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PEMA TSEDEN'S TRANSNATIONAL CINEMA: SCREENING A BUDDHIST LANDSCAPE OF TIBET

Dan Smyer Yu

The emergence of independent Tibetan filmmakers in China only began in the twenty-first century; however, their productions are already being premiered and are winning awards at international film festivals. In their productions the cinematic images of Tibetan cultural landscapes are markedly different from their Western and Chinese counterparts. Both the verisimilitude and believability of their scenes and characters point to the inextricability of Tibetan Buddhism from Tibetan cultural identity. Using a case study of the films of Pema Tsenden, the leading Tibetan indie filmmaker in China, this article illustrates the transnational nature of his filmmaking. At the same time it discusses how he cinematically depicts Tibetan Buddhist values being destabilized by the forces of globalization and modernization in the context of contemporary China.

Khyentse Norbu Rinpoche's *The Cup* (1999) and Eric Valli's *Himalaya* (1999) deserve credit for the late twentieth century's worldwide popularization of Tibetan-language feature films. They have particularly inspired native Tibetan indie filmmakers, and the growing number of Tibetan indie directors' acclaimed productions in the twenty-first century attests to their effect. Among the 15 most popular Tibetan-language feature films that the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) lists, Pema Tsenden's *The Search* (འཇོན། *Tsol* 2009), *Old Dog* (ཁྱི་རྒྱ། *Khyi rgan* 2011), and *The Silent Holy Stone* ((ལྷོ་འཇགས་ཀྱི་མ་ཉི་ལྷོ་འབྲས། *lang-jeg-je-mani-dobem* 2005; hereafter referred to as *The Stone*) are the most impressive contributions to the growth of Tibetan cinema worldwide. These films have been acclaimed at Tokyo Filmex (Grand Prize), the Locarno Film Festival (Golden Leopard Award), Bangkok International Film Festival (Special Jury Prize), Pusan International Film Festival (New Currents Award), Golden Rooster Awards (Best Director Award), and Shanghai International Film Festival (Asian New Talent Award), to name just a few. Pema Tsenden's prolific creativity rivals that of Khyentse Norbu Rinpoche; however, his name is not widely known except among scholars of contemporary Tibetan studies and Tibet enthusiasts. Since his first formal production met a global

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audience nine years ago, he has directed over six award-winning films. He is being celebrated as the founder of the New Tibetan Cinema in China (Li 2005), signifying not only the rapid growth of indie Tibetan-language films made by native Tibetans but also a particular genre and cultural theme concerning the current state of Tibetan life in China.

On both personal and professional fronts, as a friend and a teaching/research collaborator with Pema Tseden, I have seen Pema Tseden as a quiet but robustly productive writer and director. His presence among his friends and in the media is indicative not merely of an accomplished native Tibetan artist but also of a public representation of contemporary Tibet facing the dichotomy and interactions of tradition and modernity. In the midst of this, Buddhism stands out to his domestic and international viewers as the defining fabric of Tibetan cultural heritage. Pertinent to scholarly studies of contemporary Tibetan films, Pema Tseden's films have been screened on numerous prominent university campuses in the West, such as Harvard, Columbia, and Indiana; however, very little scholarly focus has been given to the process of his filmmaking. Tsering Shakya's review is the most comprehensive piece concerning the intersection of Tibetan indie filmmaking, modernization, and the changing cultural landscape of contemporary Tibet (Tsering Shakya 2011). As a contribution to ongoing scholarly research on Tibetan indie filmmaking, this article is intended as a case study of Buddhism and film regarding Pema Tseden's cinematic articulation of Buddhism as the defining but endangered element of Tibetan culture in the acts as well as in cultural ambiances and natural environments of his protagonists. My ethnographic narratives and cinematic interpretations are based on my co-teaching activities with Pema Tseden in Beijing and participation in his filmmaking activities as my anthropological fieldwork.

It should be noted, I contextualize this article in contemporary China not to localize Pema Tseden's film career but rather to heighten the transnational nature of his cinematic creative endeavour. By 'transnational', I mean simultaneous interconnectedness of geographic locations, personal and professional mobility, and resources of different regional origins. Here I provide a breakdown of how I see the transnational nature of Pema Tseden's indie filmmaking. *Transnational*, first of all, refers to Pema Tseden's work and life as a bifocal/bi-local mode of being (Vertovec 2004, 971) in terms of Beijing being his pre- and post-production and marketing location, and Qinghai (Amdo) being his homeland and filming site. *Transnational* in this case is also synonymous with a global connectivity (King 2007, 5) that allows him high mobility around the world for pre-production resource gathering and post-production screening activities. In this sense *transnational* further signifies a series of metropolitan and electronic portals that facilitate the attraction of donations and investments from different regions and countries for his intended productions (Lu 1997, 1). Since Pema Tseden's audience members are found across East Asia, Europe, and North America, *transnational* also refers to different ethnic, national, and sociopolitical circumstances and conditions that contribute to the current diverse perceptions of Buddhism as a

Tibetan cultural heritage among Tibetans and non-Tibetans alike (Dodin and Räther 2001, 391–416). Lastly, in the cinematic sense, *transnational* in Pema Tseden's film production is germane to the filmmaker's own agency in utilizing motion pictures to generate public discourses concerning the impact of modernity/modernization on Tibetan cultural heritage.

Building a transnational Tibetan cinema in China

In 2002 Pema Tseden arrived in Beijing to pursue his Tibetan-language filmmaking career. In his early 30s, he was already an accomplished writer. With support from his close friends and an NGO based in North America, he began his training at Beijing Film Academy, the only film school in China. Beijing Film Academy is at the core of 'Chinese Hollywood' which has bred renowned film directors and screenwriters such as Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Xie Fei, Huang Dan, and Zhang Xianmin. Many of them continue to hold honorary or tenure positions at the Academy. If Shanghai in the first half of the twentieth century was regarded as 'Chinese Hollywood', the centre of motion pictures in China now is in Beijing as it is a city concentrated with talent, capital, and state and private production companies. The 20% annual growth of China's film industry (EntGroup 2012) is engineered in boardrooms, studios, cafes, and private homes scattered in different parts of the city. If Bombay is regarded as India's Bollywood, I would certainly call Beijing 'Beillywood', which, on the popular level, is a magnet to impassioned young men and women who feel called to enter China's growing film industry. Very few of them make it, but while many of them are kept on the periphery waiting, a growing number of them choose to make their own productions outside the state-corporate structure. This trend is being increasingly documented by scholars such as Chris Berry (2004), and Paul Pickowicz and Jinying Zhang (2006). Pema Tseden is among those who choose to make their own independent productions.

Scholarly works about contemporary filmmaking in China are abundant. Berry's (2013) multi-volume *Chinese Cinema* attests to the scholarly fascination about the growing diversity and magnitude of motion picture productions in China. However, in the midst of the expanding number of independent productions, non-Han Chinese filmmakers' experiences, such as those of Pema Tseden, are often lumped together as 'minority experiences' (Zhang 1997, 74) and 'minorities films' (Gladney 2013, 93). Scholarly debates on the topic continue to dwell on the macro politics of 'ethnicity' and 'race' in China, often detouring from the actual, varied individual experiences of non-Han Chinese filmmakers. Undoubtedly the politics of China's 'ethnicity' and 'race' matter in Beijing; however, lumping together filmmakers of Mongolian, Tibetan, Yi or any other ethnic or cultural origins as 'ethnic minorities' often inadvertently reinforces the existing ethnicization and racialization of non-Han peoples in Chinese society. This scholarly trend is de facto Han Chinese-specific and thus often overlooks nuanced,

diverse details of filmmakers of other ethnic origins and the complexity of their productions.

It should be re-emphasized that both 'minority' and 'majority' are political constructs in the politics of ethnic identity in China (Gladney 1998, 107). They are not inherent in one's cultural consciousness. The construct intrudes into one's consciousness when one's social space is kept on the margin because of the social stigmatization of one's ethnic and cultural heritage (Smyer Yu 2012, 153). Pema Tsenden often remarks that the pre-condition of his filmmaking is to build a Tibetan-language cinema – not to advocate self-enclosure of Tibet and Tibetans in the twenty-first century but rather to narrate Tibetan experiences of the changing world in the entangled web of China's modernization, the globalization of social issues in Tibet, and the growing fascination Tibet holds in the global public arena. While he scripts his stories, casts his characters, directs his productions, and breathes life into them in Tibetan language, he also encourages his Tibetan peers and filmmakers-to-be to do the same. The way he makes his films has widely been accepted among Tibetan artists who are situated in urban China and yet are globally connected.

In this setting, Pema Tsenden's cinematic creativity is uniquely Tibetan and yet is situated in the transnational landscape of growing cinematic productions in China. Among scholars of contemporary Chinese film studies, the phrase 'transnational cinema' signifies increasing local plurality (Lu 1997, 3) and global connectivity (Tan, Feng, and Marchetti 2009, 3). It suggests that the idea of national cinema no longer stands; the boundary with production capital, creative genres, and the consumer markets of other nations and regions has become porous. In this context, plurality is a self-evident trend in the overall cinematic productions in China as state sponsored filmmaking continues to play a dominant role even as it encounters growing competition from private, independent productions in terms of genres, storylines, and representations of social issues and personal psychological states. These artistic concerns and expressions of Chinese society are increasingly produced not only to meet the demands of Chinese viewers but those of overseas audiences as well. What is more critical is that this consumption-based production is materialized with capital, specialists, and market forces from elsewhere through the conduits of China's global connectivity (Lu 1997, 11).

Pema Tsenden's film career is situated in this transnational trend of the Chinese film industry and can be seen as a part of a pluralized Chinese cinema (Lu 1997, 25) in the fact that his film degree program at Beijing Film Academy was funded by an NGO based in North America which dedicates its resources to the cultural preservation of Tibetans by building libraries and schools and granting scholarships to Tibetan students. This transnational capital was translated into the creative tutelage that Pema Tsenden received from luminaries of Chinese cinema such as Su Mu, Du Qingchun, Cui Weiping, Zheng Dongtian, Xie Fei, and Zhang Xianmin. As one professor recalled to me, Pema Tsenden was one of his most brilliant but humble students as he was particularly willing to start from scratch by

taking undergraduate courses in script-writing regardless of the fact that he was an accomplished writer before coming to Beijing. Pragmatically, his arrival in Beijing was meant to acquire cinematic technical know-how and learn to build a cinema that he and his friends could proudly call 'Tibetan cinema' with a discernible theme of embodied Buddhist practices as a foundation of Tibetan heritage.

Unlike productions by his contemporaries outside Tibet such as *Travelers and Magicians* (Khyentse Norbu 2003), *Milarepa* (Neten Chokling 2006), and *Himalaya* (Eric Valli 1999), Pema Tseden's productions do not present Tibet as a place 'far from the influence of the outside world' (The Cup 1999) with a cinematographic tone saturated with persistently positive aesthetics: the pristineness of landscape and enchanting Buddhist spirituality; instead, Pema Tseden's lenses also encompass places touched by modernity and psyches internalizing non-native forces of change. Tension, negotiation, breakthrough, breakdown, elation, and transcendence are within his cinematic vision of his homeland. The genre of *The Grassland* and *The Stone*, his first two productions made in close proximity of time and space, bear some resemblance to those of his peers' productions outside Tibet; however, they sowed the seed of his own style of realism that highlights multi-facets of the tension between Tibetan Buddhist values and modern cultural practices from elsewhere. Such stylistic realism yields its fruit in *The Search* and *Old Dog*, his two latest award-winning productions. The verisimilitude and believability of scenes and characters in both films challenge non-Tibetan audiences' conceptions of Tibet, particularly how Buddhism and Tibetan civilization are overlaid and enmeshed with each other. Buddhism, in Pema Tseden's recent films, is not a source of spiritual alternatives available for non-Tibetans but is an instrument of identity-reclamation inherently linked with a felt sense of public marginality, nostalgia, and is contentious and yet entangled in the relationship between tradition and modernity among Tibetans situated in China's modernizing landscape.

In my ethnographic work I find that Tibetan students and artists often regard Pema Tseden as the founder of what they called 'the New Tibetan Cinema', connoting Tibetan-language motion pictures directed by Tibetans and not by the state or by non-Tibetan filmmakers. To Pema Tseden's native audience members, the New Tibetan Cinema is synonymous with what they often call 'native Tibetan cinema'—a long-awaited cinematic space in which Tibetans hope to establish their own public representations of Tibetan cultural tradition, customs, and social issues in China for the obvious reason that the public representation of Tibet dominated by the state for the last half a century has engendered pejorative images of Tibet's past and overemphasized the socialist 'New Tibet' (Smyer Yu 2012, 181–182). To rebuild positive images of Tibet's tradition has been a 'Tibetanization' process (Barnett 2006, 30) noted by Tibetan intellectuals, artists, and writers since China began its reform in the early 1980s. Pema Tseden's filmmaking has been an integral part of many contemporary Tibetan artists' collective endeavour. A growing number of Han Chinese filmmakers and critics

have given their recognition of the role of Pema Tsenden in fashioning 'new cinematic forces' (Cui 2009).

In the context of China, the attraction of Pema Tsenden's films, especially his early productions, lies in his positive, Buddhist-centred portrayal of the Tibetan lifeworld. To Tibetan filmmakers outside China, this is not something new but is rather being critiqued as a form of essentialization of Tibetan culture in Buddhist terms (Lopez 1994, 43); however, to his viewers in China who have had little exposure to Tibet's Buddhist civilization Pema Tsenden's films open up a whole new world of Tibetans to the Chinese mainstream accustomed to the last half-century's association of Tibet's cultural tradition with slavery and oppression. In contrast, the cinematic appearance of Buddhism in his films shows its own pattern of evolution from a central social position among Tibetans to the margins due to China's ongoing modernization.

Revitalizing Buddhism in the new Tibetan cinema

Like other parts of China, Tibet has undergone a series of socialist reforms and political campaigns which scarred the cultural landscape and people's psyches. The initial stage of Pema Tsenden's indie filmmaking was an integral part of contemporary Tibetans' collective effort to reclaim their cultural identity. This new Tibetan cinema has become a public venue for a 'Tibetanization' in which Buddhism stands out as the core of Tibetan cultural history. When I was teaching visual anthropology courses on the themes of cinema and cultural identity in Beijing, Pema Tsenden and I regularly co-lectured and led discussions on Tibetan indie filmmaking and Tibetan cultural revitalizations. He often brought in the core members of his production team. In their exchanges with our North American students, Tibetan Buddhism was a recurring topic in the context of their emphatic points about making Tibetan-language films as a critical part of Tibetans' effort to revive Tibetan traditional culture. Pema Tsenden himself often expressed his creative intent to capture 'the tension between tradition and modernity'. To him, the tradition in his films is synonymous with Tibetan Buddhism; as he put it: 'Without Buddhism Tibetan culture does not stand.'

The positive aesthetics of Buddhism in Pema Tsenden's early productions are well expressed in *The Grassland*, a 20-minute film produced as his graduation project at Beijing Film Academy. Before its script had entered the shooting stage, Xie Fei, the former chair of the Department of Directing at the Academy, favourably recommended it for a grant from the Academy's International Student Cinema Fund. He recalls, 'I noticed it [the script] was a simple story but had intricate meanings. A non-Tibetan scriptwriter would not be able to write it as such' (Guo 2011).

In 2007 when I was preparing a film course in Beijing, I read the script again. Xie Fei's reference to the complexity in the story of *The Grassland* indicates the tension and inner conflict between Buddhist compassion and conventional criminal law, which are all embodied in Ama Tsomo, an elderly woman who wants

to retrieve her stolen yak from a suspect but who does not wish to press charges against him because she is afraid it would double his suffering: that of the punishment from his own conscience coming from his Buddhist upbringing and the punishment meted out by the legal system. In the actual shooting of the film, as Pema Tseden shared with our American students, his cinematic portrayal of Buddhism focused on its embodiment not merely in Tibetans' daily routine and social acts but also in the Tibetan landscape. To him, Tibet is an embodiment of the Buddha Dharma. To treat it as such, he prefers wide-angle shots, long takes, and maximum inclusion of both cultural and natural ambience. According to Pema Tseden his cinematographic approach is influenced by Abbas Kiarostami's films in which the landscape of the Iranian countryside is in the forefront of the cinematic narratives: the landscape speaks to the audience as the lifeworld of country folks with changing idyllic scenes of fields of crops, human communities, and the mountainous horizons. In Pema Tseden's case, his earlier films express how Buddhism marks both Tibetan natural landscape and built environment as the inner spiritual force of Tibetan culture.

For instance, *The Grassland* begins with Pema Tseden's lens following a gliding *goud* (གློ་བུ་), a Himalayan Griffon, in the depthless blue sky. These birds are also known as *hsa-goud* (ཁ་གློ་བུ་) or sky burial vultures in Tibetan. Sky burial or *hsa-dor* (ཁ་གློ་བུ་) in Tibetan literally means 'giving offerings to birds'. Pema Tseden's lens traces the lone gliding vulture until it fades into the sky, and then the scene tilts down from the sky to a half-frozen creek on an expansive wintry grassland scattered with woolly dots. Rolling mountains on the horizon all at once enter the vision-scape of the audience. Accompanying the sky and the landscape a woman sings:

Sheep are as numerous as stars,
Herders are like the full moon,
Yaks are like dew on blades of grass...

The song and shifting landscape scenes introduce Tsezhou, a village chief, pulling a yak being ridden by Ama Tsomo, an elderly woman whose yak has been stolen. They are on their way to visit the families of three young suspects. The lens continues to follow the village chief and Ama Tsomo who is spinning a handheld prayer wheel. Her recitation of *om-mani-padme-hum* (ཨོཾ་མ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཧུམ་) sounds into the sky and the landscape as if it is a pulse of the cinematic landscape. Giving viewers a sense of the passage of time, the walk continues as the scenes move from mid-morning sun to evening's twilight, and from the expansive plains to an immense frozen river and the skyline of mountains. In Pema Tseden's panoramic vision, both Tsezhou and Ama Tsomo are reduced to two tiny dots moving on the frozen river, across wide-open plains, and on high ridges; however, the immense landscape resonates with their prayers.

In speaking of his cinematographic choices, Pema Tseden does not hesitate to state that he has an extreme preference for wide-angle lenses ranging from 16 mm to 18 and 25 mm. According to him, the essence of his cinematographic

vision is to create a reality on the screen through which the audience is empathetically moved into the lived experience of the Tibetan characters. In light of the director's vision, I see the cinematic landscapes of Tibet in *The Grassland* as 'active backgrounds' (Morgan 2009, 2) or better yet, as an inherent part of his cinematic foreground. It sustains and saturates characters' inner landscape and their social acts. Pema Tsenden's cinematic landscapes of Tibet are metonymic in nature, and they 'do not suggest their completion; rather they indicate further and larger concepts and relevance and they encapsulate rather than suggest inclusivity' (Harper and Rayner 2010, 20). The elements of a metonymic landscape function to expand the vision and image-associations of the spectator beyond the immediate screen. In other words they animate the immediate, physical landscape encompassed by the lens, and at the same time, highlight the enacted *anima* or 'soul' of the landscape through a particular personified character. In Pema Tsenden's case, he designates Buddhism as the *anima* of the Tibetan landscape. In this regard natural landscapes in his films are imbued with religion, spirituality, ethnicity, and culture. *The Grassland* is exemplary of his Buddhist vision of Tibet.

Buddhism touches everywhere and everybody in Pema Tsenden's films: in a flying bird, in carved rocks, in the wind moving prayer flags, in the dialogues of monks and lay people. It humanizes the natural landscape of Tibet, a critical medium that creates, articulates, and interlaces different cinematic terrains of affect (Bruno 2002, 253). While his wide-angle shots portray the expansiveness of his homeland, the carefully chosen material expressions of Buddhism are interspersed between the natural environment and human affairs. Before the village chief and Ama Tsomo in *The Grassland* reach their destination, the circular motion of the prayer wheel in Ama Tsomo's hand accompanies the gliding sky burial vulture in the sky, the moving footsteps on the wintry brown grass, and prayer flags flapping in the wind. In mid-journey they are greeted by a mani-stone carver (མ་དོ་རྩེ་བཟོ་། *mani-dogou*) sitting on a sheep skin and chiselling a flat rock, not far from a long wall built of piles of stone tablets with Buddhist mantras and sutras carved on them. The camera moves to a close-up of the stone carver's weathered hands. This close-up is not shot from a top-down angle but is on the same plane as the hands. The viewer's eyes cannot help but move toward the hands chiselling the words of a prayer into the stone tablet so that the gaze becomes a type of touch with its associated sensory perceptions generated by the visible.

Both the tenderly wrought panoramic sweeps and close-ups in *The Grassland* give a central position to Buddhism. Wherever and whoever it touches, it sends them in motion. 'To touch' or 'being touched' in a motion picture is inherently associated with *kinema*, the etymon of 'cinema', which connotes both motion and emotion (Bruno 2004, 1). In this sense film is an interface, intertwinement, and bonding of motion and emotion. It is a medium of the elemental ingredients of humanity's somatically embodied sentience situated in a specific landscape.

To re-illustrate, Ama Tsomo and the village chief, Tsezhou, are the moving lines drawn between points on the vast nomadic landscape which might have seemed unrelated, thereby creating routes with Buddhist meaning, connecting through embodiment as they traverse the earth. The landscape in the film thus plays an antecedent role in Pema Tseden's cinematic drawings of the terrains of the characters' motions and emotions. In the meantime, it encompasses the characters' somatic movements and brings to light the emotive currents of Buddhist spirituality and morality embodied in rocks carved with mantras, winds carrying the aroma of juniper incense, and air resounding with prayers. Buddhism in the film is no longer a static doctrine confined to a monastic environment. It is deeply integrated into the 'geopsychic terrain' of the characters, which, in the cinematic sense, is 'the place where a tactile eye and a visual touch develop' (Bruno 2002, 253).

When Tsezhou and Ama Tsomo finally find the families of the three young suspects, the elders of their community summon them to take an oath to claim their innocence. The oath itself is not lengthy when three of them utter it together:

I hold this scripture as witness to take oath. Let all mountain gods be our witnesses. If we were the thieves, may we be condemned to the Eighteen Hells without escape. If we were not the thieves, let the gods' wisdom-eye witness our innocence.

At this moment Pema Tseden's wide-angle lens integrates the temporal progression of their utterance of the oath into the natural environment of the community. Once again, landscape is antecedent to the motion of the three young Tibetans' emotional expressions or of the audience's sensing of their inner state. Pema Tseden moves this emotional terrain out of the three young men and merges it with the natural ambience as the lens pans outward from their inner world to the outer environment. As the lens tilts up following the wind carrying the utterance of the oath up into the sky, the intangible human voice moves up with the smoke of incense and meets the lone vulture soaring up into the gusty firmament. The three young men have cleared their names, and Tsezhou, the village chief and Ama Tsomo walk back home. Once again it is Buddhism that Pema Tseden deploys here to set everything in (e)motion.

The story is about to end but surprises the audience with another turn: the son of a respected elder stole Ama Tsomo's yak. The film ends with the son and his father with the stolen yak on the way to seek forgiveness from Ama Tsomo. As the silhouette of their backs blend into the vast grassland, the deep voice of a lama leads the recitation of the Four Bodhisattva Vows:

May all beings be endowed with happiness and its causes;
May all beings be free of suffering and its causes;
May no being be without happiness devoid of suffering;
May all beings dwell in a state of impartiality toward attachment and hatred.

Touching the modern skin of the Tibetan landscape

Pema Tseden's positive Buddhist aesthetics toward his homeland's physical landscape and weather patterns have become less predominant in his productions of the last three years. To many of his audience members and critics this marks a sudden change in his cinematic depiction of the Tibetan landscape with monks, monasteries, prayer flags, grasslands, snow covered mountains, and eulogizing folk songs. Buddhism in his recent films appears to recede from the foreground of monastic architecture and the humanized landscape with Buddhist markings to the background and margins of social and personal spaces and even further to the inner spaces of memories.

The Search and *Old Dog*, his latest award-winning productions, mark this sudden transition from portraying the positive aesthetics of Tibetan landscape to the crude social reality of his home region. The stories in the two films are entirely different; however, the social ambience in each is similar in nature: the fast-changing physical spaces of towns and villages as well as changing traditional values, communal ethos, and interpersonal relations. Pema Tseden's cinematic landscape now is no longer sending a message of 'home-sweet-home'; instead his initially-intended images of simplicity with the rich Buddhist spirituality of Tibetan people in their ancestral land are being replaced with images and motions of loss, nostalgia, alienation, and desolation though with hope and resilience evident in his characters, who are on the move to search for and regain their lost paradise, and who choose to stand their ground of with their ancestral memories and traditional morals.

This thematic and stylistic transition does not appear to be an indication of Pema Tseden's intent to disengage his cinematography from the Buddhist ethos and material culture among Tibetans. Instead it is apparent that he simply wants to go deeper and wider into the many social realities of his people. He desires to live up to the original cinematic goal he had when he came to Beijing – to narrate stories of common Tibetans in contemporary Tibet. *The Search* and *Old Dog* indeed live up to what he has promised to his audience with his own style of realism.

Pema Tseden's realism in the current phase of his filmmaking leans toward modern elements that are destabilizing to traditional practices of Buddhism among Tibetans. He invites his audience to see and touch the landscape of his homeland as if it were a changing body: its surface is undergoing an entire transformation. Buddhism in the midst of the changes becomes an object of a human search for the lost 'soul' of Tibet and is brought to Pema Tseden's cinematic foreground as a subject of moral contention on and off the screen, between his characters and among his audience. All happenings, and the feeling tone that fully saturates the characters' inner and outer worlds, are enveloped in the forceful advancement of modern practices and values. The Tibetan landscape is no longer a composite of the Buddhist worldview and its practices. Modernization and its material consequences are seeping into the Tibetan

Buddhist landscape and changing its appearance with a different set of spatial and psychological orders.

During the pre-production of *The Search* in Rigon, Qinghai Province, Pema Tsenden invited my visual anthropology class of eight US students to observe how *The Search* was being shot as a road movie, a cinematic genre often used to narrate stories on the move, such as a pilgrimage, a journey searching for a lost sacred object or a loved companion, or an exodus from one's war-torn homeland. *The Search* is about a team of filmmakers on a road trip in Amdo looking for an actor who will play Prince Drime Kunden. *Prince Drime Kunden* (འཇིག་རྟེན་ལྷ་མོ་ལྷ་མོ་) is one of the eight national operas of Tibet. Written in approximately the thirteenth century and based on the spiritual biography of Sakyamuni Buddha, it tells the story of Drime Kunden, a compassionate Prince, who loves to feed the hungry, aid the weak, and eventually offers his three children, his wife, and his eyes to three Brahmins who disguise themselves as beggars to test the Prince's compassion. As soon as his compassion is proven to be genuine, the Brahmins return his children, his wife, and his vision. The opera is widely performed in villages, towns, and among nomads in contemporary Tibet. As the Buddhist spirituality in the play is articulated through the sentient emotions of the characters rather than through Dharma talks and empowerment rituals performed by lamas, it resonates with and draws tears from the audience with the simple emotive language of suffering, altruism, compassion, and spiritual liberation. The story unfolds itself as a 'road story' in which the king exiles his son due to his misjudgement of an incident of theft in the court. The prince and his family are exiled to redeem the wrong he did not commit. They beg through villages, sleep in the open, and take residence in caves. The passages of their exile eventually miraculously lead them back home into the embrace of their family. This traditional Tibetan 'road play' can be seen as a national search by Tibetans for ultimate compassion and enlightenment, not in an abstract doctrinal language, but in the motions and emotions of flesh and blood.

As I was involved in some of the post-production work, I took the opportunity in the editing room and small screening sessions to ask Pema Tsenden about his creative intent in *The Search*. He preferred his audience to choose their own interpretations of the embedded meaning of the film until one afternoon when he asked me to translate the title of the film into English. I proposed the translation of the literal meaning of the word 'search' in Tibetan. When he and Sonthar Gyal, his cinematographer, said the word 'search' alone was not 'specific enough', I then insisted on his telling me what was the actual search embedded in the film crew's search for an actor. Finally, I got an answer: it is a search for the essence or the soul of Tibetan civilization in the popular realm of contemporary Tibet based on Pema Tsenden's observation of younger generations of Tibet who are losing touch with their ancient Buddhist tradition. According to Pema Tsenden, the advance of modern values erodes Tibetan Buddhist spirituality. It makes perfect sense that the story of the search for an actor is embedded with the director's own search for the soul of Buddhist Tibet.

In our film class, Pema Tseden told our American students that *The Search* could be a sequel to *The Stone* because the opera *Prince Drime Kunden* is one of the most critical themes in *The Stone*, taking up approximately 25 minutes at the midpoint of *The Stone*. Buddhism as a living faith among Tibetans is given a centre stage in the film: the centre is not in the monastery but among common people. To successfully complete this long segment of *The Stone*, Pema Tseden spent many days and nights looking for the right opera actors and actresses in Amdo. It was one of Pema Tseden's own 'road stories' behind the making of *The Stone*. During the pre-production phase of *The Stone*, he was on a journey searching for a village-based opera troupe that would best help him project his cinematic vision of Tibetan Buddhism being revitalized among common folks. His personal encounters in this search later became the creative cornerstone of his scripting and directing *The Search*.

Unlike the uncontested cultural position of Buddhism in *The Stone*, *The Search* delves deeper into the social space of contemporary Tibet showing Buddhist values are being challenged in modern terms. In a night club, when the team of filmmakers was interviewing a man in his mid-30s for the role of Prince Drime Kunden, he tells them that he played Drime Kunden before but stopped recently because, as he says,

I dislike the role of Drime Kunden ... What do you think Drime Kunden exemplifies? Drime Kunden offered his own eyes to others. That is his choice ... however, why did he have to give his wife and children to others? Where did he get the right to do that? Who gave him the right?

The mood of this scene is saturated with the overwhelming flashes of disco lights, loud music, and the clinking noises of beer bottles and wine glasses. According to Pema Tseden the history and spirituality of Buddhism is enveloped in and challenged by the modern secular, consumer world. Throughout *The Search*, Buddhism rather appears on the social margins instead of the central position shown in *The Stone*. Buddhism as the centrepiece of traditional Tibet finds itself in a position susceptible to being marginalized, subverted, and secularized.

Although conventional markers of Tibetan Buddhism such as monks, monasteries, and prayer flags do not take centre positions in *The Search*, Pema Tseden's lens does not discontinue its touch on villages and towns in which an actor is sought who will bring back the heroic, spiritual epic of Prince Drime Kunden to contemporary Tibet. It is a national treasure hunt but one in which Buddhism does not come into the vision of Pema Tseden's audience in its holistic images as it did in *The Stone*; instead it comes in fragments that bear little or no traditional appearances of Tibetan Buddhism. The actor is in an unknown location when the search team begins its road trip. The cinematic genre, cinematographic techniques, the director's perspectives in making *The Search* as a road movie resemble those of Kiarostami in *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999) in which an engineer attempts to document the secret funeral rituals in a Kurdish province of contemporary Iran. The engineer and his teamsters drive their jeep across the

country into the Kurdish land: long, uninterrupted takes as Kiarostami's cinematographic trademark open up landscapes of red earth, golden wheat fields, and the engineer's destination—the secluded village. Everything in the film moves and is moved. The jeep moves the landscape; the landscape moves the jeep; the conversations in the jeep draw the temporal lines of Kiarostami's cinematic narratives. Likewise, with this visible influence from Kiarostami, Pema Tsenden's creative idol, *The Search* appears to adopt the style of *The Wind Will Carry Us*. The wide angle shots and long takes intimately engage Pema Tsenden's audience with the Tibetan landscape and the mindscape of the main characters—urban Tibetan filmmakers—who fill up their moving jeep.

Pema Tsenden's directing style once again does not rely on close-ups of his characters as a conventional technique used in cinematography to convey an intimate sense of emotional touch. Instead his wide angles and long takes in *The Search*, like those in Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us*, caress the physical landscape of Tibet not only with human footsteps and natural elements but also with moving cinematographic perspectives from the moving jeep. The audience's vision reflexively assumes itself as located in the moving jeep either as the driver or as one of the passengers. New terrains and horizons continuously enter the audience's vision. While the tires of the jeep roll forward on the highway, Pema Tsenden's lens becomes synchronized with the eye of the audience: it touches wherever the moving jeep goes and whatever the lens encompasses. It is a journey of touching Tibet. Pema Tsenden's cinematic vision creates such a journey for his audience from within the narrow inside of a jeep but it offers a broad vision. Through the physical touching of and being touched by the Tibetan landscape, one enters the current condition of the 'soul' of Tibet. One village after another, one town after another, *Prince Drime Kunden* seems to have become a past tense of the present Tibet or to have retreated into the collective memory of Tibetans, as the older generations of opera performers have to recall their past performing experiences and as the younger generations of performing artists take an interest in modernizing Tibetan traditional art forms. The cultural transmission between the past and the present is obviously ruptured, as the spiritual norm of Buddhism appears to be an anomaly of modern Tibet. However, for Pema Tsenden, home is home regardless of the fragmented appearance of Buddhism. The search continues with the tires of the jeep rolling across the country until the team of filmmakers finds the right actor. The search successfully ends but the film ends with a new predicament: the actress breaks up with the actor; thus her initial agreement to play the wife of Prince Drime Kunden if the team finds the actor, her long lost boyfriend, does not materialize.

To many viewers of *The Search*, Buddhism appears displaced and scattered in different locations. The mission of the team of filmmakers is to find it, whole. The mission is obviously half completed; however, the dynamics of a road film lie not in the end result but in the journey that is itself like a pilgrimage. If the sacred element is not acquired, the pilgrim has at least undoubtedly been empowered by the atlas of his own spiritual emotions drawn with the trails, paths, and passages of

his pilgrimage. On their road trip the filmmakers in *The Search* find a living exemplar of Prince Drime Kunden, rich memories of older opera performers, the best actress, and the most ideal actor though they all scatter to different villages and towns. Buddhism, in the film, is subject to dislocation, relocation, decay, and rebirth, not immune from the cycle of sentient sufferings. The opera *Prince Drime Kunden* resides in every character in the film not in whole but in part, e.g., a piece of memory, a verse from the opera, or a contending expression toward the spiritual deeds of Prince Drime Kunden. The search team's hope for a holistic ending was thwarted by an unexpected parting scene between the actor and the actress, who once bonded in their home village when they performed *Prince Drime Kunden* together. However, the success of the search did not lie in the final finding of the actor but in the journey of the film crew in the landscape of Tibet.

This thematic motif of an endangered Buddhist Tibet starts from *The Search* and reaches its climax in *Old Dog*. Everything in *Old Dog*, e.g., people, animals, and land enters what Martin McLoone (2010, 135) calls an 'elemental struggle' for existential meanings. In his case study of Jim Sheridan's *The Field* (1990), we find an Irish production whose cinematic narrative style is similar to Pema Tsenden's, especially in playing out the kinship and moral dialectics of a son and father in the dichotomy of the field and the road, and the town and the country. These elemental human inscriptions and their spatiality in both Irish and Tibetan landscapes are cinematically symmetrical when they are juxtaposed, but they most certainly oppose each other with different values, aspirations, and existential meanings. To the son, the town in *Old Dog* is a place of opportunities for material gains; whereas to the father it is the source of suffering. The pastoral ground is home to both the son and the father; however, while the father feels rooted within it, the son feels restrained by it. The road in between their pastoral ground and the town brings overwhelming changes one after another. While the road leads the son, on motorcycle, to the town where he will sell his family dog, it moves the father, on horseback, to retrieve the sold dog from the town dog dealer. It connects home turf with the town throughout the film by bringing in a dog thief, a new dog dealer, the police chief, and, finally the old dog's death on the roadside. Shockingly, the elemental struggle of the old man in the film ends with his killing his beloved canine companion.

Throughout *Old Dog*, the feeling tone is inlaid mostly without close-ups of the son, Gonpo, his father, and their family dog as Pema Tsenden's continued use of wide angle shots and long takes does not bring them closer to his audience. Instead, Pema Tsenden embeds emotional currents and characters' inner feelings into the scenes of their home village and the township where their family dog is sold and bought back, and where Gonpo and his father are reconciled with each other. Gonpo's motorcycle, his father's horse, their old dog, and the police vehicle are the threads interlacing and juxtaposing the village and the town. In *Old Dog*, Pema Tsenden's cinematographic technique compels his audience to experience the feeling of chaos and psychological displacement. In other words the audience is arrested with the 'involuntary touches' of the lifeworld of the characters

saturated with depressing moods and a hopeless outcry for the loss of their familial and communal fabric, and their traditional collective conscience grounded in Buddhism.

The end stirs up divergent critiques and emotional responses from *Old Dog's* audiences. Some of Pema Tseden's loyal fans from his home region feel the death of the family dog is undeserved; instead Gonpo's father is expected to protect him as he would as a family member. They empathize with Gonpo's father's feeling disturbed, angered, and hopeless; however, as one audience member from a nomadic family remarked, 'The life of the dog belongs to the dog and not to his master'. The father is able to reconcile with his son but not only fails to protect the family dog, but inexplicably hangs him.

In a review session I also raised similar questions with Pema Tseden. His creative concern is not directed to seeking cultural, religious, spiritual, and ethical consistencies. The film is meant to mirror everything inconsistent, illogical, insensitive, dislocating, and disturbing happening in his homeland. According to Pema Tseden and his crewmembers, *Old Dog* represents the social and psychological conditions in contemporary Tibetan regions. Pema Tseden is making a distress call to Tibetans and non-Tibetans alike that in response to what he perceives as the chaos of tradition being endangered by modernization (Tsering Shakya 2011).

As a landscape photographer I see Pema Tseden's gentle but firm cinematic sweeps of Tibetan urban and rural landscapes as a 'see-and-touch-for-yourself' invitation for his transnational audience to have an empathetic feel of the flesh and skin of contemporary Tibet. Throughout the film his lens rarely comes in close to the old dog except at his painful, dying moment, not showing his face but his agonized, twitching body hung against the pole. The death of the family dog seems to enact an exorcizing role, creating a fresh start for the family, or perhaps the dog is an involuntary martyr to pacify the mounting tensions and distress that his human family is experiencing; however, the off-screen effect is rippling among Tibetans in and outside Tibet and generating a new wave of debates and contentions about Buddhist ethics and the national integrity of Tibetans in the midst of modernization and globalization.

Aftereffects of a transnational cinematic landscape of Tibet

Pema Tseden's films are woven together with his personal creative aspirations for filmmaking, his participation in contemporary Tibetans' social engagements for the preservation of Tibetan cultural heritage, and technical trainings and resources from non-Tibetan regions, individuals, and institutions. His production team members are often multi-national, e.g., Tibetans, Chinese, Americans, and Europeans act as planning, acting, translation, and marketing staff members. In the same manner, his audience members are cross-regional, transnational, and cross-continental, e.g., from rural Tibet, urban China, North America, and Europe. Responses to his cinematic narratives of personal and social issues in contemporary Tibet are therefore multi-nationally diverse.

Outside Tibet and China, his films are characteristically not theatre-bound but are mostly screened on university campuses and at film festivals. His stay in the US in 2011–2012 is a telling example of his viewership in the West. In fall 2011 he headed to New York. For the coming year his films were shown at Harvard Fairbank Center, Yale Himalaya Initiative, Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center of Indiana University, and other centres and departments of prominent universities. Organizations and media, such as Asia Society, Trace Foundation, dGenerate Films, NPR, and New York Times, enthusiastically featured Pema Tsenden's filmography, reviews of his films, and interview sessions. It was a festive year for his films in North America.

Pema Tsenden enchants his audience in the West with his realism. Although he expresses his discomfort about his Western film critics' characterizing it as a documentary style of shooting fiction films (dGenerate Film 2011; Wei 2012), this popular viewing angle does bring to the Western audience the social reality of Tibetans situated in China's rapid modernization in Tibet. It conveys a strong sense of pain, anger, discontent, hopelessness, and perseverance—attributes of his recent productions that his critics and audience alike commonly recognize.

Scholars in the West have similar responses to his films. For instance, Tsering Shakya (2011) points out that Pema Tsenden's *Old Dog* reflects the social and economic marginalization of Tibetans under the insatiable desire of the consumers of urban China in the context of globalization and modernization. In the same vein, Howard Choy's (2013) review of *Old Dog* echoes the shocking scene when the father hangs his beloved mastiff on a pole. To Choy, this scene 'powerfully allegorizes the endangered Tibetan existence and confronts the wild Chinese'. During the Q&A session after a screening event at NYU's Center for Religion and Media, Pema Tsenden responded to the audience's inquiries about the current conditions of Tibet with two phrases: 'spiritual suicide' and 'everything has changed' (Wei 2012). After Pema Tsenden returned home from the US, the trend of his films going public in the West continues. The Film Expo of Association for Asian Studies (AAS), for instance, hosted *Old Dog* in March 2013.

Among Tibetans and Chinese in China, Pema Tsenden has a different but diverse audience. As a successful Tibetan indie filmmaker, he is a novelty among Chinese audiences. For reasons of censorship and the existing viewing perspective of the Chinese population, Pema Tsenden's media appearances after film festivals and screening activities are often opportunities when he makes an effort to educate the Chinese public about traditional Tibetan culture and religion. In turn, film-related media coverage focuses on him as an ethnic minority success story. Because most reporters and anchor persons know little about Tibetan history and customs, the emphasis on his biography takes a predominant weight in featured interviews such as the sessions with Li Ren of *Film Art Magazine* (Li 2005) and Cui Weiping of Beijing Film Academy on behalf of *Today Perspective* (Cui 2009), a widely circulated journal on contemporary literature in China. Chinese viewers apparently show their interest more in his biography, creative influences from other filmmakers, and box office earnings. In response to these inquiries, Pema

Tseden offers his detailed narratives. For instance when asked how he became passionate about filmmaking and what kinds of creative influences he received from other writers and filmmakers, he straightforwardly informed his inquirers of his growing up with Chinese socialist films like *Mine Warfare* (1962), *Tunnel Warfare* (1965), and *Railway Guerrilla* (1962) and foreign films sympathetic to the sufferings of common people, such as Raj Kapoor's *Awara* (1951) and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) (Cui 2009). In the Chinese media, Pema Tseden is accepted more as a showcase of a successful Tibetan artist than as a public intellectual and a social critic, given the content of his films.

In April 2010 Asia Society hosted a screening event for Pema Tseden's films. The subsequent media coverage of the event from Asia Society regarded the films as 'Tibetan Films for Tibetan People' (AS 2010). This headline accurately captures the original intent of Pema Tseden and his supporters for his filmmaking path. This ideal is being materialized among Tibetans. In Cui Weiping's interview with him, Pema Tseden told her that his films have been shown in rural Tibet often with a large audience from a few hundred to several thousand people: 'In the open grasslands we used a 35mm mobile film projector. People sat on both sides of the screen. It was very touching!' (quoted in Cui 2009).

For Tibetans in urban China, Pema Tseden's films are mostly watched at home and in student dorms or screened in classrooms at Beijing Film Academy and Minzu University of China. In my ethnographic work with Pema Tseden's urban Tibetan audience members, I find their viewing perspective is identical to their Western counterparts' in terms of the tension between tradition and modernity, Tibetan Buddhist values and Chinese consumerism, and social marginality of Tibetans in China. Their initial celebration of Pema Tseden's Tibetan-language films has now evolved into an intra-Tibetan discourse on whether or not tradition and modernity are mutually exclusive, and whether or not modernity/modernization could be utilized to preserve traditional cultural practices. In my conversations with my former Tibetan graduate students, this intra-Tibetan discourse parallels the evolving focal points of his films. What were initially celebrated Tibetan Buddhist values in Pema Tseden's early productions are now subverted by China's market economy and globalization in his current productions.

The pattern of this intra-Tibetan, film-induced discourse rests upon the evolving pattern of the cinematic narratives in Pema Tseden's aforementioned award-winning films concerning the consequences of modernity/modernization. Three out of his four films personify the tension between tradition and modernity in the relationship between elder and youth. It appears that the older generation upholds traditional values and practices, while the younger generation is susceptible to deviation from traditional values. Among the sons in the three films, *The Grassland*, *The Stone*, and *Old Dog*, it is only the one in *The Stone*, who, as a young monk, inherits traditional values from the older generation. The other two commit stealing and lying, but are eventually forgiven and reconciled with their fathers. Tradition prevails in Pema Tseden's cinematic landscape of Tibet, but at a high price.

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