

Performing  
Tibetan Identities  
Photographic Portraits  
by Nyema Droma

**13 October 2018 - 30 May 2019**

Pitt Rivers Museum  
University of Oxford





## About the artist

Nyema Droma is a young Tibetan photographer and curator from Lhasa, in the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China. She developed her practice as a photographer at the London College of Fashion and has worked in both the UK and China. During 2018, she was 'visiting artist' at the Pitt Rivers Museum. This is her first exhibition in a major museum.

For 'Performing Tibetan Identities', Nyema photographed other young Tibetans, whether living in Europe as members of the Tibetan diaspora, or in Tibetan-speaking areas of China. Her pictures document the many things they share as global citizens and consumers of popular culture, as well the particularities of their Tibetan heritage. By producing double portraits of each person, in daily wear and 'traditional' clothing, Nyema alludes to the fluidity of identity formation and how it may be expressed in dress and objects, revealing the range of options for self-fashioning that are available to contemporary Tibetans.

During her visits to the Pitt Rivers Museum, Nyema studied the museum's collection of historic photographs of Tibet and created her own work in response to it. The collection features more than 5000 photographs created by British visitors to Tibet in the first half of the twentieth century and includes many studies of Tibetans, often framed according to the mode of 'ethnic type' photography that was first formulated in anthropological photography in the late nineteenth century. Among them are a set of glass plates portraying Tibetans living in Lhasa in the 1920s. Viewing the plates in both positive and negative formats was one of the inspirations behind the double portraits she subsequently created. When displayed in the museum, they articulate Nyema's critical interaction with the representation of Tibet in British museums and seek to disrupt the stereotyping of Tibetans by non-Tibetan photographers in the past.



Positive and negative versions of a glass plate from the Pitt Rivers Museum collection.  
Photographer: Charles Bell or Rabden Lepcha, Lhasa, 1920-1921





In addition to a display of photographs in the Long Gallery, this exhibition also presents Nyema's work in a variety of innovative ways that refer to the context of their creation, including filmed interviews with those she photographed. In them, her subjects express a diverse range of responses to questions about their identity and sense of belonging.

***“There is no way to define Tibetan identity, or any ethnic identity for that matter.”***

**Thupten Kelsang, Student, Oxford, UK**

***“Being a Tibetan is about culture: a way of living, a language, a custom.”***

**Karma Ermchi (AKA Shapaley),  
Doctor and Musician, Zurich, Switzerland**

Digital displays are used for the first time in the main galleries of the Pitt Rivers to make examples of the material Nyema studied in the collections accessible to museum visitors. Large scale photographs, with portraits of the same subject on each side, are suspended as banners in the heart of the museum in the style of a contemporary art installation but also emulating the prayer flags hung at Buddhist sites across the Tibetan-speaking world.





By inserting Nyema's pictures amongst the thousands of objects from all over the world that have filled the museum since the late nineteenth century, this installation acts as a commentary on a historic ethnographic museum. It is also designed to acknowledge the dynamism and modernity of Tibetan culture and to inject the presence, creativity and agency of the current generation of Tibetans, wherever they may reside.

This exhibition is the result of a collaboration between Nyema Droma and Clare Harris, Curator for Asian Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum and Professor in the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford.

**For further information about Nyema Droma's work and the history of how foreigners photographed Tibet and Tibetans see Clare Harris, *Photography and Tibet*, Reaktion Books, 2016.**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With special thanks to: Nyema Droma and all the participants in her photographic project, Thupten Kelsang, Katherine Clough, the Director and staff of the Pitt Rivers Museum, the Friends of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Marie Laure Aris, Philip and Jeannie Millward and other generous donors.



UNIVERSITY OF  
**OXFORD**



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



**Performing  
Tibetan Identities**  
Photographic Portraits  
by Nyema Droma

**13 October 2018 - 30 May 2019**

Pitt Rivers Museum  
University of Oxford

