

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

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MoMI presents complete film retrospective of groundbreaking Tibetan filmmaker Pema Tseden

September 6–15, 2024



Pictured: *Jinpa* (courtesy of Icarus Films) | [Press gallery](#)

Astoria, New York, August 1, 2024 — One of the most exciting and inspiring filmmakers to emerge so far this century, director and novelist Pema Tseden (1969–2023) revolutionized Tibetan representation in Chinese cinema, creating unprecedented films that combine standardized narrative forms with Tibetan culture and language. Museum of the Moving Image will celebrate Pema Tseden, who died last year in mid-career at age 53, with a complete retrospective of his films from September 6–15.

Born to farmer-herder parents in the Tibetan highlands of Amdo, Qinghai Province, China, Pema Tseden studied Tibetan literature and in the early 1990s began publishing short stories in both Tibetan and Chinese. The first Tibetan to graduate from the prestigious Beijing Film Academy, where he shot two short films, he became the first Tibetan filmmaker working in China to shoot a feature entirely in Tibetan: 2005's *The Silent Holy Stones*. Pema Tseden created seven more features, with largely the same group of collaborators, who are now the nucleus of a Tibetan film community continuing his legacy.

Programmed by guest curator Shelly Kraicer, the Museum's retrospective will include all of Pema Tseden's features and two shorts: ***The Silent Manistone*** (2002), ***The Grassland*** (2004), ***The Silent Holy Stones*** (2005), ***The Search*** (2009), ***Old Dog*** (2010), ***The Sacred Arrow*** (2014), ***Tharlo*** (2015), ***Jinpa*** (2018), ***Balloon*** (2019), and ***Snow Leopard*** (2023).

This series covers his career, from the artful realism of his earlier films, which explored the early 21st century lives of rural Tibetans in the People's Republic of China with carefully framed, exquisitely timed long takes and nonprofessional actors, to his later works, in which he experimented with a visionary, occasionally hallucinatory visual style that opened audiences to the more fantastical, spiritual dimensions of Tibetan experience. Given Pema Tseden's complicated position as a Tibetan in China, and the necessity of having his films pass stringent Chinese censorship, his ability to tell these stories directly, naturally, and eloquently, in films of such quiet, rhapsodic beauty, is nothing short of astonishing.

The schedule for Pema Tseden is posted online at movingimage.org/series/pema-tseden with full descriptions, which are also included below.

PEMA TSEDEN RETROSPECTIVE, SEPTEMBER 6–15, 2024

All screenings take place at the Museum of the Moving Image, 36-01 35 Ave, Astoria, NY 11106. Tickets are available in advance online at www.movingimage.org or at the Museum's admissions desk.

The Silent Manistone + The Grassland

Friday, September 6, 6:30 p.m.

The Silent Manistone. Dir. Pema Tseden. 2002, 30 mins. Tibet/China. In Tibetan with English subtitles. Pema Tseden's first short film is a beautifully simple tale of a young monk that anticipates his first feature, *The Silent Holy Stones*, activating a gentle contrast between traditional Tibetan tales, monastery life, and video entertainment that seeps in from the outside world.

The Grassland. Dir. Pema Tseden. 2004, 20 mins. Tibet/China. In Tibetan with English subtitles. Pema Tseden was the first Tibetan director to graduate from the Beijing Film Academy, and his graduation film is the first of many road trips in his oeuvre. As an elderly couple searches for the thief of their yak, basic moral quandaries—what is a crime, what is justice?—are revealed to be not as simple as they seem.

The Silent Holy Stones

Friday, September 6, 8:00 p.m.

Dir. Pema Tseden. 2005, 99 mins. Tibet/China. In Tibetan with English subtitles. With Luosang Danpai, Living Buddha Jhuancang. During *Losar*, Tibetan New Year, a very young Tibetan lama living in a monastery in Qinghai discovers the delights of binge-watching a Chinese TV serial, *The Tansen Lama* (aka *Xi you ji*, aka *Journey to the West*). He shuttles between watching the shows at home and in his monastery with his friend

the Tulku (a seven-year-old living Buddha), and attends—and hilariously, interrupts—a live traditional Tibetan opera on the life of Prince Drime Kundun. The little monk starts to explore and integrate the various parts of his identity, as he's pulled in various directions: by traditional and contemporary society, by folk opera and modern media, by a life apart from and one that flows through the secular world.

The Search

Saturday, September 7, 2:30 p.m.

Dir. Pema Tsenden. 2009, 111 mins. Tibet/China. In Tibetan with English subtitles. With Manla Kyab, Tsondrey, Lumo Tso. *The Search* is a road movie wrapped around three love stories. A director and crew are driving through the Amdo region of Qinghai looking for local cast to star in their film version of the classic Tibetan opera *Prince Drime Kundun*. They encounter a woman who agrees to play Drime Kundun's wife, Mande Zangmo, only if the crew helps her to find her ex-lover, who is now a schoolteacher. Along the way, a businessman companion recounts his own sad love story. Shot in exquisite long takes, this brilliant film explores how stories can be told and how love can be articulated, in a culture whose traditions are under great stress. And it hints at the possibility of capturing, in cinema, an evanescent spiritual beauty, almost but not quite beyond reach.

Old Dog

Saturday, September 7, 5:00 p.m.

Dir. Pema Tsenden. 2010, 89 mins. Tibet/China. In Tibetan and Chinese with English subtitles. With Lochey, Drolma Kyab, Tamdrin Tso. An elderly Tibetan shepherd lives with his son Gonbo and Gonbo's wife, Rikso. They own an old Tibetan mastiff, a sheep-herding dog whose breed became a prized possession for Chinese buyers on the Chinese "mainland" (i.e. non-Tibetan China). Their dog is sold, recovered, resold, stolen, and recovered again, passing through the hands of a Chinese dealer, the local police, and Tibetan dog rustlers. Amidst relentlessly fenced-off Amdo grasslands and a decidedly unpicturesque village, the old shepherd struggles, to the best of his ability, to fend off everyone who sees his dog as a mere commodity. In what may be Pema Tsenden's darkest film, crises of identity and masculinity collide as vultures circle overhead.

Jinpa

Sunday, September 8, 4:00 p.m.

Dir. Pema Tsenden. 2018, 87 mins. Tibet/China. In Tibetan with English subtitles. With Jinpa, Genden Phuntsok, Sonam Wangmo. Pema Tsenden's offbeat fable is a striking departure from his realist narratives: part road movie, part Tibetan western. Two men named Jinpa meet on a mountain road in the Kekexili highlands near Tibet. One Jinpa, never without his sunglasses, is a truck driver (and Neapolitan song fancier), upset he has struck and killed a sheep. He picks up the other, brooding, Jinpa, who announces he is on a search for the killer of his father. We follow the first Jinpa to a monastery, a butcher, his lover, and a saloon presided over by a sultry barmaid (an incandescent

Sonam Wangmo). Eventually the two men's stories, dreams, and fates intertwine, as weighty moral questions of karma and compassion hang in the balance. Filmed by Lü Songye's in tightly focused, fantastically warped Academy-ratio photography.

Tharlo

Friday, September 13, 6:30 p.m.

Dir. Pema Tsenden. 2015, 123 mins. In Tibetan and Chinese with English subtitles. With Shide Nyima, Yangshik Tso, Tashi. In Pema Tsenden's most sublime film, *Tharlo* is a Tibetan shepherd from Qinghai with a phenomenal memory. He recites the entire text of Mao's famous essay "Serve the People" to a policeman when he applies for an ID card. Needing to wash his long, braided hair for his ID photo, *Tharlo* meets beautiful hairstylist Yangtso, who charms him and takes him out for a wild and disorienting night on the town. Highlighted by cinematographer Lü Songye's mesmerizing black-and-white long takes and superb performances by Shide Nyima as *Tharlo* and Yangshik Tso as Yangtso, this fable about the agonizing clash of two Tibetan cultures—traditional and contemporary, pastoral and urban—is a penetrating psychosexual study of masculinity in crisis, and a riveting exploration of social change.

The Sacred Arrow

Saturday, September 14, 6:00 p.m.

Dir. Pema Tsenden. 2014, 96 mins. Tibet/China. In Tibetan with English subtitles. With Rinchen Dundruo, Sonam Nyima, Dekyid. A fascinating departure from Pema Tsenden's usual style, this experiment in commercial ethnic cinema is a full-blown, gorgeously shot, widescreen modern fable with professional actors and a largely Chinese crew. Handsome Nyima and brooding Dradon are two ace archers from rival villages who vie in an annual contest for the ultimate prize, the Sacred Arrow. When Dradon objects to Nyima courting his sister Dekyid, we think we know where the story is headed. But Pema Tsenden surprises with an ecstatic, virtually wordless final 20 minutes, taking an unexpected character on a mystical journey. After the darkness of *Old Dog*, *The Sacred Arrow* offers something like a utopian vision of how Tibetan culture might thrive, revivifying the strength of its roots to face the future.

Balloon

Sunday, September 15, 2:30 p.m.

Dir. Pema Tsenden. 2019, 103 mins. Tibet/China. In Tibetan with English subtitles. With Sonam Wangmo, Jinpa, Yangshik Tso. The two little sons of virile Tibetan shepherd Dargye (Pema Tsenden's favorite actor, Jinpa) mistake their parents' condoms for balloons. Their mother, Drolkar, puts up with her husband's robust sex drive. Drolkar's sister, the enigmatic nun Shangchu Drolma, visits while Dargye is looking for a ram to impregnate his flock of ewes. When a family member suddenly dies, the urgent need to identify his reincarnation threatens to tear the family apart. *Balloon* is fascinated with ideas of potency, pregnancy, and the possibilities for female autonomy. DP Lü Songye's spectacularly colorful compositions propel Pema Tsenden's vision in darker, unexpected

directions. The dead, the reincarnated, and the living interweave while this family's world, captured in semi-realist semi-hallucinatory style, slowly catches emotional fire.

Snow Leopard

Sunday, September 15, 5:30 p.m.

Dir. Pema Tsenden. 2023, 104 mins. Tibet/China. In Tibetan and Chinese with English subtitles. With Jinpa, Genden Phuntsok, Xiong Ziqi, Tseten Tashi. The last film Pema Tsenden finished before his death at age 53 is an enthralling, semi-mystical fable about the deep spiritual connection between a snow leopard and a young Tibetan monk. On the high Tibetan plateau of Madoi County in Qinghai province, a snow leopard (conceived with superbly subtle CGI) has killed nine rams belonging to the young monk's brother, Jinpa. Jinpa is furious and demands compensation; otherwise he'll kill the captive leopard. But these magnificent beasts are rare, protected animals. As a TV news crew arrives, local officials and the police try to mediate, leading to a tense standoff, as tensions between state power, traditional ways of life, contemporary media, and migrating souls play out in ways both troubling and deeply moving.

Museum of the Moving Image (MoMI) is the only institution in the United States that deals with the art, technology, enjoyment, and social impact of film, television, and digital media. In its facility in Astoria, New York, the Museum presents exhibitions; screenings; discussion programs featuring actors, directors, and creative leaders; and education programs. It houses the nation's most comprehensive collection of moving image artifacts and screens over 500 films annually. Its exhibitions—including the core exhibition *Behind the Screen* and *The Jim Henson Exhibition*—are noted for their integration of material objects, interactive experiences, and audiovisual presentations. For more information about the MoMI, visit movingimage.org.

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[Press images are available here.](#)

Museum of the Moving Image is housed in a building owned by the City of New York and has received significant support from the following public agencies: New York City Department of Cultural Affairs; New York City Council; New York City Economic Development Corporation; New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature; Institute of Museum and Library Services; National Endowment for the Humanities; National Endowment for the Arts; and Natural Heritage Trust (administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation).