

# Tibetan social enterprise weaves fresh fabric of tradition and modernity

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When Academy Award-winning documentary maker Ruby Yang returned to Ritoma – a village on China's Tibetan plateau – in 2016, she noticed changes both big and small since her previous visit four years earlier.

For one, lives have improved significantly, thanks to a social enterprise, the Norlha workshop, which employs villagers to spin yak wool into luxurious clothing.

"Villagers are renovating their homes. With the income they get from Norlha, they can afford heat and electricity," Yang says.

"Norlha are able to teach the women computer skills. In a city like Hong Kong, it's nothing unusual. But in a small village like that, so far away and remote, that is special. With income, the women have a lot of say in the families. They are no longer just child bearers."

Women can now choose their own husbands rather than having their marriages arranged.

Then there are the subtler changes noticeable only to the observant eye: the grass is not as lush, so the nomads have trouble finding food for their herds; horse racing has become so pro-

hibitively expensive that herders now keep an eye on their sheep and yaks on motorcycles instead.

The most impactful change has arguably been the introduction of the internet in 2012.

"Suddenly our computers have a new meaning and a new worth. It became this doorway to the whole world," says Dechen Yeshi, co-founder of the Norlha workshop – the name translates as "wealth of the gods" in Tibetan.

Before that, Yeshi and her staff had to drive to the nearest town and write their emails at an internet cafe, or stick dial-up devices into their computer, while villagers had hardly any internet access.

Internet access is crucial for Norlha, far beyond running its daily operations.

"I found that I no longer needed to try to create this whole world for them to understand. Especially when working at Norlha, we're creating a project that goes to a whole other world – the fashion boulevards of Paris. It's challenging to get them to understand what they're making," Yeshi says. "Now it's a lot easier. It's possible to bring them to places. They can see the changes in the modern world themselves and experience it."

"Even being in the village with

internet, with just social media and smartphones, people are so much more aware of the outside world."

As part of the Tibetan diaspora, Yeshi has grown up living in different places, including the United States, Mongolia and India. In her mind, Tibet has always been this surreal and beautiful land.

However, when she returned to the region in 2004 after graduating from university in the US state of Connecticut, what struck her was the extreme poverty.

This was why she established the co-op, hoping to raise the living standards of the villagers and keep the community together, even as rapid urbanisation threatens to tear it apart. And their work is now bearing fruit.

"When I first started Norlha, people were still thinking about how they will eat their next meal. Now they're thinking about saving towards a car, a house, a pilgrimage," Yeshi says.

"We have become the glue that keeps the community together. So now younger people are not migrating to towns and cities, they can remain with their children and parents."

"The cultural preservation happens naturally as a result."

Invited by Yeshi and her

mother, Kim Yeshi, to revisit the village, Yang headed to the highlands with her crew two years ago to document the transformation with their cameras.

The 57-minute film centres on a basketball team set up by the social enterprise. Basketball has always been popular among the

young nomads, but with the internet came NBA games, which stoked their interest. Willard Johnson, a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a passion for the sport, joined the Norlha workshop to coach the team.

The documentary named after

the village, *Ritoma*, is released this year, and a screening will be held on Thursday at the Asia Society Hong Kong Centre, followed by a question-and-answer session with Yang, Johnson and Jampa Dhundup, a local Tibetan who leads the team. The film weaves in footage and images collected over

more than 10 years. "I've never been around guys that work so hard. As a coach, you want to coach those guys. Because they're just yearning [for] it, getting more information and trying to get better," Johnson says.

He hopes the training serves as a model for similar programmes in other parts of the region.

There is, however, a lot more to the story than basketball.

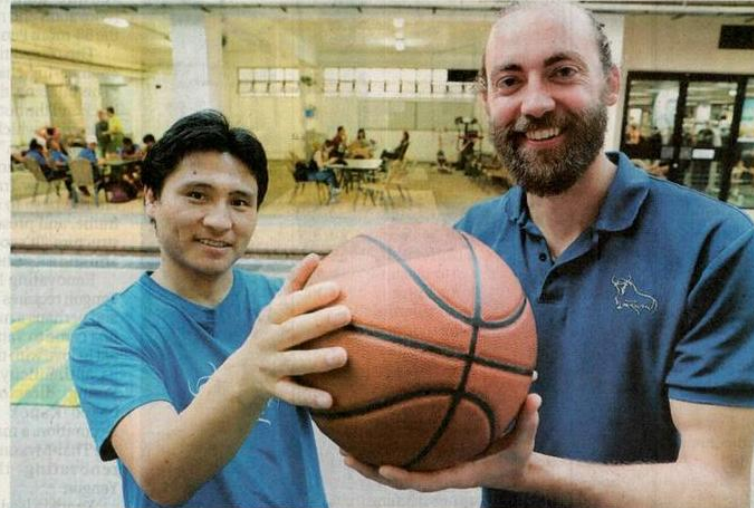
"It's a transitional time for them going from a traditional to a modern life. I'm using basketball as a metaphor for them going through modernity," Yang says.

At the heart of her film is a story that will find an echo in villages across China that, like Ritoma, have to wrestle with the changes brought by rapid urbanisation.

It gives both sides of a story playing out across the developing world: where young people are leaving in search of opportunity, while those left behind struggle to preserve their traditions and culture.

Can Ritoma escape this fate? The film does not offer a definitive answer, but it shows there is a silver lining to change.

*Ritoma*, Thursday, 6.30pm, Asia Society Hong Kong Centre, 9 Justice Drive, Admiralty, HK\$100 (members), HK\$150 (non-members), eventbrite.hk



Tibetan Jampa Dhundup (left) and Willard Johnson star in *Ritoma*. Photo: K.Y. Cheng