



## THE SEARCH

An Icarus Films Release  
Directed by Pema Tseden

"A masterpiece of understated emotional longing set against an urgent desire to preserve a disappearing culture." —**Cinema Scope**

"At times, the film feels like Tibetan Idol, with the film crew recording bizarre and amusing auditions in frost-swept brick courtyards, cavernous rehearsal rooms and dimly lit anterooms." —**All Things Considered, NPR**

"The chance to see Tibet through a contemporary resident Tibetan's eye... The imagery is often stunning." —**Senses of Cinema**

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## FILM SYNOPSIS

A director, his assistant, and a businessman drive through the Amdo region of Tibet, scouring small villages to find actors for their adaptation of the *namthar* of Drime Kunden, an opera traditionally performed for the Tibetan New Year, that tells the story of a prince—an early incarnation of Buddha—who gives away all his possessions, his wife and children, and even his own eyes.

Driving through the country's stunning landscapes, the crew meets frustration in their search for actors who can live up to the legendary roles. They find that while many of the traditions they would like to film have persisted, others are disappearing.

Directed by Pema Tsenden, whose *SILENT HOLY STONES* was China's first Tibetan-language film, *THE SEARCH* reveals a contemporary Tibet where the ancient and the modern co-exist.

The film is framed by two love stories. In the first village they visit, the team discovers the perfect actress to play Made Zangmo, Drime Kunden's wife, but she will not perform unless her ex-boyfriend, who has left the village for a job in the city, plays the lead. The crew consents, and brings her along to find him. Along the way, the businessman tells the story of his first love. This moving account entertains the crew between stops in the villages, and captivates the otherwise quiet actress.

A human story that unfolds in the context of religious parable and historical change, *THE SEARCH* offers a sensitive, nuanced look at contemporary Tibet.

## SELECTED FILM FESTIVALS

Grand Prize, 2009 Shanghai International Film Festival  
Special Jury Prize, 2009 Bangkok International Film Festival  
Official Selection, 2009 Toronto International Film Festival  
Official Selection, 2009 Locarno Film Festival  
Official Selection, 2009 Vancouver International Film Festival  
Official Selection, 2009 London Film Festival  
Official Selection, 2010 Hong Kong International Film Festival  
Official Selection, 2010 Melbourne International Film Festival

## FILM CREDITS

Title: "The Search"

(找智美更登/ རྩོམ་པ།, *Xun Zhao Zhi Mei Geng Deng/'Tsol*)

Country: China

Copyright Date: 2009

Release Date: 2013

Director: Pema Tseden

Writer: Pema Tseden

Running time: 105 minutes

Presented by Sangye Gyamtso and Pema Tseden

With

The Director...Manla Kyab

The Businessman...Tsondrey

The Veiled Girl...Lumo Tso

The Cameraman...Rigden Gyamtso

The Driver...Sangye Tashi

Chief Coordinator Xu Feng  
Literature Planning by Wang Hongwei and Ma Xiuwen  
Arts Advisors Zheng Dongtian and Xie Fei  
Production Manager Sangye Gyamtso  
Production Supervisor Tian Zhuang Zhuang and Pierre Rissient  
Subdirector Nima Thar and Rigden Gyamtso  
Supervisor of Production Yang Guang and Richli  
Documentary Director Pema Tashi  
Log Keeper Wang Juan  
Log Assistance Tsomo Gyal  
Art Director Sonthar Gyal  
Art Director Assistants Phakmo Tserang and Kathub Tashi  
Producer Tsheshuk Tso  
Field Producers Dawa and Zhou Yu  
Production Coordinator Dorje Gyal  
Catering Drukmo Tso  
Manager Tserang Dondrub  
Camera Sonthar Gyal  
Camera First Assistant Li Hong Ye  
Camera Second Assistants Zhao Wu and Yang Wei Chao  
Sound Dukar Tserang  
Sound Assistants Yang Da Lin and Wang Yu Gang  
Editing by Chen Hai Ling, Benjamin Illos and Zhou Xing  
Post Production by Zang Jun Qing  
Audio Post Production by Dukar Tserang  
Lighting by Peng San  
Lighting Assistants Zhao Yao Yu, Song Wei Gang and Lu chun Lai

Produced by Himalaya Audio & Visual Culture Communication Co. Ltd.

An Icarus Films Release

## IN THE PRESS

"DIRECTOR SEEKS TO CAPTURE LIFE IN MODERN TIBET"

NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO (NPR), "ALL THINGS CONSIDERED"

BY LOUISA LIM

JUNE 30, 2009

Pema Tsenden is the son of Tibetan nomads, the only one of three siblings to have finished his schooling. He is also the first director in China ever to film movies entirely in the Tibetan language.

This is a sensitive issue, since the exiled Tibetan leader, the Dalai Lama, has accused China of "cultural genocide" since it occupied Tibet in 1951. But *The Search*, Pema Tsenden's latest film, won the Grand Jury Prize at Shanghai's recent International Film Festival and is slated to be shown at the upcoming Locarno film festival in Switzerland.

### JOURNEY THROUGH NEW TIBET

Pema Tsenden's Tibet is not the land of soaring peaks and picturesque monasteries. It's a land of stark brown hills and squat, featureless, one-story brick houses.

He feels he is setting the record straight.

In his first interview with a Western media outlet, the 40-year-old filmmaker — who is also known as Wanma Caidan — tells NPR that for too many years, Tibet has been depicted by outsiders who pander to their own imagination.

"I think Tibet has always been mythologized and worshipped, and made more remote," he says. "People's psychological expectations and experiences of Tibet are stuck in the past. They don't understand the new Tibet."

*The Search* is literally a journey through new Tibet. It looks like a documentary, but it isn't. Filmed near Qinghai Lake in the far western Chinese province of

Qinghai — the same area where Pema Tseden was born — the movie uses nonprofessional actors speaking only the Amdo dialect.

The movie follows a film crew looking for a singer to perform the part of Tibetan opera character Prince Drime Kunden. This deeply symbolic character epitomizes selflessness and the virtue of charity; he is a previous incarnation of Buddha, who gave away his children and wife, and all his possessions to those in need and eventually plucks out his own eyes.

But in modern Tibet, the film crew struggles to find anyone who can remember — or perform — the story.

"That's really how things are," Pema Tseden says. "In some areas, villagers always used to perform the Tibetan operas, and everyone would go to watch. But people aren't interested anymore, and it's harder to see them performed. Some places still want to continue, but they've received many challenges. Tibetan opera is a symbol of Tibetan culture."

#### SEARCH FOR DISAPPEARING CULTURE

At times, the film feels like *Tibetan Idol*, with the film crew recording bizarre and amusing auditions in frost-swept brick courtyards, cavernous rehearsal rooms and dimly lit anterooms.

They encounter a Tibetan opera troupe consisting of girls performing stylized dances and using butter churns as props, but who can't actually sing Tibetan opera. They hear a boy monk in a monastery who recites the English alphabet for his audition, and a Tibetan Charlie Chaplin who leaves them in stitches.

The film also features a man who used to sing the part of Drime Kunden and now performs in a nightclub. Drunken and furious, the nightclub singer tells them he hates the role, and asks them whether they really believe love still exists in this world.

Pema Tseden says that, on one level, the film reflects a search for Tibet's disappearing culture.

"It's being buffeted by modernization. It's not obvious, but it's being affected. It's like those sacred stones with Buddhist sutras carved on them. They've been standing like that for hundreds or thousands of years with no apparent change. But, in fact, they're being slowly changed all the time. I think Tibetan areas right now are like that," he says.

Woven into the film are two love stories that accompany the search for the singer, and often the camera is simply perched in the back of the car, recording as a Tibetan businessman tells of his lost love. The style and pace of the film is idiosyncratic, with shots mostly static and sometimes held for as long as two and a half minutes.

#### CELEBRATING TIBETAN AESTHETIC, AVOIDING CONTROVERSY

The jury at the Shanghai International Film Festival called *The Search* the most challenging film they saw — "almost a meditation in patience and an exercise in it."

Pema Tseden explains.

"It's a traditional Tibetan aesthetic. Tibetan *tankas*, or wall hangings, are like that — they're like a panorama. All the story is in one picture. It's very peaceful, but it's very detailed," he says.

Pema Tseden's own route to filmmaking was circuitous. He studied Tibetan literature in college and worked first as a primary school teacher in his hometown, and then as a civil servant. Eventually, he returned to school as an older student at China's top film school, the Beijing Film Academy. But he believes it is his experience living and working in Qinghai that has had the greatest influence on his films.

The film and its director tread a delicate tightrope, tiptoeing around controversial political issues. As a Tibetan film, the picture underwent stricter censorship than other Chinese films. It was vetted by the State Administration of Film, Radio and Television, as well as by the Religious Affairs Bureau and the United Front Work Department, which manages relations with ethnic minority groups in China.

*The Search* is Pema Tseden's second film; his first, *The Silent Holy Stones*, won a Golden Rooster, a major Chinese award, in 2005, the year Beijing celebrated 100 years of film.

#### MULTIFACETED ROLE AS TIBETAN AUTEUR

Pema Tseden is circumspect when asked whether there is a danger of being co-opted by the establishment, only commenting that all those working in film in China must have a clear idea of what they are trying to achieve.

His film was feted as China's first movie made in Tibetan, with a Tibetan director and crew. But he says it's wrong to celebrate this achievement.

"Lots of people asked me if I felt it was a very glorious and very proud moment. But I felt very sad that it's taken 100 years to have a Tibetan film. I'm not proud; I think it's a matter of great sorrow," he says.

Pema Tseden is now working to get his films more widely shown in Tibetan areas. He will fund free screenings of his second film for local audiences in the more remote Tibetan regions.

"I think it's important for them to see it," he says, noting that his showings of his first film were welcomed by Tibetans. "They were very happy to see their everyday life. They felt it was very close."

But still, he admits, his parents — who keep herds of goats and a few yaks — don't understand what a film director actually does.

At the end of *The Search*, the film crew finds its singer, a teacher whose government job won't allow him to go home to sing for the traditional festivals. And despite the long search, the film director can't decide whether he is right for the part — a bittersweet conclusion, perhaps reflecting Tibetans' dislocation and doubts about their own identity.

Listen to NPR's conversation with Pema Tseden here:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106089201>



“50 BEST FILMMAKERS UNDER 50”

CINEMA SCOPE MAGAZINE

BY SHELLY KRAICER

Pema Tseden himself considers it sad that only now, after one hundred years of cinema history, the first Tibetan filmmaker has emerged. But the first is already a master, with three brilliant features to date. Known also in Chinese as Wanma Caidan, Pema Tseden was born in 1969 in the Tibetan ethnic region of Amdo, in Qinghai province, China, to nomadic herder parents. He graduated as a mature student from the Beijing Film Academy in 2004, the year he shot his first feature *The Silent Holy Stones*. This film established his subsequent practice: his films' dialogues are in a Tibetan dialect (with bits of Mandarin Chinese); he shoots with an entirely Tibetan crew and a non-professional Tibetan cast, in and around the Tibetan areas where he grew up. And he is the first director of Chinese nationality to do this. His subject is also consistent: the contemporary culture and life of Tibet, shot from within local society, a practice that consciously puts his films in deliberate contrast to the exoticizing fiction features about Tibet that have been produced by outsiders, both Chinese and foreign.

*The Silent Holy Stones* tells of a young monk who, coming home from his monastery for the holidays, becomes enraptured with TV serials of Buddhist stories, and tries to bring them back to his fellow monks. Against this background his village is performing the traditional Tibetan opera *Drime Kunden*—and this becomes the subject of Pema Tseden's second feature *The Search* (2009). This film uses perfectly framed long takes, from a largely distant yet intimately engaged camera, to tell the story of a film crew driving around Tibet looking for actors to play in a filmed version of the opera. It wraps this quest around two concurrent love stories, and the whole becomes a masterpiece of understated emotional longing set against an urgent desire to preserve a disappearing culture. The subtle politics of the first two features comes somewhat more to the fore in the angry, almost despairing fable *Old Dog* (2011), in which an elderly Tibetan herder would rather kill his dog than

see it sold to Chinese dealers for a fabulous price. Given Pema Tseden's extremely complicated position as a Tibetan in China, and the necessity of having his films pass stringent Chinese censorship, his ability to speak eloquently of individual despair and the emergency of cultural obliteration is masterful; his ability to do this in films of such eloquent, quiet beauty is nothing short of astonishing.

## 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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