

Resisting Modernity and Indigenising the Future:

Living with Pollution and Climate Change in a Sacred Landscape in Southwest China

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ABSTRACT: In Dechen (Bde chen) County, Yunnan Province, a Tibetan county of the People's Republic of China, prominent lay Buddhist practitioners work to resist and mitigate the impacts of agrochemical pollution and climate change on sacred landscapes. In this region of northwest Yunnan officially renamed and dubbed "Shangri-La" by the local and national state for tourism purposes, and in alignment of this name with the term Shambala, a place of divine serenity in Tibetan Buddhism, the protagonists in this paper insist that chemical futures and pollution are only adding to the creation of a "fake" Shangri-La, and that more than human- and nature-centric views are necessary in building a more ecologically sound future. This paper ethnographically analyses these activities and motivations in the context of ecocentric views surrounding indigenous Tibetan more-than-human spirit worlds. I ask what drives rural Tibetan grape-growers to pursue an ecologically friendly agenda. Motivations include observation of chemical degradation on land, Buddhist ethics, local land worship, and conceptions that being a local Tibetan should revolve around the preservation of sacred landscapes and mountain gods and spirits rather than purely economic profit and development. A critical variable, however, is that lay Buddhists holding these beliefs are exceptions, with most villages showing more concern for the economic benefits of new cash agricultures over sacred landscapes and spirits. I argue that while many villagers are willing to ignore the long-term vitality of the sacred landscape in favour of economic prosperity and view new economic activities as morally acceptable within Tibetan spirituality, some individuals insist that preserving the local landscape is paramount to a sustainable future both locally and across Greater China.

KEYWORDS: Tibet, China, nonhuman agency, Buddhism, pollution, climate change.

Introduction

Buddhism and belief are very important for protecting the environment and for sustainability. If you believe in Buddhism and you believe in your heart and pray, this helps us to protect our mountain, the glacier, the forests, and the river and water. (Ani Dom, 1 May 2015)

I easily recall my first encounter with Ani Dom in Bu Village in Dechen County of northwest Yunnan in 2014. While his daughter and I sat in her living room discussing the local wine economy in the village, an elderly man in a wide-brimmed hat appeared with a beautiful strand of Tibetan prayer beads in his hand. This was Ani Dom. From that moment, I listened, captivated, to him talk about

the region, the sacred mountain Khawa Karpo, Buddhism, the forest, his previous life as a hunter, and the pollution occurring with viticulture.¹ I would later discover that his and others' perceived impacts of pollution were connected with local climate change realities. This first meeting opened my eyes to a new type of local environmental awareness created by the expansion of viticulture with agrochemicals. It would be the first of many conversations I

1. The winemaking and grape-growing industry in northwest Yunnan was primarily introduced to local villages as an agricultural development project in 2002, in which the government provided vine seedlings and other supplies for village households to replace subsistence crops with grape vines to produce grapes to sell to the state-supported Shangri-La Winery. Many chemical fertilisers and pesticides were introduced and recommended for use and are applied today in large, unregulated quantities.

had with Ani Dom. Another key informant was Li Weihong 李衛紅, who is known for her work in organic viticulture, received a national environmental award in Beijing from The Nature Conservancy in 2013, and travels throughout China to share a documentary film she produced about her village and organic wines.

Herein I examine a particular religious and entrepreneurial identity surrounding Tibetan viticulture and local understandings regarding the impacts of pollution and climate change in Tibetan areas of the People's Republic of China. I question what drives some rural Tibetan grape-growers to pursue an ecologically friendly agenda and future. Conversely, without addressing these concerns (as most individuals in this region do not), what would a future without attention paid to local sacred landscape ecologies look like? Motivations among the individuals featured in this paper for creating a sustainable path forward include: observations of chemical degradation on sacred animate land, Buddhist ethics, and new conceptions regarding how ecologically friendly forms of commodity production protect sacred landscapes. These activities promote what Ani Dom calls a "real Shangri-La or Shambala" (a place of divine serenity in Tibetan Buddhism), rather than a fake one, in particular reference to the Chinese government's renaming of the region as "Shangri-La" in 2001 (Hillman 2003). Although government incentives promoting production of Shangri-La brand wine as development and state incorporation tend to overlook sustainability, some villagers are aware of and concerned about the effects of viticulture on ecological health and sacred landscapes. They question and demonstrate concern and fear regarding what this means for the future of sacred ecologies and mountain spirits. In response, they seek to alter new state and corporate-based wine commodity schemes to promote ecologically sound practices. Unlike most local producers, these select villagers are interested in a future that promotes sustainability and ecology, and in their pursuit of these values, they practise viticulture and winemaking in ways that they consider to be compatible with indigenous cosmologies. Their approach runs counter to that of many village grape-growers who have merely accepted growing grapes and the agrochemicals introduced with them by the state as a means to improve their economic livelihood. This reflects similar observations elsewhere in Tibet, where new markets and livelihoods, in particular fungi-collecting activities that were previously viewed as invading upon sacred lands and gods, are now in the eyes of local villagers morally acceptable forms of natural resource extraction given the rising economic value of such commodities within capitalist market society (Woodhouse et al. 2015).

Most are engaged in a process of "indigenising modernity" (Sahlins 1999; Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015), to describe situations in which indigenous populations adapt to modernity and new market economies by engaging with them in their own innovative ways. For a majority of Dechen Tibetans, however, "indigenising modernity" does not necessarily involve following ecologically sound practices. But for Li Weihong in particular, ecological practices are a vital component of such endeavours and involve the integration of viticulture into local worldviews. Many around Li Weihong and Ani Dom produce grapes and wines marketed and labelled as "Tibetan" and with imagery of the sacred mountain Khawa Karpo and the local landscape. However, Li Weihong and Ani Dom contend that the villagers produce these commodities

using conventional fertilisers and pesticides against the views and wishes of the local spirit landscape and sacred mountain, whose deity inhabitants are opposed to agriculture that favours chemicals and pollution. Utilising the mountain and its sacred landscape to promote Tibetan culture for Chinese consumption, without paying particular attention to the views of the mountain and the spirits who inhabit it, is a poor decision in the minds of lay Buddhists. Their view of futurity specifically prioritises mountain deities, while that of their fellow villagers (and family members) involves a perceived lack of interest in preserving Khawa Karpo as a god and spirit. Most instead choose to utilise the mountain and the cultural values surrounding it to make profits with what Ani Dom and Li Weihong believe are negative consequences that are simultaneously killing the mountain, precipitating a dangerous and disastrous ecological future. These differing opinions and actions towards the mountain thus create tension between local Tibetans over their exploitation of Khawa Karpo and Tibetan "authenticity." This is not unlike state and market-driven change elsewhere in Tibet as observed by Makley (2018), where local perceptions are that mountain deities have become active within contestations over land development as the Chinese state appropriates Tibetan culture for economic development purposes.

Understood through a framework of religious ethics and cosmology, villagers have responded to concerns over chemical use on health and environments, including perceived pollution impacts on the sacred peak of Khawa Karpo, where glaciers are rapidly retreating. These responses involve villagers producing their own chemical-free wines, which they insist are healthier not just for people, but also for the mountain, the god for which it is named, and local ecology. This coincides with and reflects a perceived problematic ignorance on the part of today's average Tibetan farmers, who are disregarding centuries (including pre-Buddhist and prior Bön ideologies – a combination of shamanistic practices and spirit worship) of thought and practice with respect to landscape and mountain deities (Karmay 1994, 1996; Buffetrille 1998, 2014). Ani Dom, Li Weihong, and others like them in a longstanding Tibetan tradition acknowledge the "ecological" agency and actions of nonhumans in the form of mountain deities in hopes of generating a more sustainable future (Bellezza 2005: 330). There is an awareness among lay Buddhists that people have been propitiating mountain deities for generations and hundreds of years and that in doing so they have preserved the ecology and beauty of the region's landscape. They question then, why would their own children and other humans seek to break these relations with the mountain in favour of a future in which long-term sustainability (and economic productivity) is uncertain?

The sacred landscape of the mountain deity Khawa Karpo and its many lesser guardian deities is inhabited by a multitude of animate beings whom these villagers consider close neighbours. These spirits that dwell within and throughout the landscape, and whom villagers seek to move into the fold of local environmental politics, are viewed by Tibetans as not only neighbours but as superior to humans. A lack of devotion and care for these deities through the modernisation of agriculture with chemicals and other forms of "development" among villagers are, in the minds of lay Buddhists, leading to noticeable impacts and agentive reactions and behaviours. These are particularly apparent when looking at climate change impacts in the region,

including glacier retreat. The deities are thought to provide abundant natural resources and things like good weather for growing crops when people treat them with respect. Bad weather is similarly often viewed in Tibetan spiritual ecology as a direct agentive response by deities to the negative behaviour of humans.

Many Tibetans believe that things such as glacier retreat and disease among fruit trees are negative repercussions for mistreatment of the deities (Coggins and Hutchinson 2006; Coggins and Yeh 2014). These interactions are thus working to build upon past traditions regarding reverence and care for mountain deities in light of changing contexts to nurture more of what Yeh (2014), quoting Agrawal (2005), calls a new form of “environmentality” among some lay Buddhists such as Ani Dom and Li Weihong. As Yeh outlines, terms such as ecology and sustainability did not previously factor into the everyday thinking of Tibetan environmentalists who focused on local deity complexes, but after meeting and collaborating with Chinese environmentalists and Western conservation organisations the framing of their thinking changed.

Articulating relations between humans and nonhumans, I demonstrate the ways that Tibetan Buddhist environmentalists are agitating against larger state-initiated development schemes in response to pollution and climate change. Their stated intent in doing so is to provide agency in environmental decision-making to nonhuman spirit beings within the lands of Khawa Karpo. My goal in bringing these actions to light is to generate discussion and awareness towards the importance of nonhuman agency and indigenous knowledge and practice in mitigating and living with pollution and climate change in the Tibetan and Chinese contexts with respect to an ecologically sound future. While such perspectives are often ignored by conservation science, they have been in operation in Tibet for centuries and have been highly effective at conserving local landscapes and biodiversity with the recent support of the local state (Salick et al. 2007; Salick and Moseley 2012). Some might suggest that nonhuman approaches do not provide sufficiently grounded practical applications to solving environmental problems. Based on my interviews and participation with local Tibetans, one can see that it is precisely a lack of attention and care for the nonhuman beings living within sacred landscapes that has caused rampant pollution and environmental destruction. For some Tibetan grape-growers in Yunnan, however, humans are indeed not seen as exceptional, but as only one small part of a much larger world and way of knowing.

Framing this as an effort to listen to local lay Buddhists, who ask their fellow villagers and neighbours to pay attention to spirits and what they and the landscape have to say, provides a new way of understanding environmental problems and futures in China and Tibet. This is of particular importance with China being at the centre of the world’s crises of pollution from economic development, and Tibet experiencing pronounced climate change impacts with receding glaciers, expanding alpine tree lines, and warming temperatures (Baker and Moseley 2007). I ask in what ways the engagement of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners and entrepreneurs with their local spirits and sacred landscapes may provide new insights into future-making. While it is true that deity worship might at times be considered superstitious by the Chinese state, environmental conservation in this region for the sake of preserving mountain landscapes for tourism is a government priority. Local

environmentalism by actors such as Li Weihong, who works within the confines of state capitalist markets, is often encouraged. One important conclusion, then, with relevance for anthropological and climate change scholarship captured by others in this region as well, is that pollution and climate change are seen as local issues that stem from two factors: a lack of local devotion and reverence for local mountain deities, and an influx of new “modern” forms of agriculture and Chinese tourists who are not in harmony with sacred mountains and pollute them through littering and a lack of understanding and respect (Salick, Byg, and Bauer 2013; Coggins and Yeh 2014; Sherpa 2014). These perceived ecological harms, if continued unchecked, are believed to be leading to an unsustainable future.

Tibetan landscape animism, cosmology, and climate change beyond the human

Contemporary Tibetan Buddhism and mountain deity worship combines elements of Buddhism, pre-Buddhist Bön, and mountain deity or cult beliefs that predate Bön. Natural features contain spirits whom practitioners propitiate to maintain natural harmony. There are various geomantic points and homes of deities in the Tibetan landscape such as mountain passes, lakes, springs, and trees that are important to maintaining balance for even everyday mundane activities such as hunting, fishing, gathering food, medicines, etc. (Karmay 1994, 1996; Bellezza 2005: 330). Prior to the existence of Buddhism and Bön, Tibetan cultural areas have long had mountains, lakes, and rivers that are named after gods and spirits who are believed to inhabit them, and it is the role of humans to ensure that these deities are kept content through propitiation. Tibetan sacred sites and landscapes are multiscalar and include things as small as single trees and stones to items as large as entire mountain ranges.

Engagement with the spirit world through natural landscapes extends beyond religious beliefs, and includes local ideals and mythologies about landscapes, as well as a sense of place (Woodhouse et al. 2015). This is relevant given that today in Dechen, local people have come to represent themselves through local natural and economic resources, including ideal land for viticulture and fungi collection that the landscape provides. However, for some, such as Ani Dom and Li Weihong, using the land for economic benefit without providing reverence and respect to the mountain will lead to a problematic future. Khawa Karpo is a god and a deeply important landscape for both local and larger Tibetan Buddhist practice, and reaping economic benefit from the land at the god’s expense through modern practices including chemically intensive viticulture and hunting is seen as not paying proper homage or respect to the local mythologies that have developed over generations. It is worth noting, however, that similar forms of environmentalism and care for locally sacred landscapes suggest that these localised “Tibetan” efforts are likely also influenced by changing state policies towards environmental protection and communication with Western environmental organisations (Yeh 2014; Woodhouse et al. 2015). Prior to 2008, several transnational conservation organisations and domestic Chinese environmental NGOs actively worked in collaboration with local Tibetan communities to promote biodiversity conservation and the value of sacred landscapes.

In Tibetan cosmology, mountains are the most important sacred objects in the natural world. The 6,740-meter Khawa Karpo acts as both of two types of sacred mountains in Tibetan beliefs. It is both a *néri* in the local Tibetan language (Wylie transcription *gnas ri* གནས་རི), a mountain and god revered throughout the Tibetan cultural region and absorbed into Buddhist practice, and a *shidak* (*Gzhi bdag* གཞི་བདག or *yul lha* ཡུལ་ལྷ), which is a locally sacred mountain worshipped secularly by villagers and laymen in forms of practice predating both Buddhism and Bön (Karmay 1994, 1996; Diemberger 1998; Huber 1999a; Coggins and Hutchinson 2006). In greater cultural Tibet, Khawa Karpo is one of eight highly sacred *néri*. It is the most sacred among Kham Tibetans (eastern Tibet) and arguably the second most revered in Tibetan Buddhism after Mount Kailas (Coggins and Hutchinson 2006; Buffetrille 2014). Thousands of pilgrims circumambulate the mountain range every year, and every 12 years, tens of thousands visit during the Tibetan year of the sheep associated with the mountain. As Buffetrille describes, mountain cults surrounding Khawa Karpo (and other *néri* like it) historically underwent a process of “Buddhicisation” (1998: 30), in which its role as a *shidak* was drawn into Buddhist practice and pantheon, leading to its being transformed into a site for pilgrimage as a “holy” mountain rather than just being viewed as a secular cult by locals. Today, local villagers such as Ani Dom and Li Weihong who reference the agency of the mountain reflect both its veneration through Buddhist practice and its importance to their local spiritual ecology and ideology-spanning generations.

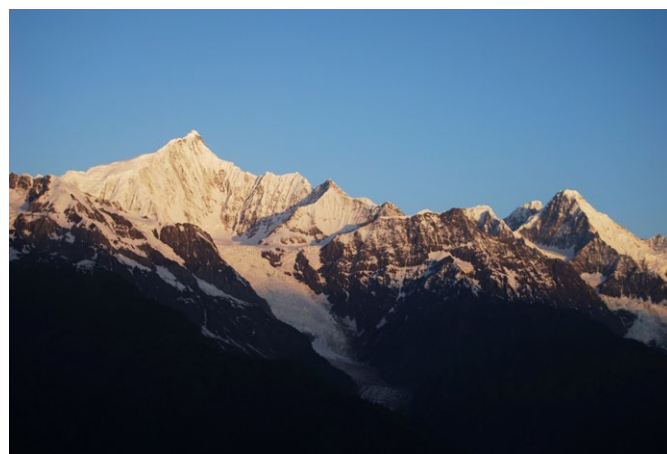
The name Khawa Karpo refers to the range’s highest peak and the god who lives there, making it the most common Tibetan name for the mountain range. The range in its entirety is named Menri, which translates as medicine mountains, reflecting the rich diversity that the habitats of the region provide in terms of traditional Tibetan medicinal plants and other resources (Salick and Moseley 2012). The most commonly used colloquial name for the mountain range, Meili Snow Mountain (*meili xueshan* 梅裡雪山), is a transliteration of the Tibetan Menri, originally coined by the People’s Liberation Army while mapping the region during the 1950s (Coggins and Hutchinson 2006; Salick and Moseley 2012). Sacred geography around Khawa Karpo is incredibly important for conserving a variety of habitats, landscape features, and old growth forests (Anderson et al. 2005). Historically, a religious management system existed among villagers in the region, in which people divided the mountain into two sections above and below 4,000 meters in elevation. This system was abolished by the Chinese government in the 1950s, but since the 1980s is gradually being reinstituted among local villagers including Ani Dom. Areas below 4,000 meters make up the mundane human world, although this area is still full of sacred sites and spaces. Above 4,000 meters, one crosses the “door of the mountain” *ri-gua* (*ri ‘gag* རི་གཤམ་). This marks the boundary between the human world and the divine world of the mountain gods, who live at higher elevations where humans must take nothing from the landscape. If someone commits a transgression against the gods above the *ri-gua* such as hunting, fishing, or cutting trees, the gods will exact revenge. In these relationships, the gods and Khawa Karpo serve as patrons and guardians to the local villagers of the region who show them proper respect (Huber 1999b; Litzinger 2004; Coggins and Hutchinson 2006). When villagers show the mountain proper respect and propitiation, the gods provide good weather and abundant forest resources and medicines. But

when villagers commit transgressions against the sacred landscape, the spirits are likely to instigate natural disasters, catastrophe, and environmental decline.

There are both lay and monastic examples of perceived local failures to appease the gods. One such occurrence was the failed attempt by Chinese and Japanese climbers to summit the mountain in 1991, when an avalanche killed all the climbers and was viewed by locals as revenge from the gods for disturbing their sacred realm. A second perceived failing in devotion to the gods is the effect of climate change. Khawa Karpo’s largest glacier, Mingyong, has retreated over the past 80 to 100 years as documented through photo replication of the works of early Western explorers in the region. Villagers and monks who see the glacier as a sacred site, traditionally marked by temples at its base, have observed this retreat. Because the glacier has continued to shrink, monks who worship at the Mingyong temple have begun to express concern that either they are not praying enough to appease the gods or that local villagers are failing in their devotion (Salick and Moseley 2012). Similarly, local village elders noted the following about the glacier’s retreat as a local phenomenon and violation of sacred space in a group conversation during a film cited and quoted by Coggins and Yeh (2014: 6):

Especially after the year 2000, there are more people coming; the pollution is serious and now there’s electricity. These three problems put together make the situation really bad. In the past, people couldn’t even go up [to the glacier]. Now even cows can make it up. If there were no people going up, no littering, and no electricity use, the glacier could recover naturally. If the current situation continues, the glacier will continue to recede (also see Nima 2002).²

Figure 1. Peak of Khawa Karpo with Mingyong Glacier below



Source: photo taken by the author.

These feelings and relationships between locals and Khawa Karpo and its glaciers reflect observations elsewhere in the Himalaya and the world, where local practice, cosmology, and worship intimately connect with glaciers as animate speaking objects. Often, such relationships with glaciers reflect more than responses to things like climate change as perceived by Western science (Cruikshank

2. See also the film 冰川 (*Bingchuan*, Glacier) directed by Nima Zhaxi 尼瑪紫西 in 2002.

2010; Drew 2012). For example, the anthropologist Julie Cruikshank explores a variety of oral histories and stories surrounding glaciers in the Yukon region of Canada, where glaciers themselves are actors and speakers in the changes that occur in the landscape. Some, especially coming from a Western scientific background, would attribute such changes (including glaciers receding) to climate change, while indigenous populations suggest that other nonhuman agents might also be at play. Grounded in her research in the Yukon, Cruikshank asks if glaciers listen. Conversely, for Ani Dom and others such as the monks residing at the foot of Mingyong Glacier, the glacier is speaking and locals are not listening or responding.

Understanding how Ani Dom and Li Weihong view their relationship with Khawa Karpo and its landscape, as well as their desire for better appeasing the mountain through more sustainable practices, can be framed using what Da Col (2007, 2012) has called “economies of fortune” in Dechen. Da Col frames this work around a sense of fortune, hospitality, and spirit-mediated vitality among local people at Khawa Karpo. Local Tibetan villagers’ economic fortunes, and thus futures, are intimately linked with how they behave towards Khawa Karpo and its sacred landscapes. This provides an intriguing sphere of analysis, integrating traditional Tibetan views about the local landscape regarding merit and fate while also addressing how these views interplay with modern economies.³ Two different viewpoints or methodologies in future-making come head-to-head. While Da Col suggests that many villagers’ economic activities still often mediate their relationships with Khawa Karpo and the local spirit world today, this still does not take sufficient account of the pragmatic views practised by local village farmers. Individuals such as Ani Dom and Li Weihong are unusual in exclusively maintaining such beliefs in mitigating their relationships with the mountain and the sacred landscape. Many villagers I have interacted with have accepted the economic prosperity and gains that come with modernity and things like viticulture and tourism profits, with less attention or devotion given to cosmology and spirit worship. Some explain that they carry reverence for the mountain, spirits, and landscape, but are not necessarily as keen to allow such care to come between them and economic prosperity.

Many of my regular interlocutors around Dechen often seem to care less than Ani Dom and Li Weihong about Khawa Karpo’s spirit world and its protection. Ani Dom’s own family, daughter, and wife in particular hope he might quit being a conservationist. In their minds, these activities do nothing more than alienate him from the rest of the village and waste the family’s money. When he was a famous hunter, everyone loved him, but now, according to many interviews throughout the community, most in the community despise him. Li Weihong’s family see some profit in her activities, especially the documentary film-making and the cash awards she has won for it, but many households in her community also see no real benefit in spending more time devoting themselves to organic viticulture when they can simply spray pesticides and spread chemical fertilisers more easily. I have seen many villagers engage in a number of environmentally destructive activities, from excessive littering to cutting down forest trees, simply to reach the wild fruit at the top. I have seen many trees cut down, and often people give no second thought to this activity. Many local villagers indicate that Khawa Karpo and its surrounding landscape is sacred and important

to them as their homeland, but contrary to Ani Dom, Li Weihong, and others like them, there is no ill will in seemingly harmless activities such as cutting down trees to harvest fruit or to improve one’s home or property.

According to Da Col, however, like the pilgrims who visit Khawa Karpo to gain merit, villagers in the region are constantly working to mediate and maintain a positive relationship with the local landscape to obtain good fortune. Acts such as cutting trees, even when necessary for protecting the safety of one’s own home, are still seen as negative by active Buddhists because they may interfere in humans’ relationships with their patron gods in the mountain (Da Col 2012). Much of the fortune and merit-building that Da Col describes is based on what he calls “cosmo-economics,” a practice of managing fortune and luck while simultaneously appeasing the spirit world around Khawa Karpo (ibid.: 75-6). Villagers share this vital energy with spirits and the landscape of Khawa Karpo, and believe incorrect actions can easily push it out of balance (Makley 2018). In this case, Da Col introduces the ways in which maintaining a balance between traditional beliefs about fortune and modern economic prosperity can create conflicts, such as through villagers’ responses to discovering matsutake mushrooms. At first, they are often happy that their fortune and vital energy must be in a good place to have made such a discovery. However, such a fortunate discovery may also imply future challenges. For instance, finding a large number of mushrooms all at once is often an indicator that their value and price on the market is about to drop. Therefore in the economies of fortune and merit, luck is not always as beneficial as it might appear, and this is something villagers are consistently leery about (Da Col 2007; Tsing 2015). Ani Dom in particular exhibits this type of reverence and caution in his relationship with the local landscape by warning that any human activities can be harmful to Khawa Karpo and its landscape. Li Weihong also cares deeply for her village spirit landscape and the mountain, although if she can keep this relationship positive through organics and sustainable methods, expanding her economic profits and gains is not a contradictory act. Cosmo-economics, for Li Weihong, represents a fine balancing act and method of mediation with the animate spirit world. Promoting organic agriculture is for Weihong a form of cosmo-mediated future-making.

Ani Dom, pollution, compassion for life, and Khawa Karpo

During my days in Bu Village, Ani Dom was my teacher and explained to me much about local Buddhist practice and the cosmologies surrounding Khawa Karpo, both the mountain and the god for which it is named. Ani Dom is a Buddhist with a deep reverence for life, the mountain, and the local environment and culture, and he regularly shared his feelings about what he perceived as excessive pollution from viticulture, which was killing the mountain and its spirit. He was not, however, always a Buddhist, and

3. See also Makley (2018), who draws from Da Col in discussing the in-depth ways that struggles over land and Tibetan cultural resources between local villagers, the state, and modern market economies have created what she calls “battles of fortune.” As I observe in Dechen, in Makley’s work in the Tibetan region of Rebgong in Qinghai Province, some local villagers readily collaborate with the state and take up modern market economies while others resist them, sometimes leading to intervillage conflicts and conflicts between the state and local mountain deities.

did not adopt these beliefs until a near-death experience, which he recounted for me. Ani Dom was a great hunter known throughout Dechen before 1986. That year, during a 25-day sleepless trance brought on by a heart attack, he dreamed about the spirits of all the animals he had killed coming back for revenge. He next saw the god Khawa Karpo in his vision and devoted himself to conservation. The god told him to throw his hunting dog in the river (which he did), and he surrendered his gun to the police. During his career as a hunter, he had killed 15 bears, 17 deer, more than 70 wild cows, 200 to 300 blue sheep, and numerous rabbits and birds. His wife did not support his hunting and even called him a devil for killing so many animals, but for the broader community, these escapades as a hunter earned him the name Ani Dom, “Grandfather Bear.”

Upon his conversion to Buddhism and environmental activism, Dom’s life has changed. Many villagers in Bu, including members of his own family and the village leader, now think of him as a nuisance for interfering in their economic activities and success in growing grapes and making wine. As the village leader explained to me, he really does not get along with Ani Dom because of his fight against chemical usage and Sunspirit Winery, a company which buys its grapes from village households. As the leader of the community primarily concerned with income and livelihood success, the leader thinks that overall, using chemicals is better for earnings and livelihood. He states that Ani Dom only cares about the environment and Buddhism and does not have sufficient regard for economic wellbeing. Today Ani Dom devotes all his time to working with NGOs to preserve and protect Khawa Karpo and the village environment. People have come to know him for his work protecting a sacred old growth juniper grove in the village, where he also worked to build a small temple commemorating Khawa Karpo using funds generated through donations from NGOs and Buddhist monasteries. Villagers such as Ani Dom who reside outside of the Catholic village of Cizhong downstream, where a long-term household winemaking tradition exists, indeed describe viticulture as something associated with modernity and for him negativity, because of the ecological harm it causes.⁴

Ani Dom’s stories about his work with various NGOs and his Buddhist teachings are important to understanding his actions. His seniors’ group, the Khawa Karpo Traditional Knowledge and Ecological Conservation Association, teaches villagers to plant grapes more organically and sustainably in collaboration with the Hong Kong NGO Partnerships for Community Development. For Ani Dom, this work became important when he began to notice that the overdose of pesticides used with grapes was also very bad for walnuts and other fruit trees, and that the soil degraded after many years of spraying pesticides and applying chemical fertilisers. Based on his observations and knowledge collected from outside NGOs, he explains that pesticides are harmful for the air, earth, soil, water, and all other life beyond just humans, and that to care about these things is what traditional Buddhist philosophies tell us: all life is sacred.⁵ Ani Dom first developed these ideas and concerns about sustainability in his collaborations with The Nature Conservancy and with the Khawa Karpo Culture Association in the 2000s.⁶

One day when I asked Ani Dom about the idea of developing a culturally Tibetan Shangri-La wine brand, marketed as sustainably produced, he explained:

Grapes and wine are not part of traditional Tibetan culture. This culture has been lost to the chemicals and garbage that come with grapes. Grapes and wine are from foreigners (7 September 2014).

When I asked about the future and any link between grapes and Tibetan identity, he stated: “If pesticide use continues, things will be bad, and the soil will be destroyed. I do not think the grape industry is promising for Dechen’s future.” For Ani Dom, there is no future with the current level of pesticide and fertiliser use and the pollution that comes with these chemicals. To make an ecologically sound future (or to have any future at all), the use of chemicals must be abandoned, and agriculture must be transformed using ecologically sound methods, such as those used previously with local subsistence crops such as barley and wheat, which have been long abandoned in favour of viticulture and its high profit margins.

Ani Dom’s story and my interactions with him are important to understanding the mini-environmental movement that exists in the region as a response to modern market economies. One evening in May 2015, while visiting the temple in the sacred juniper grove, Ani Dom talked about the juniper trees and their importance. As he explained, the sacred junipers around the temple connect with the Samye monastery in Tibet through Buddhist scripture. Previously the government wanted to log this grove of junipers, but he worked with other elders in the village to protect them as a sacred site. Ani Dom explains that the trees themselves do not speak, but that they still have spirits in them, and if they are cut, the spirits will be disturbed and disasters would ensue. The oldest tree in this forest is 1,200 years old, the same age as the Samye monastery in Tibet. There was an emperor during the Tang dynasty who was a supporter of Tibetan Buddhism and who journeyed to the West. He and the Tibetan king of the time collected juniper seeds from all over the world, and when they came to Khawa Karpo, a raven tricked them, telling them that the Samye Monastery in Tibet had already been built and junipers were not needed there, so they planted their seeds at Khawa Karpo, and the seeds became this forest. People also often problematically collect bark from the trees to use as medicine but overharvest it and kill the trees. Ani Dom then describes how some of the trees accidentally burned in 1988 when the road through the village was built. Before that time, there were never any floods, but afterwards a flood came and washed away a small shop, killing the owner. Villagers found three holes in the man’s hat and believed that these were from the tiger god who came down from the mountain and killed the man as punishment for the building of the road through

4. See Galipeau (2017). In Cizhong Village, all households grow grapes and make wine themselves in reference to their identity as Catholics and in reverence to a historical past with vineyards planted by French and Swiss Catholic missionaries. Here viticulture and winemaking are activities with much more cultural and religious association and affinity versus being viewed as purely economic.

5. Of course there remains an ambivalence in Ani Dom’s actions and beliefs about the sanctity of life given that he killed his dog upon converting to Buddhism. Given this contradiction, when I asked about it, he explained that according to the god Khawa Karpo in his dream, throwing his dog into the river was required as part of his redemption and conversion process to Buddhism, and his Buddhist forms of thinking are directed by the teachings of Khawa Karpo.

6. The Nature Conservancy was active in the region through the mid-2000s with many projects involving local knowledge experts and village conservation practitioners such as Ani Dom. See Litzinger (2004), Salick and Moseley (2012), and Moseley and Mullen (2014) for detailed analyses of The Nature Conservancy. The second is an environmental and cultural NGO started by a local Tibetan.

the sacred trees. During one evening prayer session at the temple on 2 May 2015, Ani Dom explained more about his Buddhist and environmental philosophies:

Things like mining and pesticides are not good for the five elements of nature and Khawa Karpo. They destroy the natural balance of the elements. China has lost a lot of its Buddhist philosophy and is very confused now. Buddhism is important for protecting the environment. There have been too many campaigns and too much violence in China with the civil war, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and current environmental destruction. This is why in my early years I was a hunter; I had no guidance towards the cultural values that were lost in all this turbulence. Buddhism is 2,000 years old, but today human practices of destruction overpower conservation. Humans are too greedy to satisfy their own needs and end up destroying each other. If you believe in Buddhism and you believe in your heart and pray, this helps us villagers to protect our mountain, forests, and water.

Another morning, as we walked down to the temple, we choose to go through the vineyards rather than on the road, and Ani Dom talked more about the ideas of Buddhism and ecology, saying that the government pest program with zapper lamps that we observed at the time and other techniques kill all the insects, not just the pests, so it is bad for the ecosystem's health and biodiversity. For Ani Dom, local knowledge is better than laws and policies for protecting the environment. Ani Dom explains that he believes nature is the state that exists without the actions and interference of human activities. These are his own words, and he claims to have developed this belief and way of thinking on his own. However, several transnational conservation NGOs have worked closely with villagers including Ani Dom for many years, and his way of thinking about nature today is possibly influenced by those interactions. Some local people resist Ani Dom's protectionism, but he explains that everything is connected and that things such as pesticides do not just affect one thing but everything including the water and the rivers since all are connected. He believes the government does not actually care about health and biodiversity. It doesn't give money to biodiversity or the village because this doesn't generate income.

Ani Dom's concern for ecological health motivated by Buddhist ethics leads him to campaign against agrochemical use. He has actively worked with the Hong Kong Partnerships for Community Development to organise special training sessions on organic methods for grape vine care and pest management. Although Ani Dom talks about reverence and caring for all sentient life and the natural elements around these things, including animals, trees, and natural elements such as the Mekong River, he regularly portends that the pollution that comes from viticulture makes the god of Khawa Karpo angry, because it destroys these natural elements and life forms.

Li Weihong, care for the land, and ecological entrepreneurialism

Li Weihong's work with organic viticulture, community organising, and NGOs is different from that of Ani Dom in that while also

Figure 2. Ani Dom discussing the sacred juniper trees next to his temple



Source: photo taken by the author.

motivated by Buddhist thought and care for the local environments around Khawa Karpo, she also uses this work for financial benefit. Unlike Ani Dom, she actively pursues viticulture and winemaking as an economic livelihood, but also uses entirely organic methods. She may thus be described as an ecological entrepreneur. She has actively worked with two of the same NGOs as Ani Dom, the Hong Kong Partnerships for Community Development, and the Khawa Karpo Culture Association, which in the past has often collaborated with participatory ethnographic filmmakers of the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences. According to Li Weihong, as elsewhere in Dechen, in the early 2000s the government introduced grapes to her village, Gushui, encouraging villagers to grow them to sell to the Shangri-La Wine Company. At that time, the government also introduced many chemical fertilisers and pesticides to use with the grapes. Over time, Li Weihong began to notice that the health of the local environment was degrading and that the walnut trees around the vineyards looked especially sick. As a Buddhist with a particular fondness and connection with the god and landscape of Khawa Karpo, she was concerned about its health. She wrote a letter to the Khawa Karpo Culture Association and the professor at the Yunnan Academy of Social Science who had been working with them describing these worries. Hearing about the environmental problems with pesticides, an American agriculture professor from Kunming came to teach Li Weihong and others about using sprays made from cigarette and grass ash as organic forms of pest control, along with using various forms of manure as fertilisers. She also connected with the Hong Kong Partnerships for Community Development, which sent a viticulture expert from the Philippines who trained her in organic methods developed in Bordeaux using natural chemical sprays. This was the same training program that Ani Dom helped organise in Bu Village.

After the American professor visited Gushui and taught Li Weihong about organics, she tried to pass this knowledge on to other village members and nearby villages, encouraging them to follow. Today 12 of 20 households in Gushui are all-organic, including hers, while others still use chemicals. She has worked with other villages, though, who have expressed interest in other parts of Dechen County. In the beginning in 2002, when the government began the

grape programs, her family still grew barley while the government requested that villagers grow solely grapes. Li Weihong wanted to keep some of the barley fields, but eventually acquiesced to her mother's insistence that they grow only grapes. Her fields are now all vineyards, but she keeps greater spacing between them than the government recommends, growing grains between the vines as she still worries that she will not have enough money to buy rice and barley at times. In Gushui as elsewhere in Dechen, most families have fewer yaks and cows than from before they planted grapes, but she still has 15 yaks, much more than most families because, as she jokingly explains, her husband likes animals. She agreed to keep more animals since they provide organic fertiliser. As Li Weihong explained to me regarding these types of "traditional" agricultural practices during our first conversation: "I like living in past times with things being less modern, including not using chemicals, using old horses, and living in old-style Tibetan homes." For Li Weihong, there is a future in maintaining traditional agricultural methods alongside "indigenising modernity" through organics. In her way of thinking, maintenance of tradition, such as through the continued cultivation of barley, can create a buffer against uncertain economic futures.

Li Weihong's work with organics and community organising has won government recognition on both national and provincial levels. In 2013, she travelled to Beijing to receive a national environmental award from the Chinese government and The Nature Conservancy, an event that garnered much attention from provincial media. The award included a trophy, certificate, and RMB 50,000. She explained to me at our first meeting that in the past her parents and husband both made fun of her as she was getting less money from grapes than other families with all of her organic experimentation. However, since the government sent her to Beijing and gave her a large sum of money, they are now more supportive. Li Weihong also explained that, like her father before her who actually introduced mushroom cultivation to Gushui, she very much enjoys experimenting and trying new things; she often tries out new pesticides she creates with local plants and has developed her own winemaking through experimentation.

Li Weihong's other primary project has involved documentary filmmaking about her village life and in particular viticulture and winemaking. In 2011, as part of a participatory documentary film program, some Chinese professors from the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences taught her how to use video cameras and basic film-editing skills. At that time, she explained how she wanted to make a film about grapes and planting and caring for them, but the professor running the program said it would be very difficult to film and explain this whole process and suggested that she instead film her village's Tibetan New Year festival. She filmed both, and the next year when the professor returned and watched both films, he said the one about grapes and village life was better. She has travelled all over China to screen it in many places, including at universities in Beijing and various ethnographic film festivals. She now spends about 90 days per year outside of the village for various engagements showing her film and organic promotions. When she leaves, she worries that her neighbours will start using chemicals, which really bothers her because she wants to produce pure wine and grapes. Her fears are well-founded, since it is clear that other villagers do indeed use more chemicals when she is absent.

During another conversation while working together in her vineyard, Li Weihong explained to me that her parents always taught her to be kind to everyone and everything and that you do not need to contribute to the country or society, but you need to be a kind person. When the Khampa (eastern Tibet) TV station came to interview her about getting the award in Beijing, she said she did not really share the news with anyone except for her parents when she took the trophy to their graves to show them; they were the only ones important enough to share this news with. Li Weihong also believes that these days more and more people are concerned about the importance of organics, so her reputation has grown around Dechen. I also observed how, overall, her vineyards and the surrounding ecosystem look much healthier than elsewhere in Dechen. There are more birds, more greenery, and indeed more weeds, but her vineyards look more natural and less controlled than other places where agrochemicals are used. In addition to being environmentally friendly, the profit potential of her organic projects and the desire among more people in China for things that are organic and centred on Tibetan culture also motivate Li Weihong.

Figure 3. Li Weihong discussing her vineyards



Source: photo taken by the author.

Reactions to pollution and climate change in the context of modernity and Khawa Karpo cosmology

Ani Dom and Li Weihong's work promoting ecologically friendly agendas with viticulture both connect with their care for the local landscape surrounding Khawa Karpo, although in many ways they are in opposition. Li Weihong is an environmentally conscious entrepreneur who has mastered the art of coexistence and collaboration with the state by negotiating her own market outside of state-run capitalism, "indigenising modernity" in the same way described by Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud (2015) in which local minorities in Yunnan strive to fashion state-formed market economies into their own ways of thinking and indigenous practice. For Li Weihong, to be indigenous and to be modern means to recognise and maintain balance with the sacred landscape while still engaging with the emerging viticulture and market economy taking shape within the region; this is the ecological future she envisions. Others

around Li Weihong, including some of her fellow villagers, do not take this view and practise agriculture using agrochemicals and methods introduced by the state without localising these practices to conform in a way that does not pit them against the wishes of local mountain deities. On the other hand, Ani Dom does not seek to engage with modernity or markets and contrarily retreats from, resists, and avoids the authorities as much as he can. No real amount of economic prosperity is acceptable to him. However, both villagers' motivations remain based on Khawa Karpo's renown throughout the Tibetan world, and the local cosmologies that Tibetans follow with respect to the mountain deities. In doing so, Ani Dom and Li Weihong acknowledge the agency of the mountain and other nonhuman beings because of the negative ecological ramifications of not doing so. Without such acknowledgement, any future at all is uncertain as seen through harbingers from the spirit world such as the shrinking of Mingyong Glacier.

Contrasting Ani Dom and Li Weihong's actions with those of other villagers in many ways exemplifies an inverse "economy of fortune" (Da Col 2007, 2012), wherein villagers feel endowed with certain riches given by the environment around them. To others, unlike Ani Dom and Li Weihong, concerns over trespassing on sacredness and the animate landscape in order to benefit from this fortune is mostly nonexistent in the modern economy. Being a resident of a community with access rights and tenure to this landscape gives people the right to do so. Today, quality of life and standards of living drive economic success. The production and sale of grapes is vital to this standard of living, as conveyed to me by several villagers when I asked if growing grapes or making wine is part of being a Dechen Tibetan today. This goes hand-in-hand with collecting and marketing items such as valuable mushrooms, which like wine are highly desired not by local Tibetans themselves but rather by Chinese consumers, or in the case

of matsutake, consumers in Japan. The modern economic success of Dechen's people is largely a product of capitalism and commodity chains.

Taking up viticulture and collecting fungi are some ways that most of the region's villagers have "indigenised modernity" (Sahlins 1999; Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015). Ani Dom and Li Weihong's practices and ways of doing so, however, remain exceptions to these methods, attempting to maintain balance in luck and fortune with the spirit world to preserve the possibility of a future. They act in hope of mitigating the nascent impacts from pollution and climate change seen in the local landscape. Based upon these understandings, to come to grips with climate change and economic modernity, taking a more ecocentric view like the one inspired in Ani Dom and Li Weihong by the deity Khawa Karpo is perhaps warranted and necessary to understand how global environmental change is perceived and mitigated at the local level.

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