memories of small details of our past flooded back to me. Starting from that reading room in Chabcha, Pema and I had shared so many experiences. At the end of the 1990s, I was working at the Qinghai TV station. When they created a film and television division, since I had published a few novels, they transferred me there to write film and television scripts. I thought that writing novels and scripts were two very different things, so I asked them to give me an opportunity to learn the craft first. After I was given the permission, I immediately called Pema to share the news. At that time, he was already studying at the Beijing Film Academy. He wholeheartedly supported me and invited me to go to Beijing with him. In Beijing, I lived at the apartment he was renting, went with him to class, and tried to write a literary film script. I wrote a paragraph, and he corrected it, and so on. This is how paragraph by paragraph I finally finished this script. I had basically passed the scriptwriting test.

Later on, Pema and I co-wrote a script that we published in the journal *Chinese Writers*. Although this script won the Qingke Literary Prize and the Yingxiong Ernü Film Script Prize, due to various reasons we never got to make it into a film—another half-told story.

In 2016, the Lūxun Literary Institute and the Huacheng Publishing House jointly conducted a discussion of the work that Pema and I had written together in Beijing. The critics gathered there gave our work the highest marks. To this day I remember the comments made by professor He Shaojun: “Pema Tseden emphasizes narrative, rationality, and wisdom, while Lung Rinchen leans towards lyricism, the emotional, and the poetic.”

The Other Part of the Story Needs Young People to Complete It

The connection that Pema and I had was never severed. Just on the 27th of last month,³ Pema called me to discuss a movie script. He told me that on May 1 he was going to Lhasa. I answered: “Then, let’s meet when we have a chance.” He replied: “For sure.” Nobody could have imagined that our next meeting would actually be to say goodbye forever.

For the last few years, Pema’s movies have been filmed higher and higher above sea level. After *Jinpa*, all his movies were shot at altitudes above 4,000 meters. This is the case of *Snow Leopard* and *Stranger*. The film that was being shot in Central Tibet [for which he

³ The author is referring here to April 27, 2023

flew on the 1st May] was directed by Pema's son Jigme Trinley, an emerging and talented filmmaker. The location was Nagartse county, at an altitude above 4,500 meters.

Pema was like an eagle, yearning for higher places; yearning to take off from a height to soar even higher into the sky.

Lhasa is the objective of a long and arduous pilgrimage for pious Buddhist Tibetans. Pema's pilgrimage has unexpectedly arrived at its final destination, but the other half of the story is yet to be told. A new generation of Tibetan filmmakers needs to carry on telling it. In recent interviews, I have been asked about the future of Tibetan cinema. I answered that if we compare the movies made by the new generation of filmmakers like Jigme Trinley, Pema Tseden's son, with those of the previous generation, these new films have more genre-based and market-oriented elements. They are the ones narrating now the other half of the story of Tibetan cinema.

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Lung Rinchen (left) and Pema Tseden (right), Xining, August 2017 ©Françoise Robin

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