

A FILM BY OSCAR® WINNER

RUBY YANG

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Tradition and modernity collide
on the Tibetan Plateau



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— PRESS KIT —

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Website

www.ritomamovie.com

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Production Company

Chang Ai Media Project Ltd.

ONE-LINE DESCRIPTION

High on the Tibetan Plateau, the old way of life is on the decline. We follow the nomads of Ritoma as they navigate the collision of tradition and modernity.

LONG SYNOPSIS

On any given day on the vast Tibetan Plateau, you will find nomads herding their yaks and sheep, and monks reciting their mantras. You will also find them playing one of their favorite sports — basketball.

Makeshift courts are found in nearly every village. Next to traditional horseback riding, basketball has become a way for young men to work off their aggression and channel their energy. With the introduction of televised NBA games, the nomads of Ritoma have a new strategy for their court game. And when a proper coach arrives from the United States, slam-dunk becomes their new mantra.

A new tournament has been announced, the first in their region. Can they put together a team that's good enough to take part? Might they even be able to win?

SHORT SYNOPSIS

As tradition and modernity collide high on the Tibetan plateau, the nomads of Ritoma have a new passion — basketball. Leaving their old way of life behind, they battle to keep their culture alive while embracing the modern world.

When they play against former professional players from the US and other Tibetan teams in their region's first tournament, will their team win?



BACKGROUND

Ritoma is a village in transition: it struggles between the traditions of the past and the beckoning of the future.

The nomads of the Tibetan Plateau have been herders for hundreds of years, braving bitterly cold winters and crushing altitudes. Modernity has worked its way into this community slowly, but it's taken its toll on the traditional way of life. Overgrazing has reduced the grasslands to a shadow of their former glory, making it hard to feed the livestock that no longer sell for enough to support a family. And with more children attending school, managing a large herd is impossible.

In 2007, the Norlha textile workshop opened in Ritoma, employing former nomads and monks to create yak-wool scarves. Skills that had made them good herders — being able to tell sheep apart and weaving wool for heavy blankets — allowed them to quickly become expert weavers. Learning new skills and earning a steady salary were empowering for the nomads. It strengthened their livelihood from a daily question to a certainty, building unshakable confidence and a sense of hope in the community.

The Tibetans have a deep-rooted passion for basketball. Makeshift courts are found in nearly every village. A few years ago, the Norlha workshop built their employees a proper basketball court and set up a team. It's proved incredibly popular, especially with the male workers. They're on the court every day at lunchtime and after work, no matter the weather. Now that they have their first coach, a former college basketball player from the US. Slam-dunk has become their new mantra.

And now, women are getting into the game as well. Together, Norlha and basketball have created an environment where women can work and play as men do without judgment or restrictions. With their new passion for basketball, they are no longer constrained by their traditional roles as homemakers and child-bearers, heralding the erosion of long-held, patriarchal values and a new beginning for the women of Ritoma.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

ཨོཾ་མ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཧཱུྃ།

Om purifies bliss and pride

Ma purifies jealousy and need for entertainment

Ni purifies passion and desire

Pad purifies ignorance and prejudice

Me purifies poverty and possessiveness

Hum purifies aggression and hatred

My research for a video project about sustainability on the Tibetan Plateau led me to the Norlha workshop in the village of Ritoma. The workshop trains and employs former Tibetan nomads using yak fiber from the local region, transforming the raw materials into luxurious clothing and accessories such as scarves and shawls.

Through skills and income, former nomads can reduce their reliance on traditional nomadic herding which is now under threat due to climate change and overgrazing.

To me, Ritoma represented an intriguing dichotomy: nomads were being economically empowered through being educated and learning new skills, and yet, in giving up herding, they were also fighting to preserve their nomadic culture and traditions. As a filmmaker, I felt that documentary was the perfect tool to capture Ritoma's ongoing transition, which would be an important part of the village's collective memory and history. In the summer of 2016, I was told about the first ever regional basketball tournament in the village. Norlha's team, coached by an American, would be competing. I found basketball an exciting metaphor of Ritoma's modernization, so I quickly gathered a small crew to witness and capture the events.

DIRECTOR'S BIO

Filmmaker Ruby Yang has worked as director, producer and editor on a range of feature and documentary films exploring Chinese themes. She won an Academy Award for Documentary Short Subject for *The Blood of Yingzhou District* in 2007. She is also known for her feature documentary *Citizen Hong Kong* and the award-winning documentary *My Voice, My Life*.

With filmmaker Thomas F. Lennon, Yang founded the Chang Ai Media Project in 2003 to raise HIV/AIDS awareness in China. Since then, its documentaries and public service announcements have been seen by hundreds of millions of Chinese viewers. Together they made a trilogy of short documentary films about modern China, including *The Blood of Yingzhou District*, which won an Oscar, *Tongzhi in Love*, and *The Warriors of Qiugang*, which was nominated for an Academy Award in the Best Documentary Short Subject category in 2011.



Yang lived and worked in San Francisco for many years, relocated to Beijing in 2004, and now lives in Hong Kong. In 2013, she was appointed Hung Leung Hau Ling Distinguished Fellow in Humanities by the University of Hong Kong. Her recent feature documentary *My Voice, My Life* was named one of "Hong Kong's five most-notable films of 2014" by The Wall Street Journal. *Ritoma* is her latest documentary.

Yang is a member of the Directors Guild of America and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. She now heads the Hong Kong Documentary Initiative (HKDI) at the University of Hong Kong, which aims to nurture the next generation of documentary filmmakers in the region. In 2017, she served as producer on two projects with seed grants from the HKDI: *China's Forgotten Daughters* and *Gateless*.

A complete listing of her films is on IMDb.

Ruby Yang's website is www.yangruby.com.

PRESS



Hoop dreams on the Tibetan Plateau

Nikkei Asian Review, April 4, 2018

<http://ritomamovie.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Hoop-dreams-on-the-Tibetan-Plateau-Dean-Napolitano-Nikkei-Asian-Review-Deputy-Editor-.pdf>

How a Hong Kong Filmmaker Came Across a New Kind of Tibetan Business

The New York Times, August 25, 2016

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/25/world/asia/how-a-hong-kong-filmmaker-came-across-a-new-kind-of-tibetan-business.html>

Tibetan American turns heads of world's top fashion brands

Global Times, August 1, 2017

<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1059068.shtml>

Traveling the World for A Love of Basketball

Slice of MIT, June 30, 2016

<https://alum.mit.edu/slice/traveling-world-love-basketball-mit-alum-bill-johnson-coaches-eastern-tibet>

FEATURING



JAMPA DHUNDUP

Jampa was born to a nomad family and grew up on the Tibetan grasslands. When he was nine, he stumbled upon a fountain pen out on the pasture — a clear sign of his destiny. He began writing poetry chronicling his life and his feelings. As the grasslands eroded and livestock prices fell, Jampa made the choice to abandon nomadism and take a job at the local workshop. He loves basketball, so he jumped at the chance to be captain when the workshop started a team.



DECHEN YESHI

As soon as she'd graduated from university, Dechen moved to Ritoma and began researching the potential of yak wool. In 2007, she set up the Norlha workshop with her mother Kim. The workshop aims to give former nomads who have no schooling a way to earn a living while also preserving their culture.



KIM YESHI

Kim Yeshi has a long history of involvement in Tibetan social enterprise and is the co-founder of the Norlha workshop. Through the workshop, she has found a steady balance that provides jobs for former nomads and preserves their culture and traditions. The workshop also empowers young women by increasing their social status in a male-dominated community.



YIDAM KYAP

Yidam is Dechen's husband and shares her ambition to modernize and protect Ritoma. His eldest brother is the last nomad in his family. Together, they established a co-operative of 19 nomad families to keep the tradition alive. Touched by the enthusiasm Norlha employees had for basketball, Yidam and Dechen set up a team for them and had a basketball court constructed.

FEATURING



WILLARD (BILL) JOHNSON

Bill grew up in Seattle, Washington. An engineer by profession, Bill's real passion is basketball, and he has competed in tournaments around the world. At six feet eight inches, Bill really stands out in Ritoma. Using his experience as a former assistant coach with the MIT Engineers Men's Basketball Team, Bill now trains the workshop's team in game strategy.



NORLHA MEN'S TEAM

In Ritoma, basketball has become just as popular among the young men as traditional horseback riding. Now that NBA games are shown on Chinese TV, former nomads from the yak-wool workshop have ambitious goals: to play like the professionals.
(Photo courtesy of Mike Cristina)



NORLHA WOMEN'S TEAM

When the Norlha Men's Team first started training with Coach Bill, the women were happy to watch from the sidelines. But as time passed, they began to want to go themselves. Now, the women — many of them former nomads and young mothers — are finding the confidence to come out onto the court and form their own team.



MIT ALUMNI TEAM

A ragtag group of friends and former professional players, along with the arrival of the MIT Alumni Team brought great excitement to Ritoma. Duke University alumna Abby Bartolotta bonded with the Norlha women when she put them through a basketball boot camp to encourage them. When the American and the Tibetan all-star teams play a friendly match, spectators cheer for both sides, a true show of sportsmanship.
(Photo courtesy of Mike Cristina)

FEATURING



LHAMO

Lhamo suffers from a degenerative muscular disorder that has paralyzed her legs. On the Tibetan Plateau, not only is it difficult for her to get around due to the rough terrain, there is also a strong stigma against people with physical disabilities.



NORZIN

Seven-year-old Norzin is the eldest of Dechen's daughters. A natural-born leader, she is popular among the village children. She is also Bill's "assistant coach" thanks to her ability to translate between English and Tibetan. Norzin loves and protects Lhamo, who is her best friend. The two are inseparable and ready for any adventure.



THE VILLAGE OF RITOMA

The village of Ritoma is located in the Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province, at an altitude of 10,500 feet (3,200 meters). It has a population of 1,500.

PRODUCTION STILLS



The Norlha Men's Team, all former nomads, train with any equipment and in any location they can find — even in the workshop cafeteria!



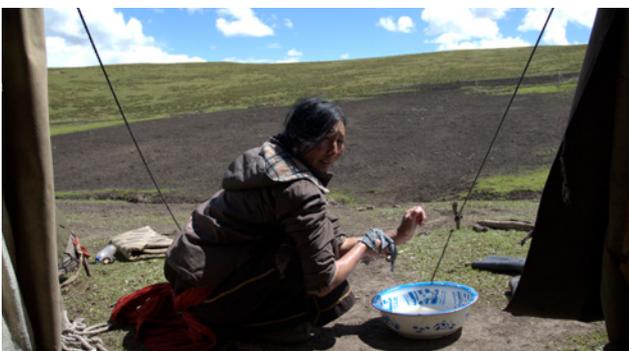
Traditional horse riding is now competing with basketball as Ritoma's favorite sport.
(Photo courtesy of Bill Johnson)



Coach Bill sings at the closing ceremony of the basketball tournament.
(Photo courtesy of Mike Cristina)



The MIT Alumni Team pose with other players at the end of the tournament, with an audience of villagers and monks watching from all sides.
(Photo courtesy of Mike Cristina)



The old nomadic traditions are slowly dying out — this woman lives in a tent — but most families in Ritoma now live in houses.
(Photo courtesy of Dechen Yeshi)



Evidence of changing times is clearly visible in Ritoma, with signs of construction on street corners and SUVs parked outside houses.

PRODUCTION STILLS



The Norlha workshop employs former nomads in jobs that allow them to use skills learnt from herding to earn a steady income.



Traditional drop spindle spinning with yak wool.
(Photo courtesy of Dechen Yeshi)



At Ritoma's Laptse Festival, each man carries an arrow pole representing his clan to make offerings to the mountain gods and ask for blessings.



Gonlo, a member of the Norlha Men's Basketball Team, takes part in the Laptse Festival.



A young nomad boy with his horse. In the past, every family would send one child to school, one to a monastery, and keep the others to help with herding. Now, almost every child attends school.



Women nomads wake up at three in the morning to milk the yaks. Their days don't end until ten in the evening.

PRODUCTION STILLS



A Tibetan girl minding her herd of pigs while keeping up with her school work, something that would never have happened in the past.



The young women of Ritoma's new passion for basketball is helping loosen the constraints of their traditional roles as homemakers and child-bearers.



Wandi Tso finished middle school and now assists with Norlha's e-commerce website. She is the leader of the women's basketball team.



Yidam Kyap and his brother with the other men who make up the nomadic co-operative, an initiative aimed at preserving the ancient culture of the Tibetan Plateau.

END CREDITS

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ADDITIONAL PHOTOS	Bill Johnson
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END CREDITS

IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE	Jampa Dhundup Bill Johnson Dechen Yeshe Yidam Kyap Dugya Bum Gindun Gyamtso Kim Yeshe Lhamo Tso Wandi Tso Jamyang Dolma Norzin Andrew Taylor Lhamo Norlha Men's And Women's Basketball Teams Norlha Laptse Invitational Teams MIT Alumni Team Tibetan All-Stars Team
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END CREDITS

OTHER MUSIC

"Song Of Realization"

Written By Steve Tibbetts

Performed By Chöying Drolma &
Steve Tibbetts

Courtesy Of The Orchard

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