Women in Pema Tseden's films: a so far uneasy relationship
A brief overview

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The rise of Tibetan cinema
It has been fifteen years since Tibetan cinema in Tibet[2] proper started taking off, with Pema Tseden (Tib. Padma tshe brtan, b. 1969) and Sonthar Gyal (Tib. Zon thar rgyal, b. 1974) as its two main and gifted representatives. The two of them total in early 2019 ten (respectively 7 and 3) released feature films so far, with one more each in the making at the time of writing. Their films are regularly shown in world-class art film festivals and often reap prizes. As a consequence, both filmmakers have a capacity to shape and inform the image of Tibet on the global art film scene. Kamila Hladiková has already offered a study of Pema Tseden's filmography as an act of deconstruction of both the Sino-centered ethnically biased misrepresentation of Tibet and the Western-centered idealisation of Tibet (Hladiková 2016). In this summarised article, a more specific topic is under scrutiny, that of the issue of gender representations, gendered tropes and roles, and more precisely women's roles and representations in films by Pema Tseden, and, to a lesser extent, by Sonthar Gyal. This summarised article reflects upon the reasons that account for the striking silence and invisibility of women roles in both filmmakers' filmographies.

Pema Tseden as a writer and as a filmmaker
Pema Tseden started his artistic career as a fiction writer, in the late 1990s, before he was able to turn to filmmaking, his initial passion, in 2004 (for an overview of Pema Tseden's career and films, see Hladiková 2016 and Robin unpublished). He has so far published around 60 short stories, written either in Tibetan, or Chinese, or in both languages. A cursory survey of roughly a third of Pema Tseden's published short stories shows that women characters in them do

at times endorse substantial roles, a few short stories even having a woman as a first-person narrator. Such a degree of agency for women characters could be expected in Pema Tseden's films. But, on the contrary, women there are usually silent and subservient–with one exception, his sixth film, "Tharlo" (2015). How to account for this discrepancy between the women he shapes on screen and the ones he shapes in fiction?

Women on screen
It should be reminded that, contrary to fiction where strong women have been portrayed for decades,[3] limited woman agency on screen is the standard. Film and feminist studies, which have developed together in the 1970s, have from the onset denounced the male-centered gaze prevailing then in the majority of films, what the leading feminist film theoretician Laura Mulvey termed the "patriarchal regime of looking" (1989), imposed upon the characters and the watchers.

How to measure this patriarchal regime of looking? One can turn to the "Bechdel/Wallace test". This test, often quoted in popular feminist culture, started as a joke in 1985 in a lesbian comic strip, *Dykes to Watch out For*, by the cartoonist Alison Bechdel. In that comic strip, a woman character claims that, for her to take a film seriously, it should fulfil three criteria: 1) it must have at least two women characters; 2) these two women must talk to each other; 3) they must talk about something else than a man. In spite of its simplicity, this "test" (which has been complexified and diversified since then) has gained respectability, even among professional circles.

Fig. 1

Women in Pema Tseden's films
How do Pema Tseden's films perform when applied the Bechdel/Wallace test? While they all feature 2 or 3 women characters, those women only talk to each other in four films out of 6. And if we take into account the number of line (in subtitles) spoken by each of them, the result leaves more to be desired: at best, dialogues spoken by women occupy 15% of the overall dialogues ("Tharlo", Tib. Thar lo, 2015, see below), while in the three others, they do not exceed 1% of the speaking time. "The Search" (Tib. 'Tshol, 2009) is an exception: Kalzang Tso (Tib. Skal bzang mtsho), a woman character, gets 330 out of over 1400 subtitles of the film, amounting to about a fourth of the dialogues. But she is a central character *in absentia*: not only is she never seen on screen, but she is never heard either. Instead, her voice comes through that of her first lover, a wealthy entrepreneur who spends the whole film narrating their failed love story, who relives his lengthy conversations with her.

As mentioned above, "Tharlo" (2015) is the one exception in Pema Tseden's filmography, with its sizeable and reasonably talkative woman character, Yangtso (Tib. G.yang mtsho). An urbanized, independent Tibetan woman, she privately runs a hair salon. But far from celebrating Yangtso's economic or gender empowerment, the film shows her cheating upon the naïve Tharlo, a herder unfamiliar with the devious ways of modernity and urban life.

This characterization of an independent woman as a cheater does not bode well about the status of liberated women in Tibetan women filmic representation. Still, Pema Tseden blurs the picture further. Although Yangtso is indeed a *femme fatale*, the films opts for restraint and modesty in her representation. No

Fig. 2

bodily exposure, no close framing of her body or face, which is the preferred mode of representation of *femmes fatales*, and of women at large, in male-gaze centered films, especially those who target an international audience, as is the case of Pema Tseden's works.[4] Jinpa (Tib. Sbyin pa, 2018), Pema Tseden's latest released film at the time of writing this article, seems to come closer to a more accommodating standardized, male-centered gazing of feminine roles. The two

Fig. 3

main characters are men, both called Jinpa. One of them, the truck driver, is very manly, with his sunglasses and leather outfit, the other much thinner and fragile. The truck driver roaming remote and scarcely populated Tibetan areas, he has an occasional lover, a simple and loving young woman with whom he sleeps (a rare sight in Pema Tseden's modest films). He is also shown, in a memorable and Caravaggio-inspired scene (see picture below), with a very flirtatious bar owner, who runs her business with authority and charm, reminiscent of the hairdresser in "Tharlo". Neither Jinpa' lover nor the bar owner have a name (the credits only mention: "Hostess" and "Lover", Tib. resp. *sbyin bdag* and *dga' rogs*), testifying to the secondary part they play in the film.

Prescribed feminine invisibility vs. imperative of visibility
How to account for the physical and verbal underrepresentation of women in Pema Tseden's films? According to the Tibet specialist and anthropologist Hamsa Rajan, in Amdo, "in ritual and traditional practices, women are often meant to show humility, displaying they are more respectful, humble, silent, and deferential than men. By so doing, women show they are good women" (Rajan 2014: 154). This normative feminine invisibility clashes with contemporary imperatives of visibility, a prerequisite both in cinema and in today's world, in which "visibility capital" (Heinich 2012) has become the latest must-have. While men in Amdo have had little problem accumulating "visibility capital", women still struggle with it, as it clashes with their prescribed modesty. Obviously, Amdo is not the only cultural realm facing this dilemma. At other times or in other parts of the world, different compromises have been worked out: at the onset of Indian cinema in 1911, filmmakers had to hire men to play women's roles as no respectable woman would perform. In Turkey, "all female roles were played by non-Muslims until the foundation of the secular Turkish Republic in 1923" (Dönmez-Colin 2008: 142). Veil on screen is compulsory in contemporary Iranian films (it is well known that Abbas Kiarostami, Iran's foremost director, has been

an inspiration for Pema Tseden). In Afghanistan today, as shown in Sonia Kronlund's documentary film "Nothingwood" (2017), the number one and prolific Z-movies director Salim Shaheen must hire an effeminate male actor to play women parts in his numerous films.

In Amdo, a massively rural area where public modesty is still the norm for women, where professional acting, especially among women, is practically unheard of, and where directors have mainly to rely on amateurs, how to reconcile these two apparently antagonistic imperatives on woman invisibility and media exposure? Pema Tseden and Sonthar Gyal have devised different strategies: in "The Search", as we have seen, one woman is talked through the reminiscences of her former lover; another sports a scarf, as most women do in Amdo; in "The Sacred Arrow" (Tib. G.yang mda', 2014), Pema Tseden hired a professional actress from Khams to play the lead actress, Dekyi (Tib. Bde skyid, who, still, has a minor

Fig. 4

role); in "Tharlo", the lead woman role is played by a professional singer, Yangchuk Kyi (Tib. G.yang phyug skyid) who, incidentally, already featured in "The Silence Holy Stones", Pema Tseden's first feature film, in 2004, where she played the younger sister of the monk who has the lead role. In "Jinpa" (2018), the lascivious and flirtatious bar owner is played by a professional dancer and singer from Lhasa, Sonam Wangmo (Tib. Bsod nams dbang mo; she is also the lead actress in "Balloon", - Tib. Dbugs sgang -, Pema Tseden's latest film, in its final stage at the time of writing). Typically, it was difficult to gather information about Jampel Tso (Tib. 'Jam dpal 'tsho) who plays Jinpa's lover in the eponymous film. Apparently, she is a model and not a professional actress[5] but hardly any information is available about her. In "The River" (Tib. Gtsang po, 2015), Sonthar Gyal also resorts to hiring another professional singer, Rigdzin Lhamo (Tib. Rig 'dzin lha mo), to play the second leading woman role, while choosing as the lead actress a 6-year old relative of his, Yangchen Lhamo (Tib. Dbyangs can lha mo, her real name and the name of the character), who as a pre-teenager is yet to fully interiorise Amdo woman's predicament of modesty and invisibility.

Conclusion
The discrepancy in regime of artistic representation (agency in fiction, subordination in cinema) in Pema Tseden's artistic achievements may not be solely attributed to a deliberate choice on his part, but testifies to his necessary adaptation to the restricted public visibility that applies to adult women in Amdo today. One can see positive aspects to this restriction: in the same way as political constraints bring in an imperative of greater subtlety, such gender-based constraints force filmmakers into devising clever strategies to bring women in the picture. Moreover, underexposure of women bodies in Pema Tseden and Sonthar Gyal's films may come, at least to women watchers, as a relief in a world otherwise hyper-saturated and imbalanced in terms of gender overexposure. Still, if Tibetan art cinema is to flourish, it cannot be deprived forever of meaningful adult women's complex characters on screen, especially in an environment where ultra-sensitive censorship excludes *de facto* many political and meaningful themes.

Things might change soon, for a variety of reasons: in Tibet, education has become less imbalanced in terms of gender since the 2000s, with the

Fig. 5

generalisation of 9-year compulsory education. The literary scene has recently made room for Tibetan women novelists and short stories authors (Mkha' mo rgyal, Tshe ring g.yang skyid, Tshe sgron skyid, Rnga ba Tshe ring skyid) offering potential for a fruitful and more balanced gender cooperation in terms of script writing. Moreover, it has been claimed that, in Turkish cinema, the emergence of a feminist movement in the 1980s was "the most prominent factor in the emergence of films that focus on women's issues and women's place in society" (Atakab 2013: 49). As it happens, women feminist activists are also beginning to appear and make an impact in Amdo society (Robin 2015, Rajan 2015). Last, at least three women filmmakers can be found today in Tibet: Dutsi Kyi (Tib. Bdud rtsi skyid), "Tharlo"'s lead male actor Shide Nyima (Tib. Zhi bde nyi ma)'s daughter, has won a few awards with her fictional short film called "A kid under a tree" (Tib. *Gangs 'dabs kyi shug sdong kher skyes*, literally "A solitary juniper down the glacier"), made in 2014.

Also to be mentioned is the documentary filmmaker Seldron (Tib. Gsal sgron) from Lhasa; last, Trakho (Tib. Bkra kho), a TV producer at Qinghai TV, who directed a feature film in 2014, called Thogme (Tib. Thogs med), in Amdo – the film so far does not seem to have been released at the time of writing.

Fig. 6

E. Atakav has described "woman's film" as a film in which "women and thus women's emotional problems are of major significance" (Atakav 2013: 16). Anneke Smelik, a prominent feminist film theorist, defines feminist cinema in terms of the centrality it grants to female subjectivity (Smelik 1998: 3). Annette Kuhn, for her, has suggested the expression "new woman's cinema", which she defines as films where "the central characters are women, and often women who are not attractive or glamorous, in the conventional sense. Moreover, narratives are often frequently organised around the process of woman's self-discovery and growing independence" (Kuhn 1994: 131).

In the People's Republic of China, with its increasingly assimilationist political and social environment, one may reasonably harbour doubt about the sheer existence of an environment favorable to the flourishing of Tibetan culture and language. Still, one must take into account the deep-rooted awareness and determination, displayed by a growing number of members of the educated Tibetan population, to participate in a Tibetan language and cultural revival. With sweeping changes currently affecting Tibetan society at large, particularly in terms of education, literacy, and women's rights movements, young women are beginning to assert a more visible and public role, and it may not be long before Tibetan cinema with women at its center starts emerging from Amdo, be it in the guise of a "woman"s film", "feminist cinema", "new woman cinema" or yet another avatar.

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Footnotes

1. This article was written before the release of Pema Tseden's "Balloon" (2019). In that film, Pema Tseden gives a prominent role to three women. The present analysis, as a consequence, only concerns Pema Tseden's films before "Balloon".

2. By "Tibet", I mean the Tibetan plateau, that encompasses not only the Tibet Autonomous Region but also half of Sichuan province, most of Qinghai province, and parts of Gansu and Yunnan provinces.

3. V. Woolf, in *a Room of One's Own* (1929), noticed that, in literature, women were always portrayed in relationship with men, not as autonomous subjects: women "are now and then mothers and daughters. But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men. It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. [...]" (Woolf, Virginia, 2007 [1929], *A Room of One's Own, in The Selected Works of Virginia Woolf*, London, Wordsworth Editions: 614).

4. To give an example, Zhang Yimou has been criticized by Rey Chow for being an "exhibitionist, displaying his exotic female protagonist and then engaging in the oriental's orientalism" (Chow, Rey, 1995, *Primitive Passions. Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, New York, Columbia University Press: 170).

5. Jigme Thrinley (Tib. 'Jigs med 'phrin las), Pema Tseden's son, personal communication, 21 February 2019.