



# THARLO

A film by Pema Tseden

North American Theatrical Premiere  
September 28 – October 04, 2016

The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York City  
Followed by cities across the U.S. and Canada

2015 | 123 minutes | Black-and-white | Drama | dGenerate Collection  
An Icarus Films Release

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## LOGLINE

Leading Tibetan filmmaker Pema Tsenden brings his own novel to the screen in this poignant, edgy tale of a lonely shepherd who starts to question his traditional way of life when he travels to town for an ID card... and meets a modern young woman.

## SYNOPSIS

Tharlo lives a simple life in rural Tibet. A 40-year-old shepherd who can recite extensive passages from Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book* from memory, Tharlo, nicknamed "Ponytail," rarely interacts with other people. But when he travels to town for an ID card and meets a modern young hairdresser, their relationship threatens to upend the life he knows.

## SELECTED FESTIVALS

World Premiere in Venice Film Festival, 2015 Orizzonti Section  
Asian Premiere at Busan International Film Festival, 2015 A Window on Asian Cinema  
Best Adapted Screenplay, 2015 Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival  
Grand Student Jury Prize, 2015 Tokyo FILMeX  
INALCO Prize, 2015 Vesoul Asian Film Festival  
2015 Vancouver International Film Festival  
2015 La Orquidera International Film Festival  
2015 Brisbane Asia Pacific Film Festival  
2016 Black Movie Geneva  
2016 Gøteborg Film Festival  
2016 Minneapolis Saint Paul Film Festival  
2016 Wisconsin Film Festival

Press Room

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More Information

<http://icarusfilms.com/dgenerate/tharlo.html>

## ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Pema Tseden (Wanma Caidan) was born in 1969 in Amdo, in the Tibetan region of Qinghai Province. He is widely recognized as the leading filmmaker of a newly emerging Tibetan cinema and is the first director in China to film his movies entirely in the Tibetan language. Tseden has published more than 50 short stories and novels both in Tibetan and Chinese. His work has won numerous awards including the Drang-char (sbrang-char) Tibetan Literature Prize and has been translated into languages including English, French, German and Czech. Collections of Tseden's short stories have been published in the books *Neige* (in France) and *The Search* (in Japan). In 2005, Tseden directed his first feature film, *Silent Holy Stones*. Tseden is Chairman of the Directors Association of China; he is also a member of the Filmmakers and Literary Societies of China.

### Selected Filmography

2015	<i>Tharlo*</i>
2014	<i>The Sacred Arrow</i>
2010	<i>Old Dog*</i>
2009	<i>The Search*</i>
2005	<i>Silent Holy Stones</i>

## IN THE PRESS

*Tseden shows us a country where deep-rooted traditions and a rich cultural history co-exist uneasily with the encroaching tide of modernity.*

—Wendy Ide, *Screen Daily*

*“Tseden is in no hurry and in no mood to rush to conclusions but his measured pace helps us to invest in *Tharlo*, whose confusion is conveyed with considerable skill by Nyima, a long-time comedian and theatre actor making a rare foray into film.”*

—Amber Wilkinson, *Eye for Film*

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An Interview with Pema Tseden  
The Brooklyn Rail  
By Lu Yangqiao  
April 06, 2016

Considered the first Tibetan director in China, Pema Tseden has chosen, from the very beginning of his filmmaking career, to make films only in the three Tibetan regions (Anduo, Kangba, and Weizang) and almost entirely in his Tibetan mother tongue. His films reject any objectification or exoticization of the Tibetan landscape, while at the same time responding to the uniqueness of ethnic experience and the universal value of humanity. In his fifth feature film, *Tharlo*, Tseden deploys his trademark visual austerity to tell the elliptical tale of a shepherd caught between Chinese state bureaucracy and Tibetan spirituality, a parable of the conditions of contemporary Tibetan life rendered in stunning black-and-white. With its profound apprehension about the future, the film suggests the pessimistic vision that is evident throughout Tseden's cinema. In *Old Dog* (2011), the titular character eventually dies in the hands of its caretaker, who exhausts every means to save it from any possible ill fate; in *The Search* (2009), an unyielding journey to find the right actor for a Tibetan opera ends in a scene of bureaucratic absurdity; and in *Tharlo*, the shepherd who goes into town to get his identification card ends up embarking on a journey that eventually costs him, above everything else, his faith. *Tharlo* continues the director's calm yet deeply emotional exploration of issues such as the loss of identity, individual predicaments, and the collective oblivion of disappearing spiritual legacies. In a time when economic growth reigns over all, Tseden's films bear witness to a Tibetan way of life that is adopting an ever more practical mentality that is affecting the social structure of the region as well as its belief system. Pema Tseden is neither an opponent of economic development nor an advocate for preserving traditional ways of life for their own sake. Rather, he charges his work with the mission of narrating the Tibetan story of vicissitude as modern civilization invades. Today, as the surging investment in the Chinese film industry has created a malnourished environment that feeds on the superficiality of sensationalism and the capital of celebrity, Pema Tseden's unflinching faith in a humanist approach to filmmaking undoubtedly makes his cinema a singular voice of quiet but striking rebellion.

Lu Yangqiao, Brooklyn Rail: *Tharlo is a unique film, visually. It is black and white, unlike all your previous films, and it is composed of fixed shots only, most of which are long-takes. Can you talk about the ideas behind these stylistic choices?*

Pema Tseden: There are 84 shots in the film's two hours, I believe. These choices are to serve the living conditions and mental state of the character. Black and white suits Tharlo's lifestyle well. He lives in a very simple world, barely has any contact with the outside, mostly spending his time with his sheep year-round. His life is so simple that he doesn't have much understanding of, or even ability to understand, the reality outside. The texture of black and white underlines this state of life. Take his loneliness, for

instance: I felt that a color image would look really fake. In terms of long-takes, they contain an integrity of time and space, giving the film a quality of continuity and intactness. It also asks for the participation of the audience.

*The film opens with a very impressive ten-minute take of Tharlo fluently reciting the Mao Quotations in Mandarin. As a member of the younger generation, I didn't recognize what he was doing here. Can you explain the scene a little?*

It is a stamp that the Cultural Revolution branded on those who remained in the Tibetan region during those years. At the time, many Tibetans could perfectly recite by heart the Mao Quotations. Even today, you can still find some who can. They can recite the whole thing even though they might not fully understand what it all means, and they recite it in Mandarin, except that the tone can sound strange, because basically it's the tone of reciting the Tibetan Bible. So it is something quite unique to the generation and the region.

*And the length of the shot. One would think it would be challenging to the viewer, but it is actually quite absorbing.*

Yes, it puts you immediately in a very specific mode, and that is what I wanted.

*You have mentioned before that the form of image in Tharlo is a purer and more primitive condition of cinema. What is this condition of cinema that you are referring to?*

When something is first born, it is very pure. Cinema is like that, too. Through those early black-and-white images, we see emotions that are untouched and unsculpted. That is the ideal gesture of image in my opinion.

*From The Silent Holy Stones (2005) to The Search, then to Old Dog and Tharlo, your films are getting more and more quiet.*

Yes, but inside they are getting more and more turbulent.

*There were still a lot of moments of delight in The Silent Holy Stones. Old Dog and Tharlo don't seem to believe happiness is possible any more.*

The darkness and bleakness is really a portrayal of the reality of the Tibetan region in recent years. Maybe *The Silent Holy Stones* still shows some of the beautiful memories I have of my hometown.

*So you are rather pessimistic about the current condition of the region?*

Yes, I am pessimistic.

*What are the challenges that Tibetans are facing today, in your opinion?*

It is hard to be specific about it, but one people, once it has changed spiritually, is going to become another people, a different people.

*I heard that the censorship procedure in China is different if the film involves ethnic minorities?*

Normally, a script or a film only needs to go through the examination at the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television. The procedure gets a lot more complicated for anything that touches on the subject of ethnic minorities, particularly regarding Tibet and any religious issues. First of all, one needs to report to The United Front Work Department of CPC Central Committee, and sometimes one might also need to submit to the State Ethnic Affairs Committee and the Bureau of Religious Affairs. The censorship is not just on content but really on ideology. The situation varies every time, and the people who actually conduct the examination always have different opinions, so there is a lot of uncertainty involved. This is actually one of the reasons that *Tharlo* was made, because its script passed the censorship.

*Contemporary life in the Tibetan region is at the core of your films. Do you often go back to the region now?*

Yes, I go back quite frequently, and sometimes I would go back and stay there for a while. I have been living outside, mostly in Beijing, for many many years now. When I look back at it, I see it through the lenses of an outsider or a bystander. It is inevitable, but that allows me a perception that is more objective and more calm, I think.

*You are considered the first Tibetan filmmaker in China. When did you become aware of your identity as a Tibetan?*

As an individual, one wouldn't think about the Tibetan identity from the very beginning. I was more aware of it around the time when I left home to attend middle school in the county town. They talked about the subject of ethnic minority in history and geography classes, but it was all pretty vague. This awareness of identity is actually a reflection of your social surrounding. It emerges and develops as the social surroundings grow on you.

*Then what does the Tibetan identity mean to you?*

I grew up in the Tibetan region called Anduo (in Qinghai Province). There are people from other ethnicities in the region, mostly Han people though, and it's the same culturally. As I was growing up, this identity gave me a lot of pride, confusion, and disappointment.

*How old were you when you left the Tibetan regions?*

Around the age of thirteen or fourteen. I wasn't quite aware of the Tibetan identity yet, except that I knew it was what I should put down as my ethnicity when I filled out forms.

*After you left, have your ideas and consideration about the Tibetan regions and people changed?*

Before I left the region, I looked at them in simpler and more naïve way—I was just proud of the traditions and the cultural heritage that I came from. But after I left, I began to reflect on my own people and to examine a lot of issues—the culture, the religion, the history—and it became much more complicated.

*You studied Tibetan literature in college and have done a lot of translation work between Tibetan and Mandarin, both ways. How do you deal with the issue of things being "lost in translation"? Is there anything lost in Tharlo?*

For my own novels, some of them do have two versions, but I don't translate them. I just write them again in the other language. It is another creation. Films are different. They have to face both Tibetan-speaking and non-Tibetan-speaking audiences. There would always be some small things that are lost in translation, I guess. As for *Tharlo*, yes: for example, the name Tharlo has the connotation of "the man who flees" in Tibetan. Although non-Tibetan audiences wouldn't get that, they would learn from the story that it is a nickname, and it's a nickname that Tharlo doesn't even remember, so it conveys some meaning and sentiment in the same vein I hope.

*Do you think the question of language constrains your writing or the reception of your films?*

I don't think it constrains it at all. Quite the contrary, it creates a surprising tension sometimes.

*Is this a problem for you, especially considering the majority of your audience in China doesn't speak Tibetan?*

I think a sense of strangeness or distance could be helpful, in terms of communicating with the audience and creating an experience. It actually brings you closer to the image and the film itself. Maybe those who understand Tibetan and who are familiar with the life in the region might miss some things that are raw and essential.

*Do you intentionally embed this sensibility in your films then?*

No, but maybe unconsciously.

*You have always insisted on shooting on location in the Tibetan regions. It makes me think of the metaphor that Abbas Kiarostami made of his work, that his country is to his cinema as the land is to a tree, and if the tree were transferred, it would stop bearing fruit.*

My stories would no longer stand if I left the Tibetan regions. My knowledge of the life and people there give me the necessary confidence, although what I am doing is not to search for my origin or root but to contemplate and explore the future.

*Can you tell me something about the collaboration with Liao Ching-Song, who also served as the editing director for Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *The Assassin*?*

He looked at *Tharlo* after we finished the first round of editing. He really liked the film, so we invited him to do the final editing. He spent a week in Beijing and did some very detailed and delicate work. He is very good at managing the emotional aura of a film. I think the sentiment and the ambience are there in our footage already, but he made it more precise.

*Liao is famous for drawing inspiration from the lyrical tradition of ancient Chinese poetry. Is Tibetan poetry a source of inspiration for you?*

Maybe, but I don't consciously look for inspirations from Tibetan poetry. I do love reading poetry though, like Baudelaire, Bei Dao, and Tsangyang Gyatso (the sixth Dalai Lama).

*The Tibetan folk love songs in Tharlo are lovely. To some extent, they build this connection between the past and the present, and also hint at the themes of continuation and change.*

To me, those songs are very open yet extremely private at the same time. When I hear or think of them, I feel a warm and sweet feeling that is very endearing to me. Maybe I will make a film called *Love Songs* in the future.

*Are you working on a new film? Can you tell me about it?*

The next film is called *An Eternal Day*. It is adapted from two short stories: *As if all happened in one day* by Tibetan writer Dakbum Gyal and my own *A Piece of Red Fabric*. The film tells a story where one person experiences all four seasons and his whole life in one day. It is what you might call a piece of magical realism.

*So it's a color film?*

Yes, most likely.



## FILM CREDITS

Title: *Tharlo*  
Director: Pema Tseden  
Script: Pema Tseden  
Cast: Shide Nyima and Yangshik Tso  
Cinematography: Lu Songye  
Art Director: Daktse Dundrupp  
Editor: Gregorius Arya and Song Bing  
Sound: Dukar Tserang  
Music: Wang Jue  
Produced by: Gao Hong, Xu Li and Sun Jialin  
Producers: Wu Leilei and Sean Wang  
Executive producer: Qin Ling  
Production supervisor: Zhang Xian Min

Production: Heaven Pictures (Beijing) Culture & Media Co., Ltd.  
Beijing Ocean & Time Culture Communication Co., Ltd.  
Beijing YiHe Start Film Production, Ltd.  
New Heaven Picture (Beijing) Culture & Media Co., Ltd.

Theatrical running time: 123 minutes at 24 fps  
Image: Black and white  
Production year: 2015  
Release year: 2016  
Aspect ratio: 16:9  
Exhibition format: DCP  
Language: In Tibetan with English subtitles  
International sales: Asian Shadows

*Tharlo* is part of the dGenerate Collection at Icarus Films

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