

A Journey to the Sacred Land of Larung Gar, Kham (Tibet)

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One of the Largest Buddhist Institutes in the World



All photos by Sabina Ragaini

It's afternoon and the wind whips around the hill sacred to Dorje Legpa that rises towards a clear sky dotted with light clouds. We are at more than 4000m above sea level: Serthar County, Kham, East Tibet, in what is now the province of Sichuan (People's Republic of China). February. The icy air moves the many prayer flags whose bright colors break the aridity of the land, dry and hard on this side of the hill. From time to time we have to stop to catch our breath and admire the magnificent scenery in the clear light, the river below completely frozen, the dust rising from the little-used road. Up on the pass a few pilgrims have placed bottles full of stones in the midst of many *lungta*, a new way of paying tribute. On the other side of the hill the natural scenery changes, all at once light green on the hills, on the slopes. This changing color of the land in Tibet is always

incredible.

Along the trail that is almost completely frozen at the base of the hill, the prayer wheels are turning and the images of Padmasambhava, Vajrasattva and, above all, Dorje Legpa appear in all their power. The hill is also sacred to the Buddha of Medicine; in certain niches along the path you can collect a little earth with medicinal properties.

The monk replies politely to our questions – he is and will be an extraordinary guide for a unique journey to a corner of the world that is unimaginable in today's troubled reality. Thanks to him, it will be possible to make a real pilgrimage to temples, monasteries and the surrounding places that are permeated with an atmosphere of profound sacredness.



A few kilometers from the high hill appears the Buddhist center of Larung Gar, one of the largest and most influential centers for the study of Tibetan Buddhism in the world and particularly known for practicing Dzogchen. A myriad of tiny low houses, in dark brown wood or brick, topped with painted red roofs. Seen from afar the center looks like a nest of termites, a disorderly cluster of

small buildings from which a few large temples jut out in its long and troubled history.

Wumin Foyuan, in Chinese the Buddhist Institute of the Five Sciences, is an academy founded in 1980 in an uninhabited valley by Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, an eminent lama of the Nyingma tradition, *tulku* of the great Terchen Lerab Lingpa, one of the masters of the thirteenth Dalai Lama. A highly respected Master dedicated to spreading the Dharma, Jigme Phuntsok was best known as Choje, lord of the Dharma. To give new life to Buddhism and benefit sentient beings after the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Choje founded this nonsectarian center, in which all schools of Buddhism could be represented and where devotees could come to study and meditate, even though attention was increasingly shifted towards the Nyingma school. Here the highest level of doctrinal preparation for a monk could, and still can be, achieved, rising to the title of *kenpo*. The site was chosen because for centuries it had been sacred to the Vajrayana. The autobiography of the great *terton* Terchen Lerab Lingpa, who visited the valley in 1880, describes the place as “a hermitage for liberation through the great body of light”, residence in the past to thirteen practitioners who obtained the “rainbow body.”



A prophecy of the first Dodrupchen Rinpoche, a great *siddha* who lived in the eighteenth century, reads: “In the Danjian Ala Mutian Larung valley, Guru Rinpoche will appear as Jigme ... His teachings of Sutra and Tantra will shine like the illuminating sun and his activities to benefit beings will be able to hold up the heavens and sustain the earth. He will draw sentient beings from the ten directions to lead them on the path of liberation ... “.

After meeting many important representatives of Buddhism, in the 90s, Jigme Phuntsok was invited to India by the fourteenth Dalai Lama to receive and give teachings to His Holiness. In the following years he devoted himself more and more intensely to teaching and was able to bring many disciples up to the level of Kenpo.

The early part of the twenty-first century was terribly tragic for Larung Gar due to the violent campaigns directed against the free religious expression of the monks and nuns who lived there. The central government ordered all the students to leave the center and when they refused to leave their lives as practitioners to return to their families, most of the Academy, along with all the countless small houses and monasteries, was razed to the ground. Notwithstanding, teachers and students resolved never to leave the place and, with the help of many practitioners, the center rose again, bigger than before, with the approval of local government less opposed to the *dharma*.



When Jigme Phuntsok died in 2004 following complications after a heart operation at a hospital in Chengdu, China, the Academy had more than 300 *kenpo* who, by mutual agreement with the students and attendants of Larung Gar, decided not to interrupt the teaching of the texts of the Master and Buddhist doctrine, thus ensuring the Academy a life that is still surprising in its intensity

and authenticity.

Built with the support of a hundred or so students, Larung Gar has incredibly expanded with the passing years. The fame of the Academy, the depth and the high level of the teachings that are offered has driven thousands of Tibetans to go there. The center was, and is mainly directed to monks and nuns, although there is the possibility for some ordained lay students to reside.

Today there are more than ten thousand students, with the peculiarity that more than half are women. In addition, about a third of them are Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore as well as from other provinces of the People's Republic of China. It seems that in 1987 it was Choje's visit to Wutaishan, the sacred mountain of the five peaks dedicated to Manjushri with more than sixty Buddhist temples in Shanxi Province, north China, that made it known to Chinese Buddhists some of whom followed him to the arid land of Kham, regardless of the prohibitive natural conditions of the center, located at over 4000 meters, with cold winters and Spartan accommodation. Today it is the Chinese monks who show their endless admiration for Tibetan practitioners, for their good karma as custodians of the teaching and for the way they express themselves with a humility worthy of being emulated.

Life within this huge "village" is dictated by the rhythms of the lessons that are held every day, morning and afternoon, divided into different classes, by study, by moments devoted to debate and, of course, by practices, some daily, other as scheduled. Classes for Tibetan monks and nuns are in the Tibetan language while those for Chinese monks and nuns are in Chinese Mandarin. Accommodation for men and women are strictly separated, as are the monasteries that house male and female students.

For decades Larung Gar has been known for the practice of *phowa* that, while the center was directed by Jigme Phuntsok, was done every day after his lesson. In those days when someone died in the area surrounding the Gar, the body was brought to the center for the final ritual. Even today, almost every day, on a hill not far away, in a building whose architecture is curiously very Chinese, sky funerals take place with the dismemberment of the corpse of the deceased.

It is a day with a clear blue sky when my monk-guide decides to take me to observe the ritual. The families of the dead, some practitioners and some people who are just curious stand near the hill. The "butchers" perform their duties with detachment and precision on three bodies while, high up, along the ridge of the high ground, hundreds of vultures line up patiently and in an orderly way.

Once the butchers finish their task, they move away from the place of dismemberment. As if they had received a command, the vultures swoop down from the hill, some in flight others gliding with their talons sweeping the ground until they throw themselves on their meal. We can see nothing but the beating of wings and the beaks rising and falling, listening to the screeching of the birds. In a small cave not far away, we can hear the beat of the *damaru* of the person officiating. Another *chodpa* shortly arrives, *kangling* in one hand, in the other a *damaru* that is still covered. With his

dark skin, slow gestures, he uncovers the *damaru* and begins to turn it with a rhythm accompanying the recitation of the practice. It is a sound that brings some peace.



In the highest part of Larung Gar, the Gyutrul or Portentous Temple opened in 1995, stands out for its beauty and bright colors. It has twenty-two chapels dedicated to divinities belonging to different schools. At its feet is the *kora* where starting at dawn, pilgrims follow one another turning the great prayer wheels and running their fingers over their *malas* in continuous *mantra* recitation.

At this time of year, the days before and during Losar, the Tibetan New Year, they are particularly numerous. Of all ages and backgrounds, they have faced long arduous journeys to reach this place which is more than fifteen hours of travel from the nearest large city along a rough road because of bad weather. Even before dawn on the day of Losar the center echoes with the *mantras* recited in the monasteries. Some loudspeakers carry the sound as the sun slowly rises from behind the mountains that surround the town.

In the central hall of the *gonpa* of the *ani*, nuns huddle side by side concentrated on the reading of

the texts. The space is large and there are several thousand women of very different ages: older women with skin deeply marked by their years sitting close to young girls wearing small nuns robes that the older sisters have helped to fix. The *gonpa* has three floors, each of which has side rooms off the corridor that runs along the open central quadrangle. From the top we can admire the central hall on the ground floor where we hear the beat of the big drum. In every corner small prayer wheels are turning. Some of the rooms seem to be reserved for small groups of young students, including some male children. This year the rituals for Losar are headed by the Abbess of Ani Gompa and for this reason the female temple is the most crowded.



In the *gonpa* of the male monastery the monks are less numerous, although the room here is very full. The monks are distinguished by their yellow or reddish-purple robes. They are sitting in rows, marking the reading of the texts with a regular rhythm, then, at certain times they change their positions, turning to the side, or turning their backs on the row in front of him. Even here the recitation of the texts continues throughout the day. In the other two *gonpas* the Chinese monks and nuns are reciting.

The texts at Larung Gar are often written in two languages, the original texts in Tibetan letters which are followed on the lower part of the page by Chinese characters that are the phonetic

transcription in Chinese of the pronunciation of the practice in Tibetan.

Chinese is, against all expectations, the lingua franca, as is English with us, because no one here, in my experience, speaks a Western language. Even here the Tibetans study Chinese in order not to be isolated socially and economically from the world around them beyond the mountain, while the Chinese study Tibetan as a sacred language, with great difficulty due to the radical difference of pronunciation and writing. A linguistic coexistence that is amazing but at the same time calming in a situation that is so unique, for the ease with which festivities can be celebrated bidding farewell to the Tibetan year of the horse and welcoming that of the sheep.

Out of monasteries the streets are crowded, monks and nuns moving hurriedly through the narrow alleys between the houses as they move from one place to another. In some corners and in areas where the sun never strikes ice makes every passerby step carefully; ice often makes it dangerous simply to visit the public baths, used by a great many students who do not have toilets in their houses and also by pilgrims living in the guest house where the bathrooms are out of order because all the pipes are frozen.





In the few squares and courtyards in front of the temples lay Tibetans dressed elegantly in their best clothes stand in groups: the girls look like princesses, the young men like knights and the women queens. The semi-precious stones in their rings enhanced by time, embedded in their

earrings or forming great necklaces. After visiting the temple, some will go up to the *kora* around the Portentous Temple or to a space below prepared for prostrations, while others will go down to the festivities in the family homes built outside Larung Gar, along the road leading to the town of Serthar, in whose main square the wheel of the dharma is prominently placed on the top of a column.

It is a quiet Losar in this corner of the world, perhaps a special Losar, not disturbed by external factors.

At Larung Gar the rituals continue in the temples as the sky darkens and night falls.

Text and photos by Sabina Ragaini