

My Second Life in Tibet

AN UNLIKELY COLLABORATION SHOWS HOW ART CAN CROSS ALL BORDERS,
IN THE INTERESTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

BY ARAHMAIANI FEISAL



A young monk in Yushu, China, 2012. Photo courtesy Arahmaiani Feisal.

I never dreamed of visiting Tibet. If not for the 2010 earthquake in Yushu, I probably would never have visited the place where I met the Buddhist monks and lamas with whom I would then collaborate. Yet, as a conceptual artist with an approach that emphasizes process rather than product, creating works that are often dubbed “experimental,” it has become more common for me to work with disaster situations and minority or marginal communities, rather than with the art world.

Being Indonesian, brought up in a hybrid culture—Islam assimilated with earlier animism, Hinduism and Buddhism—I do not find it difficult to interact with other cultures or faiths. Living as a nomad over the last 28 years, moving to various cultures and countries, has obliged me to respect differences. So, since 2006, I have been working on the “Flag Project,” a long-term community-based art project already being implemented in Indonesia, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Japan, Thailand and China. This is what brought me to Yushu.

The “Flag Project” is designed to study and develop collective creativity. I implement an “open art system,” in which art is defined as broadly as possible, to break through rigid discourses and established values, engaging in democratic dialogue, but also taking a critical approach when needed. During this process, outcomes—artworks or other forms—are produced collectively, collaboratively or individually. Another aim is to create and maintain a network that enables

the exchange of ideas and experiences, or development in the form of collaborations.

In 2010, four years after beginning this project, I found myself stranded in a tiny remote village, situated around two and a half hours by car from Yushu, which historically was in the Kham region of Tibet but is now part of China’s Qinghai Province, from where three of Asia’s largest rivers—the Yangtze, the Mekong and the Yellow River—flow through China and Southeast Asia. I was courteously met there by around 500 Buddhist monks, several Geshes (Tibetan Buddhist “professors”) and lamas. Although they seemed taken aback at first by the unexpected visit of a female Indonesian artist, uninvited and not working for anyone except myself, there was evidently a rapport between us, and since that day we have been collaborating. On my first visit I could not stay there overnight, as the rules prohibit women from doing so, but by my second visit I was invited to live in the monastery.

Following interviews with Khadeng Lama, Geshe Lharampa Sonam Lobsang and monk Sonam Rinchen concerning the teachings of Buddha about the natural environment, I mustered the courage to offer suggestions to address the challenges facing the environment around the monastery. When I arrived I was in awe of the dramatic natural beauty of the place, but soon I was sad and disappointed because there was garbage everywhere, even in the small creeks that villagers use for their daily needs.

After only a few days I had already requested that the monks clean up the area’s

garbage! I nearly reduced Sonam Rinchen to tears from embarrassment. Of course this was not my intention, but I felt compelled to make that place clean, safe and comfortable.

However, this idea proved problematic. Initially, Sonam Rinchen suggested that lay people be paid to do it instead, because the revered position of monks in Tibetan society made it difficult for them to accept the idea of cleaning the garbage up themselves. But, I had my own argument: the need to awaken an individual consciousness and instill a sense of responsibility concerning the environment. The issue had yet to be resolved when I left, but two weeks later I received a text message saying that the monks would personally remove the garbage; they even sent photographs of themselves at work, from their mobile phones.

The monks also accepted my suggestion to plant trees, and at the beginning of spring, 60,000 pine trees, with some medicinal herbs and flowers, were planted across the surrounding slopes and valleys. Actually, this was nothing new: around 100 years ago Jamyang Lobsang Gyatso, the 13th Lab Rinpoche, planted poplar trees around Yushu and in the monastery grounds. Inside the complex there remains a kind of monument commemorating what was perhaps the first Tibetan “green movement.”

Ten months later, I was at last able to visit the area again, staying for one month. I was so happy to see that the monastery, village and creeks were free of garbage. A waste management system and recycling program had been implemented and the trees had begun to grow. We used the time we had together to share ideas and develop more programs: obliging monks to use cotton shopping bags and personal, reusable water bottles; an idea to cultivate more edible and medicinal plants; protecting rare plants and animals to safeguard the area’s biodiversity; and a book project featuring edible and medicinal plants, and traditional organic food recipes.

I dream that this village and monastery will serve as a pilot project, an information center for environmental issues on the Tibetan Plateau—which provides water for more than 2 billion people in Asia. Print and digital information, including audio and video, are urgently needed and will require distribution. Specific attention must also be given to carbon-free energy as the area develops. Indeed, the local government has already begun to introduce solar energy.

This region is crucial for global sustainability, yet 70 percent of the forests here have been felled and the glaciers and permafrost are melting extensively, causing floods and mudslides. If we believe that mutual dependency is a fact of life, that humans are a part of nature, we should bear the responsibility of conservation and sustainability, for future generations.