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Reaffirmation of "Ritual Cosmos": Tibetan Perceptions of Landscape and Socio-Economic Development in Southwest China

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feature ARTICLE

Reaffirmation of "Ritual Cosmos": Tibetan Perceptions of Landscape and Socio-Economic Development in Southwest China

—Tyler Denison

In 2002, the Chinese government decided to officially change the name of the county of Zhongdian to "Shangri-La." By attracting people with the amazing biodiversity and natural beauty of the region and its similarities to (and supposed inspiration for) the Shangri-La of James Hilton's 1933 novel Lost Horizon, the government has successfully boosted the local economy through tourism (1). As a result, tourism in neighboring Deqin county, part of the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the northwestern corner of China's Yunnan Province, also greatly increased, bringing ever larger numbers of Chinese and foreign tourists to see the natural beauty and traditional culture of the region.

Fig. 1 – The Xidang village

My research focused on Tibetan perceptions of a religious landscape in light of new socio-economic realities brought on by the resulting modernization and globalization. As an increasing number of foreign and domestic tourists flood the area, Chinese and Western conservation organizations have sought to ensure that tourism does not damage the environment. These developments have brought new social realities and economic opportunities to the Deqin Tibetans, bringing them in closer contact with the rest of China and the rest of the world (2). Yet how have such socio-economic developments changed these Tibetans' perception of the connection between their environment and their religion, Buddhism?

My methodology incorporated anthropological fieldwork and research of previous scholarship. I placed paramount importance on gaining an understanding of the specific beliefs and stories of the Deqin Tibetans, through informal interviews and observation while living with families in the villages of Yubeng, Xidang, Mingyong, and the town of Deqin. (Fig. 1) I was unable to arrange a translator, so all my communication with the locals was in Chinese (Mandarin, the official language of China), which made some conversations very difficult, but not impossible. At times, visiting Chinese tourists would assist in conversation, their more standard Mandarin making things easier. I also interviewed members of The Nature Conservancy, a non-governmental organization doing work in the area, and relied on secondary accounts from journal articles, monographs, and

ethnographies for help in analysis and interpretation. Through this research, I discovered that in Northwest Yunnan, the Tibetan religious perceptions of landscape are not disappearing with increased Western and Chinese influences. Yet, at the same time, these perceptions are not unchanged. Instead, the beliefs have gained increasing importance in everyday life, as the Tibetans have adapted to the new developments, reevaluating and reaffirming their belief in the "ritual cosmos." This study then has significance for further research, as Tibetan perceptions can be seen as part of a dynamic cultural process, rather than a static reality (3, 4).

The Landscape as a Ritual Cosmos

The Deqin Tibetan perceptions of landscape are tied to the greater Tibetan worldview of the ritual cosmos, or "sacred geography," in which every part of the natural environment is alive with various types of spirits and deities (5). These beings must be interacted with, respected, and appeased in everyday life, as part of a mutual, obligatory relationship (6). If humans regularly give offerings to the deities and do not commit transgressions against the natural world, then the spirits and deities will help them gain material benefits, such as fertility, productive harvests, monetary success, or good health (5, 6). In anthropological terms, "Transgressions, whether inadvertent or intentional…can upset the sensitive and often capricious local deities of nature who might cause, for example, environmental irregularities, illness and lowered fertility" (6). As was explained to me by a visiting lama (a high spiritual teacher in Tibetan Buddhism) in Xidang village, the wrongdoer is not always the only one punished: "Sometimes the anger of a spirit affects a whole village, or just someone who is unlucky."

Despite the risk of angering the deities, religious authorities realized that humans could not survive without some sort of land exploitation and building. Thus, the *rigua*, or "sealing the mountain," line was developed: a physical boundary between the human-inhabited lands and the spirit world, maintained by lamas and enforced by local village chiefs. The locals explained to me that many normal human activities are considered profane and are forbidden on the sacred side of the line. These activities include the harvesting of mushrooms or herbs, hunting or killing of any kind, yak or cow grazing, the cutting down of trees, and the building of structures. Even on the human side of the rigua line, spirits inhabit every part of the natural world, and must be appeased and convinced to coexist with humans, or forced to coexist, which can only be done with the intervention of a lama.

Fig. 2 - Kawa Karpo, 6,740 meters (22,107 feet), one of the eight guardian deities of Tibetan Buddhism

Central to the belief in the rigua line, and in the ritual cosmos as a whole, are the deities that inhabit the surrounding mountains. According to the prominent Tibet scholar Toni Huber, "mountains have, without a doubt, been the most venerated and culturally significant feature of the Tibetan landscape throughout space and time" (7). The spirits that inhabit mountains are usually the most powerful in the area, and thus the rigua lines are set in relation to the mountain deities and are found at a certain elevation on the mountainside. For

example, in Yubeng, the rigua line is about a two-hour hike uphill from the village, at about 3,400 meters (11,152 feet) in elevation.

The most important of these mountains are the néri, or "mountain abodes." As Huber states, "Although a great many mountains throughout Tibetan areas are considered to have resident deities," there are only eight néri mountains in the entire Tibetan cultural area.* One of these is néri Kawa Karpo, which is located in Deqin County on the border with Tibet. (Fig. 2) Kawa Karpo, along with the other néri, "are considered the places of residence and activity of certain important…'defenders of Buddhist religion,' a class of [protector] deities that constitute a large section of the rich Tibetan pantheon" (7).

**By Tibetan Cultural Area I refer to the regions which Tibetans inhabit and have influenced (to a great extent) culturally. This includes the Tibetan Autonomous Region (political Tibet, what most Westerners picture when they think of Tibet), and areas of the Western provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan in China; and the countries of Bhutan, Nepal, and parts of India.*

A villager in Lower Yubeng told me the following story of how Kawa Karpo became a protector deity of the Deqin area:

> Néri Kawa Karpo was once a horrible being with nine heads and eighteen bodies. He terrorized many people and destroyed those who stood against him. One day a special lama defeated Kawa Karpo, cutting off all his heads but one and all of his bodies but one. Kawa Karpo was humiliated, and vowed to change his ways. The Buddha [Sakyamuni] was touched with compassion when he heard of Kawa Karpo's desire to abandon evil. He took Kawa Karpo as a disciple, and Kawa Karpo studied Buddhism for many years. The Buddha gave Kawa Karpo an army and told him to walk through Tibet in search of an area in need of protection. After years of travel, he came to Deqin, and assumed the form of a mountain.

According to this story, Kawa Karpo's wife, children, uncle, and army followed him and also assumed mountain forms, making up the entire range of thirteen snow-covered peaks and several lesser peaks that tower above the Deqin area. (Fig. 3)

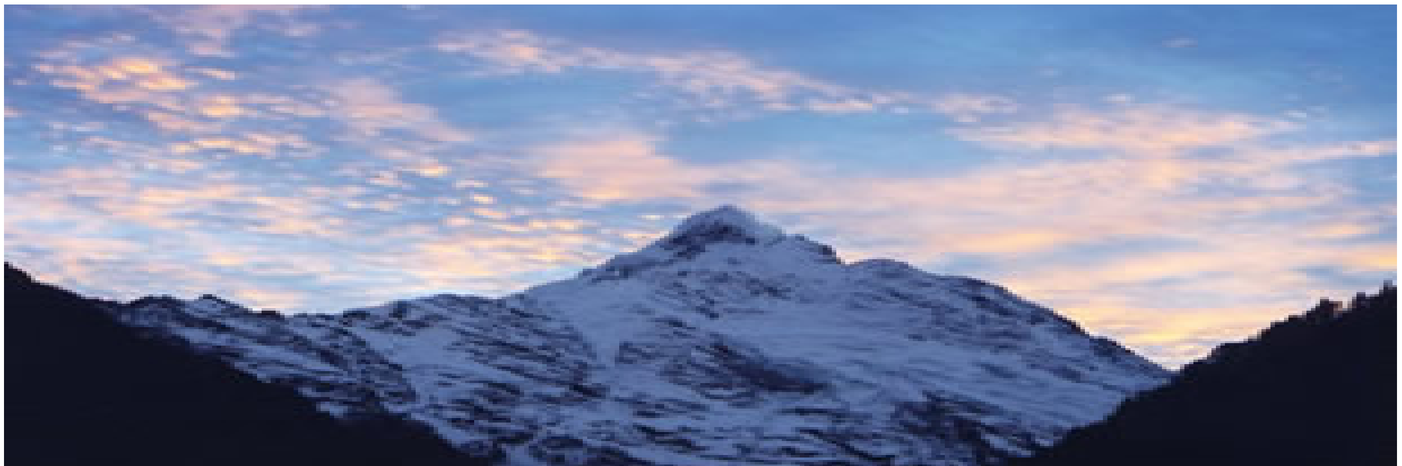

Fig. 3 - Miancimu, Kawa Karpo's majestic wife

As a néri, Kawa Karpo is one of the most important pan-Tibetan Buddhist sacred sites, making it a very important pilgrimage site. Every autumn to early winter, thousands of pilgrims from all over cultural Tibet travel to Kawa Karpo to show respect for the deity. Kawa Karpo holds specific importance not only in the entire Tibetan worldview, but also in how the local Tibetans conceptualize their landscape. The snowy mountains of Kawa Karpo and his followers dominate the Deqin landscape as a physical representation of the deity and his power. The locals are aware of this supernatural presence, and they understand that, in their everyday lives, they must maintain a good relationship with the spirits that inhabit their world, especially Kawa Karpo. Their belief in Kawa Karpo, and the importance they place on him in the ritual cosmos, have greatly shaped how they perceive the increasing number of outside visitors and changing socio-economic realities. (Fig. 4)

Fig. 4 - Buddhist stupa, a spiritual monument, with Kawa Karpo in the background

Socio-economic Change and the Ritual Cosmos

While conducting my research, I couldn't help but notice the number of visitors, either pilgrims or tourists, to this seemingly remote area. When I first visited in November 2003, there were hundreds of pilgrims from all over cultural Tibet coming to see the sacred sites every day. These pilgrims either follow the outer pilgrimage path that circumambulates the mountains, or the inner path that visits the sacred waterfall outside of Lower Yubeng village and the temples located under the Mingyong glacier that tumbles down the side of Kawa Karpo, above Mingyong village.

During my summer 2004 visit, not many pilgrims came to see the sacred sites, but there were many Chinese and foreign tourists visiting the area. The villagers explained to me that during the summer, Tibetans are too busy harvesting crops, and during the late autumn when the fields are dry, there is more time to go on pilgrimage. As I noticed, the local villagers were busy all summer long collecting medicinal herbs and mushrooms. These items are sold to the market in the town of Deqin, then to bigger markets in the provincial capitol of Kunming, and eventually in larger cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, or Hong Kong. (Fig. 5)

Despite some economic stability from mushroom and herb cultivation, the residents of Diqing prefecture are among the poorest in China, with more than 60% of inhabitants living below China's poverty line of US $70 a year (8). The government and the locals are hoping that tourism will bring a needed boost to the economy. Presently, many villagers of Yubeng, Mingyong, and Xidang run guesthouses (spare rooms they build on their homes) and guide tourists to view the sacred sites. The guesthouses are built with the help of The Nature Conservancy, which has been promoting sustainable eco-tourism that coincides with local beliefs in the sacred geography. The locals welcome the idea, and have been turning their homes into guesthouses at an increasing rate. For example, in 2002 there was only one guesthouse in Upper and Lower Yubeng combined. As my informants explained to me, at the beginning of 2003 there were fifteen guesthouses; by the end of the year

there were thirty. In some cases families have even decided to split up and live in different homes, in order to run separate guesthouses and make more money. As a result, there are clear economic improvements, as villagers took great pride showing me the televisions, radios and other appliances that they were able to buy with the added income.

Fig. 5 - Mushrooms, an important source of income for the Tibetans, for sale in a Deqin market.

However, the socio-economic influence of the new cross-cultural contact has not diminished the religious importance of landscape and, in fact, has helped reassert its importance. Tibetans I spoke with described their happiness with the increased visitors to the area, as long as the tourists respect the landscape and their beliefs. For example, one group of tourists that came to Yubeng while I was there visited the sacred waterfall, and then wanted to visit a small, glacial lake that is situated under the mountain believed to be Kawa Karpo's uncle. It was raining , and the locals explained that Kawa Karpo was angry that outsiders had camped at the lake the previous year. The rain, their guide explained, was a sign to the visitors that they should not visit the lake at that time.

Moreover, since the turn of the twentieth century there have been several attempts by Chinese and foreign mountaineers to climb Kawa Karpo, none of which have been successful. The most tragic of these attempts was in 1991, when a joint Sino-Japanese team of seventeen climbers perished. The failed attempts, the locals explained, reasserted the god's power over even outside powers, as he was angry at the attempts to be conquered.

Another reassertion of the Tibetans' continuing identity with the landscape has come through the pilgrimage itself. Modernization has brought an increasing number of pilgrims, traveling by road and air, many of which have never made the pilgrimage before. The locals explained to me that the tourists coming to the area are also, in a way, pilgrims. One man, who works as a guide in Yubeng, eloquently stated his understanding of the changes:

> We bring the Chinese and outsiders [*waiguoren* in Chinese] to see the sacred sites, and they see what is important to us. Yes, making money is important, but I feel that by bringing people to see Kawa Karpo, I am also becoming closer to him [Kawa Karpo], and that is very important.

Reaffirmation of the Ritual Cosmos

Viewing landscape as a dynamic process shows the need to further redefine what is considered "traditional" Tibetan society. Westerners popularly perceive Tibetans before the 1950 "liberation" by China "as a happy, peaceful people devoted to the practice of Buddhism, whose remote and ecologically enlightened land, ruled by a god-king, was invaded by the forces of evil" (9). Moreover, the Western view has been bolstered by Tibetans-in-exile, recalling memories of their homeland to call attention to their plight (10, 11).

Rather than finding Tibetan tradition being destroyed by Chinese rule and the influx of people, goods and ideas from the modern world, I witnessed firsthand the importance of Kawa Karpo and the ritual cosmos in the lives of the Tibetans of Deqin county: it has not been diminished. Tibetans' enduring perception of the landscape as a ritual cosmos cannot be termed a static reality of tradition, but more a dynamic cultural process, as they are continually renegotiating and redefining their beliefs in light of new social and economic realities (4).

The various ways that modernity takes shape in specific contexts show that there are multiple issues that "problematize a host of previously assumed dichotomies, including those between tradition and modernity, between the West and the rest, and between the local and the global (levels)" (2, 12). As globalization increases, the world does, in a sense, become increasingly connected and similar; however, globalization does not affect a Deqin Tibetan village in exactly the same way a town in another part of China, or the rest of the world, may be affected (13). Cultural processes, such as landscape and modernization, need to be examined and understood more specifically in their own contexts as well as in relationship to others, without tending toward the broad dichotomies of "modernity" and "tradition." I am hopeful that my study will further this discussion.

I would like to thank the villagers and townspeople of Deqin county, the Nature Conservancy, and the Chinese and foreign tourists I met during the course of my research. I would also like to thank the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) and donors for the generous Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) award that allowed me to conduct this research project. In addition, my research mentor professor Lu Yan has been an invaluable source of guidance and encouragement, academically and personally, and I cannot thank her enough. Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends, whose support has been undying.

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Author Bio

***Tyler Denison** is no stranger to new places. A current resident of Epsom, New Hampshire, Tyler lived in Washington and Arizona before his travels took him to China in the fall of 2003. The exposure to this diversity of peoples and places has given Tyler a distinct curiosity about "the human condition: who we are, what we believe, how we interact, how we see the world, what we did in the past, and what we may do in the future." Though it was most satisfying for Tyler to get to know the Tibetans of the Deqin area and "how they live their lives and understand the world around them," he felt quite limited, as many researchers do, by the time constraints. Ideally, he would spend up to two years in China conducting research, but his many other interests and obligations do not make it easy. "I want to eventually go to graduate school and later be a professor, but also continue with rock climbing, photography, and making music as much as I can." But above all, this soon-to-be graduate of the University of New Hampshire (Spring 2006) wants to use his degrees in history and anthropology (with an Asian studies minor) "just to be happy and keep learning." Tyler hopes that his research will interest readers, and "provide insight into the reality of life for one group of Tibetans in China, as there are a lot of misinformed stereotypes that are not always valid."*

Mentor Bio

*Dr. **Lu Yan**, a native of Shanghai, is currently an associate professor of history at the University of New Hampshire. Her primary academic focus is modern Chinese history, "especially transformation of Chinese culture and society, particularly Chinese-Japanese relations and Hong Kong as a global city and its influence on the mainland." Working with Tyler was an interesting process for Dr. Lu because of his "cross-disciplinary work on a subject that's just caught historians' attention in the recent decade or so." She finds his observations "original and refreshing, giving us insight to the complex interactions between the Tibetans' local place, Western influence, and the market force unleashed during China's reform years." Dr. Lu was most impressed with Tyler's perseverance in working with extremely difficult subject matter (for a non-native speaker of either Tibetan or Mandarin) and in conducting field research in a distant land. When Dr. Lu is not hiking in the great New Hampshire forests or drinking tea and chatting with friends, she is planning new academic experiences for her students. She is hoping to make the class "Modern China through Film" a permanent offering in the University curriculum and to introduce a new course on "East Asian Civilization."*