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## Tibetan Tribute: Dirt Was Never This Symbolic

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*Part of the 'Bringing Tibet Home' film team following NY screening (l-r): Joel Diamond, co-composer; Tenzing Rigdol, artist; Diana Takata, associate producer; Don Thompson, associate producer; and Tenzin Tsetan Choklay, director.*

*Photo: Larry Jaffee*

A brilliant [film](#) depicting the plight of Tibetans in exile, *Bringing Tibet Home* captures the essence of political protest, conceptual art and family honour.

The feature-length documentary received its US East Coast premiere 31 July at the Asian American International Film Festival in Manhattan and a SRO house. A UK screening is planned for later this year.

At the film's core is its defiance in face of past Chinese oppression, and the possibility of repercussions resulting from [physically moving 20,000 kilos](#) (22 tons) of soil from Shigatse, Tibet to Dharamsala, India, where more than 100,000 Tibetans live in exile, including the Dalai Lama, whom Beijing continues to view as a thorn in its side.

Tenzing Rigdol, a 32-year-old Tibetan artist living in New York, came up with the idea for the soil project as a way to pay tribute to his father who had hoped to return to his homeland of Tibet before he died. When it became apparent that he was too ill to attempt such a trip, his son figured out a way to bring Tibet to all those who shared a similar forced dislocation.

Rigdol's parents both fled Tibet after the Chinese government's occupation in 1959, initially moving to Nepal (where the artist was born in 1982), and then India; the family received political asylum in 2002 from the US government. Rigdol's mother attended the New York screening; his dad died a few years ago.

Rigdol enlisted childhood friend, filmmaker Tenzin Tsetan Choklay, also of Tibetan heritage, living in New York, to visually chronicle the project. They first met when they were 7 years old, and became reacquainted in 2009 when Choklay moved to New York.

Rigdol's personal reason for wanting to see the project through weighs as heavily as the film's political statement, embodied by the inclusion of news footage of someone burning to death, as we learn that there have been more than 100 self-immolations by Tibetan monks to protest China's disallowance of their culture.



*Bringing Back Tibet's* strong narrative is aided by two camera-friendly characters, the first being Rigdol's childhood friend still living in India, Topten Tsering, who, with a glint of mischievousness, agrees to help any way he can, fully understanding the implications of what they're taking on (i.e., potential arrest, etc.).

Exhibiting deadpan humour, the unflappable Tsering figures out the logistics of getting and transporting the soil, as he negotiates over a mobile phone with unseen contacts in Tibet. Meanwhile, Rigdol stoically deals with various setbacks, and wonders to himself if his soil project may be doomed and all the prior work, time and money in vain.

Seeking spiritual guidance, the artist's jovial uncle, the other pivotal character providing comic relief, assures him he will be successful in his quest, despite the mounting adversity, such as having to trust unknown intermediaries who say it's too dangerous for the truck carrying the soil to attempt crossing the bridge into India without being found out by the Chinese authorities.

As if divine intervention suddenly manifests, Choklay's camera captures bags of soil zooming across a zip line that apparently has been used to carry other clandestine items. Rigdol presents a sample of the dirt to an overjoyed Dalai Lama, who blesses the project and writes with his index finger in the soil the equivalent of "Tibet" in their native language. In the film, the Dalai Lama also expresses hope for diplomacy and understanding with the Chinese government, striking a universal chord that as easily applies to the current Israeli/Palestinian conflict.



*Tenzing Rigdol working on the Tibetan soil installation*

*Bringing Back Tibet* culminates with the public mounting of the installation in India, as innocent school-age children sing how they study hard. Out of the mouths of babes, indeed. The song turns into a chant for Tibetan freedom and unity.

While much of the film is situated indoors as Rigdol and Topten plot their next moves, Rigdol's art, as well as the picturesque landscapes of Tibet, Nepal and India all practically deserve character status. Two Western collaborators, co-composer Joel Diamond, and editor Bernadine Colish, make significant contributions to Choklay's vision.

Diamond's soundtrack supports musically the proceedings as things get intense to moments of hopefulness that the soil will make it safely to India. Not surprisingly, Diamond's past credits include *Milarepa* (2006) and *Brilliant Moon: Glimpses of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche* (2010), films about a legendary Tibetan priest and a Buddhist teacher, respectively. *Bringing Back Tibet* co-composer Tenzing Choegyal, a Tibetan refugee who also grew up in Dharamsala and currently plays and composes music from Australia, provides traditional touches when the crew visits a village in Nepal.

Rigdol's art is represented by the London gallery [Rossi & Rossi](#), and his work has been exhibited throughout the world. *Bringing Back Tibet* was [funded in part](#) by a Kickstarter campaign.

In January, *Bringing Tibet Home* won the Young European Jury Award (Prix du Jury de Jeunes Européens) at the 27th edition of FIPA – International Festival of Audiovisual Programs (The International Festival of Audiovisual Programmes) in Biarritz, France.