



Patron: Jim Broadbent
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Tharlo (Cert PG)

Dir: Pema Tseden

Starring: Shide Nyima, Yanshik Tso

Synopsis: Qinghai, Tibet, now. Tharlo, nicknamed Ponytail, has spent most of his 40-odd years as a shepherd; he guards a large flock, some of which are his own. When local police chief Dorje tells him he must get an ID card, Tharlo goes into town to get his photo taken. The photographer sends him to Yangtso's small hair salon to smarten up. Impressed by talk of the value of his herd, Yangtso invites him to a karaoke bar and gets him drunk. Next morning he wakes in her salon; she urges him to sell his sheep and take her away to the big city. Tharlo returns to his herd but is distracted; he learns some traditional love songs for his next visit to the karaoke bar. After a night of heavy drinking, he wakes late to find many sheep killed by wolves. The owner of the sheep is furious. Some time later Tharlo turns up at Yangtso's salon with 160,000 yuan in cash, having sold the herd. She persuades him to lose his ponytail to make himself less recognisable and that evening drags him to a hip-hop concert, where he's threatened by her former boyfriend. Next morning he wakes in the salon to find Yangtso and the money gone. He turns to Dorje for advice, but is merely told that his shaved head means he will need a new ID photo. Tharlo's motorcycle runs out of gas on a mountain road; he lets a firecracker go off in his hand.

Tharlo doesn't mark the start of an authentically Tibetan cinema, but makes it impossible to ignore the case for taking new Tibetan cinema seriously. Pema Tseden - who was still known by the Chinese form of his name (Wanma Caidan) when he debuted with *The Silent Holy Stones* in 2005 - was already an innovative force in Tibetan literature when he began training as a director in Beijing Film Academy. *Tharlo* is his fifth feature since graduating; but he's still prolific and increasingly popular writer, publishing in both Tibetan and Chinese, and has encouraged his former cinematographer Sonthar Gyal to direct two features. Nobody has done more to foster a Tibetan cultural renaissance.

In Chinese-controlled Tibet, that means treading carefully. The communist party's official policy is to promote and nurture ethnic diversity, but also to snuff out any criticism of Beijing's rule - let alone any hint of separatist ambitions. Like plenty of other artists around the world working under intolerant regimes, Pema Tseden initially took Abbas Kiarostami as his model; his second feature *The Search* (2008) deliberately echoes *Through the Olive Trees* in concept and structure, although its theme and details are specifically Tibetan. His own distinctive voice emerged more clearly in *Old Dog* (2011), which explores generational conflicts and a certain endemic stubbornness; he may be one of those artists, like Jia Zhangke, whose wit is sharpened by the need to circumvent Film Bureau censors.

Shot in exquisitely judged monochrome, *Tharlo* is nothing like any Kiarostami film. It rests on a simple, understand



irony; when the virginal, middle-aged shepherd Tharlo is ordered to apply for an ID card for the first time, his attempt to comply ultimately costs him his identity. We discover in the opening scene that Tharlo has only one palpable asset; an excellent memory. This equips him to be a capable shepherd (he can recognise individual sheep, even in a flock of going on 400), but also powers his sole claim to fame, the ability to recite the whole of Mao Zedong's 1944 speech 'Serve the People' in Chinese. It's the speech in which Mao quoted the ancient historian Sima Qian on death, the meaning of which depends on the way a life has been lived. At the start Tharlo recites the words without any clear sense of what they mean; by the end, when several grave mistakes cause his memory to falter, he understands that his own life has become worthless.

Pema Tseden says that the character "is typical of Tibetans in the present generation...in a state of confusion, disorientation and desensitisation". That's very likely true but the film's triumph is that it presents Tharlo as a distinct and idiosyncratic individual, a man who prefers his nickname 'Ponytail' to his real name and who sees his actual, old-fashioned ponytail as a defining characteristic. Since Tharlo is really only at home with sheep, his awkwardness in social situations and inability to judge what others expect of him, are matched by his general reluctance to speak - but his face is highly expressive, and the film's predilection for long takes gives the actor Shide Nyima (a stage actor-comedian making his film debut) great opportunities to 'say' a lot without words. Tharlo's downfall follows his first encounter with a gold-digger, a predatory young woman who exploits his naivety and who, like Delilah, robs him of his strength by cutting his hair. The hairdresser Yangtso is tired of small-town life and dreams of travel to Lhasa, Beijing and Hong Kong; she too was a shepherd in her childhood, but her sense of social mobility is a mystery to Tharlo.

There's a productive mismatch between the choice to film in long-held shots (most scenes are single takes, generally from a fixed angle, some involving mirrors) and the overall narrative drive, which counters a sense of inevitability by eliminating unnecessary exposition and maintaining a steady

flow of visual surprises and strong supporting characters. There's an almost Brechtian use of songs-as-commentary (including some Tibetan hip-hop from guest star Dekyi Tserang!) and some discreetly subversive play with Mao's calligraphy on the wall of the police station (the word *renmin* - 'the people' - is cheekily bisected by a vertical pillar, first head-on, then reversed in a mirror). The film doesn't chafe against China's occupation of Tibet, merely noting how alien the imposed policies and bureaucracy seems to an indigenous way of life - albeit a way of life that's changing rapidly under the pressures from outside. Tibetan culture has a new benchmark.

Credits

Tharlo	Shide Nyima
Yangtso	Yangshik Tso
Chief Dorje	Tashi
Owner of the sheep	Jinpa
Singer	Dekyi Tserang
Director	Pema Tsenden
Screenwriter	Pema Tsenden
Cinematography	Lu Songye
Editor	Song Bing
Art Direction	Daktse Dondrup
Music	Wang Jue
Sound	Dukar Tsering

China 2015. 123 mins

Another View

Issues of identity, clashes of culture and the nitty-gritty of sheep-herding are the themes which drive Tibetan director Pema Tsenden's beguiling fable *Tharlo*. The eponymous central character, a simple shepherd more used to the derisive moniker 'Ponytail' than he is to his given name, finds the certainties of his austere, isolated existence called into question when he is sent to the nearest town to be photographed for an ID card. This is a slow burning piece of storytelling which moves at the same unhurried, methodical pace as life in the steppes. As such, it requires a certain investment from the audience. However, this is repaid amply by an unassuming but accomplished picture which should connect with an adventurous arthouse audience.

The film also works on an allegorical level as a commentary on Tibet itself. Tsenden shows us a country where deep-rooted traditions and a rich cultural history co-exist uneasily with the encroaching tide of modernity. Tharlo (Shide Nyima) is a man full of contradictions. He has an exceptional memory and can still recite the huge, unwieldy chunks of Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book* that he learned as a nine-year-old. But he can't remember how old he is - his rough estimate is "past 40, I guess". In some ways, he has stalled at the point where his scant education stopped and he was sent to work. Morality, for him, is black and white. People are either good or bad.

When he is informed by the local police chief that he must get an ID card, he is bewildered. "I know who I am. Isn't that enough?". But he complies, and with an orphaned lamb in tow, he makes the long journey to the nearest town. The photographer takes issue with his straggly, unwashed hair and sends him across the road to a barbers to be tidied up a little. It's here that he has the fateful encounter that will change the course of his life.

The hairdresser, Yangchuo (Yang Shik Tso), is a modern young woman. She has cut her hair short, she smokes. Tharlo is slightly scandalised; it's the first time he has seen a Tibetan girl smoke. She lazily toys with Tharlo, tugging his stringy

ponytail and calling him handsome. He is lost.

Tsenden shoots in striking black and white, using long takes and locked shots which give the audience plenty of time to absorb the admirable work by production designer Daktse Dondrup. But where the film really excels is in its use of sound, supervised by Dukar Tserang.

From the moment that Tharlo gets into town, he is buffeted by noise. There's the constant putter of traffic in the street outside: at least two radios bleeding into each other; the hum of the flies that languidly weave around the shop. It's a stark contrast to the almost oppressive silence of the mountains, punctuated by the occasional yelp of wolves and mournful folk songs that drift from Tharlo's radio, ghostly voices from a long-forgotten past. A scene in a karaoke bar is particularly well-handled. Yangchuo slyly serenades Tharlo with the lyrics, "I am leaving the mountains to go out into the world" while outside their cubicle, the world gets drunk and howls at the night.

Some of the symbolism is a little heavy handed. The lamb, for example, is clearly a metaphor for Tharlo's embattled innocence. So no prizes for guessing how well things work out for the lamb. But for the most part, this is a beautifully judged picture from a director to note.

Wendy Ide: Screen International

Our next film: Friday February 2nd, 7.30pm A Date for Mad Mary (dir: Darren Thornton. Ireland 2016)

Darren Thornton's terrific debut feature is a comedy-drama with real heart, spiky dialogue and a splendid lead performance. Mary, a lost soul with a history of aggressive behaviour and a prison record to boot, emerges from her latest spell inside to find that her best friend Charlene is to be married and wants her as Maid of Honour. Mary is both surprised and flattered, but in attempting to find her 'plus one' and be part of the occasion, she finds it's not easy to let go of her past and join the people she thought she knew in their new present.

Seanna Kerslake is outstanding as Mary in a film that is both sad, truthful and caustically funny.