

Pema Tsenden. *Enticement: Stories of Tibet*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018. 138 pp.

Pema Tseden is a Tibetan. He is a well-published writer, known and honored in China, where his name is written Wanmacaidan 萬瑪才旦. He has an international reputation as well since his works have been translated into English, French, German, Japanese, and Czech. *Enticement: Stories of Tibet* contains ten of Pema Tseden's short stories, originally published in Tibetan and Chinese between 1997 and 2012. He is also acclaimed for his films, which likewise have been enthusiastically received by audiences in China and in the West. In fact, it has often been his practice to explore a theme and characters in a short story, which then becomes the basis for one of his feature-length films.

He was born in 1969 in Guide County, Qinghai Province. This province is in western China, and geologically it is the northeast section of the high Tibetan plateau. It is a land of rugged mountains and wide valleys, with little vegetation and harsh weather. The landscape is buffeted by cold winds and, in winter, swirling snow that comes to blanket the land. Tibetan is the language most widely spoken by the people who live there, although Mandarin Chinese is, of course, taught in the schools. As portrayed in Pema Tseden's stories, local officials are Tibetan, but in the cities one can expect to meet Chinese running some of the shops and businesses, and there one finds buses and trucks along with the small motorcycles that are more useful in the countryside of the rugged land.

Being in general isolated from the outside world, the people whom Pema Tseden encountered as he was growing up were other Tibetans like himself. Most were herders of sheep and yak, as were his parents. The culture that surrounded them was the age-old culture of Tibetan herders, semi-nomads living close to the land and accepting without complaint the challenges handed them by the demanding climate. Overlaying their physical world were the practices of Tibetan Buddhism, a philosophy of seeking calm and preparing for rebirth after death through constant prayer and honor proffered to the communities of monks living nearby. Their world, at once highly defined and isolated from the outside, permeated Pema Tseden's consciousness. Even after moving to faraway Beijing to study film and directing, he knew that his own culture formed the very core of his worldview. He respected and cherished that culture and so far, in both his writing and film-making, he has been determined to reveal this culture for the larger world to see.

In each of the stories in this collection, the influence of a Buddhist perspective on life and existence can be seen, stronger in some of the pieces than in others but always woven into the tale being told. In the first story, "Orgyan's

Teeth," two boys are good friends as they go through school in the herder's village, sharing homework and devising adventures together. They are separated later, as one boy, the narrator, moves away from the village for high school, while his boyhood friend remains in the village. At age eighteen, the narrator discovers that his boyhood friend Orgyan had been declared a reincarnated lama. Elders visit him with gifts and beg for his blessings. When the two former classmates meet, Orgyan does not ask for religious formalities to be observed, but the narrator cannot bridge the sense of separation between them. This is not a story of philosophical questions but, instead, is told with a chuckle and a gentle irreverence toward those who put too much weight on the idea of pure holiness.

A gentle Buddhist acceptance of life even in an untrustworthy world colors the second piece, "Tharlo." First published in Chinese in 2012, it became the story in one of Pema Tseden's biggest film successes to date, the film *Tharlo* (in Chinese, *Taluo* 塔洛) released in 2015. It was nominated for the Golden Lion Award at the 72nd Venice International Film Festival in 2014, and in 2015 at the 52nd Golden Horse Film Festival, Pema Tseden won the Best Director award for Best Adapted Screenplay and also for Artistic Exploration, plus being nominated for Best Picture and Best Director at the 23rd Beijing College Student Film Festival in 2016.

In this story, Tharlo is an unassuming and gentle shepherd, content to spend his days next to the wind-swept hills tending to the herd. The local police officer tells him that he needs to have an identification card, and the card needs to have a recent photo of Tharlo on it. Tharlo cannot imagine why he would need such a card, since everyone with whom he is in contact knows him well. But he agrees to take a bus into the nearest city to get a photograph. The people whom he meets in the city have a lot of ideas for Tharlo. A female barber suggests she and Tharlo should run away together to find a new life. This seems an attractive idea, so Tharlo sells his sheep and brings all his money back to the barbershop. The barber shaves off all his hair so that no one will recognize him in the future when they begin their new life. But after a night together, she takes his money and disappears, leaving the trusting Tharlo wondering exactly what has happened. Back in his village, the local police officer tells Tharlo that his identification photo no longer resembles him with his bald head, so he will need to return to the city for a new ID photo. The Tharlo in this story reminded me of Lu Xun's character Ah Q, except that the Buddhist Tharlo has none of the sarcastic humor or bitter commentary in Lu Xun's stories. Tharlo can return to the herds of sheep and rebuild his prosaic life. All the characters in Prem Tseden's stories display the quiet matter-of-fact acceptance of life shown by Tharlo.

Prem Tsenden's quest in his stories and film-making is to display for the outside world the life of the Tibetan people living in China today. He is dismayed by the shallow romanticism he finds when outsiders come to the area to report on the Tibetans living there. Likewise, he objects to the "exoticism" that outsiders bring to their conclusions about the lives of contemporary Tibetans. These themes are reflected in the story "Eight Sheep." One day, as the boy Gaylo is tending to his sheep, a blond, blue-eyed foreigner appears. This young man is an American student from Beijing who has been studying Mandarin but, because of his deep interest in Tibet, he sets off to backpack in the wilderness of the Tibetan foothills and has spent twenty-eight days soaking up the atmosphere of the free and open lands in China's western borderlands.

The problem is that Gaylo does not know one word of English and very little of the Mandarin the foreigner speaks to him. Their communication is through some gestures and Gaylo's sharing the yak jerky his mother had given him. When the foreigner speaks, Gaylo does not understand, but simply looks at the foreigner and sometimes nods his head. The foreigner thinks perhaps Gaylo indeed understands the one-sided conversation of the foreigner. Gaylo does not feel threatened by the foreigner, but clearly is not having a deep exchange with him. When a motorcycle brings some newspapers for the local village chief and the driver gives them to Gaylo for delivery, the foreigner sees that planes have flown into the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001. As the foreigner begins to cry and hugs Gaylo, Gaylo's attention is taken by a young lamb nearby who has just been born and is trying to stand upright. The foreigner decides that he needs to leave China immediately to return home, and as he begins to walk away, Gaylo gives him the plastic bag of yak jerky for his trip home. In return, the foreigner takes off a souvenir badge from the Potala Palace in Lhasa and gives it to Gaylo. When the foreigner is out of sight, Gaylo thinks about what has just taken place but soon hears again the continuous bleating of the lambs. This thoughtful story tells us that the Tibetan boy and the foreigner had communicated with each other, though neither side had learned much about the other. At the end of the brief encounter, each returned to his own society and its values.

Most of the stories in this collection are set in the here and now, a world of daily events that just happen to take place in a part of the world that not many readers will have visited. But in a few of the stories, Prem Tsenden expands his conceptual framework to draw us toward the world as explored by Nobel Prize-winner Mo Yan, whose detailed, realistic descriptions provide an "absurdist" recounting of the real world. In "A New Golden Corpse Tale: Gun," Prem Tsenden takes traditional Tibetan tales of a magical talking corpse and weaves them into his story. In this story, a young man called Decho Zangpo

undertakes a journey to the remote Dewatsal cemetery in the hope of capturing a talking corpse so that this magical creature can bring him and his family a better life. The only rule is that Decho Zangpo cannot speak to the corpse or reply to the stories that the corpse might tell him. He puts the corpse into a burlap bag, but as they head back to Decho Zangpo's home, the corpse tells a story so interesting and so puzzling that Decho Zangpo asks about it, at which point the talking corpse quickly leaves the tied bag and returns to his place in the cemetery. Decho Zangpo recaptures the corpse repeatedly, but each time the stories only get more interesting, so each time Decho Zangpo asks a question, and the corpse responds by flying away to his home in the cemetery. To hear these fascinating stories, set in the context of folktales that adults and children alike learn in Prem Tsenden's homeland, I invite readers to enjoy this story, along with the others that take up Mo Yan's approach to literary exposition.

This collection of stories contains several delightful and original illustrations, including the cover, by Tibetan artist Karma Dorje Tsering (artistic name Wu Yao) who, like the author, has won many prizes for his work. The editors and translators, Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani and Michael Monhart (along with Carl Robertson, and Françoise Robin), have rendered the stories into an English that is pleasant and satisfying to read. This is a collection that deserves a wide readership.

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