

“While he was alive, we never worried”: Tseten Tashi on Working with Pema Tseden on *Snow Leopard*

Tseten Tashi

(Transcribed by Tsering Wangdue and translated from Tibetan by
Françoise Robin)

Abstract: Tseten Tashi plays the monk in *Snow Leopard*, Pema Tseden’s penultimate film. He visited Paris in February 2024 upon the invitation of the 30th Asian Cinema International Film Festival (FICA), held in Vesoul (Eastern France). Before heading back home, Tseten Tashi was invited by the Tibetan Studies department at Inalco (Paris) for an encounter with Tibetan film fans, members of the local Tibetan community, and Tibetan language students. For two hours on 14 February, he described in Tibetan language his own debuts as an actor and remembered fondly the unique and first-hand experience of having worked under Pema Tseden’s benevolent and professional guidance. He then answered the audience’s questions ranging from the Tibetan people’s relationship to snow leopards to the real monk behind the character played by Tseten Tashi and the fake sheep in the film, from vegetarianism to the problems of shooting films in various Tibetan dialects. He also described in detail the extreme hardships he inflicted upon himself to provide the best performance he could. The exchange ended in an emotional mood, as Tseten Tashi was requested to comment about the future of Tibetan cinema after Pema Tseden’s

untimely demise. Throughout his speech and in his exchange with the audience, in accordance with the Tibetan custom consisting in avoiding mentioning by name a deceased person, Tseten Tashi refers to the director of *Snow Leopard* by his honorary title, ‘Gen-la,’ which can be translated as ‘Sir,’ or ‘Teacher’. The translator has opted for leaving it as it is. His speech and the Q&A are slightly edited for clarity.

Keywords: Pema Tseden, film, acting, Tibet, snow leopard



Still from *Snow Leopard* (2023), with Tseten Tashi (courtesy of TIFF)

My Experience as an Actor in Snow Leopard

(Tseten Tashi’s talk at Inalco)

My name is Tseten Tashi. I am from Nangchen in Kham. I have never studied cinema, but before I played in a movie, I went to work for a year in a Chinese film company. Among my colleagues at the time

was a Chinese film actor named Dang Haoyu.²⁵ He was a Buddhist. He once stayed in a retreat in my hometown. He had performed the 400,000 preliminary practices²⁶ and had already gone all the way to Lhasa by prostrating.

That person had a Chinese school friend who was the producer of Gen-la's movie *Balloon*. That school friend introduced him to Gen-la because he had gone to make a pilgrimage to Lhasa. When Gen-la found out that he was going to make a pilgrimage again, this time from my hometown of Nangchen to Lhasa, he felt like making a documentary about it. Why? Even for us Tibetans, it is difficult to make a pilgrimage to Lhasa. But it is even less easy for a Chinese to make a pilgrimage of twelve hundred miles over four months. In addition, Gen-la's son, Jigme Trinle, was yet to make a documentary. Gen-la thought it would be very auspicious for his son to take this pilgrimage as the topic for his first documentary. He instructed his son to work hard for four months to make a film on the said topic.

When the Chinese actor declared to me, "You will come to do the prostrations with me," at first, I thought I would not be able to do the prostrations all the way to Lhasa. I had lost weight then; so I was a little weak. I said I would certainly not be able to make it, and also, I

²⁵ See <https://www.chinaindiefilm.org/meet-the-filmmakers-2/> for some details about Dang Haoyu (all footnotes are by the translator).

²⁶ Preliminary practices refers to a set of religious actions that a Buddhist practitioner must accomplish when entering the Vajrayana path. It often consists in reflecting about the nature of life and the necessity to engage in the practice, and then in the accumulation of hundreds of thousands of prostrations, mental purification, offerings and spiritual union with one's lama. Its aim is to purify the person's mind and develop the prerequisite qualities for the main tantric practices.

feared that if I felt a little unwell on the way, that would cause trouble to all the film crew. So I refused and said I would instead stay in my homeland for about four months to accumulate the preliminaries while he would do the prostrations. At that time, there was a hermit in our homeland who had been in retreat for eleven years. When I went to ask him for the instructions on the preliminaries, I told him the whole story. He said that I would always have the opportunity to accumulate good preliminaries, but it was exceptional to get so much help when prostrating all the way to Lhasa. After pondering over it for three or four days, I finally decided to go prostrating with him.

By that time, my Chinese companion had already reached a good distance away from my home. If I started prostrating from home, I wouldn't be able to catch up with him. So I joined him by car where he had reached by prostrating, and we then prostrated together. I decided that I would prostrate later from my home to where I had caught up with him, to make up for my late start. When I arrived, he was just by himself, so he was delighted to see me. All types of things happened on the way. They said later that they had shot more than two thousand hours of rough cut. It must be very difficult to edit it to a one to two-hour film. It is currently being made and is in progress. Jigme Trinle is the director of this film. Gen-la was the executive producer; and Tsemdo, Rabten, Akhang, Dolma Kyap were also part of the crew. There was also a monk who helped us carry our luggage.

I met Gen-la for the first time when we arrived in Lhasa. Gen-la, his wife, and his son were waiting for us in front of the Jokhang with *khata* scarves in their hands. I had never met him before, but that day I was very happy to talk to him without any shyness. He asked me a lot

about my past and my goals for the future. Generally, as we were on our way to Lhasa, prostrating, the Chinese man told me that Gen-la was writing the script for the movie *Snow Leopard*. I was a little surprised back then, as a film about snow leopard is exorbitant due to special effects. Until then, no Tibetan had been able to make such a film, owing to excessive cost. So I ask the Chinese man jokingly to help me get a role in that film. And he replied jokingly that he would certainly ask Gen-la.

But in fact, neither did he ask Gen-la and nor did I tell him directly that I wanted to play in the film. But Gen-la looked at the two thousand hours of rough cuts and chose me. Here is how it happened: On 20 August 2021, Tashi, a fellow countryman who had played in the films *Jinpa* and *Balloon*,²⁷ left me a message, saying that Gen-la had chosen me to play in his movie.

I thought I would probably be playing a secondary character in the movie, with few scenes; so I accepted the proposal. Then I discussed it with my Chinese friend, with whom I had prostrated. At that time we were both in Nangchen. He also said that I would probably be playing mostly short scenes. I replied that I would be happy just acting in the movie, whatever the length of the scenes.

But I was unsure, since I had not yet seen the script. Then one day I received it, with a message: “There is a monk in this film. This is the character you are going to play.” I read the script once

²⁷ Tashi is from Yushu and he has been working with Pema Tsenden and other Tibetan filmmakers for many years. He is especially in care of finding casts for the films.

from beginning to end. I thought, "The monk has a major role in the film. There might be another one, and maybe I will play that part of the monk with fewer scenes." I read the script two or three times. But there was only one monk in the film. That frightened me somehow. In addition, the script only reached me four days prior to the beginning of shooting. What's more—the play was going to be performed in Amdo Tibetan, which I did not know at all. So I asked a friend from Amdo to read in Amdo Tibetan the lines I had to play, and to send them to me via WeChat. I listened to his voice messages and thus memorized my entire lines. Gen-la had told me to come to Matö, a place about three hundred kilometers from my home. I was torn between two feelings: On the one hand, I felt some sort of anguish then; but, on the other hand, I had memorized all my lines, and that gave me a little confidence.

I had watched many times Gen-la's movies such as *Balloon* and *Jinpa*. A van was arranged for us to go to Matö. When I opened the door of the van, some actors who had performed in Gen-la's other films, among others Jinpa himself, were already there. That made me even more nervous. In the film *Jinpa*, he was quite scary, so I thought it would be the same in real life. But later, they all cracked jokes at each other and the atmosphere became very congenial. Gen-la who thought I didn't speak Amdo Tibetan had arranged for an Amdo guy to dub me in the postproduction stage after we had finished filming. When I told them I had memorized all the dialogues by heart and he should not worry, they did not believe me. Tashi told me not to say such a thing, because if it didn't work out, it would be shameful. I said I had spoken the truth.

After a while, we all got together and rehearsed. I had memorized the whole play from beginning to end, so I recited it in its entirety. Gen-la said that we should have all cameras and other equipment ready to go there the next day for the rehearsal. I was very anxious. Jinpa and Gedun Phuntsok felt my anxiety and said, “Don’t worry, there is no reason to be afraid.” But this was easier said than done. I couldn’t sleep that night.

The next day, we went to the shooting location. There was a scene in which I had to talk a little before entering the car. After I had done it, Gen-la told me “Start with your lines!” and immediately, my fear disappeared. When playing the role, it felt as if it was real life. After it was over, the teacher said, “It went on well. No need to worry.” When I heard the teacher’s words, I felt kind of confident about myself.

So this is how the shooting started. It was just after the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, and it was the most frightening time. We thought that the pandemic would create obstacles, but fortunately, our location was in a remote area, so the pandemic was hardly felt. It was equally smooth with Gen-la: he was always even-tempered during the shooting. He never showed anger. Even if we sometimes giggled during the shooting, Gen-la never got angry. If we laughed too much, the teacher would just say, “Please stop!” and we all would automatically get our focus back.

As Gen-la directed without coercion, we actors felt a kind of encouragement, naturally. In my case—all my colleagues had studied film before, so I obviously became convinced that I had to work much harder than them. Although Gen-la did not give me specific

instructions, I tried to act as if I was really experiencing the feelings of the character, and I did not just avail myself with mere acting.

All the staff working under Gen-la were Tibetans, except for the one Chinese actor. One of the main reasons we all respected him was that he was a wonderful person besides a wonderful artist. We actors thought we were working very hard, but it was nothing compared to him. If we shot in the morning, we would have a good afternoon's sleep. But we hardly ever saw him sit down and rest or sleep. If he had a little free time, he would read the next day's script and make plans over it. Witnessing that, we naturally really felt that we must really work harder. Whenever, for example, the scenes to be shot were over at noon, Gen-la would read in the evening the scripts that other directors had submitted to him, seeking advice, and he would think about changes that had to be made, etc. To be honest, we never saw him sleep.

Among the Tibetans who worked with Gen-la, there was not much difference between the actors, the technicians, and other staff. Even the actors, when not on stage, carried things up and down, and so on. Everyone was very close and united. In the world of Chinese cinema, being an actor is supposed to be very prestigious, so there is no tradition of them helping the staff. There was only one Chinese actor in the whole film. When he saw us Tibetan actors very close and helping one another, he had no other option than to help us, the Tibetan staff, when he had no role to perform. In Han China, he has thirty million followers; thus, he can be considered rather famous. At the end of the forty-day shooting, this Chinese actor's face had turned totally dark, like that of a Tibetan. We formed a tight-knit community and worked

closely during the shooting, and I think this is all thanks to Gen-la. When he was there, directing the film, the people who worked under him never spoke badly of others or fought.

Snow Leopard was shot in Matö, a place located 4000 meters above sea level. We shot the film in October when the temperature was six or seven Celsius degrees below zero. It was the coldest time of the year. I always thought that since I had no experience in acting, I should try harder than the rest of the people. If in a scene my character had to be frozen, I would go up the mountain an hour or half an hour beforehand, take off my clothes, rub snow on myself; in brief, I really made myself freeze. We had an actress named Yangdrontso who told me, “Tseten Tashi, you don’t have to do that. You can just act as if you’re frozen. If you keep doing like that, you’ll get sick.” But I was so inexperienced in acting that I always felt that if I performed the part of a frozen person without being actually frozen, the fakeness of it would show.

Gen-la’s films are different in the way that we actors didn’t have to make our faces up or anything like that. But when it came to clothes, whatever we were wearing, we had to keep them on all the time, and we did not change them. I wore the same outfit for 40 days, never took it off even once.

Gen-la’s very latest movie is called *Singpangtra* (སིང་པང་བླ་མ་) in Tibetan. This name refers to a place in Bathang, Kham. I don’t know if it has a definite title in English, but if we translate the Chinese title, it is *Stranger*. Gen-la directed most of the movie, but his son, Jigme, completed it. From an artistic point of view “*Stranger*” is even better

than *Snow Leopard*. Jigme said that his late father was hopeful to be selected at the forthcoming Venice Film Festival.

Tseten Tashi's Conversation with the Audience

Student: Is *Snow Leopard* based upon a real story, and if so, where did the story take place? What were the local people's thoughts when it happened?

Tseten Tashi: In the given valley, a snow leopard really penetrated into an enclosure and killed many sheep, and in that valley, there was a monk, known as the 'Snow Leopard lama,' who had developed a special relationship with that animal. These things are real. But I was not aware of them until I played in the movie. Moreover, I have never met the Snow Leopard lama in person. But Dechen Yangdzom, who plays Jinpa's wife in the film *Jinpa*, as well as Gendun Phuntsok, both told me about him and the events, on the shooting. BBC, or perhaps Discovery Channel, contacted the monk when they were making a documentary about snow leopards. The snow leopard would roam around without being afraid of the monk, so the monk helped them to film the snow leopard and they were able to make their film. The Snow Leopard lama must be from Amdo.

Student: The Snow Leopard lama certainly has developed a closeness with his environment. What is this like?

Tseten Tashi: The relationship between the Snow Leopard lama and the snow leopard is not something that other locals can see. I heard that this monk has been enjoying taking pictures of the local

scenery since childhood. So when he went up into the mountains to take pictures, it is as if the scenery and nature had grown up along with him. Moreover, perhaps the snow leopard got used to his red robes and ended up recognizing him. If someone else had gone there, it would have been different. When the monk published online the pictures he had taken, many people saw them and asked who the photographer was. They understood it was that monk himself. When they asked how he could have taken those pictures, they realized that he had a special relationship with the snow leopard.

Generally speaking, it is not only snow leopards that are concerned. Deer, lynx, antelopes, wild cats, wild birds, and other animals can actually be seen not far from or even among monks and nuns who live in remote monasteries or who are in retreat. While the animals do not fear monks and nuns, when we laymen get close, they all run away. This is specifically due to the kindness and compassion of those monks and nuns, I guess.

Student: No matter how many people are at Serta monastery, animals are not afraid of humans and live near them. All monks and nuns there are vegetarians: do you think that the animals sense this?

Tseten Tashi: For me, this is one hundred percent true. For example, in my homeland there is a nunnery. When we look from a distance, we see nuns sitting among deers and antelopes. But when we go near, the animals run away. Also, there is a monastery on the cliff. Every night the bears come down to the monastery to eat. The monks can touch them, and bears do not harm them. They eat everything they need to eat and then they go back up. You may have seen the videos

of this on the internet.²⁸

Student: In the movie, the snow leopard bites many sheep on the neck and kill them. Were these sheep real? You are a vegetarian: from your point of view, what do you feel when you see such scenes?

Tseten Tashi: The sheep are not real. We went to the slaughterhouse and bought the skins of slaughtered sheep. We stuffed them with clothing and made them look like sheep. I felt more comfortable not having scenes in which I had to touch the fake sheep. Yangdrontso, who played the snow leopard in the film, would always scream when she had to touch those sheep skin.

Student: What was your experience of acting in that movie? Do you have plans to continue to act in movies in the future?

Tseten Tashi: I was totally ignorant about cinema before [acting in Pema Tseden’s film]. So when I arrived on the shooting set, I came with a feeling that if I could quickly wrap up my scenes, I would be able to go home equally soon. But when the film shooting was over, forty days later, we had become so attached to one other that separation was difficult. At that time, Gen-la and all my workmates asked me if I would like to act in the future. I had been contemplating that, but because of the huge change [i.e. Pema Tseden’s death], I am not so sure anymore. Before that, Gen-la said, “First, go back, think carefully and then answer.” I thought hard for a month because I did not find it right

²⁸ Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pE8dvtkQnoM>

to say to someone like Gen-la, “I am determined to being an actor now” without a pure determination. So after thinking hard, I told Gen-la, “Please introduce me to a good school where I can study to become a good actor.” Gen-la replied, “As a human, it is most important to make good decisions. There is no need to be in such a hurry right now; take your time.” Since I had made up my mind, I thought I should take a step along this path. I started reading cinema-related books that Gen-la had advised to me and watching carefully a film that had been made before 1936.²⁹ I studied it, thought about it, took notes on my phone. In 2023, when I went to Venice, Tokyo, and so on, I realized that film was indeed a very powerful media. I had heard that Gen-la had a huge reputation on the international stage, but I had never really witnessed it personally. But in Venice, I saw that it was not only us Tibetans but also Italians who were also crying over the sudden death of Gen-la. In the same way, when the film was over, they came over to me, shook my hands, saying “Thank you!” So I realized that what one calls “cinema” is not just an ordinary thing; right? It is very powerful. And I thought that in the future, I had a part to play in it.

I used to think that cinema was mere entertainment. But after my acquaintance with Gen-la, my vision changed. I am now absolutely disinterested in watching fighting scenes. I have reached a point where I feel that the slower, artistic scenes, which show real life, are so much more important. I have watched a great deal of more artistic and realistic films. So sometimes when I watch the kind of films I used to like, I lose interest after ten or twenty minutes.

²⁹ The title of that film was unclear during the interview, and thus, it is lost in translation. Apologies to our readers.

Student: What was the most memorable event in the entire filming process?

Tseten Tashi: I can still remember vividly all the scenes I had to play, but a special one was in which I had to pretend to be frozen after the snow leopard took me up the mountain. Initially, I thought I could pretend to be frozen to perform the scene, but I found out that although from the outside, I could perform the physical expression of what it was like to be frozen, when it came to speaking, and there were many lines, the tone in my voice utterly failed to express my emotions. So I thought I had no choice but to become really frozen. Why? Because forty or fifty of us were coming up the mountain with all the equipment, so it would certainly not be fine not to try my best. So the second day I went up the mountain an hour early, took off all my clothes, and sat down for about ten minutes. Although I was feeling already quite weak, however hard did I try, I still did not feel cold. As a solution, I rubbed my body with the snow on the mountain. So by the time I had been doing that for 20 minutes, I really started to feel frozen. It was so cold that snot dripping from my nose froze immediately, close to my lips, and I could just pull it out in one go.

At that point, I had to talk to the snow leopard and say "You are the snow leopard whose life I saved when I was a kid, right? I never thought you and I would meet on the day of my death. I may well be dying. When I am dead, please eat my body. I may be dead, but my mind will pledge to do charity [by giving you my body]." These were my lines. But when I said them, there were many people around, everyone was very quiet, the shooting was taking place on rocks, and my words echoed. I reached a point where I felt like I might really die.

After I spoke my lines, I felt so cold that I couldn't stand up. Strange sounds came out of my mouth. They said something had happened to my liver. Whatever, I couldn't stand up anymore. I had to be carried by two people from the top of the mountain to the bottom. The next day they said they really thought I was going to die.

Then, after the shooting was over, somewhere around March 2023, Gen-la told me that we had to record again the dialogue "I may well be dying" for the postproduction of the film. At that point, that one line was the only thing I had to say, but I gave a lot of thought to it, because I didn't think it was right to say it unless I was really physically cold. It was in March. It was very cold in Bathang. So I took off my shoes, my socks, my shirt and all, and just walked around. It didn't help. Then, there was a trough full of water for the cattle. I got into it. It still didn't help. Then I put my head in the water and drank. After two or three gulps, everything became black in my eyes. Then, after a few minutes, Gen-la called out to them, telling them to hurry. I had to repeat the line "I may well be dying" many times. Gen-la told me "Tseten, bear it, be strong!" At one point, I almost sobbed, saying "I may well be dying!" And Gen-la said, "Now that's a wrap!"

Sometimes we had to play a certain scene up to seventy-eight times, for fifteen minutes, without interruption. When we reached the thirtieth scene, we were not very concentrated anymore. What I understood later is that we did not know which take, out of the seventy, the director was going to edit in the film. He may even choose the scene you did not find the best among the seventy plus; right? So, no matter how many times you repeat it, it is extremely important to always do it carefully. Now, to return to the part I just mentioned, we went to the

mountains for five or six days, and every time we shot the same scene thirty or forty times. As I did not know which take he was going to select, I acted as best as I could.

A member of Tibetan community in France: In the movie, your Amdo accent does not sound very natural, right? Is it involuntary or deliberate, to show that this is not your native dialect? When you acted in the film, did this sometimes give you difficulties, for instance did it happen that you would not understand the conversations in Amdo Tibetan?

Tseten Tashi: As I said, the script only reached me four days before the shooting started. I already knew Kham and Lhasa Tibetan, but I didn't speak Amdo. Besides, there are big differences between Amdo, Kham, and Lhasa Tibetan; right? So I asked a friend of mine who spoke Amdo to help me with the script. I memorized it. Gen-la, who thought I wouldn't make it in such a short time, had arranged for a native Amdo speaking person to dub me in the post-production stage. For example, Lobsang Choephel, the actor who plays my father, is from Lhasa. He said he would not be able to learn Amdo Tibetan, so he performed only in his Lhasa dialect. In the post-production stage, Gen-la arranged for an Amdo person to dub him entirely. As for me, Gen-la never requested of me that I speak Amdo. But I considered it. I called Tashi again and asked him. He said I should speak Amdo. So I asked him in which specific Amdo dialect I should speak. Tashi said I did not have to go to such extent. So I asked a friend from Golok to read and send me the whole script in Golok Amdo Tibetan via WeChat. I listened to his messages all night and repeated them over and over until I could recite all my lines by heart.

A member of Tibetan community in France: I live in France, and I have seen many of Gen-la's movies, and that gave me some sort of hope. But his sudden death has filled me with sadness. You were fortunate to play in a movie by Gen-la. You must have been extremely saddened by Gen-la's sudden passing away. Gen-la's son aspires to a cinema career; right? Do you think that young people in Tibet will be able to carry on Gen-la's work?

Tseten Tashi: Generally speaking, it was very difficult to make films for people like Gen-la. It took him at least ten years to establish a career. At the time of Gen-la's sudden demise, hundreds of people like us worked in offices that Gen-la has established, and who worked with Gen-la, like me. While he was alive, we never worried at all. No one ever thought that he would pass away so suddenly. When that happened, we all became orphans, and then we were stranded, not knowing what to do. But the work Gen-la has left behind, Gen-la's hopes, we must strive to keep them alive. He died suddenly, but the younger generation raised by Gen-la must carry forward his hopes and live up to his trust. Because the evening when Gen-la passed away, the last message he left for us was: "You, the younger generation of film directors, you must work hard!" This is the last message he sent before passing away. Now, many among us pledge to work hard to make good movies, whatever we do. So, there is 100% hope for Tibetan cinema in the future.

Now, when we think about Gen-la, on the one hand, we are saddened and sometimes cry. But on the other hand, although his death was a great loss to us, we think that Gen-la has finally found some rest. Because he had no time to rest when he was alive. I heard that

he sometimes slept only three hours a night. He was always working. Now, to whom has the loss been inflicted? We are the ones who have lost everything. We have lost the opportunity to study with him, the opportunity to be cared for by him. And this is a huge loss.

Student: After his death, is his *namshé*³⁰ looking for someone to carry on his legacy?

Tseten Tashi: To be honest, all Tibetan filmmakers were given opportunities to meet Gen-la. Whoever wanted to study with him, whoever wished to meet, Gen-la would always give them a chance. So the persons in whom Gen-la saw some potential, he has already nurtured them by educating them.

Student: After the death of Mr. Pema Tseden, many people in and out of Tibet wrote about him and expressed their appreciation in various ways, be it literary or artistic. Many of his friends praised him. As someone who worked close to late Pema Tseden, what is your most valuable memory of him? Do you feel any regret now, looking back? Do you feel, “Oh, I should have done this when he was alive?”

Tseten Tashi: Whenever I think about Gen-la now, the only image that comes to my mind is him looking at me with a smile. As for my regret, here it is: when he was alive, I never managed to thank him in person,

³⁰ This Tibetan word translates with difficulty in Western languages. It means “flow of consciousness” or “spirit.” Tibetans consider that a dead person’s *namshé* will survive him or her and carry on by integrating a new physical body – a process that is referred to as “reincarnation” in English.

but only on the phone. This haunts me. I always feel that if I had the opportunity to meet Gen-la in person now, I would hug him and say, “thank you!” (At this point, Tseten Tashi was choking and became silent).



Tseten Tashi (right) with J.M. Therouanne (left), holding the “Golden Cycle” awarded posthumously to Pema Tsenden for *Snow Leopard* at the Asian Cinema International Film Festival (FICA, France) on 13 February 2024 ©J.M. Therrouane