The Mobilization of "Nature": Perspectives from North-west Yunnan

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ABSTRACT The Yunnan Great Rivers Project is a collaborative conservation and development project between the Yunnan provincial government and The Nature Conservancy. Transnational environmental projects of this kind must be brought more critically into view in order to understand the competing discourses and struggles over nature as the west is opened for investment. In this case the subject of ethnographic enquiry is a county-level workshop sponsored by The Nature Conservancy which drafted a petition eventually presented to the State Council requesting an end to mountaineering on a "sacred" Tibetan mountain. This case study raises a series of questions about the politics of ethnic minority empowerment and disempowerment and the transforming role of transnational environmental activity, including the production of biological and cultural knowledge.

On a flight from Bangkok to Kunming in 2000, I stumbled across an article in an in-flight magazine called, "In search of Shangri-la: adventures at the end of the world." Before me was a description of the author's journey from Bangkok into the heart of the mountainous region of north-west Yunnan. I scribbled it into my field notebook: "This could well be the Shangri-la many people dream of, the Shangri-la of pure, unpolluted air, framed by slowing moving white clouds in a sky of deep blue." The author proceeds, merging the allure of pristine nature with the ethnographic gaze: "And the innocent smiles on the tainted faces of Tibetan children soon remove any vestige of fatigue; innocent eyes outshining the dirt on their faces, making it easy to return a smile that quickly melts any wall of differences." Despite the obvious romanticism of this imagery – and I would find it again and again in popular magazines and tourist brochures over the next two years – north-west Yunnan is indeed a remarkable place, historically complex for its inter-ethnic relations, culturally bizarre for its hybrid worlds of contemporary consumerism and Buddhist spirituality, and stunning for its natural landscapes, its river gorges, snow peaks, glaciers, flowers, mushrooms, medicinal herbs and, of course, its forests. It has today become a mountaineer's dream and a backpacker's playground. Once again, as it was during the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, it is re-emerging as a botanical laboratory, arguably one of the world's most diverse biological eco-zones.

The transformation of north-west Yunnan in the last decade owes much to the phenomenal growth of tourism in Yunnan province. For example, for the province as a whole, between 1980 and 1990, foreign exchange income from tourism increased from $1.75 million to $16.43 million. In

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1991, this grew to $63.79 million, an increase of 388 per cent, three to four times higher than any other provincial growth rate. Between 1995 and 1999, the total number of tourists grew from 17 million to 28 million, a 16 per cent annual growth rate. The situation in north-west Yunnan is even more stunning. From 1991 to 1999, foreign tourists visiting the region increased from 28,100 to 238,381, while domestic tourists increased from 1,080,000 to 10,130,000, an annual growth rate of 36.5 per cent. Between 1993 and 1999, income from domestic tourism in north-west Yunnan increased from 194 million RMB to 3.955 billion RMB (US$485 million). The attention given to the old town of Dayan in Lijiang after the devastating earthquake of 4 February 1996 and after Dayan was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997 has certainly fuelled this growth.[1] But since then other places, further up on the Tibetan Plateau, have also been opened to tourist travel. Tourist growth in Diqing Prefecture, for example, is now almost as legendary as Lijiang's. In 1999, tourism statistics reveal that 180,000 domestic tourists visited Diqing, an increase of 300 per cent over the 50,000 tourists reported in 1998. In 2000, Diqing Prefecture reported 1,062,000 visitors; 67,600 of these were foreign tourists. By September of 2001, total visitors to the area had reached 1,284,666, of which 65,000 held foreign passports.[2] Deqin, the most "remote" of Diqing's counties, is today the launching-off point for trips into the 6,000-plus metre mountain range that forms the administrative border of north-west Yunnan and the Tibetan Autonomous Region. A Deqin County Tourism Bureau official reported that 86,000 tourists visited Deqin in 2000, of which 12,300 held foreign passports.

However, the opening of the region for tourist travel is only part of the picture. In the mid-1990s, Yunnan began to promote the idea of a "great ethnic cultural province," which resulted in the drafting of a government strategy plan in 1997.[3] The general idea is that Yunnan, because of the plenitude of its ethnic minority populations, was well poised to market the handicrafts, arts, traditions and cultural performances of its minorities. This commercialization of ethnic minority culture was given a further push when, in 1998, the tobacco industry collapsed. Throughout the early 1990s tobacco had provided 70 per cent of the province's tax revenues. As Andreas Wilkes has argued, this neoliberal approach to development in Yunnan treats culture as a renewable resource, subject to the laws of supply and demand.[4] Across the province, this has furthered the commer-

1. See Charles McKhann, "The good, the bad, and the ugly: observations and reflections on tourism development in Lijiang, China," in Tan Chee-Beng *et al.* (eds.), *Tourism, Anthropology and China* (White Lotus Press, 2001), pp. 147–166.

2. These figures come from various tourism bureaus and are provided in The Nature Conservancy, "Tourism market assessment," unpublished report, 2001. McKhann, "The good, the bad, and the ugly," raises some issues about the reliability of such figures, p. 149.

3. See Yuan Shaolin, "Overall plan for the construction of a Great Cultural Province in Yunnan," unpublished government document, 1998.

4. See Andreas Wilkes, "Multiculturalisms and bioculturalisms: ethnic minorities, natural resources, and development in Yunnan, SW China," unpublished manuscript, 2003. Wilkes draws on the Yuan Shaolin report as well as on Yang Jun and Yang Hongyin,

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cialization of such activities as the Dai Water Festival, Dongba pictograms, Naxi ancient music and Tibetan horse races. In short, under the aegis of the "great ethnic cultural province" scheme, the futures of minority livelihoods are increasingly linked to the establishment of strategically located cultural enterprise sectors and the marketing of ethnic brand names.

In conjunction with the marketing of ethnic culture as a strategy of economic development, Yunnan has also become the site for a number of international conservation and development projects. These projects are also contributing to how the "western" regions of China are being ideologically rethought and, in turn, spatially reorganized as sites not just for investment but also for cultural struggle. The focus here is on a large-scale collaborative venture between the Yunnan provincial government and the Washington DC based environmental organization, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), known as the Yunnan Great Rivers Project.[5] The TNC project site is huge, encompassing an area of 15 counties and cities in four prefectures, about 66,000 square kilometres, approximately the size of Ireland and eight times the size of Yellowstone National Park.[6] The TNC staff has been working closely with the Yunnan provincial government to envisage and implement projects from the formation of alternative economic development schemes to the alleviation of poverty in rural areas to the conservation of the region's diverse biological resources.[7] They have also been developing eco-tourist villages and attempting to curb household timber use and other forms of localized resource depletion. Finally, in addition to their biodiversity work, they have worked to locate what some staff members are calling "sacred knowledges," in the hopes of integrating these systems of knowledge into policy recommendations.

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footnote continued

"Developing the nationalities cultural industry: a rational choice for coordinated economic structures in Yunnan," paper presented to the Leadership Conference on Conservancy and Development, Kunming, September 1999.

5. Research on this project began in the summer of 2000, when I attended an international conference in Kunming, Yunnan hosted by the Centre for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (see their website at www.cbik.com). Thanks to Xu Jianchu and Andreas Wilkes for this opportunity. I returned to Yunnan in October 2000 to begin researching the TNC project. From September 2001 to July 2002, I conducted additional research in north-west Yunnan. Funding for this research was provided by a Fulbright faculty research grant.

6. These are Deqin, Zhongdian (now Xianggelila) and Weixi counties in the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture; Gongshan, Fugong, Lushui and Weixi counties in the Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture; Dali, Bingchuan, Jianchuan, Heqing, Eryuan and Yulong counties in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture; and Ninglang and Lijiang counties in Lijiang Prefecture. In all, this is an area of 68,908 square kilometres, accounting for 17.48% of Yunnan's total area with a population of 3.094 million, or 7.47% of Yunnan's total. See The Nature Conservancy, "Yunnan Great Rivers Conservation and Development Project: biodiversity module conservation strategy preliminary workshop report" (Yunnan Great Rivers Project, Joint Project Office, printed 12 March 2000).

7. For discussions of the relationship between international NGOs and the Chinese state, see Michaela Raab, "Non-governmental social development groups in China: summary of a study Commissioned by the Ford Foundation," unpublished report, 1996, and Scott Rozelle, *China: From Afforestation to Poverty Alleviation and Natural Forest Management* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2000).

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Where does the central government's Open Up the West project fit into all this activity in Yunnan? Has it smoothed collaborative efforts such as the Yunnan Great Rivers Project? The first thing that must be noted is that the Open Up the West strategy has, in many respects, been a late-comer to the neo-liberal schemes of the provincial government, which were well under way by the mid-1990s. For example, the opening pages to the main provincial government statement on the strategy are filled with colourful photographic images of a number of sites and cultural practices that were already being promoted under the great ethnic cultural province scheme.[8] Moreover, the language of the text, with its obsessive focus on poverty villages, rates of consumption, areas of low and high intensity capital and infrastructural investment, was already being fully deployed in provincial policy documents throughout the late 1990s. When the provincial level Open Up the West office published its first major report on the campaign in June 2001,[9] Yunnan province, in a very real sense, had already gone west; that is, the province was one step ahead of the official rhetoric of the new strategy, already putting into policy and play the language and projects that were ironically being claimed as the genius and vision of the central government.

What about the view from the ground in north-west Yunnan? Throughout the course of research, I kept looking for evidence of how the Open Up the West campaign was transforming the region and lives of the people who live there. Though it was difficult to obtain official figures, a government official in Deqin county reported that the total investment in 2002 for the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture was around 400 million RMB. A large portion of this went to paving the dirt road first built by the PLA in the late 1950s that connects the county seats of Zhongdian and Deqin; the intention of this massive paving project, still under way, is to open up the far corners of north-west Yunnan to tourists, eco-tourists and adventure travellers, though one must also consider how it will hasten the movement of military troops and equipment. Another major project during 2001–2002 entailed laying new communication lines between Zhongdian and Deqin county, a project funded by the National Military Defence Bureau. These moves to make "remote" regions more accessible for business enterprises, travellers and future investors is consistent with the policy guidelines set out by Zhu Rongji in October 1999. All the same they do seem to be arriving almost as an afterthought; for many of the people I came to know, they were inconsequential compared to all of the other kinds of activities, especially around the figure of nature, that were sweeping throughout the north-west in the late 1990s and early years of the new century.

This examination of the Yunnan Great Rivers Project is thus more centrally about competing mobilizations of nature than simply related to the operation of the Open Up the West agenda in north-west Yunnan.

8. See Zhao Zhongbing and Wang Ziyuan, *Yunnan yu xibu* (*Yunnan and the West Region*) (Kunming: Yunnan keji chubanshe, 2001), pp. 1–16.
9. *Ibid.* p. 1.

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Cultural struggles over particular figures of nature, in particular battles over how landscapes should be named, protected and developed, might help shed additional light on struggles in other parts of western China, especially as the campaign becomes less of a case of financial conjuring, to use a phrase from Anna Tsing,[10] and more a part of everyday struggles on the ground. This article first considers the TNC project and the cultural politics of a workshop aimed to halt mountaineering on a Tibetan sacred mountain. It concludes by raising a series of questions about the politics of ethnic minority empowerment and disempowerment and the relationship between development agendas and transnational knowledge production in the context of China's strategy to "Open Up the West."

A Sense of Snow

TNC's work in north-west Yunnan began in Lijiang county, not far from the city of Lijiang. The origins of the project can be traced to the towering snow peak, the Yulong (Jade Dragon) Snow Mountain, that hovers above the Lijiang valley to the north of the town. The "father" (as he is sometimes affectionately referred to by members of the TNC staff in Yunnan) of the project is Vickrom Kromadit, a Bangkok real estate developer who first travelled to Yunnan in 1993 in the hope of developing a ski resort on one of the upper reaches of Yulong Mountain.[11]

Fuelled by dreams of further riches and inspired by the bustling South-east Asian economy in the early 1990s, Kromadit wanted to identify recreational sites for the new Asian middle class. According to him, Asia's new rich were discovering nature and a desire to escape the major urban centres of South-east Asia. He hired Steve Mikol of the Colorado-based Conservation Development Corporation to conduct a feasibility study, but Mikol found, much to Kromadit's disappointment, that the area's lack of snowfall would not support a ski resort. Deterred yet still enchanted by the region's astonishing terrain, Mikol recommended the building of a national park. A long-time member of The Nature Conservancy, Mikol eventually tracked down Carol Fox, who worked in the development office of TNC's Hawaii office, and is now TNC's China project director. Kromadit increased the stakes by providing a six-figure donation to launch the project. In March 1997, the TNC's board of governors instructed the TNC staff to proceed as advisors. By November 1997 China's first international environmental non-governmental organization, the Institute for Human Ecology, introduced the TNC advisors, who included Hank Paulsen, a Goldman Sachs executive and the co-chair of TNC's Asia/Pacific Council, to top officials in China. Within a year TNC opened an office in Kunming.

The stated mission of the Yunnan Great Rivers Project is "to preserve

10. Anna Tsing, "Inside the economy of appearances," *Public Culture*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2000), pp. 115–144.

11. For an account of this early phase of the project, see Ron Geatz, "Great Rivers of Yunnan: conservation in a Changing China," published by Tibet Environmental Watch and available at www.twe.org

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the biological and cultural diversity of north-west Yunnan province and promote the long-term economic well-being of its citizens by successfully integrating conservation and economic goals through compatible development strategies." The general project site is located where the eastern flank of the Himalayas turns abruptly south, where the administrative boundaries of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, the provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan, and the country of Myanmar (Burma) meet in the heart of what geographers call the Hengduan Mountains. This is the region where European and American botanists and explorers such as Frank Kingdon Ward and Joseph Rock collected plant life during the first part of the 20th century, when the first topographic maps and photographs of the region were produced and published in journals such as *National Geographic Magazine* and the *Geological Journal*.[12] It is also where the People's Liberation Army crossed the mountains in the mid-1950s, as they attempted to find alternative routes into Tibet when Kham resistance in western Sichuan thwarted their military advance. And where a major highway was built in the late 1950s, also by the People's Liberation Army, linking by dirt and gravel road the Chang [Yangtze] River and Mekong watersheds, a highway over 20 years in the making that allows one today to drive overland from Kunming to Lhasa. More recently, this is where international environmental organizations – such as the World Wide Fund for Nature and Conservation International – have located the world's most recent "biodiversity hotspot."[13] From the perspective of these and organizations such as TNC, the biological resources of the region are now under threat from the advancing forces of mass tourism and by village women who continue to collect firewood and shun the use of the new biogas converters that have been placed in many villages. Finally, this is the land of Shangri-la, the place where James Hilton's 1939 novel, *Lost Horizon*, has been rediscovered by enterprising tourism officials and communist capitalists, where a colonial image of a lost Tibetan kingdom has been given new life in a post-socialist imaginary world in which "man and nature" (to quote from a popular ubiquitous environmental poster seen throughout contemporary China) are to march ahead together into a future of prosperity and sustainability.[14]

North-west Yunnan has thus become, since the mid-1990s, a place of intense, almost obsessive activity, all centring around the desire both to consume and to protect nature. It is a place in which a range of people and organizations, in China and beyond, are now criss-crossing the region, setting up conservation projects, organizing participatory training sessions, starting eco-tourism businesses, shooting videos and taking

12. See Joseph Rock, "Through the great river trenches of Asia," *National Geographic Magazine*, No. 50 (1926), pp. 135–186; Frank Kingdon Ward, "Glacial phenomena on the Yunnan–Tibet frontier," *Geographical Journal*, No. 48 (1916), pp. 55–65.

13. See R.A. Mittermeier *et al*., "Biodiversity hotspots and major tropical wilderness areas: approaches to setting conservation priorities," *Conservation Biology*, No. 12 (1998), pp. 516–520.

14. See Tang Shijie, *Menghuan gaoyuan* (*The Illusory Plateau*) (Kunming: Yunnan jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000).

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photographs, hiring SUVS, paying radically inflated rates to translators and research collaborators, and reshaping the meanings of places. When travelling through the region it is indeed difficult not to come away with a sense that north-west Yunnan is one the last "great places on earth," as TNC brochures often refer to it. Here one finds the world's most diverse array of rhododendrons, a plethora of medicinal herbs, plants and mushrooms, and thick forests of fir, pine, hemlock and oak. It is a world of narrow, impassable river gorges, of towering peaks, of glaciers that fall from the sides of mountains and can be seen miles away from strategically located "scenic spots." TNC was, quite understandably, attracted to this excess of nature.[15] The name, "Yunnan Great Rivers Project," is actually derived from the fact that four of the great rivers of Asia – the Chang, Salween, Irawaddy and Mekong – flow off the Tibetan Plateau within 75 kilometres of each other. The topographic extremes are immense, with an elevation range in the TNC's project site of 5,000 metres. Locally, elevations can change 3,000 to 4,000 metres within 10 to 20 kilometres.

Coincident with this extreme topographic gradient is a similarly steep environmental gradient. Compressed within short distances are subtropical ecosystems in the canyon bottoms, rising through temperate, boreal and arctic-alpine life zones to permanent snow. Glaciers descending off Kawagebo Peak (6,740 metres), the highest summit in the Meili Snow Mountain range and the highest in Yunnan, reach the lowest elevation of any in China, nearly terminating in a subtropical eco-zone. Along these rivers and up the mountain valleys grow 10,000 of Yunnan's plant species. Some 500 species of bird live in and migrate through the area. The project site is also the home of the snub-nosed monkey and the endangered black-necked crane. Following Kromadit's lead, the dream is eventually to establish a national park, most probably modelled on Yellowstone, which would allow visitors to enjoy the region's stunning landscapes, glaciated mountain peaks and abundant flora and fauna, and to observe first hand how Tibetan and other "indigenous" peoples, with their cultural ideas of sacred landscapes, have protected and managed the region's biological resources for centuries. North-west Yunnan is thus a world where the European colonial, the Chinese imperial, the socialist modern and the global collide, where fiction has been turned into fact, where nature meets culture in fantasies of indigenous stewardship, and where the biological and ecological sciences are being mobilized to save the region and save the planet.

15. For a discussion by the senior ecologist on the Yunnan Great Rivers Project, see Bob Moseley, "The Nature Conservancy's framework for site conservation planning in mountain regions," in Xu Jianchu (ed.), *Links Between Cultures and Biodiversity* (Kunming: Yunnan Science and Technology Press, 2000), pp. 111–17.

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Anti-Mountaineering and the Politics of Collaboration

In 1998, record floods on the Chang River killed at least 3,000 people, devastated large tracts of China's most fertile countryside, and displaced or affected some 230 million people. Initially, the flooding was blamed on the heavy rains caused by El Nino and the abundant snowmelt from a heavy winter in Tibet and Qinghai province. Some months later another explanation emerged in China. Government officials began to argue that the floods were caused by years of extensive deforestation on the Tibetan Plateau, and in particular in the vicinity of the headwaters of six major Asian rivers, an area that includes the Yunnan Great Rivers Project. These officials recognized that centuries of conversion to grazing lands and small-scale fuel wood harvesting affected the forests of the Plateau. But they also argued that it was not until the 1950s, and the advent of intensive industrial logging, that the forests began to be seriously affected. It is today generally acknowledged in China that since the 1950s forest ecosystems on the Tibetan plateau have been under intense pressure from state-run enterprises, even though state forestry management laws and regulations prescribed a sustainable quota system by which annual timber harvests were never to exceed annual forest growth.

This quota system was never really implemented in practice, however, in large part because of development pressures or political events, such as the Great Leap Forward. When timber markets were opened in the early 1990s, there was a lack of effective management to deal with the market-driven over-harvesting by the many logging companies owned by different levels of the government, and there were also no effective mechanisms in place to ensure that state- and collective-owned forests were replanted. A 1986 study by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development in Nepal and the Beijing-based Commission for the Integrated Survey of Natural Resources found that the rate of cutting in parts of Sichuan province was nearly three times the rate of regrowth. In western Sichuan alone, 42,000 square miles of clear-cut land have been subjected to severe soil erosion.[16] Other studies have argued that the problem of over-harvests, combined with forest and other land converted to agriculture, are the main causes for the loss of 85 per cent of old-growth forest cover along the Upper Chang during this period.[17]

The Chinese government's ban on timber exploitation on the Tibetan Plateau in 1999 has transformed the economy of north-west Yunnan. In responding to the logging ban, TNC has promoted eco-tourism as an alternative to the now defunct timber industry. It should be no surprise that much attention has turned to the glaciated and snow-capped peaks in Deqin county, which form a north to south boundary between the

16. See Charles Clarke, "Logging on top of the world," *Earth Island Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Fall 1999), pp. 32–38

17. The literature on the forestry industry and its relation to resource depletion on the Upper Chang is too huge to quote in full. For a brief discussion, see "Ecosystem profile: mountains of southwest China" on the website of the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (http://www.cepf.org). For a broader historical perspective, see S. D. Richardson, *Forests and Forestry in China* (Washington DC: Island Press, 1990).

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Mekong and Salween gorge country. At the centre of this attention, and one of the key sites for protection in the Yunnan Great Rivers Project, is the 6,740-metre glaciated peak called Kawagebo or Meili Snow Mountain (or Mount Khabadkarpo, as the Tibetans in the area refer to it, or Kawa Karpo as it sometimes appears in English-language texts).[18] Kawagebo is considered by Tibetans all over the world to be a sacred mountain, and it properly belongs to that classification of mountains known by Tibetans as *neri*, literally translated as "mountain abode." Mountains such as Kawagebo are considered to be places of residence and activity of certain important deities. This means that not only is the deity thought to dwell in or in the vicinity of the mountain, but also that the deity is seen to be the equivalent to the mountain itself. Pilgrims from all over China visit this mountain every year to circumambulate the peak, in essentially a 12–15 day trek that crosses over three 5,000 metre passes.

Kawagebo has also been the destination for a different kind of pilgrimage – mountaineering and adventure travel, though to this day the mountain has yet to be successfully climbed. In villages such as Yubeng at the base of Kawagebo on the Mekong side of the range I listened to villagers recount stories about the history of mountaineering in the area. Between 1987 and 2000, numerous teams set up base camps in the grazing camps to the west of Yubeng, which sit just below the lower ice fields of the mountain range. These climbers came from the United States, Japan and China; the Tibetan Mountaineering Association has also organized several assaults of the mountain from the Salween side of the range. In almost every case, according to those interviewed, villagers were never informed or consulted about the expeditions, until an advance team arrived to hire porters, cooks and other support staff.

Most people in Yubeng and throughout Deqin county remember vividly the nationally publicized mountaineering disaster of 3 January 1991, when 17 Chinese and Japanese climbers were killed by an avalanche at Camp 3 at 5,100 metres during the morning of their final assault for the summit, an event that was broadcast live by the Chinese internet portal Sohu.[19] A young man in Yubeng, whose uncle worked as a porter and communications liaison for the climbing team, told me the following story:

On January 2 the advance team reported to the base camp that weather conditions were good for a final assault of the summit, which would begin at 2 am the next morning. This message was then relayed to officials in the Deqin county seat, and word quickly spread throughout the town that Kawagebo was about to be conquered. Within hours, hundreds of Tibetans from the town and the surrounding villages walked out to the Felaisi temple, where one can look out across the Lancang (Mekong) River valley to glaciers and peak of Kawagebo. The women especially

18. Kawa Karpo is the name used, for example, in Toni Huber's recent study of popular pilgrimage in the Himalayan border district of Tsari in south-eastern Tibet. See *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain: Popular Pilgrimage and Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

19. See "Report on the climbing of the Meili Snow Mountain in the new millennium" on the Sohu website, www.sohu.com.

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were extremely upset at the mountain, began to curse it, and raise their skirts, a form of insult. They were yelling at the mountain god, demanding to know why it was succumbing to this mountaineering team. The next morning all radio contact was lost with the advance team and within hours it became clear that they had been wiped out by an avalanche, which was heard and witnessed by many people in the herding camps in the valleys below. The villagers returned to the Feilaisi overlook, asking the mountain deity for its forgiveness for their insulting actions the day before, crying hysterically, but also praising the mountain for defeating the climbing team's final assault.

I asked my friend if those who made their way to Feilaisi during those two fateful days were sorry about the deaths of the Japanese and Chinese climbers. "Of course," he said, "everyone felt bad about the deaths, but many were more concerned that the corpses would never be recovered and just how these restless spirits could be tamed. A series of rituals were thus performed for the dead in the upper reaches of Yubeng."

Since this tragic event, Tibetan villages in the vicinity of the mountain have voiced their opposition to further expeditions, a form of popular grievance that did not escape the TNC staff who opened an office in the town of Deqin in spring 2000. I first began to interview TNC staff in the summer of that year and was invited to return to Deqin in October to attend a workshop convened by TNC and hosted by the Deqin county government. From the perspective of TNC interests in the area, the ostensible aim of the workshop was to popularize its conservation strategies, to discuss how to develop a comprehensive management plan for the area, and to promote sustainable social and economic development (green tourism). Local officials in Deqin also wanted to solicit TNC support to deal with Chinese national and international attempts to climb the peaks on the Meili Snow Mountain range. As the TNC report on the workshop states, "the ultimate goal of the partnership [between TNC and the Deqin county government] is to make Meilixueshan one of the top conservation areas in the world, combining compatible tourism and other economic development with conservation of the extraordinary scenic beauty, the vibrant Tibetan culture, and the rich biodiversity." Nearly 80 people attended the four-day workshop, including village, county, provincial and state government representatives, as well as Chinese national experts (from Kunming and Beijing, mainly) on tourist development, conservation financing and cultural preservation. The workshop was extensively covered by both the Chinese and international media, including representations from newspapers and broadcast television in Kunming, *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), the Beijing-based English language *China Daily*, and National Public Radio from Washington DC.

The workshop included visits to the Tibetan temple known as Feilaisi, which was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and has been rebuilt and refurbished in the last ten years, and to the base of the Mingyong Glacier, which drops four miles off the east face of Kawagebo. The workshop was organized around small-group work sessions, which discussed issues such as policy and public participation, biodiversity and

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nature reserve management, green tourism, and cultural preservation. In addition, there were public lectures by John Sacklin, chief of planning at Yellowstone National Park, and Uttara Sarkar Crees, who has worked for the World Wildlife Fund in Pingwu county, Sichuan and now runs the Gyalthang Travel Service out of the town of Zhongdian. There were also presentations from Yu Xiangqian, the deputy director of the Deqin County Tourism Bureau, Wu Jiyou from the Yunnan Environmental Protection Agency, Chen Shuwang of the Forest Ecology Section of the Yunnan Institute of Forest Planning and Inventory, and Fei Xuan, a Kunming-based ecological entrepreneur who is the president of a quasi-private, quasi-government corporation called the Yunnan Investment and Development Company.

Yang Fuquan, a scholar at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, who was once a member of the TNC staff in Kunming, facilitated the cultural preservation break-out group, in which I participated. It was also attended by Liang Congjie, the head of the Beijing-based Friends of Nature, and Wang Xiaosong, one of the most respected scholars of Tibetan Buddhism in north-west Yunnan. The group also included two "living Buddhas," as well as representatives of six different Deqin county government agencies. Much of the discussion focused on the history of Tibetan, Chinese and international mountaineering in the region and what should be done to halt current attempts by different groups both in China and beyond to obtain permits to climb the mountain. The reincarnate lamas explained in some detail the cosmology of local Tibetan beliefs about the mountain landscape, and why many people in the villages are opposed to anyone venturing above certain altitudes. This has to do with the ways in which Tibetan villagers divide local spaces into internal and external dimensions of their world, the internal belonging to the world of the household, the village and the surrounding arable land, the external belonging to the mountain and forest land outside village space. They explained that the boundaries between these worlds are marked by mani stone piles and incense burning ovens, and that many of these transition points are called Ri Vgag, meaning "the door of the mountain." This external world, located in the forests and mountain pastures in the high country around the village, is controlled by a group of local mountain deities, all of whom centre around Kawagebo. The main reason that mountaineering had to be stopped, it was argued, is that this form of activity disrupts the power of the deities and creates an imbalance between the internal and external worlds which brings illness and misfortune to the communities living in the vicinity of the mountain range.

When the various break-out groups returned to the larger workshop, the cultural preservation group made a recommendation that a letter of protest be submitted to Vice-Premier Wen Jiabao of the State Council. Liang Congjie, who has deep historical connections with government officials in the capital, would personally present this letter to the vice-premier. The aim of the letter, signed by all participants attending the workshop, was to get the State Council in Beijing to issue new regulations banning all future mountaineering on Meili Snow Mountain. A

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Tibetan TNC staff member eventually translated the letter from Chinese into English. Addressed to the respected vice-premier, the petition read as follows:

> We are conservationists, scientists, and scholars attending the "International Workshop for Meili Snow Mountain Conservation and Development," which was held in Deqin county of Yunnan province from 11 to 14 October 2000. This workshop was held under the auspices of the "North-west Yunnan Conservation and Development Action Plan Project" (NYCDP), which is being carried out by the Yunnan provincial government with the advice and assistance of The Nature Conservancy. Due to its unique diversified cultures with Tibetan culture as the core, intact ecosystem and rich biodiversity, Meili Snow Mountain is an area of great significance to the Chinese people and to the world. Meili Snow Mountain is in an area that the Chinese government is nominating as a World Heritage Site. Many domestic and international scientists and scholars have recognized Meili as unique for its cultural, natural, and scenic heritage. Therefore, the Meili area has been selected as one of the priority areas for the NYCDP and a comprehensive management plan, which is aimed at preserving the natural and cultural resources as well as promoting sustainable social and economic development of this area, is being carried out.
>
> At the workshop, all participants expressed the opinion that Meili Snow Mountain should be protected. Mountaineering became a heated topic of concern to all participants. Meili Snow Mountain is a famous sacred mountain in all Tibetan areas, and persists as a highly holy position in the Tibetan people's hearts. Consistently we heard about strong appeals from local people, religious circles, local government officials and scholars: they do not want any mountaineers, either domestic or overseas, to climb to the top of the most sacred mountain in their hearts. We also heard about a dozen climbing attempts organized by both domestic and overseas organizations since 1987 that have not only greatly hurt the Tibetan people's hearts and sentiments, but also brought about negative impact to the social stability and implementation of the national ethnic regulations and laws in this Tibetan area. In early 1997 the Office of the State Council wrote clearly in a reply to the petition by Professor Liang Congjie, a member of the CPPCC, to the General Secretary of the State Council, Mr Luo Gan concerning stopping mountaineering on the Meili Snow Mountain so that in future all of these kinds of activities should first listen to the opinion of all aspects and respect the decision by the local government. In late 1999 the Deqin county government submitted to the Yunnan provincial government a report requesting to stop mountaineering attempts on the Meili Snow Mountain.
>
> We, the undersigned, hereby ask you to consider the Meili Snow Mountain mountaineering issue; we hope you demand relevant departments to abide by the previous wide decisions made by the State Council, and to ban mountaineering on Meili Snow Mountain as soon as possible.

There is much that can be said about this attempt to petition the State Council to ban mountaineering on Meili. The letter itself makes references to the history of mountaineering in the region and it opens up a space for the representation of local forms of opposition, which are in this context given voice through an international workshop exploring the interplay and potential contradictions between conservation and development. (Obviously mountaineering could become, as it has been in other parts of the Himalayas, a huge source of revenue for the county government.) During the workshop, there were strong arguments from

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local Tibetans, religious experts and county officials that mountaineering was an insult to the Tibetan people. The protection of biodiversity in the region, they argued, should not only be about protecting one of the great heritage sites of all of the Tibetan and Chinese people, nor should the terms of protection only be stated in the scientific language of ecology. The protection of nature had to make way for the religious beliefs and practices of the Tibetan people, and this meant, first and foremost, keeping outsiders off the mountain. In the letter, there are also references to minority nationality policies and regulations which, in principle at least, call for the empowerment of local concerns in decisions about the trajectories of development. This seems to suggest that local officials, especially as the campaign to Open Up the West is stripping away some local decision-making power, are attempting to remind the central government of the precarious nature of political relations in minority autonomous regions. Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, there is a kind of new community imagery in the making, one that does not simply unify all Tibetans in the region, but also unifies local officials, religious experts and villagers with international conservation agendas.

There was also quite a lot of debate about how precisely to name the main peak. Should the petition refer to it as Meili Snow Mountain or as Kawagebo? Part of the problem stemmed from the fact that TNC, in planning the workshop, decided to use the term Meili publicly to name and announce their new conservation action plan in Deqin county. Several TNC staff eventually admitted that this was, on the one hand, a matter of political expediency: some government officials in Deqin thought it was too dangerous to reverse the tide of history and rename the peak using the Tibetan term, for this would amount to a public acknowledgement that the People's Liberation Army had made a mistake in the 1950s. Knowing that their project in Deqin would never get off the ground without the help of the government, TNC clearly acquiesced to the government's wishes. On the other hand, it is clear that the decision was also driven by the interests of advertising: the name Meili Snow Mountain has become such a fixture in the popular imagination of Chinese and international tourists that it was thought to be too confusing to use the Tibetan name for the peak.

This decision had unexpected repercussions. Several Tibetan and Chinese scholars, with long histories of research in Deqin county and who had worked with TNC in the early phases of the project, refused to attend the workshop. One, Professor Guo Jing of the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, insisted that he boycotted the TNC workshop because they had failed to acknowledge the "intellectual property rights" of the local people and had succumbed to the wishes of some local government officials who were merely trying to protect their relations with higher-level officials in Diqing Prefecture. By refusing to participate in the workshop, and by essentially cutting off his collaborative relationship with TNC, Guo Jing publicly contested TNC's decision to name the peak as Meili Snow Mountain. He also argued that TNC was simply

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replicating the new tourist imagery of north-west Yunnan as a rediscovered Shangri-la, in which the Chinese language was being used to replace Tibetan linguistic modes of naming the landscapes in which they live. Indeed, in tourist brochures and on adventure travel web sites, the peak is almost always referred to as the Meili Snow Mountain.

Guo Jing explained that Tibetans living in the villages at the base of the peak call it Khabadkarpo, meaning white snow mountains, and Kawagebo is a Chinese transliteration of this. In the Tibetan language, it is also called "Gnas chen kha ba dkar po" and "Rong btsan kha ba dkar po." The addition of "gnas chen" and "rong btsan" is meant to signify the divine nature of the mountain. According to local understandings, Kawagebo is the name of the highest peak, but it is also the general name for a group of mountain gods led by the god who resides in Kawagebo peak. That is, the name refers at once to a geological phenomenon (the mountain) and the gods residing in the 13 peaks along the mountain range.

The contested history of how Kawagebo came to be referred to as Meili Snow Mountain can be traced back to the 1950s. "Meili" is a Chinese transliteration of the Tibetan word "sman ri" (meaning "the mountain with medicinal materials"), which used to refer to a very short section of mountains (about 10 kilometres) from Luwa to Liutongjiang villages in Foshan township. At the foot of the Sman ri, there is a village on the Mekong River called Sman ri shod, meaning simply "at the foot of the mountains with medicinal materials." Starting out from Sman ri shod and climbing over the Shuola pass, one enters Zuogong county in the Tibet Autonomous Region. In the 1950s when the People's Liberation Army entered Tibet via this pass, they named the pass and the entire mountain range upon which it is located Meili. In 1957, when the Yunnan Department of Transportation was building the highway that today connects Deqin county with Yanjing county in the Tibet Autonomous Region, they used the original PLA maps. They too marked all the mountain ranges to the west of the Mekong River within Deqin county as "Meili Snow Mountain." This included the 6,740-metre Kawagebo peak.

Guo Jing has argued that since the unsuccessful summit attempt made by the Sino-Japanese Joint Climbing Team in 1991, the word "Meili Snow Mountain" has become the standard way to name Kawagebo peak and the ridgeline that separates Yunnan from Tibet. In fact, the Joint Climbing Team used the road building maps from 1957, when Kawagebo peak was mistakenly marked as "Meili Snow Mountain." It was for this reason that the climbing team came to be known as the "Japanese–Chinese Meili Snow Mountain Joint Climbing Team for Scientific Research." What they called "Meili Snow Mountain" was what the Tibetans called "Kawagebo," the 6,740-metre summit. Because of the wide media coverage that followed the failed summit attempt (the progress of the climb was covered daily on a Chinese website run by China's largest internet portal company Sohu), this nomenclature has come to be widely adopted. The real problem, according to Guo Jing, is that it has denied the rights

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of the Tibetan people to control how their landscapes will be named, and ultimately put to use.[20]

Conclusion

The history of this particular anti-mountaineering episode highlights some of the complexities involved in collaborative environmental projects in north-west Yunnan. The evidence suggests that if there are new natures in the making in north-west Yunnan, then these are being created in spaces for debate and dialogue that have been opened up between the state's collaborative efforts with international biodiversity organizations and those who are arguing for the protection of landscape cosmologies. These various mobilizations of nature are not outside new configurations of environmental governance, nor are they removed from the anxieties about market reforms, World Trade Organization hegemonies, poverty, environmental destruction, and, of course, the Open Up the West campaign that have come to China in recent years.

In order to draw attention to the ways in which Tibetans in Deqin have opposed mountaineering, Guo Jing argues for the value and worth of the religious beliefs of these peoples, which he would like to see play a greater role in the formulation of developmental policy. This positioning is similar to other forms of critical multiculturalism that have emerged in recent years around the figure of the indigenous.[21] Yet one danger is that Tibetans are too easily viewed as quintessentially religious subjects, simplifying the multiplicity and complexity of subject positions found in Tibetan communities throughout north-west Yunnan.[22]

This question of the relationship between religious beliefs, identity and the opening of Tibetan regions for development was brought home to me when, in May 2002, I had the opportunity to return to Yubeng with a Tibetan friend living in the county seat of Deqin. Qisi, as I will call him, works as a tour guide for the Meili Travel Agency and helps run a low-budget lodging establishment called The Trekkers' Lodge. Yubeng is one of the village stops on what is known as the internal pilgrimage route, a shorter inner path on the Mekong side of the range that pilgrims walk when they do not have time to commit to the longer "outer" circuit. I had asked him to take me to the site of the 1991 climbing exhibition base camp. After a six-hour trek through mixed fir and spruce forest, we

20. See Guo Jing, "A mountain of nature, also a mountain of divinity," in Xu Jianchu (ed.), *Links Between Cultures and Biodiversity* (Kunming: Yunnan Science and Technology Press, 2000), pp. 230–39.

21. For a discussion of the concept of "neoliberal multiculturalism," in which proponents of neoliberalism endorse limited versions of indigenous cultural rights to advance their own political agendas, see Charles Hale, "Does multiculturalism menace? Governance, cultural rights, and the politics of identity in Guatemala," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, No. 34 (2002), pp. 485–524.

22. For an excellent discussion of how the Tibetan exile community has advanced a set of essentialist representations of all Tibetan peoples living in eternal harmony with nature, see Toni Huber, "Green Tibetans: a brief social history," in Frank J. Korom (ed.), *Tibetan Culture in the Diaspora* (Wein: Verlag Der Osterreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften, 1997), pp. 103–119.

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arrived in a large upper meadow that served as a herders' camp. We set up camp and spent three days exploring the upper reaches of the valley, working our way on to the moraines and lower glaciers, collecting mushrooms, and visiting a secret sacred lake, where pilgrims collect water to take back to the elders in their villages who can no longer make the pilgrimage. In recent years, he told me, herders from Yubeng had found the remains of corpses scattered here and there on the glacial moraines: pieces of bodies, twisted arms and bones, and bits and pieces of climbing gear.

Qisi loved this land, and often talked about the historical brutalities of the Chinese regime, his hatred of Han Chinese and especially the new backpacking tourist groups who came from Beijing and Shanghai and refused to hire the guiding services of his local travel agency. I repeated to him my comments to a *China Daily* reporter in an interview about tourism and mountaineering during the Meili workshop in the autumn of 2000: despite the local opposition to mountaineering, always presented on spiritual or religious grounds, the massive influx of tourists to this area would ultimately do more harm than an occasional mountaineering exhibition. He laughed and told me a story about how the previous year he had led three mountaineers from Italy who wanted to climb Kawagebo into the upper meadows of Yubeng. One evening, as they were waiting for the weather to clear, a contingent of villagers from Yubeng came to their camp to inform Qisi that his Italian friends would not be able to go any further: travel on the upper glaciers was forbidden by village mandate. Qisi and his friends reluctantly turned back. He said to me: "imagine the money that could be made if these villagers were not so superstitious!"

How might these complex cultural positions, these divergent mobilizations of nature, be analysed in relation to China's Open Up the West strategy, with its grandiose, almost utopian visions of regional transformation and its heady policy proclamations? On the one hand, it is tempting to retreat to the literature on colonialism, especially when we consider the history of how the Chinese state, since the late 1950s, has effectively incorporated – through a combination of ideological struggle, military campaigns and a more locally entrenched state apparatus – the ethnic minority regions of north-west Yunnan into the People's Republic of China. Yet this return to the colonial as an explanatory device fails to capture the complexity of the diverse actors involved, in various ways and to varying degrees, in development projects in north-west Yunnan. Nor does it capture the complex ways in which capital, whether from the central government, the World Bank, the Asia Development Bank or TNC's well-healed liberal environmental donors, is working its way into this region. On the other hand, it is tempting to argue that the Yunnan Great Rivers Project represents the emergence of new forms of trans-local (across different localities in north-west Yunnan), trans-regional (across different parts of China and East and South-east Asia), and transnational activism and knowledge production (across the Pacific). Analytically the transnational argument appears immediately strong, in part because of the

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focus on the role of international agencies in regional affairs. Yet the transnational, as with its seductive twin globalization, too easily, and too dangerously, erases the state from analytical purview.

The presence of international actors such as The Nature Conservancy does not then signal the retreat of the state, nor does it suggest that the central state has turned everything over to local cadres. The Chinese Communist Party and the many bureaus of the government continue to exercise their authority and manage the everyday affairs of the diverse locales and peoples in north-west Yunnan. But this exercise of authority and the politics and processes of everyday management – especially when matters of conservation and development are at stake – is increasingly carried out in conjunction with international organizations and agencies. The TNC project, and perhaps the entire Open Up the West campaign, calls for a methodological shift in the study of development politics in China's west. It is perhaps time to jettison the singular and spatially hierarchical relationship that has adhered in the age-old description of the relationship between state and society, the view that the state is above society and can extend its reach either through force or persuasion.[23] Instead there is a need to explore the new discourses and practices of management, planning and policy formation that can now be witnessed on the ground as the Chinese state moves both to invite and to collaborate with a range of transnational actors, from multilateral institutions to non-governmental organizations.

And what about the future for the ethnic minorities who mostly reside in China's west? Neo-liberal dreams of the regional and global markets as a panacea for the increasing problems of poverty and unequal development will continue to disempower ethnic minority populations, especially when, as with the great ethnic cultural province scheme, their cultures, and worth as citizens of the PRC is seen only through the logic of the commodity form. But disempowerment, a term that has today become a powerful signifier in the anti-globalization movements sweeping the globe, also fails to capture what is happening in collaborative ventures such as the Yunnan Great Rivers Project. Workshops such as TNC's, which bring together a wide range of actors, from government officials to scholars to the staff of the United States' most lucrative environmental NGO, open up new forms of dialogue and planning that may work ultimately to empower villagers, or at least give them more say in how their resources will be used, by whom, and to what ends. This in itself would be a huge advance in the not-so-far reaches of north-west Yunnan, perhaps resulting in mobilizations of nature radically different from those experienced over the last half-century.

23. See James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta, "Spatializing states: towards an ethnography of neoliberal governmentality," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2000), pp. 981–1002.

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