

Fall 2005

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Recommended Citation

Lanier, Frazer, "The Role of Tibetan Buddhism and Culture in Sustainable Development (A Case Study of Yubeng Village)" (2005). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 418.
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The Role of Tibetan Buddhism and Culture in Sustainable Development

(A case study of Yubeng Village)

By Frazer Lanier

December 6, 2005

SIT Fall 2005

Advisor: Ma Jianzhong, Meili program manager for TNC

During a lecture by Li Bo, of CBIK (the Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge a Chinese NGO), I was given a glimpse into the role that culture plays within poverty alleviation and environmental conservation. While poverty alleviation aims to develop community economies, this goal is usually seen as being in conflict with environmental conservation because it requires the use of environmental resources. This is a common misperception. According to Gou Jing's article *Gateway between Culture and Nature*, "man's touch bestows nature with culture"

(Guo Jing 12). The interaction between nature and humans is the foundation for culture and the point that transforms nature from meaningless to meaningful, simultaneously creating the circumstances for exploitation and reverence (12). This seemed to be the holistic key that could bring the two conflicting goals together harmoniously. Although I had a feeling that the empowerment and preservation of traditional culture could give synergy to poverty alleviation and environmental protection, I didn't understand why, and the concept seemed very ethereal and hypothetical. I decided I would delve into the question by researching what seemed to be the most obvious correlation between culture and environmental protection: peoples' traditional spiritual connection to their environment.

After reading through projects already undertaken by previous SIT students I decided the perfect location for my research would be the Meili Snow Mountain range in the Diqing Tibetan autonomous prefecture of northwest Yunnan province. The American based NGO The Nature Conservancy has been working in the area for 5 years and heavily promotes the relationship between its environmental conservation work and Tibetan Buddhist notions of the sacred, as a major factor that influences the success of its program. After a bit of research Yubeng village appeared to be the ideal location. Yubeng is a remote town, which is considered the central village of the inner pilgrimage route of Mt. Kawagebo, one of the most important pilgrimages for Tibetans. Yubeng has been a major focus of The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) work in the area because of its potential for successful ecologically friendly development due to its rich culture religious beliefs, potential for ecotourism, lack of infrastructure, amazing biodiversity due to its remoteness and wide range of ecosystems, and the threat of unmanaged and harmful development looming in the near future.

The importance of the Meili range

The Meili Snow Mountain range is part of TNC's "Three Gorge" project, which is currently attempting to preserve the environmental and cultural heritage of the area in close collaboration with the Chinese government. The area is located on the southern border of the Tibetan Autonomous region, in the very north western corner of Yunnan province. The area was historically Tibetan, however when the Chinese took over Tibet in 1951 they divided it geographically. Thus much of historical Tibet is now in Yunnan, Sichuan, and Gansu provinces.

According to Ma Jianzhong, the Meili project manager and an ethnic Tibetan from Zhongdian, TNC's interest in the area originally stemmed from its world class geography and ecology. Through the area flow four of Asia's mightiest rivers, the Salween, The Irawady, the Yangtze, and the Mekong, all within 50 kilometers of each other. The mountains rising from the deep gorges were thrust upward by the Indian subcontinent, and are the massive foothills of the Himalayans. This drastic environment creates an amazing variety of ecosystems, from subtropical to alpine and ranging substantially in the amount of annual precipitation from the bottom to the top of any one gorge, as well as from one gorge to another. This gives rise to vast biodiversity throughout the region (Ma). The Meili range rises to 6740 meters at Mountain Kawagebo, which looms above the Mekong River flowing at only 2000 meters above sea level. Yubeng itself is tucked between a small valley within the Meili Snow Mountain range, created by a subsidiary creek that flows into the Mekong. The village is divided into two parts, upper (*shang*) Yubeng, and lower (*xia*) Yubeng, which lie a steep 20 minute hike, on opposite sides of the creek from each other.

Yubeng, and its neighboring villages are used to hearing about the significance of the area in which they live. The geography and ecology of the region have great cultural and religious importance to local Yubeng villagers, and Tibetans at large. The mountain range, along with numerous lakes, waterfalls, rocks, hills and forests, are considered sacred in Tibetan Buddhism. Mount Kawagebo "is one of Tibet's eight sacred mountains, which explains its significance as a pilgrimage site" (Piazza 14). The pilgrimage around Kawagebo is considered vital for all Tibetan's to take part in at least once in their lifetime if they are to receive a good rebirth (Ci Li Nuo). The sacred nature of the area plays a vital role in its environmental and cultural conservation. There are two roles that the sacred spaces of Tibetan Buddhism play in the environmental conservation and sustainable development. The first is the religious reverence paid to the spaces, which serves to protect these spaces from exploitation. The second is the cultural unity and cultural empowerment found in foundational myths within local and Tibetan culture.

TNC's interest in the area is a result of the severe "indirect and direct" threats to this unique and endangered part of the world. There were three direct threats, according to Ma. Although logging in North West Yunnan has been banned since 1998, the forests are still being threatened

by fuel wood consumption, and home construction (a Tibetan style home uses a particularly large quantity of wood) (Ma). This collection method was originally fairly self sustainable due to the low population density in this Tibetan area, however locals are now paying the price for the unsustainable government logging program which clear cut most of the regions forest. Over grazing was another large problem recognized by TNC. The number of livestock has increased dramatically , along with the general population, and the local production system has changed so traditional methods of grazing have been altered, and people aren't going as far away from the villages as they did to graze there livestock causing erosion. The over collection of "non-timber commercial products" such as worm grass, caterpillar fungus, matsutake mushrooms, and snow lotus, as well as the illegal poaching of animals such as the rare snow leopard, is a serious and direct threat to the local ecosystem.

Poverty, and population growth, along with the loss of traditional culture and belief system, is what Ma Jianzhong calls the indirect threats resulting from a changing socio-economic structure. Due to the logging ban of 1998, many people in the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Diqing lost one of their only sources of income (Ying 55). The government has recently attempted to boost tourism to compensate for this loss, but the money is not yet reaching the majority of the areas population, and it remains one of the poorest regions of China (Ying 55). Coupled with the regions poverty is population growth, which results in the increasing consumption of local natural resources (Ma). Tourist dollars, modern media, the history of the Chinese in the Tibetan region, and changing production methods have all led to an alteration of the Tibetan traditional belief system, and traditional culture (Ma).

According to many of the journalist I had read before going to Yubeng, the village faced a large number of additional problems. In "A Holy Place Fights for its Life," written in 2001, Erick Eckholm notices that the increasing number of tourists have created a big garbage problem in the village. He also noted the six hour hike to the nearest road and the lack of adequate medical facilities creates a serious health threat to the local villagers. In an article entitled *Paradise or Parking lots*, written in 2003, author Susan Jakes portrays her strong fear that tourism development in Yubeng will destroy the towns "fairy-tale seclusion", due to the poor track record of previously ill planned tourist development in the area. Both articles recognized TNC's role in

the area, and the organization's potential to assist with well planned development and environmental protection.

Diving in

So I set off for Yubeng filled with preconceived notions about the natural state of the area, and the factors playing into Yubeng's future. My first stop was Zhongdian, known as Gyalthang in Tibetan. The town itself has been ironically renamed Shangri La after the area in which James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon*'s takes place. The entire region of Diqing Autonomous prefecture and Zhongdian Tibetan Autonomous prefecture has also been renamed as such. The renaming was done in an effort to boost tourism and has been heavily associated with a new brand of cooking products, and cigarette products called Shangri La. The Irony of the name comes from the beautifully and fairly accurately described scenery of the area, and the simultaneous misrepresentation of the culture in the novel. This is the same recreation and commodification of culture that seems to recreate culture as a sales device, as opposed to a social device. So how is marketing culture different than supporting culture? It seemed to me that focusing on the superficial aspects of a culture, such as clothing, dance and food, and exploiting the strange/exotic aspects, at which tourists pay money to gawk, was harmful to a societies self confidence, as opposed to empowering. And something about the support of the more philosophical, and foundational elements of culture, was empowering and a step towards a strong, self confident society. I was fairly confused about it all, so I set off for Yubeng, stopping first at Meili Village.

Meili Village is an important stop for most pilgrims on their way to circumambulate Kawagebo. The village boasts a spectacular view of the Mealy range, and the Mekong River flowing far beneath. It has also been heavily developed in recent years, which made me curious to see how a paved road and a few small hotels had impacted a town that was recently very similar to Yubeng, in its religious significance and picturesque "fairy tale seclusion."

I woke up early and caught a bread bus (the common name for compact Chinese minivans, which look like loaves of bread) to Meili Village from Deqin to catch the sunrise. Apparently hundreds of other tourists had had the same idea. When I arrived the first orange light of the morning was gleaming off the peaks of Kawagebo, Micianmu, and Wufouguan. I elbowed my

way to the crest of the hill where I could take a picture without another person in it. Once the sun had adequately covered the face of the mountains the tourists buses started their engines, and within fifteen minutes I was left alone sitting on a white stupa in front of the juniper fireplaces, in which Tibetans burn juniper branches, and throw rice in order to ask Kawagebo to protect them as they begin their journey. Although there is a trash can sitting next to the plastered fire place, which looks very similar to the conical yak butter cakes which locals use to make yak butter tea (suo yu cha), the ground was littered with plastic incense wrappers blowing in the wind and off the crest of the hill into the Mekong valley.

“Tourism has had good and bad effects,” Rinchen a Tibetan translator from Zhongdian told me, who was standing close by with his German client. “This town has been altered. Cars, tourist trash, ugly concrete buildings, and tourists wasteful mentality has polluted the area. However, tourism has also forced the ban on logging and locals now have a concept of the need to preserve their environment by throwing their trash away, which they did not previously have, and the tourists still don’t have.” Rinchen believed that this environmental consciousness was brought about through tourism not a local concept of the religious sacredness of the place. I listened to him as I watched a woman buy a pack of incense, and throw the wrapper into the wind, light the incense, and then load on the bus that was waiting for her. Although tourism brings the trash and the waste, it also forces local awareness to preserve the environment of the area that people are paying money to experience. It’s a semi-self defeating cycle, but one that is occurring none the less.

I went to a small restaurant owned by a Tibetan family on the other side of the street from the overlook. An old woman wearing the traditional multicolored embroidered apron, and blue dress invited me to sit down next to the brass pot of burning coals, which provide most homes with their only heat source. She spoke no Mandarin but her daughter sitting next to her spoke enough for us to have a limited conversation. I asked her what she thought of the tourists in Meili Village, and how the town has changed recently. She thought for a second then told me that The Nature Conservancy has helped them to establish a network of trash cans which they simply didn’t have a few years ago. Each family in the village is now responsible for one trashcan and the area around it. Another problem is that outsiders own all the biggest and most profitable new business in town,

she said, and the locals are just their employees. They own one of the few restaurants owned by a local family in Meili Village.

I witnessed the same problem in Lijiang, a booming tourist town a few hundred kilometers south of Diqing Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan. Lijiang is an ethnically Naxi town, with a beautifully preserved old town, and a magnificent view of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, a traditionally sacred mountain for the Naxi. The town underwent a severe earthquake in 1996 and, with millions of relief dollars, the old town was revitalized, modern buildings were knocked down, and the ancient architecture was standardized. After UNESCO recognized the town as a world heritage site, tourist began flowing in. According to the host family I was stayed with in old town Lijiang, foreigners have come to their house on multiple occasions, wanting to buy their house to turn it into a hotel, offering them upwards of 500,000 Yuan (about \$60,000 US), more money than they had ever seen before. Most people naturally except the money, they told me, but they don't understand that if they made a guest house themselves, they could have more money, and it would better preserve the local culture. A Naxi local who works for the tourism bureau said that locals are loosing Lijiang, it is being bought out, more than 80% of the businesses are now owned by foreigners, and the locals are all moving to modern suburbs outside of the old town. If locals could be in charge of the business they could earn more money, and be more in control of the future of Lijiang. Meili Village has seen a similar transition on a smaller scale then Lijiang because it is a smaller town. Since Meili Village was once very similar to Yubeng, the town reminded me that Yubeng still has a chance to keep business local.

After I ate lunch at the restaurant I walked down the street to find Feilai Temple. I stopped first at the Meili Guesthouses, one of the half dozen blue and white concrete modern Chinese style hotels on the side of the road. I wanted to talk with the owner. I was lucky, Nick, a Han Chinese businessman from Shanghai who speaks very good English, greeted me in the lobby. He told me that his hotel was the first real hotel to be built in Meili Village after the road was paved in 2002. He continued to tell me, a bit disdainfully, that since then four or five others have been constructed. He had an interestingly critical view of the effects of development in Meili Village for being a businessman from Shanghai. "Since the road was build locals have become obsessed with money," he told me, "Money is now more important than Buddhism, which can be seen by

the way monks in the Feilai Temple now ask for money if you want to take a picture, or want a prayer, and that's not the way it was before the road was paved."

I watched the employees washing the floors, and cooking food. They have jobs and money that they did not have before, but it feels like they are less in control of their town, or their future. The owner has the power, authority, and money to control a village's future and the actions of employees.

I walked down toward Feilai temple; a beautiful Tibetan building was on the right side of the road and I thought it might be the temple so I walked in. There was a group of friends sitting around a wood stove inside. They asked me to sit down with them, and told me that this was a guesthouse owned by locals. The proud greeting gave me the impression that locally owned business was fairly important in the eyes of the community. The owner asked me if I had ever seen Thonkan painting, a Tibetan Buddhist style of painting. "Just in temples," I told him. So he took me into his room and showed me a large sheep skin hanging on the wall, with a beautiful painting in its center where the fur had been shaved away. The painting was of the 10 interlocking syllables, an important Tibetan Buddhist icon. He tried explaining the significance of the piece, but I couldn't understand. Hold told me that sitting around the fire is the artist who made the piece, and one of the best Thangka painters in Deqin. The experience made me reflect on the value of local ownership, and the rich culture local business models endows on its guests and the community.

After having some Yak butter tea, I set off to find the real Feilai temple. Feilai temple is the temple of the flying Buddha. The statue inside the temple is said to have miraculously flown there from India, landing on the hillside in the village (Yeshi interview). The temple was a few minutes down the road. It was a small temple, with prayer wheels bordering its outer walls. One should spin the wheels clockwise, and circumambulate the temple clockwise, in order to center oneself before proceeding on a pilgrimage. I circumambulated the temple once and went inside. I asked if I could take a picture and, although there were no monks in the temple, the women standing outside selling yak butter candles said it would be fine and didn't ask for money. I bought a yak butter candle to light and offer to the statue of the flying Buddha, and Tsong Khapa. Tsong Khapa is the founder of Gelup or yellow hat Buddhism, which is the predominant Tibetan Buddhist sect

in the Tibetan region of northwest Yunnan, and the sect of the Dalai Lama.

In the entranceway of the temple is a Thangka painting of Kawagebo. Kawagebo is depicted as a great general on a white horse with the mountain range behind him, in which various gods and wise lamas are depicted. Although there are a few different stories about how Kawagebo came to be, Yeshi Gyeltsa, a guide and translator told me one that seemed to embody all the other stories the best. Kawagebo was a fierce demon with eighteen bodies, and nine heads. He took pleasure in violence, and roamed the countryside eating villagers (Piazza 14). However, when Padmasambhava brought Buddhism to Tibet from India, he roamed the countryside defeating all the demons single handedly (Yeshi interview). When Padmasambhava came across Kawagebo he cut off all his heads except one and all of his bodies except one. Kawagebo was so humiliated that he promised to give up his “evil ways” (Piazza 14). Sakyamuni Buddha was touched when he heard of Kawagebo’s desire to abandon evil, so he gave Kawagebo an army and told him to roam Tibet and find an area that needed protection. Kawagebo and his army did so. When they came across Deqin, Kawagebo decided that the best way to protect the village would be to assume the form of a mountain, and he and his army turned into the Meili snow mountain range.

Yeshi explained to me that this story is a good example of the way in which Tibetan Buddhism “tamed” these sacred places. Kawagebo was a revered historical mountain deity in the ancient Bon religion of Tibet as well. But the way in which locals worshiped him came more from fear of destruction, than a reverence for their protection (Yeshi interview).

I left the temple and went back to the white stupa on the crest of the hill where I had been sitting earlier. I sat there watching two men take off their traditional Tibetan robes which were wrapped around their business suits and black leather loafers. They were doing an advertisement on the hill for Shangri La cooking products, in front of a large Shangri La advertisement. Flags were hung from the wooden poles and tied to the ground. The flags looked very similar to the surrounding Tibetan prayer flags strewn about the row of stupas, and trees. When looking closer at the flags, I realized that the “prayer flags,” although the same color as the other real prayer flags, had pictures of a cartoon gofer printed on each, intermingled with an occasional Chinese flag.

The scene made me think of an article I had read recently in the New York Times. The article talked of the Yunnan government’s “controlled promotion of Tibetan culture,” although this

advertisement was created by a private company, and not the government, it shows what the “controlled promotion of Tibetan culture” means: emphasizing cultural element which promotes tourism and consumerism (Eckholm). Those aspects which are seen as exotic, such as the beautiful mountains, and the exotic dress, are picked out and hyperbolized, by turning the robes metallic blue, and drawing gofers on prayer flags. However, the stories behind the clothing, the mountains and their meaning to Tibetan religion are ignored.

In recent years the Chinese government has helped to rebuild the most famous temples destroyed during the “peaceful liberation of Tibet from feudal serfdom,” and the Cultural Revolution, in which an estimated 1.6 million Tibetan lost their lives (Powers 171). In the newly constructed temples the monks are given salaries through ticket sales, a practice that was never before a part of Tibetan Buddhism (Ma). According to many locals who I spoke with around Deqin, many monks wanting to truly study Tibetan Buddhism will go to India to study at one of the Dalai Lama’s schools.

The temple of Songzanlin Si, outside of Zhongdian was recently reconstructed to be larger, and very beautiful. The temple attracts thousands of tourists daily, but the commercialization of the temple has driven some Tibetans away. According to a local in Zhongdian, one day he went to the temple to pray. He was trying to ask a monk to a few questions when another monk started yelling at him, and took out a knife. This hostile monk slashed the monk he was talking with in the arm with the knife, and then hit him in the head with a large object, knocking the monk out. Fortunately the knocked-out monk was protected by the local, and the hostile monk was retained. However the man who witnessed this told me that he did not want to return to the temple, and many other locals feel the same way. They believe that because of salaries, and the generation of large amounts of tourist dollars, monks are no longer working for the religion, causing bad character, and lacking effective spiritual guidance. It is important to support Tibetan Buddhism in a way that allows it to serve its primarily function as a community/social service, not an income generator. Nicks comments on the Feilai Temple’s relationship to money made me realize that tourism could weaken local respect for Feilai Temple as well.

My stop over in Meili Village showed me the potential problems stemming from unmanaged and overly hasty development. It seemed important to me to stress local ownership, to empower

the community. It also seemed important to attract and educate visitors, because it appeared as if hasty visiting brings with it disrespect for the land. A road built to Yubeng would attract the same hordes of fifteen minute photographers I saw in Meili Village. The more profound aspects of culture need to be emphasized in order to promote cultural understanding. In Ma Jianzhong's opinion tourists who are educated as to why an area is important are more likely to respect that area.

Yubeng

The day before I set off for Yubeng I met a few young Chinese travelers. I told them I was hiking to Yubeng, and asked if they wanted to come. They all said sure, they had a few weeks to spare, so we set off for Yubeng, down the steep decent toward the Mekong river. I learned that China has an interesting culture of young trekker, backpacker type tourists roaming the country, partly bored with their jobs, and partly curious about the vast and diverse country in which they live.

We all stumbled down the steep slope leading from Meili Village to Xidang. I began the hike covered with layers of warm clothing since Meili Village is 3800 meters above sea level, and fairly cold. But as I slipped down the crumply dirt of the desert hillside I slowly stripped down to a t-shirt since the bottom of the valley was dry and hot. Traveling from Xidang over another mountain pass to Yubeng, was another huge temperature change, and allowed me to witness the extreme variety of ecosystems tucked into the Meili ranges folded landscape. Close to the top of the pass was a beautiful old growth forest, some of the only old growth forest I had yet seen in China.

Along the path I noticed a series of trashcans, with signs posted over them urging travelers to throw away their garbage, and designated a family's name to the trashcan. I later found out that the system was created by TNC, much like it had been in Meili Village, to help the villagers deal with their growing trash problem. According a Yubeng villager named Ananzhu, the government asked the village to deal with the trash, and Ci Li Nuo, TNC assistant manager of the Meili project, helped give them a method for doing so. Every few weeks the family responsible for the trashcan must clean the area around it, and take the trash down the six hour trail to Xidang so it can be driven to a dump. Ma JianZhong insists that the trash problem in the area has been greatly

reduced. The trash cans seem to be working very well, however the trashcans are made out of baskets, which fall apart easily, or tip over. It might be a good idea to donate more sturdy receptacles with lids. Although the problem of trash in and around Yubeng still exists, the extent to which it appears to have existed in 2001, when Eric Eckholm wrote his article seems to have been greatly reduced.

When my new friends and I finally reached upper Yubeng village the sun was just setting on Micianmu, Wufouguan, known as the 5 Buddha Cap mountain because of its jagged shape, and Kawaronda, Kawagebo's servant, turning the snow blowing off the tops of the mountains bright orange. We checked into Arong Lao Shi's guesthouse, and ate a wonderful meal of mutton curry-like soup and rice with the whole family. I was extremely tired, but awake enough to pay attention to the conversation between my trekking companions and Arong Lao Shi's family.

It was nice to take part in the meal with the family and feel like a friend instead of a paying guest. Arong Lao Shi is the principle of the village elementary school, who helps organize volunteer teachers to come to the village to teach the children on a semesterly basis. The current volunteer teacher was staying at Arong's house.

Arong Lao Shi explained to us that Yubeng uses a unique system to help evenly distribute the tourist income, and avoid unwanted competition. Each guesthouse has a specific day, and should go to the guest house of whomever day it is. However, if tourists end up at a different guest house the family whose day it is to have guests will get half of the money. I later found out that this is a new system, which Ci Li Nuo helped create. Ci Li Nuo told me that before this system there was a lot of competition between the villagers to try and get the tourist to come to their home, breeding distrust and bad community relations. Now people are content to allow tourists to go where they please, and are more apt to work together toward community goals (Ci Li Nuo interview). This sort of facilitation helps to encourage a strong and empowered community.

The morning after my ten hour hike across the pass to Yubeng village I woke up early to watch the sun rise on mount Kawarondo. I walked toward the white stupa just north of the village, where a frozen creek in the middle of a large pasture was thawing in the morning sunlight. Pigs bathed in the mud, and a few herders were taking their horses back to the village to find eager tourists to bring over the hill to the road, or up to one of Yubeng's sacred spaces that have become

the main tourist attractions of the area. Micheal Liu, whom I had met the day before on my hike was taking pictures of the view and talking with a villager. I walked up to them and started having a friendly conversation. The villager said that life in Yubeng is much better now since tourists have began coming. "Just a few years ago we couldn't eat as well as we do now," he said to Liu and I, "My family can now earn 5000 Yuan (\$615) per year because of the horses that the tourists want to ride to the village, and around to the pilgrimage sites, that's a lot more money than before. And my little brother's family now has enough money to build their own house."

This amount of money seems far too little to support a family, however from what I had read from articles of just a few years ago, along with villagers' accounts; life in Yubeng has gotten quite a bit better in the past few years. Arong Lao Shi, whose guest house we stayed at, explained to us one night at dinner that they only used to be able to eat rice and good meat during their annual spring festival, but now they eat a good meal every night.

Along with improving incomes, a well trained western doctor has established an office in town, which has greatly improved health conditions of the village. The doctor's service is paid for by the Ford Foundation (Ma). I visited the doctor's office while in Yubeng but no one was there. I asked a man sitting next to the office if the doctor was well trained and a good doctor, and said yes. Before coming to Yubeng I had read an article about the high infant mortality rate in Yubeng because of the lack of adequate medical facilities (Eckholm). Although this problem seems to have been somewhat alleviated, many people appear to not know about the new doctor. When I asked a woman in upper Yubeng about medical treatment in Yubeng she told me that it was very bad. "There is only one traditional Tibetan medicine doctor, and usually his patients get worse after seeing him, so we have to go to Deqin (a six hour hike, and 2 hour drive) to go to a good doctor," she explained to me.

Michael Liu and I became immediate friends. He was an ex-photo journalist from Beijing, who has been cycling around China for the past year and a half. His journalist like curiosity sticks blatantly out of his personality. When I told him that I was studying the relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and culture and environmental protection, he became immediately interested. After returning to the guest house from the pasture to eat breakfast, he asked me what I wanted to ask people, I told him and he said, "Great, lets go." He proceeded to help me with my interviews

for the next four days, and a good portion of the time taking more interest in them than I was. He was an invaluable resource.

TNC Projects in Yubeng

After walking around the village talking with villagers it seemed apparent that TNC's alternative energy program was incredibly important to the villagers. Ananzhu, the owner of a guest house, in what he called middle Yubeng, said that TNC helped each family install a solar water heater, which had made life much better. Arong Lao Shi told us that TNC has done many good things in the area, especially helping to install the solar water heaters. Solar water heaters are used primarily for showers. They are inexpensive. The unit costs about 1000 Yuan (\$125 US), and can boil water in just several minutes in direct sunlight (Greenvillage). Arong Lao Shi told us that this saves his family a lot of time and wood. It is illegal to cut down trees, and villagers are only permitted to break off the lower dead branches of trees or use fallen trees as wood fuel (Ananzhu). This is a lot of work, and some trees were still being cut down illegally due to the need for wood fuel. "Now we don't cut or gather as much wood, which is good because it's hard work, and helps protect our environment," Arong Lao Shi told us. Lu Jian Wei of the nature conservancy told me that most families without solar water heaters have to gather as much as three truck loads of wood per year, but families with solar water heaters only need one truck load of wood per year (Lu).

Arong Lao Shi also pointed out that, like many rural areas of China, many people simply do not take many showers. Tibetans traditionally take a full body shower only a few times in their life. An American in Zhongdian told me that ethnic Yi families in the area take showers three times during their life: once when they are born, once after they get married and once after they die. Arong Lao Shi believes that having access to showers has created better health conditions in Yubeng, since many basic skin diseases can be prevented through regular bathing. The heating of water over wood fires also adds to the poor indoor air quality of most homes, due to their indoor fires, and poor ventilation. Less indoor smoke reduces the risk of chronic eye and respiratory diseases (Greenvillage).

Around the Meili area TNC has helped install 597 solar water heaters, of various capacities. 1122 Biogas units, 600 fuel efficient stoves, 2 Micro Hydro power stations, and clean drinking water plumbing systems (Ma). Biogas units are only possible in the power elevations of the area.

Animal and human waste is put into a concrete container which is dug into the ground. With heat from sunlight, an anaerobic digestion process takes place. Anaerobic bacteria breakdown the waste, creating healthy fertilizer for crops, and excreting methane gas, which can be burned and utilized for fuel for heating water, or cooking food.

Micro hydro powered generators have also been installed around the area. The hydro power stations provide enough electricity to light a house. However, when asked what the biggest problems in Yubeng were, many people said that electricity was among the biggest. They have enough electricity to light their homes but not enough to own a TV, or other electrical appliances.

Fuel efficient stoves have also been introduced in the area. There are only two of these stoves in Yubeng, one at the school and one in Arong Lao Shi's guesthouse. These stoves are used to reduce wood consumption and indoor air pollution. However the first design, which Arong Lao Shi has, was not well received because villagers did not get as much heat from the fire and villagers enjoy seeing the flame. Many that received this stove have stopped using it very often, and returned to their original fire place. Arong Lao Shi's fire place was rarely used during our stay, so while the fuel efficient stove has a good chimney for ventilation, it was not utilized, and the dining room remained full of smoke. According to TNC a new model is being distributed which saves less wood, but allow one to see the flame, benefit from the heat, and reduces indoor air pollution significantly (Eckholm *Native Eyes on a Sacred Land*).

Ma Jianzhong explained to me that another benefit of installing this sustainable infrastructure, is to prepare for increased use with less impactful technologies, as well as installing an environmentally sound infrastructure before other options are available, creating a foundational alternative infrastructure (Ma).

Beyond the basic health and energy saving benefits from alternative energy, the hot showers and electric lighting are vital for attracting guests to their guesthouses. This economic benefit of TNC's alternative energy program has made it possible for families to takeout micro credit loans to purchase the alternative energy units, along with basic accessories such as beds, and cushions.

TNC's micro credit program is called CREED/Green Village Credit initiative. The goal of the program is to promote economic development and environmental protection. Although systems such as solar water heaters appear inexpensive, even the \$125 dollars to purchase a unit is more

than a typical villager's yearly income (Green village). "Green Village Credit provides local villagers with the household credit to purchase higher quality sustainable energy systems...and additionally, a loan for activities that can generate income using the new and improved energy systems" (Green Village). The loans support the installation and purchase of "solar water heaters, commercial fuel efficient stoves, biogas digesters with a green house for raising pigs, micro hydropower generators, improved cooking stoves, improved fireplaces for room heating, energy efficient houses, or home retrofitting for better fuel efficiency, and any other sustainable energy system that reduces environmental impacts, and protects biodiversity" (Green Village). Loans can also be provided for "income generation activities [including] vegetable and cash-crop plantations, animal husbandry, agriculture products processing and trading, tourism services, and any other activity with sufficient financial returns and also reduce environmental impact" (Greenvillage). According to Yang Jianhua, the Green Village program manager for the Meili project area, most families in Yubeng have obtained a loan from the program, and the first step of loan distribution was just finalized a month before I arrived (Jianhua).

The loans have already been affecting the lives of Yubeng villagers. Ananzhu told me that 32 of the 34 households in Yubeng have used the micro credit loan to purchase their solar water heaters. He has used the money to buy beds, cushions for his dining room, a solar water heater, and a horse to transport tourists here from Xidang. Arong Lao Shi's families have purchased many of the same things, as well as a small green house, for growing commercial and personal produce.

Given its location directly below glacial spring run off, Yubeng also had the unique potential for to install plumbing for clean drinking water fairly easily. Ci Li Nuo and Ma Jianzhong advocated assisting the installation of this plumbing, tapping into the pristine water of the Ice Lake, just north of the town. TNC and the local government agreed to finance the installation of the system and it was completed just six months before I came. Most homes now have running water, and unlike most of China, the water is potable, further reducing health risks, and the need to boil water in order to purify it, thus saving wood fuel consumption (Ma).

Ma Jianzhong described to me the previous hardships of carrying water from the stream in large plastic buckets to their homes. This task was time consuming, arduous and mostly fulfilled by women, as it was a domestic task (Ma). Collecting firewood is also a traditionally domestic

task. “A woman, it is said, spends about a quarter of her time in the mountains throughout the year gathering firewood” (Zhonghua 63). Thus this new infrastructure has greatly reduced the burden on women in Yubeng.

When assisting in the installation of alternative energy systems and clean drinking water, it is important that the villagers take ultimate responsibility for them, in order to insure their self sustainable maintenance in the future. To repair the village’s plumbing system Ci Li Nuo helped facilitate the creation of a fund to train and pay a local villager to take responsibility for the water system. Each villager pays 3 Yuan/per day into this fund. TNC has organized large training sessions for all recipients of the alternative energy units and attendance of these training sessions is quite high according to Anzhu, TNC alternative energy program manager.

Government Relations and Creating Trust

TNC is not the only provider of these loans and grants. The organization works closely with the provincial government of Yunnan, which actually provided 2/3 of the funding for the Green Village and alternative energy project according to Lu Jianwei, the TNC administrative assistant for the Meili project. TNC’s work in China is closely affiliated with the government, this is due to the government’s strong role in the lives of its Chinese citizens, and the limited access NGO have to Chinese affairs. TNC believes that through a close relationship with the government they garner more trust for locals and local government officials. TNC’s government relationships help to create better mutual understanding among the two entities to work toward a shared vision of the future.

TNC’s office in Deqin is a prime example of this relationship. Qupi, the current Deqin office director, and government relations officer, was the mayor of Deqin for 7 years before working with TNC. Yang Jianhua is a senior Deqin police officer as well as the Green Village Credit program manager. These links to the community give TNC credibility and cultural empathy within the local community.

Many projects around NW Yunnan have faced many difficulties based on the distrust of outsiders, and distrust of handouts and help, based on the assumption that outsider have ulterior motives. As we were walking around lower Yubeng, Michael Liu and I began talking with a Photographer from Kunming who had been documenting the lives of local villagers for three

months. When I asked him what he thought about TNC's project in the village he immediately told me that TNC were thieves. I was really shocked; no one else has said that to me. He went on to explain to me that TNC's project was an effort to gain the trust of locals in order to eventually steal the genetic information of the valuable plants of the region. The gathering of medicinal plants, herbs and mushrooms constitute a large portion of a villager's yearly income. Most of these plants are unique to this small area, and are worth large sums of money in the cities.

The fact that someone would come to the village to steal genetic information did not seem extremely far-fetched. I've heard many stories of scientists in South America and Central America taking samples of plants, and patenting the scientific information in the US for pharmaceutical companies, while locals remain poor and without proper rights over the valuable resources that should be benefiting their own communities. The danger that this could happen to the people of the Meili region is very possible without proper community rights over their natural resources.

We went back to Arong Lao Shi house to get more details on this. Arong told us that someone posing as a TNC staff member did in fact come to Yubeng telling people he was from TNC and leaving the village with a load of plant samples, however TNC had explained to them that this man was an imposter, and he believes TNC. He knows that they are here to benefit the community, and everyone else knows that as well.

The volunteer teacher from Shanghai was far more skeptical. When I asked her what she thought of TNC she immediately told me about this same scandal, and added that TNC is brainwashing local Tibetans to believe that Han tourists are more destructive to the environment and more careless than local Tibetans or foreign tourists. I asked her if she knew about all the programs TNC had helped initiate in the area, including the installation of the solar water heater which she uses to take showers, and the fuel efficient stove she uses daily at her school to provide her students with hot water, she had not. This was very interesting considering the praise for and vast knowledge Arong Lao Shi has of TNC, who is her boss and provider of free room board. It is possible that since I was studying TNC's work in the area, villagers felt obliged to give me positive responses. However, since the two negative and skeptical perspectives I heard were from outsiders unaware of the intricacies of TNC's program and history in the village, it makes me believe the villagers truly are trustful and appreciative of the program.

This is a delicate balance to strike. Many sustainable development programs have undergone serious strain due to the spread of small negative rumors. Michael Liu told me that a famous Mao Zedong quote warns people never to trust love that comes at no price, anyone who says they are giving something away for free wants something in return. “A lot of people feel this way in China,” Liu said, “there’s actually a real problem with serious trust.”

The story of a domestic NGO called CBIK (the Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge) while working on a project in Jisha village a small Tibetan village outside of Zhongdian, indicates a similarly distrustful attitude toward aid, and poverty alleviation work in rural Chinese areas. CBIK received a grant that was to aid in the construction of an eco-lodge that would be communally, constructed owned and operated by local villagers. Li Bo, the project manager explains the situation in his paper *We Share a Dream at Jisha Village*.

Various rumors started spreading among the villagers...We gradually began to understand the reason for the spreading of the rumors. After 20 years of fierce logging and destruction of the environment, the villagers were suspicious about outsiders. Also, the wrongdoings of previous village cadres and general financial chaos added fuel to the creation and spreading of rumors. What I didn’t expect, however, was that one rumor would flow the other-all the way through the project-one rumor not yet completely eliminated, a new one would have already been created (Li Bo 6).

There was great fear among village elders that CBIK’s project had not been approved by the government, although it had. The village leader’s wife was beat up one night at a town meeting for her and her husbands collaboration with the project.

A villager named Ci Li said that the Jisha project had not been approved by either the county for the prefecture government. One powerful village leader had told him face to face that he was not in support of the project. Ci li then asked the villagers who support the project to stand up, and threatened to kill the ones who would dare do so...Pei Chu [the village leader] stood up (13).

The two began to fight. His wife than attacked Ci Li and Ci li beat her up (13). Li Bo points out that above all villagers were distrustful of finances that were held by others. They suspected CBIK of convincing villagers to build them an eco-lodge without paying them, and then taking the lodge for themselves (13).

Although a rumor began in Yubeng, the villagers appear confident that TNC’s intentions are benevolent. This trust can be partially attributed to close government connections, and community membership. However TNC’s initial work to provide poverty alleviation loans, and alternative energy infrastructure, has increased local faith in the organization.

The Role of Localization and Tibetan Religion

Although government cooperation and support has been a vital element in gaining community support and trust, true cultural empathy has derived from integrating locals into TNC's staff. Ci Li Nuo, a Tibetan from Deqin, was originally a driver for the organization. However his deep faith, interest and knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism inspired Ma Jianzhong to hire him as the Meili program's assistant manager. A key element of the Meili program is to compile the "indigenous knowledge," of the area in order to analyze its potential use in biodiversity conservation, as well as cultural empowerment. Having an inside understanding of such information helps to more thoroughly understand the data being collected. Being able to profoundly understand the culture and religion of the area is also helpful in the facilitation of community meetings, and systematic problem solving. To understand the role of culture in the sustainable development of the Meili range, one must first understand the role of sacred spaces in Tibetan Buddhism and the role of Buddhism in Tibetan culture, as well as the uniqueness of the Tibetan Buddhism practiced in Yubeng.

The Cultural aspect of TNC's program includes: The photovoice project and the compiling of traditional knowledge and spiritual practice, as well as cultural empowerment and community building.

I met an American in Zhongdian who has been building schools and medical clinics in poor rural villages for the past five years. When I asked him what role he felt Tibetan Buddhism played in Tibetan culture he said "you have to understand, Tibetan Buddhism is Tibetan culture, and there is no separation. It is virtually impossible to have a Tibetan Jew, if a Tibetan is not a Buddhist they are not Tibetan. The religion is completely intertwined with every aspect of their daily life" (Scott). The history of Tibet is quite similar in that there is no real history of Tibet as would be defined by the western notions of historical fact, but rather a religious history of Tibet, as much fact has become completely intertwined with religious myth and parable (Powers).

Ma Jianzhong provided me with a power point presentation on the role of Tibetan culture in conservation; most of the following information is from that presentation. Conservation programs have realized the contribution of traditional knowledge and culture in conservation. Tibetan culture is very strong compared with other cultures. Although other cultures have traditional

beliefs in the sacredness of nature such as the Yi and the Naxi, their culture's power to preserve these spaces is not as strong due to Tibet's history, and deep religious roots. This has led to a historically well-preserved environment.

Tibetan religion developed in three stages; animist, Bon, and Tibetan Buddhism. The origins of Tibetan religion came from people's attempt to understand their environment. The environment helps to form religion and in return religion helps originate environmental consciousness. The worship of nature in Tibet comes from the difficulty and harshness of the Tibetan Plateau. The low temperature, extremely high elevation and lack of oxygen make it difficult to survive in the region, since people don't understand why their lives must be so difficult they naturally assume that gods must be in control of natural disasters and hardships. In order to avoid disaster the people must therefore appease the gods.

Mountains, heaven, and water are the most prominent natural features of ancient Tibetan animist beliefs. Tibet contains the most spectacular mountains in the world, as well as the source of Asia mightiest rivers. When imagining the life of an ancient tribe living in a village such as Yubeng, it's easy to see how extreme and condensed their lives must have been. Below the villages the valleys are steep, and beyond one valley is yet another. Above the village rise jagged mountains that stretch so far into the sky that they are unconquerable and no living creature can survive on them. This drastic environment encloses a person's life into a condensed and extreme environment, which creates a natural reverence for the mountains that appear ominously powerful.

The worship of mountains was originally localized. However, as people became more mobile and conflicts arose, warring tribes began to force the conquered tribe to worship the sacred mountains and sites of the victorious tribe. Each mountain is uniquely anthropomorphized and personified due to their diverse origins. Because of local relationships and conflicts, families, relatives, and armies of mountains arose, and stories surrounding them tell of the historical yet mythological significance of relationships between places and cultural beliefs and practices. This was the beginning of the intricate network of sacred sites, of various importances, and the mythology behind them.

Mr. Ma believes that the current stories surrounding the Meili range originated in such a way, and were then incorporated into Bonism (the first unified religion of Tibet), and later Tibetan

Buddhism. In Bonism, every natural object has a life. The mountains, rivers, lakes, rocks and trees which mountains embody are both good and bad, they cause destruction and they provide life. Zan is the powerful Bon god whom controls the heavens, birds and high mountains. When Bon was widely spread through out Tibet, mount Kawagebo was named *Ramzan Kawagebo*. When Tibetan Buddhism came to the region, Kawagebo was renamed *Nga Qi Kawagebo*, after the Buddhist Bodhisattva of protection. Kawagebo was a wild demon who was humbled and changed into a protection deity by Tibetan Buddhism. Local experts agree that the story of Kawagebo illuminates the taming self-conscious perspective of Tibetan Buddhism's effect and dominance over Bon.

In Bonism a god must be worshiped and properly respected or the people will be punished. The same sort of reverence of nature flows into Tibetan Buddhism, with an added element of karma and ethical code. When I came back to the TNC office from Yubeng I asked Ci Li Nuo what the relationship is between Tibetan Buddhism and environmental protection and he gave me the following explanation:

The phrase "environmental protection" does not exist in Tibetan Buddhism, although environmental protection ethics exists. *Nijjiden* is the world in which all sentient beings exist. *Jiuejiden* is the concept that all these beings have thoughts, love, and compassion. *Nijjiden* is the container, and *Jiuejiden* are the users of the container. Whether the quality of life in the container is good or bad for its inhabitants is partially a result of "natural law," meaning everything's movement and its action. This natural movement does not produce destructive, harmful or harmonious forces on its own. The living environment has a relationship with the actions of all living things. The Tibetan concept of reincarnation means that all sentient beings are tied to their previous life's actions, not just recent actions (Karma). If humans harm the environment in their current life, they will be punished in their next life. A survivor of a natural disaster will know that he or she has done harm to nature in their previous life. The desire to care for the environment is not for one's self but for all others who live in the world, and will be reincarnated into the world. However if you are good to nature, nature will praise you and reward you. Ci Li Nuo then looked at me very seriously and said "so I warn you not to harm the environment, take care of your environment as well as others' living environment.

I let out an awkward chuckle, and told him I would. I had stopped writing, and he looked at me and told me I should write that down as well, so I did.

According to Ci Li Nuo, the concept of reincarnation also leads to the philosophy that beings should cherish other living beings. "In the course of the cycle you need a mother to give birth to you, raise you and bring you up. All living things could have been your mother during the cycle of reincarnation and life. All things could have been any of your relatives. So you shouldn't do harmful things to living creatures because we are now in a different body and we can't remember who is who, because memory is lost during reincarnation." Furthermore all sentient beings, living

creatures with the capacity for compassion, are equally endowed with the ability to become enlightened. “An ant or a man may become a Buddha; inside every living thing is the ability to become a Buddha” (Ci Li Nuo).

This historical and ethical background helped me to understand the Yubeng villagers’ relationship to their natural spaces, and the concept of sacred spaces. When I asked the lamas and various villagers what areas around the village are sacred, almost all of them told me “huo shen shan,” or the sacred volcano, also called Bendero in Tibetan. Bendero is shorter than the other mountains surrounding Yubeng. On its south slope is a sharp cliff which descends into the valley that leads to the sacred waterfall (Shen pu) from lower Yubeng. According to a horse breeder I talked with, Bendero was once a destructive volcano and miraculously turned into a benign mountain. Ci Li Nuo added to the story by telling me that before Yubeng was a village the people of the valley lived in harmony with many wise monks on Bendero. However the people did not respect the holy mountain so the monks forced the people to move down to the valley where Yubeng is currently. Jiu Nalabo told me that people do not cut down trees, hunt animal, or gather herbs on Bendero because their families will get sick. Arong Lao Shi clarified the story for me. People believe they will be harmed if they hunt, cut trees or harvest herbs on Bendero because one day a long time ago a man was picking medicinal herbs on the mountain when he was suddenly approached by a tall monk in a white robe with a long white beard. The monk told the man “this is my realm, get out!” and the man ran down the mountains and told everyone about his encounter with the monk. That night the man died in his sleep, and seven days later his wife died. Arong said that this story is why he respects Bendero. This shows the traditional power of these natural sacred sites, the sort of reverence paid to them, and the ways in which they are effectively protected through ethical code, fears, and respect.

Scholars have begun to recognize the cultural and environmental function of places like Bendero. Ma Jianzhong calls these places sacred natural sites (SNS) (ma 2). “SNS could be understood as an integration of cultural landscapes and natural ecosystems, through natural ecological processes and human cultural practices, [the SNS] reaches a level of equilibrium flow of matter, energy and communication between its internal and external environment” (2). The Meili area has a particularly high number of such places given its significance as an integral

Tibetan pilgrimage destination. The pilgrimage exists because of the area's mythology, however many stories have been brought to the area as a result of the pilgrimage as well, such as stories of monks attaining enlightenment, and sacred text being found in rocks.

Many sacred places are protected due to their mythological significance; however another prominent way of demarcating sacred sites is the "Rigua" line. The "Rigua" is a traditional method of sealing off regions, within which access and resource utilization is limited (4). A "Rigua" is traditionally established by a living Buddha. A living Buddha is a monk whose enlightened soul is reborn, as opposed to escaping the wheel, in order to help others attain enlightenment by serving as a spiritual leader. A living Buddha has much sway in a community, and once a "Rigua" is established it is usually respected by the villagers (Arong Lao Shi). There are 11 such "Riguas" around the Meili range (5). A community self-initiated "Rigua" can also be established, it is usually "set up through the management of the village administrative people" (5). These differ from traditionally historical sacred sites because they can be established according to the wishes of the local community (5).

"Temples, landscapes forests, lands on which eminent monks undergo spiritual cultivation, sacred lakes, sacred water falls, sacred forests, and grasslands near sacred marks, are another form of sacred site," over 200 of which are located around TNC's Meili project area. It was apparent while in Yubeng that there is a concentration of sacred sites around the area because of the inner and outer pilgrimage routes (5). In a comprehensive survey of biodiversity in and around sacred sites in the area compared with non sacred sites, Ma Jianzhong and the TNC staff found that endemic plants and vegetation cover was statistically higher in areas considered to be sacred (7).

Beyond conservation sacred sites also play an important cultural function. "The existence of sacred sites...[structures] moral thinking and behavior of people to follow a fixed set of rules, thus making a community comparatively stable" (6). Sacred sites also reinforce cultural and communal identity (6). The different "degrees of influence" of different sacred sites create reinforce regional identity. For example the regional influence of Kawagebo links all Tibetan together, while the diversity of sacred sites surrounding Yubeng are unique to the village itself, and give Yubeng villagers a unique perception of their own community.

Ci Li Nuo told me a story that he believes demonstrates Yubeng villager's self-perception.

“Yubeng villagers think that they are not normal human beings,” Ci Li Nuo began, “They believe that our world is constructed by many elements, humans are just one small element. They are not gods, or animal but they are not humans either, although they do farming work like other humans. One day a strange man who no one knew came to Xidang (A town on the other side of the pass from Yubeng). The man went to a family’s house to ask if he could borrow some food. The family gave him the food and the next year the man returned to Xidang and repaid all the food. The family thought it was strange that the man would repay the food such a long time after he had borrowed the food, since they had never seen him before. A while later the same man went to the same family’s house to borrow food again. The family gave the man the food, but this time they made a small hole in the bag they put the food in. After the man left the family followed the trail of food left by the man. The trail led over a steep hill into a valley. The trail finally disappeared at a rock. The family thought this was very strange and lifted up the rock, under which they found a completely new world where Yubeng village lay.”

Stories such as this give Yubeng its own unique identity, especially considering the vast number of myths surrounding the area. I wanted to attempt to create a list of these stories in this paper, but there are simply too many. TNC’s field staff generated a database on the sacred spaces of the area. Gathering information such as: type of sacred site, Tibetan name, name meaning, mountain description, relevant histories, relevant folk stories, relevant scripture, resource management and guidelines, how use differs from religious guidelines and why, and community information (Ma 3).

This information was put together in various ways, along with Tibetan local cultural information such as Traditional medicinal information, traditional herding and agricultural practices, and traditional festivals. This traditional information can be very useful for conservation efforts. For example, traditional herding practices are semi-nomadic and moving livestock seasonally reduces erosion (Ma). A second example; At one point the government attempted to introduce high yield wheat into the area, the wheat itself was high yield, however the hay was much shorter than normal which resulted in far less food of livestock, so the locals had to use the extra wheat to feed the live stock (Ma).

Once compiled the information was given back to the village through information sessions.

Since various information is only known by village specialists, few people have an in-depth knowledge of the vastness of their own cultural heritage (Ma). Ci Li Nuo also created a book detailing Yubeng's unique spiritual beliefs to give back to the village, since such information had previously been passed down orally, and had never before been transcribed. Ci Li Nuo hopes that this will strengthen and preserve local mythology.

Ma Jianzhong believes that tourism and money have been more destructive to local culture than the Cultural Revolution, in the sense that the new generation cares far less about religion and culture than ever before (Ma interview). It is probably a combination, however. The forced elimination of Tibetan culture during one generation coupled with current modernization's effects generated by the modern media and material desires has significantly changed Tibetan culture even in areas as remote as Yubeng. However since the increase in tourists arriving to the village an influx in curiosity about Yubeng's cultural heritage has occurred, and unlike many places in China, TNC was able to compile that information, and distribute it to an incredibly receptive audience.

Another powerful method of supporting community unity and cultural identity is TNC's Photovoice project. The project gives cameras to villagers and asks them to document imagery that is important to them. The philosophy behind the project is to counteract the "one way flow of information," created by the media in rural areas (Jing 1). Since controlling and utilizing visual art forms "is not evenly distributed," rural audiences are mostly "passive recipients of outside images and information...which display the 'wondrous' outside world with new knowledge and descriptions of 'modern' materialism" (1). Photovoice attempts to give rural villagers a change to the outside world what life is like in the area from the perspective of the people. This gives villagers the chance to "communicate their values and knowledge to the outside world" (Norton 4).

If efforts in Northwest Yunnan are to be successful, government officials, scientists and international organizations must learn from those who have been living on this land for generations and design strategies that incorporate indigenous knowledge, honor sacred geography and spiritual practices, and build partnerships with villagers of this special place...involving local people, eliciting their knowledge developed over hundreds of years living on the land... [Photovoice] has given villagers a unique way to chronicle their lives and their world and to influence conservation planning and actions (Norton 5)

While eating lunch with Ananzhu he quickly revealed a box of photos to me, which he told me he had taken with the camera TNC had given him and four other villagers around Yubeng. He

showed me a picture he had taken of the sacred ice lake that I had already seen in the Photovoice magazine TNC published. Ananzhu told me that the picture demonstrated that the sacred lake is growing because the climate is getting warmer. He really enjoyed the project, and said that other villagers felt the same way.

Supporting community identity empowers the community to work together more effectively and willingly. TNC's main objective on the area is to be a facilitator. Meetings organized by Ci Li Nuo and Ma are times for the community to voice their desires and concerns, and TNC can provide ideas, tools and insights. A cohesive community can more effectively make such decisions. Yubeng and Adong villages have both created a preliminary draft of community laws and regulations. This is an important step which empowers the community politically. The "Law of Regional Ethnic Autonomy" endowed villagers with the power to create their own legislation, however little community cohesiveness makes it hard for villagers to enact such legislation (Jing 13).

In Yubeng however, community building has empowered villagers to write legislation that protects their rights and their environment, against unmanaged tourism and development. In the Yubeng rule book enacted in 2005 it states: "Tourism has recently developed significantly causing many new problems and issues. These regulations attempt to control and adjust these issues. All rules and regulations were discussed, designed and enacted by all the villagers of Yubeng" (Yubeng). The laws limit the cutting of trees, and design specific area where no one is allowed and no resources can be utilized. It also outlaws poaching and offers rewards to those who find poachers. The laws establish grass land management rules, requiring villages to use a variety of pastures around the area. It also establishes rules regulating the sustainable harvesting of medicinal plants, and outlaws the harvesting of some especially rare plants. The law also limits any outside investment, which reduces the risk of outsiders infiltrating local business as has occurred in Meili Village and Lijiang. The rules also require locals to construct only traditional Tibetan buildings and require all village adults to attend local festivals, in an effort to preserve culture. The alternating of tourist business in guesthouses and horse rental has also been codified. The collection of scientific material is strictly regulated in the rule book, and access to Yubeng's medicinal herbs is restricted to residence, in an effort to gain rights over this local natural

resource. The rules created by the Yubeng villagers show that the village is gaining the ability to effectively manage their own future, creating an empowered and unified community and culture.

Education

The volunteer teacher from Shanghai, “Ellen”, staying at Arong Lao Shi’s guesthouse told me of the troubles she has faced as the town’s only teacher. Ellen said that parents do not respect the school or think that it is important. They think religion is more important, and treat her more like a baby sitter than a teacher. Parents often ask her if they can take their children out of school for a few weeks to go on pilgrimage. She always refuses, telling them that school is far more important. The schools curriculum is mostly focused on learning Mandarin, and since she cannot speak Tibetan all classes are in Mandarin.

She went on to describe to me the financial troubles of the school. The school needs to be completely renovated, and Arong Lao Shi has designed the renovation, however there is no money to make this happen. She asked each parent if they might be willing to pool their money together communally to build the new school, however each parent refused. Shortly after she had asked for the money the village pooled their money together to build a new temple in lower Yubeng. According to Ellen, this demonstrates the community’s skewed priorities.

Ellen went on to describe the ways in which culture was being altered in Yubeng. She told me that locals no longer eat tsampa as much, now they eat Chinese food. She explained that this is a sad alteration and loss of culture. Her comment struck me as deeply ironic. The changing culture of food is more superficial than the changing nature of religion, and language. This is especially understandable after eating Tsampa. It is barley flour mixed with Yak butter tea to make a thick cereal tasting paste. Imagining eating such a thing for every meal does not sound appealing. Many people in the village including Arong Lao Shi actually associate their improving life style with having the ability to eat a better diet than before. As was discussed previously, Tibetan religion is a powerful interlocking force of Tibetan culture, establishing much of the social fabric and community unity among Tibetans. Therefore to not permit the pilgrimage of students seems especially destructive to local culture, as well as destructive to the relationship between the villagers and the school. If the school hopes to be accepted by the village the school and the government policies that establish its curriculum must be malleable enough to integrate local

culture, religion and tradition.

Another problem with the current education system in rural Tibet is its lack of relevance to village life. Li Ying, a research fellow at the Dongba Cultural Research Institute of Lijiang has this to say about rural education:

Only a fraction of youths from mountainous areas are able to complete junior secondary education and even fewer attend university. The majority return home after completing primary or secondary education with little interest in rural life...education should be adapted to meet the more practical needs of the pupils who inhabit these settings...[Due to] an unpredictable and uncompromising job market...many graduates must return home to toil in the fields with their elders...Those village children who have managed to finish their secondary education can find little use for the knowledge and skills they acquired at school...they have to learn basic farming skills from scratch and some are less capable of coping with farm work...In ethnic minority areas the traditional culture is rich in understanding the relationship between Man and Nature. However our current education system leaves little room for traditional knowledge and experiences that have been passed down over hundreds of generations. The limited material conditions in the mountainous regions make “modern” education vulnerable and the lack of ethnic traditional values makes it harder to work in these areas (Ying 55).

Much like the governments policy of incorporating the demarcation of traditional sacred sites into state-sanctioned nature reserves in order to make them accepted and respected by locals, the education system should incorporate the vast and valuable traditional knowledge that exists in the Kawagebo area in order to make education more applicable and accepted, as well as a vehicle which empowers local culture. A pilgrimage, for example, is an excellent educational opportunity. The history, mythology, culture, geology, and biology surrounding the excursion could contribute to a rich educational experience if incorporated into Yubeng elementary’s curriculum. The teaching of Tibetan language is also important for gaining the respect and appreciation of villagers. “Parents believe that Tibetan Buddhism is more important than Chinese education,” according to Anzhu, TNC’s alternative energy project manager. “The school would be more welcomed if it were a Tibetan school. Parents believe that if their children can study Tibetan their religious activity will increase.”

Ci Li Nuo taught a night course on Tibetan for once year, which was very well received according to Ma Jianzhong. There are also many other courses which TNC helped organize. Many courses taught basic math skills essential for owning a business. They were also general question and answer discussion sessions. Many villagers attended the classes, and participated enthusiastically. “Someone would say something like ‘What is the story of so and so, or what is the flower that looks like this?’” Ma told me. Other villagers would either answer, or Ma or Ci Li

Nuo could answer since they gathered and compiled all the regional cultural and religious data from monks, herders, and other local experts (Ma interview). This illuminates an interesting role being played by the increasing tourist industry. Curious tourists will ask their host questions, generating a desire by the hosts to know the correct answers, and to learn more about their own culture.

The classes were hugely successful due to a lack of activities in the isolated villages, and a strong desire to learn and participate by the villagers. This highlights the potential success of a program that established a monastery that was also an environmental education center. Currently Tibetan Buddhist monks are very interested in learning modern issues and solutions for environmental conservation. Ma Jianzhong was recently invited to give a lecture series on environmental conservation at a Tibetan lamasery outside of Deqin, which was very well received and appreciated by the studying monks. High monks have powerful sway in Tibetan communities, and the most effective way to build environmental awareness within these communities is through the monastic system. Furthermore, considering the strong religious faith of local communities, and the enthusiasm surrounding previously given night classes, Classes taught at such a center would likely be well received and attended.

“The Controlled Support of Tibetan Culture”

Throughout my experience I began to realize that the support of Tibetan culture is more of a contentious issue than I previously realized given Tibetans political history. After I returned I had a long conversation with Ci Li Nuo. He took me to his home. He seemed concerned, and eager to get something off of his chest. He told me that he loves his job with TNC, he loves solving the problems in his community. “it’s not about money,” he told me, “they can keep their money, and it’s very little anyway, but I’ve found something that I’m very passionate about, and good at.” He continued to tell me that TNC was not renewing his contract. “Tenzig called the central office in Kunming and told them ‘Ci Li Nuo is very bad, he studies Buddhism too much, and he is not good for this project.’ Tenzig was the Mayor you know, and the government does not like Buddhists, especially Buddhist that study a lot like me, that is why he doesn’t want me to work with TNC any longer.” Localization is a very good weapon, Ma told me once, Ci Li Nuo is a wonderful example of the power of localization. He is very well respected religiously and personally among the

villagers. Ci Li Nuo character makes him very effective at organizing and facilitating community decision making in the Meili area, however his religious ties appear to be considered threatening.

Ci Li Nuo's comments made me realize that I was living in somewhat of a cultural empowerment daydream, without thinking about the historical tensions between Tibetan Buddhism and the Chinese government, which naturally flow within an organization such as TNC who work closely with the government. The very core of Tibetan culture is Buddhism. The core of the Tibetan political system was and is the lamaseries and Tibetan Buddhism, so the government cannot completely support the political system of the monasteries (Ma). The Dalai Lama was historically and currently, both the spiritual and political leader of Tibet (Powers 136-171). Obstructing the political unity through the weakening of Tibetan Buddhism, and dissecting Tibetan culture geographically, has long been a policy of the Chinese government (Powers 170-187). In Tibet civil servants cannot visit the monasteries, in Deqin it's a little looser, but government officials are still underground believers.

The empowerment of local culture and religion, and the localization of an NGO concerned with sustainable development is an integral component for the success of any program. However a conflict is created by the necessity of a close connection with the government for an NGO to be allowed to work in China, and the government's fear of supporting Tibetan political power through Tibetan Buddhism creates a conflict. TNC is delicately and diplomatically balancing this dichotomy. However the conflict need not exist. With the successful improvement in the quality of life through sustainable development programs, such as TNC's Meili project, locals gain an appreciation for the program and the government that supports such a program. The feeling of empowerment and cultural self-confidence reduces dissenting tendencies, especially when an improved standard of living is simultaneously achieved.

Life is better but...

Within and beyond the issue of cultural empowerment, TNC and Yubeng village face a few current and future challenges. As I was roaming the village for information with Michael Liu we were constantly reminded of the road.

After asking what the biggest problems facing Yubeng were, Jiu Nalabo immediately said

“the big paved road that might come.” If a road is paved to Yubeng her husband Ananzhu, will not earn the money he is currently from giving horseback rides to tourists across the mountain. I saw the same problem at Bitahai Lake, where a road was recently constructed, and only a few private busses are allowed on this road. The village below the lake prospered from taking visitors on horseback to the lake. However, with the privatization of the national park, and the parks new bus system, many of these villagers have been forced back to their farms to provide for their families, according to the bus driver who drove me to lake. He was one of the few villagers lucky enough to get a job as a bus driver for the company who now owns the nature reserve.

Jiu Nalabo went on to tell Liu and I that she fears the glaciers will melt and the environment will be destroyed if a road is built. “The living Buddha told us that this place is sacred, and we should protect it” Nalabo said. When he returned from his field for lunch, Ananzhu added that he has asked TNC to help them to not have a road built from Xidang. “If the road is built the forests will disappear and the ice of the glaciers will melt, and people will stop coming here because they come for the beautiful nature.” Ananzhu believes that cars cause the ice to melt, and if cars come to Yubeng the ice will melt faster. “I have seen the ice melting more and more, and the ice lake is growing. Many people in the village want a road, they want to buy a car, and once more and more people own cars the environment will continue to get worse. For a short amount of time we would have more money because many people would come if there were a road. But this would only be for a short time.” He said that out of the 34 houses in Yubeng about 14 are against the idea of building a road.

Ananzhu and Jiu Nalabo’s comments illuminate some interesting factors. First scientific logic, and modern notions of environmental conservation such as the green house effect are being introduced, however scientific logic is being naturally intermixed with traditional Tibetan logic. Berry Baker, TNC’s climate change modeler told me a similar story. While he was measuring the recession of the Mingyong glacier, which is receding exceptionally quickly due to its low altitude and latitude, he spoke with a monk in a temple close to the base of the glacier. The monk told Berry that since the temple installed electricity the glacier has been melting faster. There was a short period of time, a few days, when the electricity went out. During that time the glacier stopped melting, and when the electricity went on again the glacier began to melt again. There is

also a monastery half way up the glacier, but they have decided never to install electricity in this monastery for fear that the glacier will disappear completely if they do.

Ananzhu and Jiu Nalabo's comments also demonstrate that TNC's presence has endowed some villagers with a perceptive consciousness surrounding the consequences of development. Furthermore a conflict is immersing within the village surrounding the construction of a road.

As Michael Liu and I roamed Upper and Low Yubeng village, many people were working in their fields, tilling manure into the soil after the last of their harvest of corn, barley, and sugar beets had been completed. We began talking with a young man picking sugar beets with his grandmother from across his fence. I asked him what the biggest problems in Yubeng were. He held his hand to his head imitating a telephone, and said "we have no phone service, we need cell phones, and we don't have enough electricity to have a TV, but most of all we need a road." "Why do you need a road?" I asked innocently. He told me "Many tourists have started coming here, but a road will bring more, then we will have enough money to bring electricity and cell phone service here. Everyone wants a road."

Arong Lao Shi agreed with the young man. According to Arong building a road is the most crucial of the town's problems and must be remedied. He told me that if the government refuses to build a road the villagers will do it themselves. The only people who do not want a road are those who have worked closely with TNC, such as Ananzhu. Ananzhu was recently flown to New York to participate in a conference on TNC's Photovoice project, an incredibly well received and widely publicized event in the American media.

The concept of a road as the element that will bring Yubeng into the modern world, and ultimately raise their standards of living, is understandable. I cannot say they I would want my home town to be without a road. However there may be ways to find middle ground if the prospects of a road leading to Yubeng become inevitable. Ma Jianzhong told me that the government has already agreed that if a road were built it would follow the less impactful route around the base of the mountain, as opposed to across the mountain pass from Xidang. Furthermore access to the road could be restricted to a few vehicles, which could run on alternative energy, allaying villagers' fears, and minimizing environmental impact as well as the number of visitors, while giving villagers quicker access to trade and medical care.

Alternatives and Solutions

Over-dependency on tourism can create a volatile economy, and does not adequately utilize valuable local indigenous knowledge and natural resources. 80% of Chinese traditional medicine can be found in the region, and the knowledge surrounding its use and gathering lies within the local population. I met a man in Yubeng with a handful of strange looking sticks. He told me that they were called winter worm summer grass. “In the winter they are a worm which burrows into the ground, and in the summer the worm turns into grass. It is good for making old people strong, and see better.” According to Berry Baker, wormgrass is actually a parasitical fungus, which invades the winter cocoon of a moth larva, out of which grows a mushroom. This is a very rare, and expensive medicinal fungus only found in a few places around this region. The man with the wormgrass told me that the bundle of about twenty cost him 40 Yuan (\$5 US). The same amount is worth at least 1000 Yuan (\$125 US), in Kunming according to a variety of people I asked. As is true with many commodities, the amount that the producer receives for their product from middlemen is far less than the amount paid by consumers.

A communal business established by a village with the ability to sell medicinal herbs directly to the consumer would greatly improve the local economy. Such a system could be established if a webpage were established and transportation were arranged. If such a business were collectively owned a portion of the profits could be directed toward local infrastructure, such as the installation of a solar power plant, which could give villagers the adequate electricity they desire, as well as improved medical facilities. This infrastructure could reduce the necessity of a paved road, leading to the sustained protection of the surrounding environment and cultural integrity.

Ma Jianzhong believes that the first step for such an idea working is further community empowerment and unity. People must trust each other enough to work together toward communal goals. Furthermore villagers must gain the rights to their village’s medicinal plants, and sustainable harvesting regulations must be officially established. All of which is slowly being currently established through legal processes, and community integration.

Conclusion

Tibetan religion and culture is intimately interwoven with the successful sustainable development of Yubeng village. For development to be successfully managed indigenous

knowledge and religion play a central role. Outside organizations must act as facilitators who empower locals to take control of their future. TNC' s alternative energy program and Greenvillage credit program gives villagers the quality of life necessary to begin thinking about ways to conserve their environment. Gathering indigenous knowledge creates a foundation for effective environmental conservation and management which is compliant with local customs and beliefs. Respecting and understanding those beliefs allows the government, tourists and international organizations to recognize traditional methods of conservation that exists in Tibetan Buddhist belief and practices, as well as local experts. Compiling cultural information endows communities with a greater sense of cultural unity and pride in the uniqueness of their culture as well as empowering communities to have greater power and influence in important decision making. Allying with locals who are religiously respected generates respect and cultural empathy, especially within Tibetan communities who are especially connected with Tibetan Buddhism, and contributes to the success of a program. Cultural unity and empower enables a community to sustain its own development (the central goal of sustainable development).

The program in Yubeng should continue focusing on empowering respected locals within its program, and continue valuable education sessions, as well as lobbying for more relevant local education and local teachers in the elementary school. The program could also attempt to begin discussion about the prospects for communal medicinal plant businesses which sell directly to consumers. Although a few issues exist, and there is always room for improvement in any sustainable development program, TNC' s program in Yubeng has been very successful due to its holistic and culturally integrative approach. Yubeng should be focused on by the government, international organizations, and local communities, as an important model and methodology for sustainable development programs in the Tibetan area.

Itinerary

11/6- I began my ISP by traveling to Zhongdian where I stayed at Hazels guest house for 3 nights, for 15Yuan per night. She let me keep all my extra stuff there while I was traveling about which was really helpful. In Zhongdian I talked with the amazing folks at Khampa Caravan; Yeshi, Tenzig, and Dakpa, and did internet research to prepare for my trip.

11/9-I caught the early bus to Deqin (35Yuan), which takes about 6 hours, and checked into the Dexin Hotel (*Dexin Lou*), which cost 30 Yuan/night, but I later found out that you could talk them into 15Yuan/night. I talked with the TNC office, who were incredibly generous with information, accommodation and internet/computer use. I ate almost every meal at the office, and they offered to give me a free room after I returned from Yubeng.

11/10- I spent the night in Meili Village at the Meili Guest house, 20Yuan/nigh.

11/11- I set off for Yubeng with a group of friends, after a 10 hour hike we arrived at Arong Lao Shi's guest house. I'm not sure how much the guest house costs per day, however I ate almost every meal there for 4 days and Arong asked me for 150Yuan total.

11/13- I Hiked to Bing Hu (Ice Lake)

11/14- I Hikes to Shen Pu (Sacred Waterfall)

11/15-I returned to Meili Village, and stayed at the Meili Guest house. If I went there again I would stay at the Locally owned Tibetan lodge up the street for the same price.

11/17-I returned to Deqin and stayed at the TNC office for free. Meals at the office were about 30

Yuan per day. The staff also took me out to wonderfully educational meals with visiting TNC staff from New Zealand and Boulder, Colorado.

11/19- I had to move out of the office because someone else needed my room so I stayed one more night at the Dexin Lou, this time for 15Yuan/night.

11/20- I caught a ride with some TNC staff driving to Zhongdian. We had a brief stop at Zhongdian's Alpine Botanical Gardens, which has an incredible view of the surrounding marshes, I'd definitely recommend checking it out. That night I stayed at Hazel's again.

11/21- I went to Dabao Temple in Ringa.

11/22- I caught the bus to Baishuitai, a three hour bus ride, which costs 30Yuan. That night I stayed at a small guesthouse near the bus stop for 15Yuan/night.

11/23- I caught the Bus to Lijians (35Yuan), which takes six hours, but is absolutely beautiful as it travels through Tiger Leaping Gorge. Then I caught the sleeper bus to Kunming for Lijiang which cost 140Yuan.

11/24-12/6- I stayed in the dorms at Yunnan Normal University spending most of my time writing my paper and visiting with Ma Jianzhong in TNC central office in Kunming.

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Most of my research was gathered through interviews with the following people:

Ananzhu and Jiu Nalabo, guesthouse owners in Zhong Yubeng

Anzhu, TNC's Alternative Energy project manager for the Meili Project.

Arong Lao Shi, Principle of Yubeng Elementary.

Berry Baker, Climate Change specialist for TNC, works out of Boulder, Colorado.

Lu Jian Wei, TNC's administrative assistance in the Deqin Field Office.

Ma Jianzhong, TNC's Meili project manager.

Ci Li Nuo, TNC's assistance manager for the Meili Project.

Yang Jianhua, TNC's Greenvillage project manager for the Meili Project

Scott Freeman, American civil engineer who has been voluntarily building schools and medical facilities around Zhongdian for the last 5 years (he can often be found at Noah's outside of old town Zhongdian).

Yeshe Gyeltsa, Tourguide/translator for Khampa Caravan in Zhongdian

Most but of my interviews were translated for my by Lu Jian Wei and Micheal Liu. Most direct quotes in my paper are my best interpretations of their translations.

Ideas for future ISPs:

Differences between Bon, Dongba, Bomi, and Tibetan nations of sacred spaces

The Dulong

What happens when Tibetans are Catholic, Cizhong catholic town

Labor practice and rights around Kunming

The children who are organized by some sort of ring leader woman on Buxinjie in Kunming

Dongba culture in Muli

The role of marijuana in Naxi culture

Commodifying walking marriage at Lugu Lake

The history and medical importance of the Brainworm