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Tibetan Spinning Craft
and Social Design



Hamburger Papiere zur Designtheorie
und -forschung an der HFBK Hamburg

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and Social Design

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Tibetan Spinning Craft and Social Design

Introduction

Home to 1500 nomads, 6000 yaks and 30 000 sheep, Ritoma is a small village sitting on the Tibetan Plateau over 3000 meters above sea level. Tents and monasteries are strewn on the rolling highlands, where the nomads lead an old-fashioned simple life as their forefathers did, far away from the riotous cities.

The word “nomadic” sounds romantic and free, while the real nomadic life is far from the hearsay. In summer the nomads have to get up at 4 o'clock and work till midnight, without even any break. In return to their arduous labor the nomads earn only about 300 dollars each year. When coming across bad influences of nature, market demand, etc, the already indigent life will get even worse. Due to seclusion and remoteness, the residents here rarely had the chance to acquire education or work. Young men in the village mostly went to big cities to seek for jobs, while women, seniors and children usually stayed and still lived the old-fashioned life. Only till less than two decades ago, when Dechen Yeshi, the girl of Tibetan (father) and American (mother) descent, arrived in the village, did changes really take place.

At the end of 2007 the workshop Norlha was established in Ritoma, for which Dechen recruited over 30 villagers as the first workers. Based on the unique material in the plateau region and the thousand-year-old spinning craft, the workshop produces all kinds of quality textiles of yak khullu, such as scarfs, clothes, carpets, etc. Soon after they came on market, those products were quickly favored by many internationally renowned luxury brands. The exquisite textiles thus walked out of the small village and to metropolises like Paris, New York, etc. In the meantime Norlha kept growing and has developed into an original design brand with over 100 employees and customers all over the world from a menial workshop.

According to Marjetica Potrč, “Social design is socially engaged design. It addresses social needs, and it aims to improve lives of communities by creating together with them a project which stands for new culture of living.”¹

An overview of Norlha's ten-year development reveals Dechen Yeshi's insight into the demand of local development and the special value of yak khullu, which guides her to joining the Tibetan villagers in bringing fresh air into Ritoma.

In the present days the villagers own a job with stable income. Young men now have the option of not leaving their home so as to seek jobs elsewhere. It provides for the Tibetan family a way to transfer from being nomads to the modern life and to earn happiness and respect with their own hands. Norlha has also taken positive influence on the ecological environment of the local prairie. As the Tibetan Plateau has been suffering from the ecological crises resulting from overgrazing, such as pasture degradation, soil degradation, etc, Norlha is helping improve the situation through buying from Tibetans the yak khullu and providing for the locals the job opportunities outside husbandry.

Through the case of Norlha's ten-year practice and exploration in the Tibetan region, this book not only records this process from a designer's perspective, but also demonstrates the epitome of product design and social design in Tibet. The contents of the book are structured as follows:

The first chapter provides the background information: the founders of Norlha - Dechen Yeshi and her mother Kimberly Sciaky Yeshi (known as Kim Yeshi), the overall circumstances of Ritoma as well as the local Tibetan life, and analysis of the problems faced by the traditional nomadic life in modern society and of the intention of establishing Norlha by the two founders together with the local Tibetans.

Chapter two introduces yak khullu, the unique material in the Tibetan Plateau, and the preliminary preparation and exploration made by Dechen and her team in establishing Norlha. The local transition from the traditional nomadic mode of production to handicraft is depicted in this chapter.

Chapter three and chapter four compose the major body of the book. The traditional Tibetan spinning craft is introduced first. Then the yak khullu textiles produced by Norlha and the development of the brand in ten years are analyzed from the perspective of product design and social design. ALL intend to exhibit Norlha's way of connecting the modern design thinking with traditional Tibetan handicraft and Tibetan culture and of employing the idea of social design and sustainable design to improve local living and the mode of production together with the local Tibetans.

The last chapter recalls and summarizes the experience of both success and failure in the case and brings up the author's analyses and opinions, which will hopefully be regarded as valuable reference for the future social design projects in Tibet.

1. Ritoma

The village of Ritoma located on the Tibetan Plateau, together with the nomadic life that has continued in that area for hundreds of years, has been enormously changed by the arrival of an American girl from New York. On the other hand, that girl found her own purpose and home of life here at the cost of ten years' youth. What kind of chance connected this American girl with a small Tibetan village? What motivated her to co-work with the local Tibetans to develop this distinctive project? In the first chapter the two founders, the locality and the local nomadic life will be characterized so as to analyze the intentions and the local conditions of establishing social design.

1.1 The Founders

Her name is Dechen Yeshi. Dechen was born in Paris, France in 1982. Her father Kalsang Yeshi is a writer from Tibet, while her mother Kim Yeshi is a Greek in America, a Buddhist, who studied Buddhism in University of Virginia and graduated with a master's degree. In 1979 Kim and her husband moved to India for a project regarding artistic and cultural sustainable development, and lived there for years. She is also proficient in spinning, and deems cashmere wool, alpaca hair and yak hair the most beautiful wool in the world. The textile of yak hair is quite rare in market, as this precious material is barely known to people. With her belief in Buddhism and passion in yak hair, Kim went to the Tibetan region regularly from 2006 on for relevant investigation and research.

Born in a multicultural family and travelling with her parents in Europe and Asia as a child, Dechen returned to the United States from North India as a grown woman and studied Asian Studies and Film Studies in University of Connecticut. Influenced by different cultures of different countries in her

growth, Dechen is always bold for risks and new stuff. In one talk Dechen shared her experience in University. "I was at a party and someone turned to me and said, this is the best time of our lives. It all goes downhill from here; jobs, mortgages, responsibilities, medication..." Those words really moved young Dechen, who made up her mind from then on that she refused to leave the best hours of life in college. She began asking herself an ancient question: what makes us happy? Her answer is simple - purpose.

In 2004 the fresh-out-of-Ivory Tower Dechen got an opportunity from her mother to go to the Tibetan Plateau, where she was encouraged to film a documentary. She also brought with her the mission of collecting the yak hair called "Khullu" and exploring its use. Packing up with a video camera and her curiosity for the Tibetan Plateau, Dechen came all the way from New York to her father's hometown.

Kim Yeshi and Dechen Yeshi



1.2 Village on the Tibetan Plateau

Located in the northeast verge of the Tibetan Plateau, Ritoma is a small village in the county of Zuogaiduoma in Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Gansu province in China, part of Amdo Region.

The nomadic culture of this place was reflected already in historical documents. According to *The Political and Religious History of A-mdo* (North-Eastern Region of Tibet), the name Amdo is composed of the first letters of a-cheh-gangs-rgyab (name of a snow mountain) and mdo-la (name of a snow mountain). In history the Tibetan region was comprised of three parts: Tsang, Kham and Amdo. In the district of Tsang Buddhist beliefs prevailed, in the Kham area lived people outstandingly tall and handsome, while Amdo were teeming with horses. The categorization reflected the geographical and cultural differences of the three parts, and the nomadic features of the Amdo region.²

The county of Zuogaiduoma is situated on the plateau 3500 meters above sea level, with the minimum temperature as low as -30°C and the annual average temperature of only 3.5°C. The county covers an area of 384 square kilometers and has a population of 3940, all of whom are Tibetans.³ The local residents are scattered everywhere and relocate seasonally. Basically they lead a half nomadic and half settled life. They stay at home in the cold winter, and set up tents where the herds go in other seasons. Covering an area of approxi-

Ritoma Village



mately 900 000 mu⁴, the grassland in Zuogaiduoma County is among the ten largest grasslands in Asia, on which the local nomads raise their life generation after generation.

The locals believe in Tibetan Buddhism, the most representative of which is Gelug, meaning observance of discipline in Tibetan language. It is also called “Yellow Religion”, as the monks of Gelug wear yellow monk hats. The Tibetans’ life centers upon the monastery. In the center of Ritoma is the Monastery Ritoma, a holy site for Buddhists with three major halls for important rituals and over 200 monks. In 1980s the local ratio of monks to ordinary nomads was 1: 3, which explained the saying of “one monk among four men”.

The most known monastery of Yellow Religion - Labrang Monastery, built in the eighteenth century, sits in Xiahe Town adjacent to Ritoma. With over 300 years of accumulation, the monastery has reserved the best pedagogic system of Tibetan Buddhism in the whole country. Up to now there are over 200 living Buddhas and 1 800 monks studying and exercising in Labrang Monastery, where they study not only the dogma of Yellow Religion but natural and social science. As the religious and cultural center of Gannan Autonomous Prefecture, Labrang Monastery also plays a crucial role in politics and economy. As Caesaropapism was executed in the prefecture before 1949, Labrang Monastery held both the clerical and political power. Various Buddhist devotions and other religious activities are run in Labrang Monastery, to which Tibetans make a pilgrimage from far and wide. Moreover, Tibetans will also bring livestock, medicine, wool, etc. for trade or exchange, which furthers the development of this area into the local economic center of agriculture, animal husbandry, and handicraft in Gannan Autonomous Prefecture.⁵

On the whole, the religious and political importance of Labrang Monastery motivates the local economic development. Conversely, the prosperous economy consolidates its religious and political prestige and social status. For hundreds of years Labrang Monastery has been taking meaningful influence on the local religion, politics, culture and economy.

1.3 The Nomadic Life

Dechen stayed in Ritoma for months for the documentary shooting. She was enchanted by the original and pure natural scenery and at the same time shocked by the local destitution. “There was no internet, the roads were really bad. There was electricity, but no plug-in.” That is the first impression of Dechen on

the local circumstances when she first arrived at Ritoma. The indigent situation was the outcome of the local Tibetans' original nomadic living style, combined with the atrocious natural environment.

In a traditional Tibetan family there is distinct division of labor. The man is in charge of livestock slaughter, out shopping, social exchanges and big decisions in the family. The trivial but heavy housework, including livestock herding, milking, yak butter⁶ making, etc. falls on the shoulder of the woman. Men need to take the responsibility of herding and sometimes helping mothers in housework before they get married, while they just sit together for chatting and tea drinking when married. In contrast, women are devoted to the tedious and arduous housework before and in marriage. Especially in summers, women have to get up at as early as 3 o'clock to milk their day up. As soon as the day breaks, they have to start herding the animals, and then continue to make cream from yak milk, dry the cheese and collect yak dungs. After the sun sets, they need to corral the livestock back to the stables and keep milking till midnight. This is an ordinary day for an ordinary woman nomad.

There once spread a common saying that "Children's feet are full of callus (through herding), women's hands are full of callus (through laboring), and men's hands are full of callus (through sitting)", vividly depicting the unequal positions of Tibetan men and women in family and society. Due to the laborious responsibility without break throughout the year, except in some important religious festivals and the New Year, together with the poor natural and medical conditions, the Tibetan women suffer long from harassing illnesses without proper treatment. The local nomads, especially women, have serious health issues.

The economic return from laborious work and even health could only afford their basic living. The annual per capita income of Zuogaiduoma County is 1904.61 RMB (312 USD).⁷ To make things worse, the defense capability of the nomadic economic system is unreliable. With a herd of over 100 yaks and 400 sheep, mishaps (for example, unexpected natural disasters, attack of wolves, etc.) lurk anywhere anytime. The worst scenario is the attack of plagues, the breakout of which could destroy the whole herd, together with the fruits of the nomads' laborious work.

Furthermore, the problems with the local education are also notable. Many youngsters were sent by their parents to the monastery instead of school for study. In the monasteries of Gannan Tibetan Prefecture 18.6% monks are minors. Different factors resulted in this distinct phenomenon. First of all, the Tibetans as pious believers of Tibetan Buddhism regard it a glorious deed to



Tibetan woman and yaks

become a monk. The direct reason why parents choose monasteries for their children to study in is the insufficient local educational resources. With schools gathering in the city, children living in villages have to walk dozens of kilometers to get to school. Besides, a lot of families send their children to the monasteries in consideration of their own economic situation, as this way reduces a load of expenses. Last but not least, the nomadic living style creates everything but a stable environment for study. The monastery becomes for most locals the only place for their children to get education and knowledge.⁸

Because of the particular teaching content and system of the monastery, monks usually need to study for 9 to 30 years. Most of the monks after graduation choose either to stay in the monastery for their further study or work in the local for religion-related activities. The educational attainment from here is usually not acknowledged by other colleges or universities beyond the Tibetan prefecture. Therefore, the monks who return to the common life barely have other options for further study.

1.4 New Aim

Investigating into the living situation of Gannan nomads, we have found that there exist all kinds of problems in the aspects of everyday life, medical condition and basic education in nomadic living style. In lack of a new way to improve the living situation, most nomads had no other choice but to accept what "fate" bestowed on them.

At the hand of internet and modern telecommunication, global village is becoming even smaller, connection between people is unimaginably convenient, and information from the modern society keeps rolling in unprecedentedly. Unwilling to be imprisoned in the traditional living style any more, the local young people have turned their eyes to the outside world instead, looking forward to fitting in the modern time. To persuade their offspring to stay nomads, therefore, becomes increasingly difficult for the nomadic parents. Unfortunately, the isolated locality and lagging economy provided for the younger generation no ideal condition for work and life. Yong men in the village could choose to work outside, for some meager income in restaurants or construction sites for example. Most women, seniors and children had no other means but to stay in the village and led the same life as before.

Seeing the strenuous life of the nomads in her eyes, Dechen decided to put down her camera for a while, and took up the task of searching for the yak hair called “khullu” by her mom. She kept thinking about a way to benefit the local people with the yak hair. If there was a way to make valuable products from the yak khullu, a workshop could then be established in the village, which would mean jobs and living. Her aim gradually grew into shape.

Social design usually starts from the dilemma in real life. In extraordinarily difficult situations or economically constrained places social design is usually in bad need. At those critical points socially committed individuals or groups are mostly expected to walk in and experience the local life in order to analyze the existing problems, come up with corresponding solutions scientifically and systematically and co-work with the locals to establish a better developing mode.

In establishing social design the objective and subjective factors must be coordinated with each other. In this particular project the natural, economic, and cultural conditions together with many a problem in medication and education make up the objective aspects, while aspiration of the local Tibetans and the project’s founders to a modern new life belong to the subjective part. Only when all those factors align with each other could an ideal design concept favoring the local development be reached and made the most of.

A young monk in Labrang Monastery



2. Preliminary Exploration

After establishment of the design goal comes the mission of studying the nature of design elements and issues relating to production and then the work of exploiting and presenting the unique charm of those elements as well as the mode of sustainable development based on their intrinsic rules. In this chapter you will be shown the unique material in the plateau region - yak khullu as well as the preliminary preparation and exploration for the establishment of Norlha.

2.1 Yak Khullu

The yak is the highest living mammal above sea level. There are in total 15 million yaks globally, mainly inhabiting the Tibetan Plateau. Through thousands of years this particular thick figure can be seen in every aspect of Tibetan life. Yaks are good help in transportation; their meat and milk provide the major nutrition for Tibetans; their fur is material for spinning clothes and tents; even their feces make the major fuel to warm the plateau nomads in freezing winters. It is believed that the Tibetans domesticate yaks, while yaks nourish the Tibetans. The yak is respected as “Spirit of Plateau”.

Around the neck of the yak there is a layer of thick and precious brown pubescence, called “khullu” by the local Tibetans. It is the finest wool in a yak, 20 micrometers in diameter and 3.4 to 4.5 centimeters in length, which is newly grown annually as a soft and cold-proof layer for the yak. Observed under the microscope, the fiber of the yak pubescence appears as fine and even as that of the sheep, only with higher density of scales, which means the former is stronger and more wear-resistant, bringing less itchiness and more warmth.

When spring falls on the plateau to chase the long and tedious winter away, the yak pubescence will fall off naturally. The yaks usually roll back and

forth on the ground, or rub to and fro in the brushwood to fasten the tearing of that “winter clothing”. The collection of the pubescence is thus by no means an easy job. As the pubescence is too slim, there is no question of using scissors to cut it off. Instead, the nomads have to pick it up little by little after its falling. The pubescence with the best quality comes from the two-year-old yak, nicknamed by the Tibetan as “Yhari”. Each Yhari produces only approximately 100 gram khullu each year.

With its distinct characteristics of cold-proofing, soft touch, and strong wear-resistance, the yak khullu as a material of quality is to generate greater value, regards Kim with rich experience and mastery of spinning. Limited by its length, the yak khullu is very difficult to be spun with, which explains the widely use of sheep wool instead. In addition to the shortage of its output, the yak khullu is mostly produced in the plateau region with poor transportation and communication. All kinds of factors put this valuable material in undervaluation. Except being used to make daily products for the nomads, most yak khullu is purchased by raw material distributors at really low prices and mixed with chemical materials (e.g. nylon) to make cheap rugs and scarfs.

There is only one way to figure out if the yak khullu can be made better use of or made into more valuable products: practice.

Led by their mother, Dechen and her brother Genam arrived in Amdo and started their life with nomads in the summer of 2004. By 2005 they had

Yak and her baby



already completed the mission trusted by their mother. Two tons of raw yak khullu that had been collected and sorted out were transported to the factory in Kathmandu in Nepal and spun out. The quality test showed that the produced textile was as perfect as they had expected: warm, soft and fine. This unique material laid the first cornerstone for the establishment of Norlha.

2.2 Preparation

Bearing full confidence in the material of yak khullu, Dechen began to discuss the establishment of Norlha workshop with the nomads, with the support and direction of her mother. It would start with recruiting people, then training them as employees, making products from the yak khullu and eventually promoting the products in international markets. In the beginning, however, this twenty something was not trusted by the nomads at all. Dechen's vision sounded like a fantasy to the locals who had been living on animal husbandry forever and never tried other ways of laboring. More importantly, with a strong sense of pride as nomads, the locals were reluctant to forsake their tradition and pursue a brand new life style. The failure of the project or even the faltering of this young woman's mind on her life here would be a big disgrace for the whole village.

As Dechen got along with the nomads and acquired deeper understanding of the plateau life, her Tibetan characteristics gradually revealed themselves. She started to dress like a Tibetan, talk with the locals in their dialect, and slowly fit in. She even found her boyfriend, a Tibetan young man named Yidam, who became her husband a year later. Dechen finally gained foothold on the land where her father was born. The Tibetans also gradually changed their view of Dechen. Among them were the couple Dunko and Dugmo, who decided to try a new way of living and became the first employees of Norlha.

The nomads living in Tibet usually collect yak wool and sheep wool in their spare time from herding and make out of the wool all kinds of household goods, such as tents, rugs, robes, etc. The technique and efficiency of this self-sufficient spinning could far from meeting the requirement of production. To establish a workshop and turn the yak hair into products requires more advanced and efficient spinning techniques.

In the October of 2006 Dechen and the first batch of employees of Norlha made their tour in Siem Reap, Cambodia, where they spent four months in learning the technique of making spinning threads and the spinning of silk.

Some of the group members had never left their hometown before, let alone the country. Along with the new technique, they also got the chance to see the outside world.

In the next March the Norlha group finished their training in Cambodia and left for Kathmandu, Nepal, where they spent six more weeks on the techniques regarding threading, dyeing and spinning. Using the wool of camels and the yak khullu collected by Dechen in their first try, they found that the spinning machine they used in Cambodia was more suitable for silk, while the machine in Nepal was capable of spinning the short (only 3.4 cm - 4.5 cm) and curly yak khullu. Eventually they bought second-handed spinning machines and other equipment for spinning in Nepal, and spent weeks transporting them to Ritoma. With the newly acquired techniques and a wider view, the Norlha people returned to their hometown.

2.3 Establishment of Norlha

The name "Norlha" was given by Dechen's father, Kalsang Yeshi. The word means "Wealth of God" in Tibetan, which is what the nomads call the yak, the source of their fortune.

Kim arrived in the plateau and set out her construction of the Norlha workshop in the summer of 2006. Her aim was not merely a workshop that could make products of yak khullu, but also an economic mode of sustainable development, which would be able to be applied in other nomadic regions so as to improve the living situation of more nomads.

The establishment of Norlha as a pioneering social project and its successful practice in the Tibetan region benefited from the support of local monasteries and government. One of the major factors that distinguishes Tibet from the inner China is that many aspects of living and production here exhibit the influence of religion. Understanding the religious influence, Kim had at the beginning of Norlha's establishment discussed the practicability of the project with the influential Amchotsans family and the eminent monks in local monasteries. They all acknowledged the benefits of the project for the village and agreed on the establishment of the workshop. Soon after Kim founded an NGO called Zamaa as a bridge connecting Norlha and the local Tibetans. In the process of constructing Norlha, the local monks offered their help in different aspects in order to align the project more with the nomads' views and habits.⁹



Norlha Workshop

In preparing for the construction, the monks also helped them communicate with the local government and win its trust. As the government attaches great importance to the economic development of the indigent regions, Norlha as the project of sustainable development obtained support from both the provincial and the local government. The upper government provided support on law and policy, while the lower government lent a hand in specific issues concerning the construction, such as the building of the workshop, the recruitment of employees, etc. The upper and lower support accorded with each other and combined to advance the completion of the construction.

In the April of 2007, the construction of Norlha broke the endless and rigorous winter in the plateau and came together with the turn of warmth. In the beginning Kim and Dechen were faced with two choices of constructive styles: the traditional Tibetan construction and the standardized factory. The former is made mainly from mining clay, stone and wood by experienced constructors during a comparatively long period. The latter, however, takes

a shorter time and costs less with bricks, cement and steel in the standardized constructing mode. After contemplation, Kim and Dechen gave their vote to the former, which accords with the aesthetic criteria of the Tibetans. The Tibetan styled construction is on the one hand more receptive to the local people, and on the other hand a form of protecting local religious habits and traditional culture. With the joint work of the local Tibetans and artisans, Norlha finally officially came into shape in Ritoma in November, 2007.

According to Bazon Brock, “Socio-Design is therefore the draft and realization of forms of life organization for individual and group members of our society.”¹⁰ The plan of a pioneering social project requires not only meticulous analysis on its practicality, but a broad view and range of actions, benefiting as more people as possible and reaching for sustainable development. Both the economic and social benefits are to be taken into account. When there come conflicts between the two types of benefits, the balanced benefit overall should be the end to achieve from the perspective of further development. The project of social design is supposed to be advanced based on systems theory. Different aspects of relevance should be regarded as an organic whole, and their interrelations with each other be coordinated properly so as to join people of relevant benefits together and contribute to the sustainable development.

3. Tradition and the Modern - Product Design

One key design thinking of Norlha products is to make the most of the material and make the best out of it. The design tries to find a connection between the unique ethnic culture and modern civilization, balancing society, culture, economy and nature with creative design schemes. In this chapter the traditional Tibetan spinning craft and its history are elaborated, and practical products are shown to demonstrate how Norlha combines traditional Tibetan culture with the modern design thinking and the design ideas of Norlha products.

3.1 Traditional Tibetan Spinning

3.1.1 Root and Development

The Tibetan spinning craft has a history of thousands of years. A wide range of spinning products weave the daily life of Tibetans, and also make the medium of ethnic culture and art. The distinction of the traditional Tibetan spinning results greatly from the unique natural environment of Tibet. Situated on the plateau, Tibet has big temperature difference between day and night and long freezing winters, which contributes to Tibetans' generous request on cold protection in daily life. Another key factor is the massive volume of animal husbandry in Tibetan region. A considerable number of sheep and yaks produce enormous amount of wool, the major material for Tibetan spinning. Last but not least, the inconvenient transportation in the region leads to the lagging development of economy and trade, which requires the manual production of all kinds of necessities. Spinning thus becomes part of the Tibetans' daily work, especially in winter when herding is on a break.

Apart from natural circumstances, the cultural environment has a

drenched influence on Tibetan spinning craft. The Tibetan Buddhism as the prevalent religion in the earlier Tibet of Caesaropapism has turned into Tibetans' blood. The motifs and colors of traditional Tibetan spinning that originate mostly from Tibetan Buddhist culture endow the textiles with a strong tone of religion. Metaphorical images are applied to express the Tibetans' loyalty to Buddhism and to bless their families and themselves. With the development of cultural integration and social diversity, however, the religiously meaningful textiles of high quality are diminishing. Except in monasteries or local administrations, in an ordinary Tibetan life the mostly used textiles are usually quite crude and rough, mainly for cold protection.

Through thousands of years' development, the traditional spinning craft has grown with extraordinary ethnic and regional earmarks, mixed with different other ethnic cultures. In the dynasty of the Tibetan Empire ¹¹, the Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo ¹² upheld the policy of cultural communication and trade exchange with old India, old Iran, China of the Tang Dynasty, etc, during which foreign cultures and techniques were imported from the outside, contributing to the development of local spinning craft. Crafts of wool spinning, cotton spinning and silk spinning were examples of foreign influences.

The earlier spinning was mostly completed in family-sized workshops, with simple and crude equipment and small amount of production. The recent 30 years of economic development have created increasing demand on textiles, which helps the village craftsmen break the constrict of land and join in the organized production of spinning products in cities. To a massive extent it has advanced the resuscitation of the traditional spinning craft in Tibet.

3.1.2 Varieties of Textiles

Traditional Tibetan textiles are part of daily life and rich in varieties. Three of the most typical Tibetan textiles are Pulu, Bangdian, and Tibetan rugs.

Pulu, also called "Tibetan Wool", is a type of wool woven by hand. Made up of pastel ribbons, Pulu is the major material of Tibetan robes, hats and boots. In old times Tibetan officials and nobles often gave Pulu, the local precious, as tribute to the central empire to show their loyalty. In later times Pulu gradually became popular among ordinary Tibetans. Except in winters when Tibetans have to wear fur to protect themselves from cold, the Tibetan robes made of Pulu prevail in all other seasons, making it the most popular clothing with the most unique ethnic features.

Bangdian, transcribed from Tibetan into Chinese Pinyin, means apron. It is made up of two stripes and a big square piece composed of stripes of dyed sheep wool threads sewn together. Bangdian is laterally patterned. The fine patterns are usually comprised of forms with similar colors, appearing tranquil and harmonious, while the wide patterns are coordinated with sharply contrasted colors, wild and delightful. Bangdian is also a sign of maturity for Tibetan women. In the coming-of-age convention of a 15-year-old Tibetan woman, she will tie the Bangdian around her waist and accept the khata¹³ and blessings from a senior.

The Tibetan rugs are woven with threads made of yak wool or sheep wool and dyed with natural dyestuff from plants and minerals. According to their functions, the rugs are categorized into carpets, cushions, mats, tapestries, etc. Among the rugs the smaller pieces are called “Kadian”, the best-known kind. They are usually used to cover the bed to prevent cold and humidity, cozy and toasty. Deeply affected by Tibetan Buddhism and having absorbed the Buddhist images and colors in thangka¹⁴ and murals, Tibetan rugs have distinguished ethnic features. They are more than daily necessities for Tibetans, but also precious crafts of rich artistic value.¹⁵

3.1.3 The Craft of Spinning

Traditional Tibetan spinning is representative of the Tibetan handicraft, which is both the accumulation of living experience and the heritage of generations. The following depicts the general process of this ingenious traditional spinning craft:

Combing: The very first step of traditional Tibetan spinning craft includes collecting the raw wool of yaks or sheep, stretching and organizing the wool by hand or with a brush, and rolling it into fluffy woolen balls, all in preparation for the next step.

Thread-Pulling: From inside the woolen ball a thin thread is pulled out and spun to a wooden spindle. With rotation of the wooden spindle, the evenly shaped threads are constantly pulled out of the woolen ball.

“Two in One”: Two separate threads are pulled out from two separate thread balls rolled from the last step. The two threads are then entwined into one. This process intensifies the thickness and toughness of the thread. The trick in acquiring properly tensed threads is to ensure the uniform speed of entwining the threads.

Dyeing: The spun threads are then boiled and dyed with dyestuff refined from rock and plants, which prevents the threads from being oxygenized and retains their beautiful colors, with no harm at all to the skin or to the environment.

Threading: The pile of dyed threads is now ready to ride the spinning machine. There are over a hundred warps on the spinning machine, sometimes even thousands for a bigger machine. All those warps require manual work to thread them in, with no single one line miss-positioned. Such is the process called “threading warps”.

Cutting: When the threads are spun into textile, protruding thread ends will be cut away, and the textile be cut into requested sizes.

Washing: The finished cloth will be repeatedly washed with water soaking Elm barks, which both cleans and softens the cloth, with no harm to the skin.

Airing: The washed cloth is straightened and aired outside or dried indoors. A wooden board is sometimes used to strike the textile in order to dehydrate the textile and to prevent it from deforming.

Tibetan spinning artisan



3.2 New Design

3.2.1 The Product System

Norlha's products on the one hand inherit the Tibetan spinning tradition, and on the other hand explore new possibilities in materials, craft and design. In these attempts an entire system of Norlha products gradually came in form, including the five main items below:

Scarfs: Scarfs are Norlha's earliest and best-sold products, with all kinds of materials and colors. They have collections of various styles to accommodate different seasons and customer groups. For every season there are new products coming on market. The collection of "Summer Symphony", for example, is made of yak khullu mixed with silk, light and permeable. This series of light blue and light green refresh your eyes with a feel of summer. Another collection called "Essentials" is made of pure yak khullu or yak khullu mixed with cashmere wool, thick and thermal. This series in red and brown are collections for winter, wild and warm.

Clothing: Norlha applies the craft of hand-felting in the design of clothes, which entail coats, vests and ponchos. The general style of design is close to the traditional Tibetan clothing, where both the neckline and the sleeves are loose, free and nomadic. In details are decorated with yak hair braid detailing and horse-hair tassel. In Norlha design the quintessential Tibetan style is radiating. In addition to adult clothing, Norlha also produces collections for kids and babies. These collections are designed with bright colors and mostly made with hand-knitting craft. The warmth and comfort of yak khullu is dialled to the highest, which meets the requirements of kids' clothing.

Home Product: In this category there are carpets, pillows, table mats, storage boxes, etc. The design of those products also takes its inspiration from Tibetan culture. The Tibetan carpet, as introduced in 3.1.2, is the most repre-

sentative product in Tibetan spinning craft. In the near Xiahe Town Norlha established a workshop especially for the production of Tibetan carpets. The carpet is made of mixed woven fabric of yak wool and sheep wool. It takes at least two weavers two to three months to finish one carpet. In the products of table mats and table runners, the background color as well as the center color come into being by felting craft at one go, a real demonstration of this exquisite craft. Generally, the household design of Norlha takes into consideration both the practical and decorative aspects of products, every piece of which inherits the high-end craft of Tibetan spinning.

Accessories: Norlha produces all kinds of accessories: hats, gloves, slippers, backpacks, dolls, cases or protections for electronics, etc. Hats and gloves are all knitted with pure yak fiber by hand. The primary color of the yak fiber makes them appear plain and warm. Backpacks and electronics protections are mostly woven with yak fiber mixed with sheep wool. The colors for those are varied, and the styles of the products are mostly in fashion, some decorated with a horn-adorned buckle or a felt tassel. They have protections specially made for laptops, electric pads and phones of different sizes, fusing the traditional crafts with modern life.

Norlha collections



Fabrics: As the first workshop that makes yak fiber its major raw material, Norlha explores the best way to spin yak hair into the best fabric. Besides products made of yak hair, Norlha also provides the ready-woven fabrics of yak hair for direct use to designers and other companies. It is another way of promoting this unique material from the plateau to a wider market. Based on the material and the craft, there are handloom fabrics, woven fabrics and felt fabrics. The first type is woven on the handloom with pure yak khullu. The fabrics are thick and varied in color, texture and weight, ready to be made into coats or jackets. Woven fabrics are made by mixture of yak fiber, silk and sheep wool. While the mixture of yak fiber with silk is light with the draping feel, the mixture of yak fiber with sheep wool makes the fabric strong but soft. The felt fabrics are mostly made with pure yak fiber, waterproof and pliable, the proper material for clothing, carpets and household products.

3.2.2 Improvement of the Craft

In its years of manufacturing the products from the yak hair, Norlha has made much improvement on the processing craft, based on the market and the realistic conditions of the workshop. While guaranteeing the high quality of products, it has heightened the utilization rate of the raw material as well as the production efficiency.

The traditional process of yak hair is rather crude. The products made in that way are uneven in quality based on the quality of the raw material, which means the products of high quality cannot be guaranteed. The yak hair used by Norlha as the raw material is purchased direct from the nomads, without selection and process. The first improvement Norlha made on the traditional craft is the gradation of raw materials. When the primary yak hair is transported to the workshop, the workers will make selection and gradation. The yak hair of the highest grade will be submitted to the artisans for the manual process of product manufacture. The yak hair of the second grade will be co-processed by the hand and the machine. The yak hair of the third grade will be used not for products, but for tents, ropes or other household goods in the pasture. The gradation of the raw materials ensures the use of the yak hair of different quality to the utmost, without the waste of resources.

Due to the costliness of the raw materials, the pure manual process by the artisans would not only keep the whole production cost massively high, but also stifle the production efficiency, unable to meet the demand of the market.

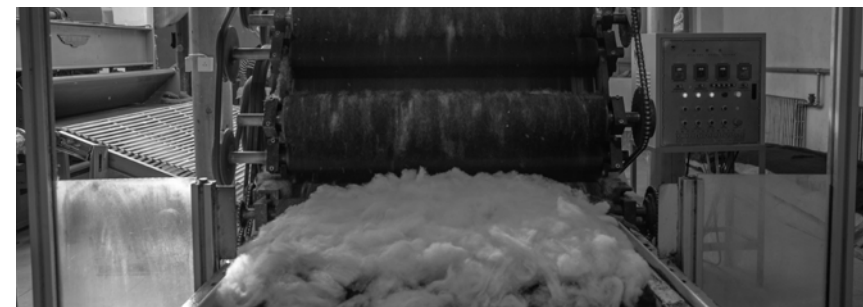
The second improvement on the craft, therefore, is the inclusion of machines in production. The production is then accelerated without losing the quality. The production of felts is depicted as an example below:

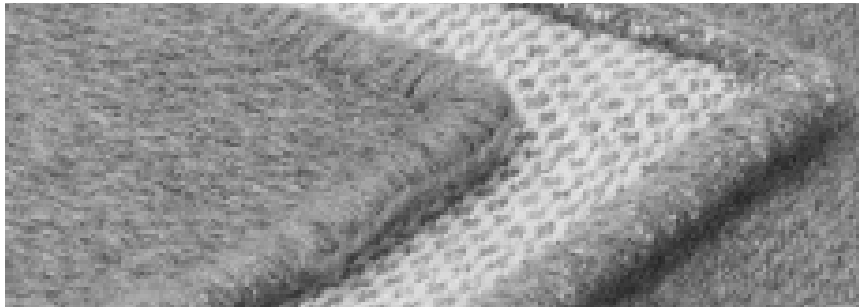
Step one: When the yak khullu as the raw material is sent to the section of felting, the artisans will use the combing machine to press the tangled yak hair flat first and order it in layers. In this process the hair of different colors can also be mixed. The light grey yak hair, for example, is obtained by the mixture of dark grey hair and white hair.

Step two: The artisans lay the thin and orderly yak hair on the working table, which is composed of the transparent Acrylic countertop and the fluorescent lamps under. With the light through the countertop the artisans can pick the impurities out from the yak hair and test the uniformity of the thickness and density of the hair.

Step three: A cotton net cloth is laid on top of the yak hair first, and another layer of net sifter comes after. In the meantime the artisan rubs with soap water over it repeatedly in order to infiltrate the hair into the cotton net

The production of felts





The production of felts

cloth. Following that, the artisans will need to twist the felt hard and strike it repeatedly to make sure that the yak hair and the cotton net cloth are fused into each other.

Step four: The well-made felts are aired, ironed and trimmed before an entire piece of felt without protruding ends comes into shape. The ready product will then be sent to other sections and continue the following process.

3.2.3 Employment of Colors

Situated 3000 meters above sea level, the Tibetan Plateau is “Roof of the World” with its ample sunshine, wavy ridges and piercing mountains covered by ice and snow all year long. The nature is colored with sky blue, grass green and snow white, which compose the pure Tibet. The Tibetans living here like to employ the bright and flamboyant colors with high contrast ratio in their art

works and artefacts, meeting the eyes with intense visual impact.

In addition to natural elements, religion again plays a critical role in the application of colors. Colors with religious meanings are always favored by the Tibetans. Red stands for power in Tibetan Buddhism, and signifies majesty in Tibetan life. Similarly, religious yellow symbolizes flourish, while the color manifests dignity in life; the color blue is awe-inspiring, and also equals to abundance in life; as symbol of purity, integrity and loyalty, white is the most revered color among Tibetans. ¹⁶

Norlha products inherit the color from Tibetan tradition and take inspiration from nature. From nature they extract sky blue, lake blue, sunset orange, prairie green, snow white and blossom pink. The symbolic colors in Tibetan culture are also frequently used in products: yellow from the monk cap, red from the traditional belts, green from turquoise of the Tibetan treasure, etc.

Besides the traditional bright colors, a good number of Norlha products employ grey and brown, the primary colors of yak hair. As Dechen regards, “(w)e need to think of products that people would feel comfortable wearing. We take a part of the plateau and present it to them without making it so traditional that somebody feels like they are wearing someone else’s culture or they are trying to be someone they are not.” The shades of grey or brown are more receptive internationally. Such employment of color is not merely appealing to the market, but lies in some deep thinking on “nature”. The raw material without any process of dyeing presents the most original color and acquaint the customers with the true status of yak hair. When the customers use the products, they would feel themselves with the yak in the plateau, which is a better “return” to the Tibetan culture and to nature.

3.2.4 Patterns and Images

Traditional Tibetan textiles are rich in exquisite patterns and images, which are mostly rooted in the distinctive Tibetan culture and aesthetics. As follows the representative patterns and images that frequent Tibetan textiles are given a detailed demonstration of.

Geometric patterns: The geometric patterns are mostly transformed from triangles, circles, rectangles and the combination of them. In old times the geometric patterns usually appeared on potteries, while nowadays those figures can also be found on textiles or adornments, widely applied in monasteries and traditional residences.

Natural elements: Elements in the natural environment are also used as the theme of patterns. There are grass patterns and flower patterns that model the plants. Other patterns shaped like stream or fire also have religious meanings. Fire, for example, symbolises light and dediabolisation in Tibetan Buddhism. And iridescent clouds linked one after another signify good lucks, one of the Tibetans' favorites.

Animals: This type of patterns have evolved from the totems of ancient times or come from daily life. The patterns with yaks, birds and beasts are commonly seen. The pattern of reining the dragon is widely used in Kadian, Tibetan rugs, thangka and murals. Dragon, regarded as god of water or the epitome of fortune in Tibetan culture, will be consecrated by Tibetans if appearing on the textiles.¹⁷

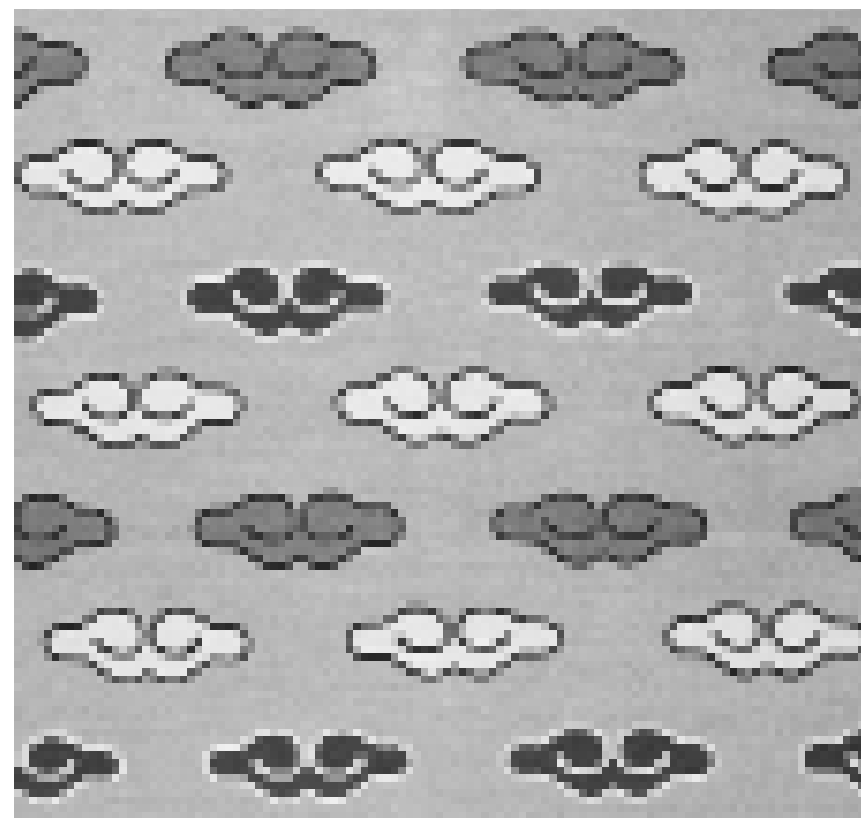
Any of the patterns above could be applied in textiles either separately or combined with others. In one piece of Tibetan rug there could appear several different types of patterns and colors, gorgeous with high decorative and artistic value.

The design of earlier Norlha products, especially the Tibetan carpets, employed numerous traditional Tibetan patterns. The tapestry named Delek Maize Hanging employs the geometric pattern resembling the Chinese character “回”, which is usually used as the central image of traditional Tibetan tapestries. The Delek Cloud Carpet takes the more representative pattern of clouds in different shades of black, white and grey that make an orderly and rhythmic picture, in concert with the view of clouds layered and changing in the sky.

Delek Maize Hanging



Delek Cloud Carpet





Yaks on the Move Carpet

Stream Carpet

Besides traditional patterns, Norlha also makes brand new trial on patterns and images. The Yaks on the Move Carpet is made of 70% sheep wool and 30% yak wool. On the flat carpet grows irregularly grey and white long hair, like the view of herds of yaks strolling on the prairie seen from the sky. With no traditional Tibetan patterns or concrete images, the carpet presents the images of “prairie” and “yaks” vividly through application of different textures and coordination of colors. Seeing the carpet, the viewer has the image of the broad plateau in mind and the urge to touch the real hair of the yaks.

Thanks to the distinct landform of the plateau and massively ample sunshine, varied shades of lakes and rivers create natural color gradients, a spectacular view, especially seen from the mountain. Inspired by the view, the carpet "Stream" creates the alternating effect by mixing the yak wool and sheep wool in certain ratios. The black part is from 100% yak khullu, the dark grey from the mixture of 70% yak wool and 30% sheep wool, light grey from 20% yak wool and 80% sheep wool, and the white from 100% sheep wool. The whole carpet is divided into different color patches by distinct curves, which infuses the full image with vibrancy and life through the flowing “streams” and watered “lake”.

In the application of patterns, Norlha both inherits tradition and makes its innovation in artistic effects and spinning craft. The new patterns and image design smartly transforms the information contained in materials, colors, texture and craft into new product semantics. The unique cultural signature of the Tibetan Plateau is perfectly presented in an abstract artistic way.

Stream Carpet



3.2.5 Modern Life

Besides the traditional textiles like scarfs, carpets, etc, Norlha also has some more modern collections, such as plush toys, storage boxes, electronics protections, etc. Those products are representative of the combination of Tibetan culture and modern life.

The yeti, the folkloric figure among Tibetans, also well known to the world, appears as a cute and happy family in Norlha design. The story of the yeti is popular among especially the Tibetan kids. In contrast to the “colossal and dangerous” image described in most European literary works, the yeti in the Tibetans’ mind has a gentle heart. Rather than eating sheep and yaks, or harming the kids, it is shy, and lives its own life up on the snowy mountain.

Considering its fame in the whole world, Norlha designed a happy Yeti family out. It is made up of a grey Boy Yeti, a pink Girl Yeti, a yellow Old Brother Yeti, a Snow Yeti with long beard and a chubby Grandpa Yeti. Tangled hair, pure smile and unsymmetrical eyes present the happy and lovely yeti figures. The traditional Tibetan bells are also sewn to the yetis, making joyful sound when playing with the kids, which adds interactivity to the product.

Yeti plush toys



Tsering Yak plush toys

Another popular toy is a yak called Tsering. The name Tsering means longevity in Tibetan, which is auspicious to children and bears the seniors’ blessings to them. Made of felts and with a complex structure, this product requires accurate cutting and careful sewing. While it costs not much material, it takes one sewing artisan at least two days to finish one of them due to its complex process.

When asked about the motivation for making those toys, Dechen said: “(t)he toys came up, because when we started to work a lot with big pieces of felts, you were left with all these scraps. It was a shame to throw it out. And we started to develop smaller products out of leftover pieces and try to get a better added value.”

These toys not only make the full use of materials, but bring more business and cultural value to Norlha. In Tibetan culture, the yeti and the yak are representative symbols. For Tibetan children, those are rather like childhood companions. Norlha attempts to spread the entailed stories and the unique cultural experience from the plateau to children in different countries and different cultures through the quintessential modern products.



Scarf of “Summer Symphony” collection

3.2.6 Values of Design

Most Norlha design is completed by Kim. In recent years, as getting more understanding of spinning, Dechen begins to take over her mother’s job and get more involved in the designing work of scarfs and clothes. Norlha also invites some designer friends from Switzerland and Britain to the workshop in Ritoma every year to help with development of new products. For the future design, Dechen thinks that “(i)n the end, a lot of the Norlha identity has to come from us, from the core, because we are the ones who know the best. But it’s helpful to have professional designers who help you with tuning and making it more digestible for the market.”

From different angles of modern design in Norlha we can see that Norlha attempts to introduce the traditional Tibetan culture into modern life in the aspects of color, pattern and product collections. It takes far more than the

addition of cultural marks on products. It invites the constant thinking over the essence of nomads and of Tibetan culture. The answer they have been pursuing comes to the close correlation between man and nature, even the unification of man and nature. Surrounding this core, the designed products embrace people with the power of nature. Norlha’s products manifest not only the uniqueness of ethnic culture, but more importantly, the universality of different cultures. People from different cultural backgrounds experience the culture of nomads and of Tibet through the products and the design.

In the industrial production system, our daily wears and products have become fast-moving consumer goods. They are cheap in price and short in usage. When there is problem or damage to them, the first thought of the consumers is to throw them away and get a new one, instead of fixing them. How much garbage will be accumulated in the future? Are we capable of dealing with that much garbage? What influence will they have on the environment? As stated by Victor Papanek, “Mankind is unique among animals in its relationship to the environment. All other animals adapt themselves autoplastically to a changing environment (by growing thicker fur in the winter, or evolving into a totally new species over a half-million-year cycle); only mankind transforms earth itself to suit its needs and wants (alloplastically).”¹⁸

Faced with those questions, Norlha has its thinking and concern. One of the keywords in Norlha’s design values is “timeless”. No matter in material, production or design, all that Norlha pursues is high quality. The aim is not the high selling price, but the classic products with long-term usage. Dechen hopes that “it doesn’t accumulate to garbage. And even if you get tired of it, it’s still such a valuable thing that you would give as a gift to your daughter or your friend. Even if we want people to come back and buy it again, it doesn’t mean that what they already bought is garbage. It means that they just have a collection and can share it with other people.”

With its own design, Norlha is in constant exploration of the way to fuse tradition with modernity, to deliver the cultural message to the customer, to accord the products with the law of nature and to make it more durable for the user. The values of “Natural” and “Timeless” are Norlha’s perpetual motive force and aim.

4. Ten Years' Persistence - Social Design

The concept of social design originates from the view of Victor Papanek in 1970s that designers and creative professional have responsibility and are able to cause real change in the world through good design. In the next 40 years, the concept of social design has been constantly practised and explored.

From 2007 up to now, Norlha has passed a decade. In this decade it has improved the living situation of local Tibetans, and taken massive influence on the economic and cultural development of the whole community. Norlha is a real practice of developing social design in the Tibetan region. This chapter explores the way Norlha joins local Tibetans in building up their home and new life.

4.1 Development

4.1.1 The Mode of Development

As described in the first chapter, local Tibetans were faced with a tough situation. On the one hand, a lot of Tibetans, especially the youngsters craved for the outside world and the possibilities of new life. On the other hand, the lagged local economic conditions propelled most Tibetans to leave home for the work outside, or kept them nomads. According to Kim and Dechen, Norlha was in need of a developing mode proper for the local development, which would provide for the locals stable jobs so as to improve their living conditions.

According to Dechen, to the NGO mode, she preferred the business mode, through which the development could be more sustainable. But the traditional business mode has its limit, as any business mode is composed of the retailer, the producer and the consumer. The commercial success of a product usually means a satisfactory profit to the retailer and a satisfactory price to

the consumer. The interests of the producer in between are compressed to the narrowest. The concerned workers, especially in economically undeveloped regions, are the most exploited group. So important as the producer and the raw materials are for business success, this area is often neglected in business industry.

In face with the situation, Dechen and Kim intend to change the game and attempt to establish another mode. They combine the unique raw materials and the artisans' exquisite craft to make products of high quality, and return the profit direct to the artisans. In the meantime they keep recruiting and training employees from the local to drive the economic development of the whole region. When they have earned what they deserve and feel confident in their work, the artisans produce as excellent works as they can. A virtuous circle is to be achieved in the industry.



Developing phases of Norlha

The developing mode Norlha has explored is different from the traditional business mode that pursues maximized profit and the mode of NGO relying on the foundation or financing of the third party. It is rather a combination of traditional business mode and NGO, or a middle way, which intends to achieve its social aim by way of business operation.

4.1.2 Beginning of the Establishment

At the beginning of Norlha's establishment, the first challenge they met was to recruit employees, and the basis of employee recruitment was trust. In talking about this challenge, Dechen said: "The first step in trusting is that you have to be able to pay people properly and once they start trusting you as a stable source of employment, they can dedicate their time and efforts to the project."

With respect to the development of a social design project, trust is a prerequisite, and supposed to be mutual. The founder of the project has to prove to the locals that she is capable of providing a solution to improve the local conditions. The locals have to first acknowledge the conception of the founder, which should correspond to their aspiration, and then join her in bettering the specific steps to accomplish the project, believing that they will achieve the expected aim with the joint effort of both sides.

Besides recruitment, another challenge Norlha faced was cash flow. It played a crucial role for the early development of Norlha. First of all, it determined if Norlha could pay all the employees on time. Equally importantly, the entrance of high-end market meant a considerable sum of capital for purchase of raw materials, update of production equipment and training of the employees.

Initially Norlha acquired an interest-free loan from the foundation, some subsidy for construction of the workshop, and some tax reduction granted by the local government. Different from NGO, Norlha is operated more in the business mode. In face of the problems caused by cash flow, Norlha depends more on the business success of its products. The situation imposed much pressure on Dechen and Kim as well as on every employee of Norlha. On the other hand, the pressure turned into a positive power to motivate the whole team to join hands in creating their own future.

4.1.3 Cooperation

Kim grew up in France, where she is acquainted with a friend in the textile industry, Christopher. In as early as 2005, Kim paid visit to the fashion houses and luxury stores with Christopher in Paris. The intention was to inquire about their interest in products made of yak hair.

Before the establishment of Norlha, the products of yak hair were quite rare on market. The cost of the raw materials combining the craft of hand



Dechen Yeshe and partners

spinning keeps the price of yak hair products lofty. At that time, few people believed in Norlha's success in business. Limited to the underdeveloped conditions of internet and media, there was barely a platform for Norlha to present the value of yak hair and the story of its own establishment. Therefore, the only way Kim and Dechen could find was to seek for cooperation with other brands by catching their attention on Norlha products, capturing their hearts in yak hair and finally getting them to purchase from Norlha.

Since 2008, a rising number of fashion brands have become Norlha's customers. Balmain, Louis Vuitton, Haider Ackermann, and the list goes on. Every year Norlha presents different collections to their clients, who would usually make some modifications to them and finally order some samples from Norlha. It is far from simple to be partner with those big brands. As recollected by Dechen, "sometimes a client makes a big order, and we would be so happy for one year and would employ more people to prepare for the next year. But next year, they said yak wool is not on the style and wouldn't order. We worked so hard, and all of a sudden, what you expected to happen doesn't happen."

Norlha gradually realized that it was not a stable and sustainable strategy to sell products direct to fashion brands. On the one hand, the styles of those brands vary year by year. On the other hand, the salaries of the employees increase with speed. In the earlier time when the exchange rate of Euro to RMB was in the downtrend, and Norlha earned euros while expending RMB, their cash flow wore out even more. To deal with those challenges, Norlha was in bad need of altering their strategy of development: holding the future in its own hands, rather than depending on other brands.

4.1.4 The Original Brand

In 2012, while continuing its cooperation with other brands, Norlha came up with its own collections of products and the first branding menu. The journey of pursuing its own brand began. Dechen regarded this stage as “always questioning ourselves, our identity.” They were seeking for a way to best present

Norlha brand label



themselves to the world. “We have so many things to say. How do we say it most effectively?”

In this process, they acknowledged three basic factors of a successful product: quality raw material, excellent craft and fine design. Norlha put a great amount of emphasis on the three aspects to research and develop, and came up with bunches of products that combined the Tibetan tradition and modern life. Those products won acknowledgement both by the market and within the industry. It earned itself HEC&1.618 Luxury and Sustainability Award. Those original products laid a solid foundation for the further development of Norlha brand.

With nonstop trials and accumulation, Norlha has extended its product line to felting, tailoring, carpeting, etc. A whole set of product system gradually came into shape. Meanwhile the values of Norlha brand and its brand image are continually enriched. Till 2015, the development strategy of Norlha is no longer to present its products to other brands, but to present its products to the whole world.

In retrospect of Norlha’s development from establishment of the brand, cooperation with other brands to becoming one of the original brands, we see some regularity behind. In the early stage of a social design project, either the support from the third party or the cooperation with other brands can help accelerate the growth of the project. In the long run, however, the project is in need of constant pursuit of its location and valuation based on its own conditions, trying to transform from the mode of pure production to the one with its core techniques and original products. Only in this way can the future of the project be in its own hand and achieve stable and sustainable development.

4.2 Operation

4.2.1 The Corporate Structure

Norlha is a production-sales company, which means it operates the whole industry chain, from the purchase of raw materials to design and production, and eventually to marketing and sales. On the one hand, it can ensure that the values of the brand are implemented throughout the whole process and the achievement of high quality. On the other hand, it provides more jobs for the local Tibetans so as to return the utmost interests that Norlha has generated to the Tibetans.

Norlha is operated in the mode of a modern company, dividing the work in different sections. The company is composed of four departments as below.

Purchasing Department: making purchase of yak khullu and sheep wool from the nomads regularly, and transporting it to the workshop of Norlha.
Product Department: divided into sections of weaving, felting and tailoring according to the type of craft. There is an extra workshop in Xiahe Town, specially for carpeting.

Product Department: divided into sections of weaving, felting and tailoring according to the type of craft. There is an extra workshop in Xiahe Town, specially for carpeting.

Finance: responsible for auditing Norlha's Financial Statements and the monthly financial budget and paying the employees on time.

For each department there is a director, representative of the department. The specific missions and plans are first discussed and decided by Dechen together with all directors, and then allocated to each employee. When any problem pops up in any employee's work or life, he or she could turn to the director or direct to Dechen for corresponding help.



Spinning training

4.2.2 Training of Employees

Due to the problematic basic education for the locals, human resource is one of the biggest challenges faced by Norlha. The proper training of the employees becomes extraly important for the averagely poorly educated local Tibetans, some of whom even have never been to school before.

There are over 160 employees in Norlha so far. Excluding several spinning teachers from the outside and a couple of foreigners, all are local Tibetans, among which women take up a big percentage. In the preliminary stage, the criteria of recruitment was not qualification. Rather, the priority of employment was provided to seniors, the physically challenged, or those impoverished families. The reason lay in Dechen's belief that the disadvantaged, especially women, take on the heavy work at home, and most of them are not able to work outside. Norlha was supposed to provide jobs for them first.

For the employees in Sales, Marketing and Finance, Dechen will teach them some simple English and computer skills to help them complete the work more efficiently. For those in Manufacture, most of the training occurs in practice. The old employees lead the new ones through from some simple work and familiarize them with the materials and different crafts. Afterwards they will be allocated to different sections based on each one's advantage. It takes an

individual about 6 months to walk through the training to independent work. Dechen has also invited some experts on spinning from Nepal and the inner China to help solve the problems in the process of manufacture.

This process is anything but smooth. For most Tibetans, Norlha was their first job, during which they still worked like a “nomad”. First starting the job, whenever they felt the urge to go home, they would just throw the work off hand and left straight away. Whenever sleepy, they would just go find a place and doze off. In this process of training, patience was not the only thing required for the step-by-step guidance. The personalized management should be in position. If an employee should not agree with his current position, he would be switched to other positions one after another until one that suits him is found. When some employee should be away for a while, the position would be reserved until he or she comes back. All employees in training can start earning salaries already. And there are canteens inside the workshop specially for employees, with breakfast and lunch free. All kinds of arrangements have to different degrees released the pressure of employees, who gradually get accustomed to the Nine-to-Five working mode through such training. Years later, there is no employee lost, and an increasing number of Tibetans would like to join Norlha.

In regard of training, Dechen now has her own views: “They have to recognize that they are playing an important role, a part of the system, that they are necessary and we are depending on them. Then there is a pressure coming on, and everything you do becomes real. If you don’t achieve it well, then it’s not good for the whole. Even though we have our own offices, we all came out and sit together so that we can share the excitement or the challenges through the day together. It’s these kinds of little things that make a big difference.”

4.2.3 Sales

Sales in Norlha involves the online mode and the offline mode. Offline there are 5 Norlha stores. 3 of them are located in Gannan Tibetan Region, one within the Norlha workshop in Ritoma Village, one near Labrang Monastery in Xiahe Town and one in Norden Camp in Sangke Grassland. The other two are respectively in Lhasa, the capital city of Tibet and in Beijing.

The decorative styles of each store are basically unified. The decoration is based on the wooden structure, enclosing the old-fashioned furniture

Scarfs in Norlha showroom





Inside Norlha store

recycled from the Tibetans. The vigorous Tibetan flavor emits in all details, in the big tent ropes made of yak wool to hang scarfs, or in the rattan grains baskets to exhibit hats or wallets. The store's decoration is well integrated with its products as well as the brand culture. The store is more than a place to sell the products, but more of a stage to demonstrate and promote the Tibetan original brand.

Besides offline stores, the online space provides an even bigger stage. Norlha has its own website and online shops, with customers from Germany, France, Switzerland and China. Norlha is also the earliest Tibetan brand to apply online sales mode. Moreover, as it has cooperative relations with different distributors, customers can also buy Norlha products on the third party's platform. In the remote Tibetan region with inconvenient transportation and communication, this modern sales mode connects Norlha products with customers from different countries.

With the modern modes of corporate management and sales, Norlha has been strict with the entire process of manufacture and effectively balanced the relation of production and sales. The training for the employees enables the local Tibetans to master a professional skill and to create values with their own hands. It compensates the lack of professional training in the local area. More importantly, the local Tibetans begin to realize the importance of basic education and professional training. The process is slow, but the influence it exerts on the future development of Norlha and of the local area is positive and promising.

4.3 New Exploration

4.3.1 Norden Camp

Sangke Grassland is located in Xiahe Town of Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. It is meadow, situated 3000 meters above sea level and covering over 70 square kilometers. The extensive quality grassland serves as the winter pasture for nomads.

One of the most attractive tourism resources, the well-known Labrang Monastery, sits in this area. With the arrangement of travel agencies, most tourists coming here are accommodated in hotels in cooperative relationship with travel agencies. The tourists are unlikely to experience true Tibetan culture by way of this mass tourism mode. The locals are unlikely to benefit from it either. In consideration of the situation, Dechen and her husband Yidam had the idea of introducing “ecotourism” in here. They wanted “to focus more on quality, less on quantity”, and more importantly, to set up “an example to local Tibetans around”.

In 2013, Dechen and Yidam established a new type of B&B for Tibetan travel and cultural experience in the Tibetan region - Norden Camp. It is composed of 7 wooden houses and 4 tents made of yak khullu. The interior design of the camp was completed by Yidam and Dechen. The bed sheets, curtains, carpets, cushions, etc. are all specially made for the camp by Norlha. The textiles are in different themes: the yak, the horse and the crane, representatives of the nomadic and Tibetan culture. The menu offered in the camp is comprised of unique local cuisines, categorized into three stories: Yak Story, Droma Story and Tsampa Story. The camp is open to the outside world from May to October every year, while it still serves as the winter pasture for nomads, who will chase the cattle and sheep in this area to graze in winter. The

virtuous ecologic cycle is well reserved in the local.

Travellers living in Norden Camp can experience not only the traditional Tibetan food and living conditions, but also hiking and horse-riding on the prairie, touching nature like a nomad. The idea of ecotourism is in pursuit of a quality experience of “luxury”. Different from the popular understanding of this concept, Dechen regards real luxury as “fresh air, being close to nature and feeling spending this time with yourself, away from all the noises, gadgets and rush of everyday life. And the essence of being a nomad is how close you are with nature.”

With the exemplary Norden Camp as a lead, more and more Tibetans have set up in the local their distinct B&B and cultural experience projects. On the whole, the idea of Norden Camp is unified with that of Norlha, with their approaches complementing each other. Norlha takes the local Tibetans to the world via the distinct yak wool products, while Norden brings the outsiders into Tibet by way of the unique experience of Tibetan culture and nomadic life.



Norden Camp

4.3.2 The Basketball Team

With the popularization of TV and internet in Ritoma years ago, NBA already became the topic of the local Tibetans for long. Basketball is a popular sport among the local Tibetans. If you have the chance of visiting some Tibetan home, you might encounter a Kobe Bryant poster on the wall.

Jamba Dhundup, the director of Purchasing Department in Norlha, organized with the local Tibetans the first basketball team in Ritoma, and set up a simple basketball playground next to Norlha workshop. Even the monks in the monasteries come to play some rounds with them. In 2015, an American named Willard Johnson, who graduated from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and had been an assistant coach for the engineers men's basketball team in MIT, came across the basketball team of Ritoma on social media, and was intrigued by the story of Norlha. He volunteered to come to Ritoma on his own expense and take the role of the basketball coach.

When recollecting his first memory with Ritoma, Willard said: "When I arrived, the first thing I noticed was just how much they loved basketball. I met with Dordje and Jamba, who is the team captain, and they said they want to be a great basketball team and train every day. So I did that for two months and really fell in love with the place."

In the beginning of this basketball team, the players all treated it as a hobby, with no professional training. The arrival of Willard has made big change to the team. As Jamba said, "as a nomad, you have no sense of time. You do not even have a set time to eat. But after we play basketball, things have changed." They have learned from Willard not only the basketball technique, but more importantly, the sense of time.

Ritoma basketball team and MIT Basketball Alumni



Since then, the basketball team has participated in the basketball matches organized in Hezuo City on behalf of Ritoma. In 2016, Willard organized the first "Norlha Laptse Basketball Invitational". Besides the team made up of the local schools, monasteries and Norlha, the MIT Basketball Alumni was also invited. In preparation for this game, Norlha constructed a brand-new basketball playground. Willard considered it as "an amazing cultural experience that use(s) basketball to connect two very different parts of the world."

Watching the men's basketball team trained and play on the ground, the local women gradually grew their interest in playing themselves, and the first women's basketball team was formed in this way, also led by Willard as the coach. In 2018, the women's basketball team joined the men's team in the basketball friendship match held in Hong Kong. This woman's team is a challenge to the local conventions. They prove to the world that women belong not just to housework, but to their own hobbies and sports, just as men do.

Basketball to Ritoma is not merely a sport, but also the adhesive to bind people together. Basketball teaches Norlha employees teamwork. It connects Norlha with the Tibetans outside it. The sport joins everyone in striving for the pride of Ritoma, which is exactly the sense of community involved in social design.

Ritoma women's basketball team



4.3.3 Internet

When Dechen first arrived at Ritoma, the local way of acquiring information was mostly radio or TV. To them, internet was still a far and strange thing. With the economic development, however, internet and smart phones gradually reveal themselves to the local Tibetans through that esoteric veil.

In the age of information, internet is one indispensable tool for branding. Norlha is now sharing their products and the manufacturing craft via their own website and various social media. One particular aspect shared by Norlha is those craftsmen manufacturing the products and their lives. Respect comes from the core of Norlha. The customers also get the chance to meet the hands from which their purchased products come. The producer in here is no longer an abstract and vague concept, but embodied in different individuals. In this way the brand of Norlha is presented to the customers dimensionally.

Internet is a bridge to connect different cultures. The local Tibetans get in touch with the outside world and the newest information via internet, while Norlha shares Tibetan culture, such as the Tibetan arts and constructs, religious holidays, traditional Tibetan weddings and the daily life of local people, etc. with the outside world by the same channel. Only through intercommunication can the world get to know more about Tibet, and Tibet the world.

On the whole, Norlha also makes its fresh exploration in other fields while manufacturing products out of yak khullu. All the projects, the establishment of Norden camp on Sangke Prairie, the training of the first basketball team in Ritoma, and the promotion of Norlha as well as Tibetan culture via modern social media, have boosted the local development, and provide a broader platform for the communication between Tibet and the outside world.



Norlha artisans on Instagram

4.4 Impact

With the joint effort of local Tibetans and Dechen, Ritoma has undergone great transformation, from an unknown small village to an exemplary project with bunches of visitors. With its constant development, Norlha is also expanding its influence in different aspects.

4.4.1 Economy

At the beginning of Norlha's establishment, some Tibetans have doubts about Dechen's motivation. They wondered if she just wanted to use them to make money and would just leave them behind after she earned the money. To those gossips, Dechen chose to ignore them, and prove herself with practice. Now, the income of Norlha employees has increased by multiple times, and will continue increasing based on the employee's seniority. The number of employees has already increased from the original 30 to over 160. It means that at least one member of most families in Ritoma works in Norlha. Even people from other villages are attracted by its name to work here.

When they begin to have stable incomes, the employees in Norlha are able to use their credit to take loans, with which they can repair their houses or buy stuff deemed "luxurious" before. The enhancement of the purchasing power has a snowball effect on the local economy. There are now a couple of restaurants opened in the village, quite some shops emerging one after another, and some business-sensitive vendors selling specially selected goods in Norlha employees' active range, especially on the pay day. All of them have enlivened the local economic life.

The living habits of Norlha employees are also under change. As they only need to go to work on time for the stable salary monthly, they find the safeguard against all kinds of risks, such as the price change of the meat,

the breakout of plagues, winter storms, etc. that they had to worry about as nomads. They thus have more energy to plan for their life and develop hobbies. They also begin to care for nutrition and health, and the focus of their dietary structure gradually moves from meat and yak butter to fruits and vegetables.

Within Ritoma, a bunch of middle-class people begin to come into being among Norlha employees. The rarity of this group naturally arouses jealousy in those not working in Norlha, which is a common issue in the development of most communities. Therefore, the organization of basketball matches, the renovation of public facilities and other projects are all Dechen's attempts to open the gate standing between Norlha and the outside, consolidate the trust from other villagers, and seek for more possibilities of cooperation. It is indispensable in the project of social design that the relationship of the group of direct interests with other groups in the community should be well balanced. The developing mode with more people involved in the interested group is more effective to avoid social conflicts resulting from economic inequality and to lay more solid foundation for the stable and sustainable development.

Tibetans pickings out clothes in the market



4.4.2 Culture

As nomads have to be busy with herding and other work all year, with no holiday to expect, the local Tibetans barely had chance before to participate in religious activities, except on some major festivals. Now that the employees have set working hours, they are able to have holiday on every religious festival.

They have more time for religious activities, and also have the chance to take the whole family for a pilgrimage in Lhasa, the most important pilgrimage for every Buddhist. Another important change concerns the Buddhist dogma of killing. The slaughter of cattle and sheep is unavoidable for a nomad to live, which however clashes with the belief of a Buddhist. Such dilemma always puts the nomads on the fence. Working with the yak hair, which falls off the yak naturally every year, does no harm to the creature. The Tibetans finally get rid of the religious guilt of slaughter.

Normally working on his own, a nomad barely has the chance to

Tibetans in the monastery



Norlha employees with their families

communicate with other people, except with his family after work. Some of them have never left the village all their lives. Norlha provides for the employees a platform to communicate with each other. With the fame of Norlha spread, crowds of people from different countries come to visit Ritoma. In the meantime, more and more employees walk out of the village and visit other cities, even go for a training or business trip in other countries. All these have opened the view of Tibetans and enriched their experience. More importantly, the cultural communication between the local and the outside world prospers.

In winter or during the period of grazing prohibition in the past, many young nomads would leave the village for the work outside to support their family, while the old men and children usually stayed home. Now Norlha provides for them an opportunity to work near home. Because of Norlha, the husband does not have to be separate from his wife, the mother not from her children, and the grandparents not from the younger generation in the family. A whole family plays an essential role in the growth of children. With more emphasis put on education and establishment of schools, most children are sent

to school by their parents for formal basic education.

With the popularity of internet and the enlightenment of communication, abundant information rushes in, which also poses a challenge to the local culture of Ritoma and Tibet. The foreign ideas like gender equality and respect of education exert positive influence on the local. Some phenomena like fast-food culture, egotism, disregard of environment in making money, etc. are nonetheless the ugly results of the sheer pursuit of profit in business society. It is therefore more sensible that the Tibetans should be open to the fine foreign cultures to bring their life to a modern world, while at the same time protect their own culture and values from harm by those ideas unfit for the local.

4.4.3 Environment

Before Norlha was established, the Ritoma area was pure pasture, on which most families lived as nomads. To increase incomes, the number of cattle and sheep grew considerably. As the result, the size of the grassland shrunk heavily year by year due to overgrazing. A series of ecologic problems like the grassland degradation, soil deterioration, desertification, etc. emerged.

The appearance of Norlha provides for the Tibetans an alternative besides herding. When the mode of production transforms from husbandry to handicraft, the number of cattle and sheep is decreasing and controlled within a reasonable range. Besides, as Norlha purchases yak hair from the nomads with a planned amount at a set time, it to some extent avoids the phenomena of overgrazing at the drive of economic profit.

In the process of manufacture, Norlha sticks to the product feature of environmental friendliness. Most products reserve the primary color of the yak kuhllu, without any bleach work. For a few products that require dyeing, Norlha applies the environmentally-friendly dyestuff extracted from minerals and plants, which is imported from Switzerland. The second round of dyeing is never allowed. The dyestuff and the products are regularly sent to Guangdong Province to examine their effect on the environment. Besides product-related measurements, Norlha also leads its employees in other social activities like tree planting or trash-container making for the village. All those actions help bring up the sense of environment protection in the Tibetans.

The ecologic environment of the Tibetan Plateau is more fragile than in other places. Once harmed, it is so hard to recover. With regards to this huge project of environment protection, the pure effort made by Norlha is far

from enough. The local government is making every effort for the protection in the aspects of grass plantation, prevention of rats and rabbits, allowance for the period of grazing prohibition, etc. The local natural environment has been massively improving with the joint effort of local Tibetans, Norlha and the government.

The changes in the aspects of local economic development, cultural communication, environment protection and living standards, the four major indicators to examine the effectiveness of a social design project, reflect the positive impact made by Norlha. It is an indispensable corporate social responsibility to balance the relations between economic development, culture, environment and people, rather than to just focus on the maximum profit.

Landscape of the Plateau



5. Retrospect and Outlook

According to artist and architect designer Marjetica Potrč, a project of social design will undergo four stages:

1. Listening to and talking with residents before making a definite plan.
2. Involving the community in the decision-making and design processes.
3. Involving the community in the construction process.
4. Transferring the responsibility for the developed project to the community in order to leave behind a sustainable work that benefits the community in the long term.

The development of Norlha accords with the four stages proposed by Marjetica. Before Norlha was set up, the founder Dechen had already lived in the local for years. She had acquired an insightful understanding of the problems in a nomadic life and sympathised with the inner requirements of the local Tibetans, their aspiration to new life. When the project of Norlha was in its embryo, the founders made a series of discussions with the local Tibetans, monasteries and villagers' committee so as to align the project with the values and beliefs of the local Tibetans overall and in details. The intention was to invite more Tibetans in the project and jointly construct a new life.

In China, the biggest developing country, there is great economic inequality between the southeast coast and the west, especially the Tibetan region. In recent years, at the advocacy of the government and NGOs an increasing number of projects of social design take place in the west. I myself have also taken part. Some of the projects failed in the necessary detailed research and practice in the preliminary stage, replacing the local people's real wish for community construction with the imagination of project founders or designers. Such design thinking runs against the intention of social design. It is important to listen to the thoughts of the locals and make communication and discussion

with multiple sides so as to meet the realistic local conditions and the inner requirements of the locals. That is where social design displays its value and where the essence of social design lies.

After the establishment of Norlha, every link in product manufacture and corporate management has the mark "local" on it: local raw materials, local employees and local economy improvement. Apparently, the aim of Norlha is not the maximum commercial interest. Rather, it intends to return the interest to the local based on local conditions and complete the community construction using the business mode. In this process changes have happened in local Tibetans on their identity. They now see themselves as the creators of Norlha instead of merely the manufacturers of products. Such identity and sense of belong motivate every employee and bring up the sense of community in the local. Every member identifies himself or herself as part of the community, the construction of which is exactly the outcome of the joint work of everyone.

In the growing stage of the social design project, the founder and designer should take the responsibility of not only creating valuable products, but also balancing the relations between economy, culture, environment and people. Norlha embodies its values of "Nature" and "Timeless" in every link of the process, from the collection of raw material, to the design and manufacture of products, and eventually to sales. The designers also need to adjust the developing direction and strategies up to date. Norlha's mode of development has boosted its successful transformation from a cooperative company of fashion brands to an independent original brand. There are also complicated issues that would require the designer to learn from and collaborate with the locals so as to find an appropriate solution, based on the exchange of different knowledges and backgrounds. It is therefore important that the designer should properly balance the relationship with the locals, that is, equality and trust, rather than "helping" and "being helped".

At last, the critical criteria for the success of a social design is sustainability. Simply put, the project is able to advance by the locals independently after the designer leaves. In the project of social design, therefore, the designer needs to collaborate with the locals to lay a consolidated foundation and create a project mode fit for sustainable development. Through the systematic training for the locals, Norlha has gradually established an improved system of production and management, with the majority of the work to be accomplished independently by the locals. Norlha is open to sharing its years of experience with the local government and other local companies.

In addition to the sustainable working mode, the change of the locals' views is another key factor for sustainable development. In consideration of cultural difference, the views of the local people are in no way to be taught with any textbook. The culture of views is a process of interfusion based on the local conditions. Based on the prerequisite of protecting traditional Tibetan culture and religious beliefs, Norlha has sowed the seeds of education valuation, gender equality, environment protection, etc. in the local soil. Those seeds are to grow into the engine for the development of Tibetan modernization.

The ten years of Norlha has combined the traditional Tibetan spinning craft with modern design ideas and created tons of exquisite products from yak khullu, opening a new channel connecting Tibet and the world, and at the same time constructing a bridge connecting an ordinary Tibetan family and the modern life. The Tibetans earn everlasting respect and happiness with their own hands in the development of Norlha. Dechen, the founder of the project, also finds home for her soul on this vast land. For the future of Norlha, this is the words from the heart of its founder Dechen: "When I first came to the village in 2004, I walked around and took some pictures of kids playing. And 10-15 years later, bunch of those kids are my employees. All these kids would have grown up with Norlha, so hopefully they can take over."

As a practical case of social design in the Tibetan region, Norlha has provided for us extravagant experience. Social design gets involved in society with design thinking and modes. It is supposed to propose agreeable solutions based on the realistic conditions of different communities and connect the community with people in it via design as the medium in order to achieve the overall sustainable development. Every designer has the responsibility to serve not merely the business, but more importantly, the more expansive social requirements: design for the sake of sustainable development. I hope that there will be increasingly more projects of social design, sowing its seeds in the soil in great need and growing more thriving fruits.



Yak on the plateau

Ritoma child

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4
Mu: 1 mu corresponding to 1/15 hectares, about 666.7 m².

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Yak butter: Butter made from the milk of the domesticated female yak, one of the staple food items of Tibetans in the plateau.

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Data from Bureau of Statistics of Hezuo City, 2005.

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11
Tibetan Empire: Tibet was unified as powerful empire from the 7th to 9th centuries AD, ruling an area considerably larger than the Tibetan Plateau, stretching to parts of East Asia, Central Asia and South Asia.

12
Songtsen Gampo: The 33rd Tibetan king and founder of the Tibetan Empire.

13
Khata: A traditional ceremonial scarf in Tibetan culture. It symbolizes purity and compassion and is presented with respect and blessings.

14
Thangka: The Tibetan Buddhist painting on the applique, usually depicting a Buddhist themed image.

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