



## OLD DOG

An Icarus Films Release  
 Directed by Pema Tseden

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"A stealthily powerful tale. Flecked with Chekhovian melancholy but also welcome moments of humor [the] bleak last scene comes as a shock." *-Variety*

"Already the focus of a career retrospective at the Asia Society [and Harvard Film Archive], Tseden is a filmmaker of international stature. [Old Dog captures] the sweeping grandeur of the landscape, as well as the hardscrabble nature of life for Tibetans, both in cities and in the countryside." *-Libertas Magazine*

Contact: (718) 488-8900 [www.IcarusFilms.com](http://www.IcarusFilms.com)  
 The dGenerate Films Collection



## FILM SYNOPSIS 1

In *Old Dog*, directed by Pema Tsenden, the leading voice of the "Tibetan New Wave," a family on the Himalayan plains discovers their dog is worth a fortune, but selling it comes at a terrible price.

The Tibetan nomad mastiff is an exotic prize dog in China, potentially fetching millions of dollars from wealthy Chinese buyer. When a young man named Gonpo notices several thefts of mastiffs from Tibetan farm families, he decides to sell his family's dog before it is stolen and sold on the black market.

His father, an aging Tibetan herder, is furious when he discovers the dog missing. He sets off to buy the dog back, sparking a series of events that threaten to tear the family apart.

Weaving together narrative strands of humor and gravity, *Old Dog* beautifully depicts life among the rural Tibetan people and the erosion of Tibetan culture under the pressures of contemporary society.

## FILM SYNOPSIS 2

Tibetan filmmaker Pema Tsenden fills his extraordinary third film with emotional allegory, conjured by the sights and sounds of rural China. *Old Dog* opens as middle-aged Gonpo slowly arrives in town on a scooter with his faithful Tibetan mastiff trotting alongside. During his visit, he sells the dog to a Chinese trader who specializes in procuring mastiffs for wealthy landowners as status symbols. His father, Akhu, is disturbed by his son's lack of regard for their dog and purchases the animal back, initiating the simple story line, which revolves largely around the dog's destiny and the familial dynamics between Gonpo and Akhu.

Tsenden's film is rich with commentary on the evolving conflict within Tibetan culture, most clearly seen through Akhu's struggle to respect his dog and perhaps his own rural existence; a way of life that is quickly giving way to a faster-paced mainland culture that his son more easily welcomes. *Old Dog*'s highly observant narrative reveals artistic insight into the current challenges facing Tibetans, gently moving toward a final tragic sequence that epitomizes Akhu's conflicted view of his culture's future.

—Seattle International Film Festival description

## FILM CREDITS

Title: "Old Dog"

Country: China

Copyright Date: 2011

Release Date: 2012

Director: Pema Tseden

Writer: Pema Tseden

Running time: 88 minutes

Producers: Xianmin Zhang

Cinematographer: Sonthar Gyal

Art Director: Sonthar Gyal

Editing: Sangye Bhum

Production Manager:

Sangye Gyamtso

Sound: Dukar Tserang

Cast: Yanbum Gyal,

Drolma Kyab, Lochey Lochey, Tamdrin Tso

## SELECTED SCREENINGS

Best Narrative Feature, Brooklyn Film Festival 2012

Official Selection, Seattle International Film Festival 2012

Official Selection, San Francisco International Film Festival 2012

Official Selection, Wales One World Film Festival 2012

Official Selection, International Film Festival Rotterdam 2012

Official Selection, Vancouver International Film Festival 2012

Special Screening and Official Selection, Slamdance 2012

Official Selection, Northside Festival 2012

Best Asian Film, Hong Kong International Film Festival 2012

"Emergent Visions: Film by Pema Tseden" at Harvard Film Archive 2012

BFI London Film Festival 2011

Grand Prize, Tokyo FilmEx 2011

Audience, Press, and Jury Awards, Cinema Digital Seoul Film Festival 2011

Official Selection, Taipei Film Festival 2011

Official Selection, Mumbai Film Festival 2011

## FILM REVIEWS

VARIETY

NOVEMBER 13, 2011

BY LESLIE FELPERIN

*A father and son tussle over whether to sell the family's mastiff in "Old Dog," a spare but stealthily powerful tale set in contempo Tibet from local up-and-comer Pema Tseden. Flecked with Chekhovian melancholy but also welcome moments of humor, this skillfully lensed digital pic is a bit more critical of Chinese culture, in an oblique way, than Tseden's previous two features ("The Silent Holy Stones," "The Search"), but not so much as to impede its access to the international festival scene, where it's picked up a few awards already. Whether it will ever open at home remains to be seen.*

In the mountainous Chinese region of Qinghai, which covers part of what used to be Tibet, a young man named Gonpo (Drolma Kyab) rides his motorcycle from his sheep farm to what passes for a town in this rural region, followed by his Tibetan mastiff, a breed of dog that looks like a fluffed-up cross between a German shepherd and a St. Bernard. Gonpo has heard that the breed has become highly prized in urban China, so much so that Gonpo decides to pre-empt any potential dog-napping by selling the hound to a shady dealer.

Afterwards, he gets drunk on the proceeds and sobers up at home, where his elderly father, Akku (Lochey), is furious that he sold the dog, whom Akku raised from puppyhood. Akku rides back to the town on his horse and manages, after considerable negotiation, to retrieve the dog, with some help from his relative, a local cop (Chokyong Gyal).

Unfortunately for the poor mutt, this isn't the last time he'll suffer separation anxiety, as he duly gets stolen in the night, and Akku must go in search of him again. Meanwhile, at home it becomes clear there's tension brewing between Gonpo and his wife, who after three years of marriage still hasn't managed to conceive.

Lensing by Sonthar Gyal, who recently helmed "The Sun-Beaten Path," deliberately refrains from offering any closeups, so almost all the action unfolds at a distance from the camera, which creates a slightly stiff, theatrical feeling. That said, what the lensing loses in intimacy it gains in sweep and scope, so that the spectacular mountain landscape and the filthy, cruddy-looking township virtually become

characters in their own right. Despite flashes of gentle, naturalistic humor, a sense of foreboding is pervasive; even so, the bleak last scene still comes as a shock.

LIBERTAS FILM MAGAZINE

JUNE 08, 2012

BY JOE BENDEL

In news of yet more outrageous but hardly surprising interference in Tibetan affairs, China has just announced an open-ended ban on foreign tourism to the occupied country. However, friends and admirers of the Himalayan nation can still get a glimpse into the on-the-ground realities there through Pema Tseden's narrative feature *Old Dog*, which screens [at] the Brooklyn Heights Cinema, as part of the 2012 Brooklyn Film Festival.

Not content with Tibet's sovereignty, China also covets its dogs. For the Chinese nouveau riche, nomad mastiffs are the newest status symbol. It is a seller's market, assuming unscrupulous dog merchants do not steal the traditional family canines first. Dog-nappings are so pervasive, Gonpo figures he might as well sell his father-in-law Akku's beloved pet and at least get some money for him. Akku does not see it that way, enlisting the help of his a local copper kinsman to retrieve the shaggy pooch. Unfortunately, the dog brokers are not about to forget about so prized a pooch.

If Jia Zhangke remade *Old Yeller*, it might look something like *Old Dog*. Helmed by Tibetan auteur Pema Tseden (a.k.a. Wanma Caidan when he is in China), it is a slight departure [for] dGenerate Films, the independent Chinese cinema specialists. However, Tseden's naturalistic documentary-like approach is quite in line with the Digital Generation style for which they are named. He and cinematographer Sonthar Gyal capture the sweeping grandeur of the landscape, as well as the hardscrabble nature of life for Tibetans, both in cities and in the countryside. It is also clear the last fifty-three years have been devastating for contemporary Tibetan architecture.

Amongst a cast clearly at home on the Tibetan Steppe, Lochey gives a remarkably assured performance as Akku. Deeply human and humane, his character bears witness to the steady corrosion of traditional Tibetan values, but he does not necessarily do so silently. Drolma Kyab's performance as the hash-up son-in-law Gonpo is also quite honest and engaging. Indeed, the small ensemble is so

completely unaffected and natural on-screen, *Old Dog* could easily pass for a documentary. Yet it has a very real dramatic arc.

Already the focus of a career retrospective at the Asia Society (amounting to two films at the time), Tseden is a filmmaker of international stature. Taking some subtly implied but recognizable jabs at Chinese hegemony over Tibet, *Old Dog* is his boldest film yet. Cineastes will earnestly hope there will be more to follow. Quietly powerful, *Old Dog* is highly recommended during this year's BFF.

GRADE: A

## DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY



Pema Tseden (*The Silent Holy Stones*, *The Search*) was born in 1969 in Amdo, the Tibetan region, in Qinghai Province. He is the leading filmmaker of a newly emerging Tibetan cinema and the first director in China to film his movies entirely in the Tibetan language.

Tseden has published more than 50 pieces of short and medium-length novels both in Tibetan and Chinese; his work has won numerous awards including including the Tibetan literature prize Drang-char (sbrang-char) and the Rookie award for Chinese Contemporary Ethnic Literature. Tseden's writing has been translated into languages English, French, and German.

In 2002, Pema Tseden began his film career. His feature films, all of which have received great acclaim, are *The Grassland* (2004), *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005), *The Search* (2009) and *Old Dog*. Tseden is Chairman of the Directors Association of China; he is also a member of the Filmmakers and Literary Societies of China.

## DIRECTOR INTERVIEW

INDIEWIRE

JUNE 10, 2012

BY CHRISTOPHER BELL

*Pema Tseden is a name you're going to be much more familiar with in the coming years. With his strong sense of visual composition and a dedication to presenting the real Tibet, it's only a matter of time before Cannes starts lapping his films up.*

*Already a prolific novelist in his native country, Tseden took up the camera in 2002, producing a number of features in the neo-realist vein and jump-starting the Tibetan independent scene with cinematographer Sonthar Gyal. Old Dog is his latest effort, a quiet affair depicting one family's struggle to keep their elderly family pooch from being stolen at a time when its breed fetches a high price. Though the plot reads like something thinly conceived, it's actually a cleverly devised story, rich in allegory and social critiques with very little fat on its bones.*

*A recent conversation with the director following a screening of Old Dog at the Brooklyn Film Festival yielded some interesting information, such as the reasoning behind his filmmaking style and new projects to come.*

### SHOWING THE REAL TIBET

One of the biggest aims for the blossoming Tibetan new-wave is to show a true portrait of the region, one not generally seen in cineplexes. "I tried to show people the traditional way of life and the social change taking place. For instance, in this film, there's a story inside a story -- that young couple couldn't have a child. Through that kind of situation I'm trying to tell people what is current in Tibet. Things are changing," Tseden noted. "The main point of the film is not just to tell a story, but also to demonstrate or document small details that make up Tibet." After showing "Old Dog" in both China and Tibet, audience members responded well, praising the accurate representation of the region.

### IMPORTANCE OF IMAGE AND LOCATION

As the filmmaker stresses his neo-realist approach to the material, one can't help but notice that many of the environments come off as a kind of post-apocalyptic wasteland. This unsettling feeling is something that the filmmaker was well aware of. "I intentionally created that kind of impact, but based on the story and the needs of the story," he explained, noting that this particular narrative called for such a bleak setting. He goes on to explain the significance of his locale choices and the way he frames them, confessing that he was "kind of depressed" during the writing and shooting stages of the movie. "Maybe you noticed that many scenes in the movie don't contain a lot of sky -- the shots were framed very level, or horizontal. We

wanted to create a very sad feeling through this. When you watch the movie, and the dog is killed, in many ways it's kind of a liberation. The dog is liberated in a way, and the old man is too. At the end, he climbs a hill, which has some symbolic meaning, because at the end of it it is closer to the sky."

#### HAPPY ACCIDENTS

Carefully composed single takes make up most of the movie, but the filmmaker often leaves room to play around, allowing for chance happenings and happy accidents. One of the most memorable scenes, in which an entire flock of sheep run across the back of the frame while an isolated one attempts to return to its group, actually came about this way. "90 percent of compositions are pre-meditated, pre-planned. We intentionally separated the one sheep from the group and set up a camera to see what would happen, but we didn't know it would walk down toward the camera. That was great, and then something even more miraculous happened. When the old man walked back with the dog, the entire sheep herd followed him. That is a very interesting part, and we didn't expect that to happen! But it happened really naturally, they merged, and it went with the feeling of the movie." Tseden often takes advantage of the digital format by shooting scenes numerous times, but he was so pleased with this outcome that he moved on after a single attempt. "It was very natural... we had the perfect one," he declared confidently.

#### BERGMAN LOVE

"I studied at the film academy in China for many years and I watched hundreds of movies, so it's hard to say who really influenced me. But I will say, Ingmar Bergman is probably one of them who really struck me."

#### NEW MOVIE

It appears that rest isn't in the cards for this director. With three ideas in his brain all demanding attention, it appears that once he leaves the States he will begin work on one of them -- the coincidentally titled *America*. Here he gives the skinny:

"It's about a Western cow, not the traditional one found in Tibet. This time the story would take place in Central Tibet. One family purchased a very expensive cow from a foreign country because they were told that it would produce a lot of milk. They're unsure what to name it, and since they know there are a lot of these in America, that's what they name it. When they attempt to breed it, it inexplicably dies, leading to an investigation from the security department. Because of this chain of events, the relationships between people in this particular tight-knit village change, which is the main point I'm going for. It's structurally different from 'Old Dog,' and the movie will start when the cow is already dead, with people giving their individual stories to the security department."





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*Old Dog* is part of the dGenerate Films Collection at Icarus Films

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