

A Grassroots Association on the Sino-Tibetan Border: The Role, Agendas and Beyond*

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Abstract

This article investigates the role of the Moluo Tourism Association in Suopo township, Danba county, Sichuan. It examines its organization, internal structure and objectives, and explores the concerns of Tibetan elites and villagers and their strategies for advancing their political and other goals in an officially sanctioned framework. The research shows that the association resembles a “state-led civil society” as its membership and agendas exhibit the strong will of the local state; nevertheless, it still manages to carve a space for expressing negative opinions towards the local authorities, pursuing the “Eastern Queendom” cause and following its own agendas. The dynamic and nuanced interactions between the association and township show that state–society relations in China are situated in a complex and convoluted landscape which has not yet been fully explored in the China field. Furthermore, the article brings to light the divergent interests and positions of the association members as well as the heterogeneity of Suopo society proper. It concludes with a brief discussion of the prospects for an enhanced engagement of ethnic research with broader China studies.

Keywords: Danba; Sino-Tibetan Border; grassroots association; civil society; state–society relations; tourism

Danba 丹巴 county in Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (*Ganzi Zangzu zizhizhou* 甘孜藏族自治州) in Sichuan has been held up as having the “Most Beautiful Countryside in China” (*Zhongguo zuimeili de xiangcun* 中国最美丽的乡村) by the media. This label has proved to be a very successful advertisement

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for Danba, and over the last decade it has become one of the best-known tourist destinations in western Sichuan. In consequence, tourism development in Danba has engendered a complex socio-political landscape in the Sino-Tibetan border area in which villagers and the local state are entangled in constant reconfigurations and negotiations over their mutual relations.

Danba's economy was largely based on logging (and agriculture) until 1998 when China launched a large-scale natural forest resources preservation project (*tianranlin ziyuan baohu gongcheng* 天然林资源保护工程) aimed at preventing soil erosion and landslides in the upper and middle reaches of the Changjiang 长江 (Yangtze River) and the Huanghe 黄河 (Yellow River). Owing to the spectacular landscape, magnificent stone watchtowers and exquisite Tibetan-style houses, as well as the area's reputation for beautiful local women, Danba has become extremely popular among Chinese tourists since 2000, and tourism is now one of the pillars of Danba's economy. While the local government and villagers have benefited from growing bonuses thanks to the rapid tourism development, there has been a proliferation of disputes revolving around the ownership of tourism sites, such as land and stone watchtowers, and the distribution of tourism income.

These disputes involve different actors, including county agencies, townships (*xiang* 乡) and villagers. Villagers frequently protest against the county and township's appropriation of tourism revenues, while the county and township officials see the grumbling public as being short-sighted and intemperate. Often, different townships, villages, or even individuals in a single village, compete for the ownership of, or access to, tourism facilities and brands. One noteworthy example is the accusation levelled against the county by Suopo 梭坡 township villagers of nepotism and corruption because it granted the label of "Eastern Queendom" (*Dongnüguo* 东女国) – a legendary matriarchal kingdom documented in ancient Chinese texts¹ – to neighbouring Zhonglu 中路 township. In response to growing tension in the region, the county set up the Moluo Tourism Association (*Moluo lüyou xiehui* 莫洛旅游协会) in Suopo to deal with this and other such conflicts.

This tension occurs at a time that has seen exacerbated intra- and inter-village/township conflicts as well as burgeoning antagonism and resistance against the local state – the county and township – as a result of China's all-inclusive political rearrangements and their ensuing consequences, and is exemplified by the unfolding intricacies of state and society interactions and the proliferation of collective resistance throughout China.² It is born of the Suopo locals' desire for a share in the tourism boom in Danba, and has little to do with Tibetan desires for

1 According to scholars in China, the title "Dongnüguo" was used to describe two different political entities during the Sui Dynasty (581–618) and Tang Dynasty (618–907): one was located in western Tibet adjacent to the Himalayas; the other was situated somewhere between Tibet and Sichuan. See Shi Shuo 2009a, 2009b.

2 See, for instance, Wasserstrom and Perry 1992; Bianco 2001; O'Brien 2002, 2008; Perry 1985, 2002, 2010; Unger 2002; Bernstein and Lü 2003; O'Brien and Li 2006; Perry and Goldman 2007.

independence or autonomy. Nor is it a product of broader Tibetan ethnic politics. It is merely a grassroots society's answer to socio-political restructuring and tourism remapping, which can be found all over China and is not specific to the Tibetan situation. It stems instead from the locals' experiences of modernizing economic and social change in a distinctive local setting and from their initiatives in constructing their identity as worthy socio-political members in Danba, and in China.

This article is based on an in-depth investigation, conducted during 24 months of field work from 2008–2012, of the tourism association's role, its organization, internal structure and objectives. It sheds light on the concerns of the Suopo elites and villagers and their strategies for advancing their own agendas in an officially sanctioned framework, providing a glimpse into the status quo and trends of grassroots associations in China.

The Moluo Tourism Association is registered with the civil affairs bureau (*minzhengju* 民政局) and the culture and tourism bureau (*wenhua liuyouju* 文化旅游局) of Danba county as a state-certified "popular association" (*minjian shetuan* 民间社团). Although defined as a popular association, it is not a purely voluntary or self-generating organization since its founding is based on the "organizational will" (*zuzhi yitu* 组织意图) of the local state. Members of the association are approved and appointed by the Party secretary of Suopo township, upon the advice of a subordinate, Uncle Pema, the principal advocate of Suopo's Eastern Queendom claim. The tourism association comes under the jurisdiction of the village committee. Despite the strong presence of the state's will as well as its semi-official nature, it is considered a "popular association" owing to the voluntary participation of the eight members from the village, and the villagers' recognition of its role in coordinating the efforts of the general public in developing tourism in Moluo. In addition, its members and villagers use the tourism association as a legal mechanism for engaging in the queendom dispute and other claims. However, among the tourism association members, there were divergent views on the association's relationship with the local state, and differing development agendas. These different stances were a continuation of everyday village tensions and negotiations.

Scholars point out that, owing to its embedment in European traditions and practices, the concept of civil society does not easily translate into the socio-political, historical and cultural contexts of China.³ In China, communal ties of kinship or networks of personal connections (*guanxi* 关系) and hierarchy often characterize various organizations and social groups. Simultaneously, owing to the omnipresent influence of the state, most officially certified civil associations or NGOs have adopted a conciliatory or cooperative attitude towards the powerful state, and as a result are not primarily concerned with their own autonomy.⁴ Therefore, these organizations do not seem to comply

3 See, for instance, Perry 1994; Forges 1997; Weller 1999, 2005.

4 See Weller 1999; Guo 2000.

with the “standard” version of civil society which is thought to: “(1) be voluntary, that is, based on the free choice of autonomous individuals; (2) act with civility, that is, accept the rights of others to disagree ... and 3) respect the legitimacy of the state while in turn enjoying a free space for action guaranteed by the state.”⁵ Thus, with the penetration of state power into social sectors, these social organizations and associations are not always “civil” in the Western sense. Nevertheless, they not only play a similar role to civil society in connecting and channelling the family/community/private sphere and the state, but also have the potential to facilitate political change and generate space for civil dissension.⁶

The question that then arises is to what extent does the state allow various associations to develop their own agendas? Highlighting the all-pervasive influence of the state, Frolic⁷ applies the notion of “state-led civil society” to categorize alternative civil society in the Chinese case. The Party-state has a firm control over its societal sectors and the state takes advantage of its created civil society to “help it govern, co-opt and socialize potentially politically active elements in the population.”⁸ However, is this a truthful or complete portrayal of state–society relations in China? Are civil associations in China undifferentiated victims of the tyranny of the state? This article uses field data to paint a much more intricate picture of state and society relations. Through the case of the Moluo Tourism Association, it explores the formation and mechanism of emerging grassroots associations in an authoritarian country.

As evidenced by the Moluo Tourism Association, despite the imprint of state will, various associations in China may still be able to secure a certain degree of free space to develop their own agendas, which as a consequence may pose a challenge to state authority.⁹ In this way, state and society display a more nuanced interaction than mere opposition. Since the heterogeneity of the societal sector (and state sector) in China continues to be a neglected issue,¹⁰ this article also attempts to uncover the intra-societal variation or internal divisions of a given society by detailing its formation, membership, role and agendas.

The Positioning of Tourism Association Members

The Moluo Tourism Association is the second, but also at present the only, officially recognized tourism association in Danba after the Jiayu 甲居 Tourism Association in Niega 聂呷 township was disbanded – although not officially – as a consequence of the Gelindeya 格林德雅 Incident in 2006 (which will be

5 Weller 1999, 15.

6 See White 1993; Weller 1999; Ding 2002; Zheng and Fewsmith 2008.

7 Frolic 1997.

8 Saich 2004, 228.

9 See, for instance, Saich 2000; He 2003; Ma 2006; Tang and Zhan 2008.

10 Elizabeth Perry is one of the major scholars in the China field who has long attached due importance to “the nuances of intra-societal and intra-state variation” (1994, 709). Nevertheless, this aspect is inadequately discussed even today. Zhang and Baum 2004 is one of the few works devoted to the examination of the internal mechanisms of a rural association in northwestern China.

discussed below). The founding of the Moluo Tourism Association in 2008 was built upon lessons learned by the county authorities from previous failed attempts to engage elites and villagers in tourism development projects. The authorities feared that if the Party and government allowed such a quasi-civil association to grow randomly and define its own agenda freely, the situation would spin out of their control. With this in mind, the Party secretary of Suopo, Mr Chen, was cautious about the membership and guidelines of the association. However, in reality, the association, which was composed of eight elites, seniors and talented people from Moluo village, appeared to be more than just a puppet organization.

The association membership comprised of a head (Teacher Thubten, a well-respected retired teacher), two deputy heads (Yeshe, a retired county cadre and a successful businessman, and Tsering, a former accountant for the village committee known for his sophistication), and five ordinary members (Teacher Dorje, a retired county cadre and local cultural specialist, Lobsang, a retired cadre, and three other people known for their singing and dancing talents, including two young men and one middle-aged woman). Although members were officially designated, they worked beyond the constraints of the local authorities by using the association as a legal framework through which they could justifiably fight for their “Eastern Queendom” brand, express their concerns about Moluo’s tourism prospects, and explore the possibilities of promoting Moluo and Suopo to the outside world.

However, the association was divided into three different positions when it came to the issues of how the association should position itself in relation to the township, what concrete measures should be taken to publicize their queendom cause, and how to advertise Moluo’s (and Suopo’s) tourism resources. These positions can be defined as cooperative, radical and passive. The cooperative position stresses the essential importance of keeping the township government and village committee informed about the association’s plans and activities while engaging villagers in the development of tourism in Moluo. This position was held by the head of the association, Teacher Thubten, who reiterated that the association must follow the guidelines set by the township and the village committee. The radical position is based on the assumed incapability and/or indifference of local authorities in promoting Suopo and advocates self-promotion to attract attention from the media, scholars and other interested groups/individuals. Yeshe and several other members endorsed this stance by declaring that the local state should let the association set its own agendas and not interfere. Finally, the passive position is characterized by a “nothing-can-be-done-about-it” or “let-it-be” attitude, which is often accompanied by a sense of helplessness and a pessimistic view of the limited role of the association. Teacher Dorje became so frustrated with short-sighted villagers who were more concerned about making fast and easy money than the queendom cultural heritage that he saw changing their mentality as a virtually impossible task.

Some members shifted their positions as the situation changed, or reacted differently in various contexts. For instance, Teacher Dorje sometimes held a

cooperative position and occasionally become radical, too. For example, he went so far as to claim that the county and township governments should leave Moluo alone, and that Moluo villagers themselves would do what was in their own best interests. From time to time, Teacher Thubten, frustrated at the association's lack of power and awkward only-in-name status, expressed his desire to quit his post and have nothing further to do with the association. Despite holding different positions, all of the members reached the consensus that outside support was essential for publicizing their queendom claim and for establishing their village/township as a top tourist destination.

The association was divided into two notable camps built upon different interests and agendas. One retired cadre – Yeshe – made up one camp by himself, winning the sympathy of one of the other members (and a small number of villagers and his relatives). The other camp consisted of all the other members and was basically concerned with whether Yeshe would take over the association and turn it into a profit-making instrument for himself. Nonetheless, it was not a homogeneous collective since everyone in this camp had his or her own ideas and plans about how the association should work. The opposition between the two camps was not wholly a derivative product of the association per se; it was rooted in daily village lives and histories. Therefore, the tourism association was just another sphere for the continuation or escalation of everyday village contentions.

It is necessary to discuss Yeshe and his oppositional position vis-à-vis the other members (and most villagers). He was not on good terms with the township cadres, either: he accused them of being irresponsible and incapable, and some cadres believed that he was sly and complicated to deal with. If this was the case, why did the township Party secretary make him the deputy head of the association in the first place?

The majority of Moluo villagers had a negative view of Yeshe, and he was frequently described as being too selfish. Nonetheless, all of them agreed that he knew how to make money. He formerly worked for the county's science commission (*kewei* 科委). After retiring, he turned the barren land beside his house into an apple orchard. He sold the young trees to other peasants or to other counties in Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and he sold his apples to fruit merchants. He also had other business interests, including the sale of cattle. Some villagers gossiped that he earned 100,000–200,000 yuan a year – a sum equivalent to the income of at least ten average households' annual earnings in Moluo. In the eyes of many villagers, Yeshe cared only about money and not about the wellbeing of the other villagers, and was uninterested in helping lift his fellow villagers out of poverty. This stingy and selfish image estranged him from the other villagers. Nevertheless, his status as the wealthiest man in the village, and possibly the whole township, and his good connections with county cadres as well as his forceful eloquence, literacy, knowledge of Party policies and of the outside world made him a strong and even intimidating presence in Moluo and Suopo. These are also the reasons he was elected as the association's deputy head.

The Formation of the Moluo Tourism Association

When asked how they joined the association, most members would say that they were elected by the villagers. However, their nomination and appointment were actually approved by the township Party secretary, Mr Chen, upon the recommendation of Uncle Pema and Teacher Dorje. By claiming that they were elected, the members conveyed the message that their membership was legitimate, that they represented villagers' interests and had the authority to speak for them.

Following the Gelindeya Incident in Jiaju in 2006, the county and township governments wanted to ensure that the tourism association, like other village associations, remained firmly under their control. After being dubbed "the most beautiful village in China," the number of tourists flocking to Jiaju rocketed from early 2000. This increased popularity brought with it many problems and disputes as locals fought over tourists and began to overcharge visitors for accommodation. There was also hostility between villagers and the township/county governments over the distribution of ticket revenues. In 2006, CCTV (China Central Television) broadcast two programmes entitled "Gelindeya" highlighting the chaotic situation in Jiaju. As a result, the county heads were censured by their prefectural superiors for failing to keep the situation in check and were forced to launch an intensive self-criticism campaign. The county government put the blame on the Jiaju Tourism Association, whose three major leaders – formerly trusted retired cadres from county agencies – had been appointed by the county's ex-Party secretary. They were accused of inciting the villagers to defy the county's authority. Following this incident, both the county and township governments marginalized the Jiaju Tourism Association by ceasing to involve it in any of Jiaju's tourism projects, although they have not officially disbanded the organization.

The creation of a tourism association at Moluo village is one of the tasks engendered by the rural development project, "Building a New Socialist Countryside" (*shehuizhuyi xinnongcun jianshe* 社会主义新农村建设) – a nationwide project initiated by the central government that aims to transform China's rural areas mentally and materially. Moluo was designated as one of the first two experimental sites in Danba in 2008. One stated objective of the "Building a New Socialist Countryside" campaign is to promote democratic development at the grassroots. The founding of the tourism association at Moluo fulfilled this agenda as its goal was to make Moluo villagers take charge of their own tourism development. Nevertheless, the Gelindeya Incident at Jiaju cast a shadow over the newly founded tourism association at Moluo, and the last thing the county/township governments wanted to see was the association turning against them by developing its own agendas and inciting villagers to protest.

Party secretary Mr Chen entrusted Uncle Pema with the task of nominating the candidates for the tourism association since he assumed that Uncle Pema, a Suopo local, knew the people and local situation quite well. Initially, Mr Chen and Uncle Pema wanted to appoint Teacher Dorje as head of the association

as he was well connected with the county authorities, was experienced in tourism, and had a wide knowledge of the queendom heritage. Despite this, Teacher Dorje declined the position because, in his view, it was difficult to work with very “practical” Moluo villagers. Mr Chen and Uncle Pema then turned to Teacher Thubten. Teacher Thubten enjoyed a high standing among the villagers owing to his uprightness and easy-going character. He was also reluctant to take on the position for the same reason as Teacher Dorje, but Uncle Pema eventually persuaded him by assuring him that the position was temporary and that when everything was on track someone else would take his place. However, he agreed to take this post also because the two village heads – the head of the village committee and the Party secretary of Moluo – and the majority of the villagers wanted him to do so since they believed that he was the only person who would be able to stand up to Yeshe, who had expressed a strong desire for the leadership.

Yeshe ran for the post of village Party secretary once in 2004, but was unsuccessful owing to his negative image in the village. Although the head of the tourism association was not a “real” post of the sort he desired as it was not an official one, he was very eager to take it on as it carried symbolic prestige and he was keen for a public stage on which to showcase his talents and skills as a leader in front of the “incapable” village heads and suspicious villagers. However, few wanted to give him such a chance. He was not trusted by many villagers who tended to believe he just wanted to benefit himself and not the whole village. Moreover, his knowledge of Party policies, formidable eloquence and confrontational style alienated him from the township Party secretary and other cadres who did not wish to see a repeat of the Jiaju Gelindeya Incident in Moluo. In other words, Yeshe was seen as a potential agitator who, if he was elevated to this leading post, was most likely to mobilize villagers to oppose the township’s agenda. Nevertheless, the township was also cognizant of the fact that Yeshe’s business acumen and creativity could bring much to Moluo’s tourism development. Yeshe was therefore appointed as a deputy head. His role was restricted by the veto power of his superior, Teacher Thubten, and the presence of the other deputy head as well as the surveillance of the other members.

The other members of the association were selected according to age, kinship ties/*guanxi*, literacy/knowledge of local history, and talent. Of the eight members, six were over 50, reflecting the views of Uncle Pema (and others) that old age itself demands respect and that seniors were more altruistic and devoted while the young tended to be selfish and pragmatic. Uncle Pema also attached great importance to kinship/*guanxi*. As China scholars point out, kinship ties were and are often a natural cause or source of political alliance or dissension in rural China,¹¹ and various forms of personal networks – *guanxi* – have also played an important part in reconfiguring social relations and power structures,

11 See Perry 1985, 1994; Siu 1989; Kelliher 1992; Huang 1998; Weller 1999; Chan, Madsen and Unger 2009.

as well as remoulding the political goals and interests of the actors concerned in (socialist) China.¹² This principle is applicable in the Suopo case, too: kinship ties/*guanxi* networks were a significant variable in deciding the tourism association's membership and shaping the power structure within it since candidates with wider and stronger kinship ties/*guanxi* were expected to invoke more support from their kin or related people. As a result, all the members, except for Yeshe, had kin or shared *guanxi* networks, or both.

In Uncle Pema's view, since the local culture and queendom traditions were major tourism resources in Moluo, space on the association should also be reserved for those well versed in local knowledge. His son, an ex-monk who was proficient in the written Tibetan language and queendom legends, was recruited into the association. Uncle Pema argued that since entertainment was of vital importance in tourism, people with musical and performing talents should also be admitted. As a result, several performers were appointed to the association. Besides Uncle Pema's son who was in his early 30s, another man of a similar age was also selected owing to his dancing skills. Only one woman, who was in her early 50s and very keen on singing and dancing, was approved to join the association.¹³

Most of the candidates were nominated by Uncle Pema, with the assistance of Teacher Dorje. They first reached consensus between themselves on the appropriate candidates and then they went on to persuade some other seniors to nominate and vote for them at the "election" meeting of the seniors and village heads. When all the candidates were "elected," the township gathered the Moluo villagers for a meeting at which one township cadre announced the names of the candidates and asked people to put up their hands if they agreed to the candidatedship. Everyone put up their hands as expected, so the candidates were passed unanimously as a result of a "democratic" election. One insider disclosed that the township had grouped together all eight candidates and put them forward as a single candidate. As a result, even if some villagers did not want to vote for certain members, they would hesitate to vote against this group as among it were their preferred candidates or close kin. Uncle Pema's careful consideration of a combination of factors when selecting the candidates – age, kinship, literacy, talents, etc. – also seemed fair enough to most villagers. However, many villagers were indifferent: as a new concept, they did not really understand what the tourism association was about and had little expectation that it would change anything.

12 See Yang 1994; Yan 1996.

13 According to Uncle Pema, women were less active in political affairs on the whole, and this woman was one of the very few who was keen on public affairs. As such, she was the only woman in the village eligible for this position. This could be easily seen as an excuse, but it was not untrue at the same time. Local women tend to express the idea that "politics" is men's business, and that women are not good at it due to their low literacy, limited Chinese language skills and preoccupation with family chores. See Tenzin 2013 for elaboration on the limited role of women in political activities.

The Role and Agenda of the Tourism Association

As stated, the assumed purpose of establishing the tourism association was to let villagers manage their own tourism resources in an effort to encourage their participation and to cultivate their sense of being responsible and qualified tourist hosts – that is, hosts with *suzhi* 素质 (personal quality). The cadres described the Suopo villagers as *suzhi taidi* 素质太低 (being of very low personal quality). This remark reflects countrywide anxiety over the *suzhi* issue in Chinese national discourse in which China’s “low-quality” population, especially the peasants, are viewed by the Party-state and urban intellectuals as impediments to China’s rise to modernity and world power status.¹⁴ Many scholars point out that the Chinese state views tourism as a modernizing force that will transform its “backward” and “uncivilized” populations, especially those minorities in remote regions with less access to “modern ideas.”¹⁵ The Moluo Tourism Association was thus expected to implement the state agenda of improving the villagers’ *suzhi* when dealing with tourists.

For Danba/Suopo cadres, the meaning of “low personal quality” encompasses two dimensions: a lack of literacy and a lack of civility. The concepts of literacy and civility are overlapping and usually indistinguishable from each other. It is normally assumed that people with literacy possess civility, and vice versa. Literacy is a very tricky concept in Suopo, as in many other Tibetan regions, while the concept of civility (*wenming* 文明) is widely applied throughout China, referring to proper manners and speech towards tourists, as well as attention to sanitary conditions. People with a traditional Tibetan education are often not counted by the state or by villagers themselves as literate or literate enough. Uncle Pema’s son, a member of the tourism association, often referred to himself as illiterate, although as an ex-monk he studied Tibetan scripture for some ten years. This case shows that the idea of literacy centres upon proficiency in Chinese and the cultivation of proper manners inculcated through the Chinese education system. It also demonstrates that, to some extent, some local Tibetans have internalized the dominant structure and discourse imposed on them by the state that has marginalized traditional means of education or non-Chinese education.

In terms of proper speech, villagers are supposed to learn to use polite phrases such as “Thank you!” and “Please,” and to avoid using coarse language. Moluo natives are often accused by cadres of having a poor sense of sanitation, which justifies the accusation of their “low personal quality.” Many locals do not bathe regularly or change their clothes often; neither do some of them clean their houses regularly. Excrement from pigs, oxen, sheep/goats and other livestock is visible throughout Moluo. The county and township governments often feel embarrassed at this situation in front of visitors and tourists, and so

14 See Anagnost 2004.

15 See Oakes 1998; Davis 2005; Notar 2006; Nyíri 2006; Kolas 2008.

the local authorities urged the villagers to improve their personal quality or civility and thereby make Moluo look better. As a result, one of the tourism association's important tasks is to prod the villagers to improve their daily habits through propaganda and education.

The tourism association is also expected to provide village heads and the township with concrete suggestions on how to develop tourism and teach villagers how to deal with tourists. To underscore the importance of the association, the township government allocated one room in the newly completed Moluo village committee's office building to the tourism association. However, most of the members had no idea how to run this association or how far they could go to realize their objectives. Towards the end of 2008, the township heads, the Party secretary and the newly appointed *xiangzhang* 乡长 (head of the township government) took the association members to Jiaju to learn from the latter's tourism experiences and the lessons gained from its tourism association. The Moluo visitors were impressed with Jiaju's cleanliness, the standard of the local guides' Chinese and eloquence, and the villagers' professional manners and hospitality, especially among reception households. They also had the chance to listen to the ex-heads of Jiaju Tourism Association – Bao and Zeng – talk about their experiences. Maybe because of the presence of the Suopo cadres, Bao and Zeng talked as if the tourism association at Jiaju were still functioning. They impressed upon the Suopo visitors that preserving cultural heritage and exhibiting authentic local culture to tourists was crucial to the success of tourism development since tourists came to see traditional local Tibetan culture. Both of them expressed admiration for Suopo's distinctive queendom cultural heritage. Bao, who had been Suopo township's Party secretary in the 1980s, asserted that Suopo had a much greater potential in the tourist market in China, and even in the world, since its queendom heritage was truly exceptional and unparalleled.

Bao's remarks were taken by the members of the Moluo Tourism Association as a reaffirmation of their unique cultural traditions. Like Bao and Zeng at Jiaju, most members were aware of the importance of cultural heritage when attracting tourists. As Uncle Pema pointed out, both cultural learning and entertainment were important in tourism, so a positive way to develop tourism in Suopo and Moluo would be to combine the two and entertain the tourists with cultural performances. The association drew the same conclusion and decided to set up a *Kordro* (a circle-dance popular among Tibetans and some other ethnic groups) troupe, a *Bashe* (another kind of circle dance popular in the Kham region) troupe, and a folk music group. It encouraged villager participation, promising them that they would benefit economically when tourists came and paid to see them perform.

This way of presenting or commercializing local culture had much to do with Yeshe. At every association meeting, he would bring up the issue of how to turn local resources into capital. As the one with the radical position, he was disappointed with the incapacity, lack of imagination and indifference of the local authorities. He insisted that the market was the only way forward. He suggested that the association should invite interested individuals and corporations from

other parts of China to invest in Moluo, and then act as coordinator between the investors, the local authorities and villagers. In this ambitious project, the local authorities would play a minor role and preferably have little to do with Moluo's tourism plans. Not every member agreed with him. Cooperative proponents still expected more direction and financial/policy endorsements from the local authorities, and they also preferred a safer and more conventional development route. However, owing to his success in business, no one could take issue with Yeshe's ideas. Nevertheless, Yeshe was so frustrated by his conservative colleagues who were unable to understand his modern marketing plan that he sometimes expressed the desire to quit.

Given the full support of the township, Uncle Pema played a significant role in the association. As the "King of the Eastern Queendom" – a title bestowed upon him by local villagers – he took every opportunity to promote the queendom agenda. He believed that the major task of the tourism association was to "dig" into and revive the culture of the ancient queendom and restore to Moluo the queendom label that had been "stolen" by Zhonglu. He had been collecting legends on the queens for years in support of the claim that Suopo was the site of the queendom (palace), and had made every effort to integrate the local oral history of the queendom with related historical records and literary writings as a way to reconstruct the history of the Eastern Queendom. Owing to his illiteracy in written Tibetan, the evidence he cited for the existence of the queendom in history and its connection to Suopo was almost exclusively based on his reading of Chinese literature. He was fully aware of this shortcoming. To compensate for this, he often consulted his son and others who knew written Tibetan on the meanings of some place names and expressions he assumed were associated with the queendom.

In 2008, a new graduate, originally from Suopo, who had studied Tibetan at college for years, gained a position at Suopo township. Uncle Pema took the opportunity to educate this young man about the importance of preserving queendom traditions. As a result, he converted to Uncle Pema's queendom cause. One cadre at the township joked about their relationship, referring to the new employee as Uncle Pema's disciple, who, like Uncle Pema, was uninterested in administrative affairs and only concerned with studying and promoting the queendom. Uncle Pema started to learn the "standard" Tibetan language from this man. I was always impressed with his creative use of his limited Tibetan language skills in the service of his goals. For instance, he argued that the Tibetan name of the Dadu 大渡 river, which literally means "sweat of the queen," actually means "the river in front of the queen[s] palace at Suopo]." In his view, since this river begins in Suopo after its two major streams converge, this name itself is very informative and symbolic and tells the exact location of the queendom palace: Suopo. His Tibetan language teacher and his son told me that Uncle Pema would interpret many place names or historical accounts imaginatively, despite corrections and protests from them.

Uncle Pema was also asked by the township Party secretary to write a tour guide's speech for the tourism association. Local guides would use it to introduce local conditions and culture to tourists. As one might expect, it was almost entirely about queendom legends and claimed that Suopo was the correct site of the queens' palace. On the Party secretary's instruction, he and the young cadre who taught him written Tibetan also worked on promoting the ancient trees in Moluo to tourists. Those with a very unique shape were given exotic names related to the queendom. For instance, a certain tree might be dubbed the "Queen's horse-tethering tree" or "Queen's reposing tree." Since Uncle Pema was the authority on queendom issues, he was entrusted with the task of adorning the trees in Moluo with queendom cultural decorations.

Both the tour guide's speech and the tree project were authorized by the Party secretary and the township head as ways to engage and steer the association towards taking concrete measures to develop the tourism in Moluo. As for the association itself, some members admitted that they had not yet done many "real" things. Owing to ambiguity about the association's actual role, its members were often puzzled about what they were supposed to accomplish and whether they could really do it. The tourism association was expected to assist the township, village committee and tourism bureau in coordinating villagers' efforts to participate in, and contribute to, tourism development in Moluo. However, the actual responsibilities and functions of the association were not clearly defined. This led to a paradoxical impression of the position and role of the tourism association: on the one hand, it seemed that it was allowed to do anything to promote tourism in Moluo as long as it did not challenge the hegemonic role of the township and village committee; on the other hand, the association seemed powerless to put into action any concrete plans since their activities were overseen and checked by the authorities, and so in fact it had no real power to act.

From 2004 to 2007, the tension between the Moluo villagers and the township on the issue of how to distribute revenue from tourists' entrance fees was heating up. In addition, in May 2007 a few tourists complained to the prefecture about the poor attitude of the township cadres who were collecting entrance fees at Suopo Bridge. After fully realizing how difficult it was to manage villagers and deal with tourists directly, the township government hoped that the tourism association would help to ease these problems. The association members and some villagers believed this was just a ploy to shift the township government's responsibilities and burdens onto the association. However, some of them did see it as a signal that the association should feel free to do whatever it could to resolve difficult situations. Considering that the members were approved and appointed by the township authorities, it looked as if the association could be fully entrusted with the task of resolving these tough issues on behalf of the township. However, the association members complained that they were given neither the authority nor the money to carry out their duties, and that their real job was actually to offend people since to discipline and educate villagers about exhibiting

the correct behaviour when dealing with tourists would definitely provoke some resentment.

The tension between the two camps in the tourism association led to little action being taken. Although the members all recognized the creativity and business talents of Yeshe, most of them did not trust him. His idea of corporatizing tourism in Moluo by introducing external investors and partners to manage the tourism trade was simply too unconventional and radical for most of the members and villagers. They also questioned his real motives for joining the association. Consequently, because of opposition from the other members, the township and villagers, it was unlikely that his ambitious plans would come to anything.

The tourism association's inertia also had to do with the low numbers of tourists visiting Danba in 2008 and 2009. Tourism in the area was seriously affected by Tibetan riots in March 2008 and the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008. Although no uprising took place in Danba, and most of the locals, like their Han Chinese compatriots, condemned the rioters and their demands for Tibetan independence, it was still viewed by many as a potentially dangerous place to visit. Many Chinese were unable to distinguish between "rebellious" Tibetans and "peaceful" Tibetans as a result of the widespread Tibetophobia in China. At the same time, despite the fact that Danba was not severely affected by the earthquake, tourists still stayed away because of safety concerns. In Golden Week in October 2008 (the seven-day countrywide holiday for National Day), Moluo received only about 100 tourists in total, and collected just 1,088 yuan in entrance fees. One villager commented:

During the Golden Weeks in 2004, 2005 and 2006, every day we received so many tourists – as many as the ants. It was just like at the county seat. The path from the bridge to Moluo got so congested that it was almost impossible to get through. Last year it was not bad. One or two thousand people came. This year it was really horrible. The tourism association said they would distribute the money to each household. We have over 50 households, so each one can get ... How much? Eh... a little over 10 yuan. I myself feel ashamed of accepting this money. What can this little amount of money be used for? Buy a bag of salt?

The lull in tourism continues in Suopo today. Various factors are to blame, including: the construction of a viewing platform (*guanjingtai* 观景台) on the highway that enables tourists to have a close look at the Suopo landscape and stone watchtowers for free; the non-operation of the newly completed Suopo Bridge; the county's tourism development bias towards Jiaju and Zhonglu; and the poor state of the highways between Chengdu and Danba. In turn, the lack of tourists has led to the inactivity of the tourism association. The association was expected to deal with problems arising from the locals' interactions with tourists, but since few tourists come, no such conflicts arise and, in the eyes of some villagers, it seems that it does not really do anything.

I was struck by the fact that several association members reminded me that the tourism association was just a temporary measure and that it would complete its own mission when tourism in Moluo and Suopo was on a par with that in Jiaju. They argued that when tourism in Moluo and Suopo was standardized and the

personal quality of locals had improved, the association's intended role of coordinating and mediating between tourists and villagers, and between villagers and township/county, would diminish to the extent that its existence would not be necessary any more. I was somewhat shocked by the uniform and standardized explanation of the tourism association's eventual fate. It turned out that this plan was conceived by the newly elected township head, who used to be the deputy head of Niega township (to which Jiaju belongs) in charge of tourism development at Jiaju. He took the post at Niega right after the Gelindeya Incident, when the tourism association at Jiaju was unofficially disbanded. His remarks on the eventual fate of the tourism association represented the official views of the local state. When he was transferred by the county to the new post at Suopo, he began to publicize his reasoning for the temporary nature of the tourism association. Most of the Moluo Tourism Association members accepted this. This gave them little incentive to become involved in actively engaging villagers in tourism development. They felt they did not have enough resources (money and authority) to publicize Moluo and motivate villagers to become involved with tourism projects, and they were also conscious that villagers were very difficult to deal with if conflicts did arise. Their acceptance of this situation was echoed by their uncertain and pessimistic attitude towards the association's future.

The success of Jiaju in the tourism market is often held up as an inspirational model for Suopo by both its township cadres and tourism association members. It has generated a belief that Jiaju's today is Suopo's tomorrow, and that Suopo can catch up and perform even better than Jiaju owing to its unique queendom heritage and cultural features. However, it was unclear whether the Jiaju Tourism Association itself could also serve as a model. On the one hand, the heads of Suopo township took the Moluo Tourism Association members to Jiaju to learn from the "advanced" experience of the (ex)heads of its tourism association; on the other hand, it was rarely touched upon that, owing to its disobedience and its mobilization of villagers against the authorities, this association was unofficially dissolved by the county and township governments. It was as if such an incident had never happened. As the new head of Suopo township and ex-deputy head of Niega claimed, since tourism at Jiaju had reached a mature stage and villagers were experienced and "civilized" enough to do the right things, the tourism association there was no longer deemed necessary. However, most members of the Moluo Tourism Association knew what really happened to the Jiaju Tourism Association. Its demise brought home to them the limitations of their role and that it was better to play safe by maintaining their subordinate status vis-à-vis the village committee and the township.

Beyond State Agendas

Although Yeshe proved to be a headache for both the village and the township, most other members of the tourism association, especially Teacher Dorje and Teacher Namkha, were on good terms with the village heads and township

cadres, and the tourism association's allegiance to the authorities seemed unchallenged. However, this does not mean that the association was a mouthpiece for the local state. All members, including Yeshe, knew exactly the importance of official support for their work. If they did not comply with the local authorities, their actions could be seriously curtailed, checked or even invalidated, as exemplified by the Jiaju case. Therefore, they declared that the tourism association was a grassroots association under the direct leadership of the village committee (and the township government). However, this did not mean that the association would act exactly in the way expected by the local authorities. In fact, the tourism association became a public arena for the expression of different, and even oppositional, opinions and the articulation of concerns about vanishing cultural traditions. It was also used to rally support for the queendom claim.

A common topic for discussion by the tourism association members was the unfair treatment they had received from the county and the status quo of the queendom dispute. They unanimously attacked the county officials for their neglect of Suopo and declared that they would find their own way to rejuvenate and promote Suopo. To quote several members:

Zhonglu said that the queendom was in their place. What evidence have they got so far? They are lying. Just counting upon several Zhonglu officials at the county seat, they want to take away our queendom label? NO WAY!

How many years have we been "liberated" (*jiefang* 解放)? Our Suopo used to be one of the best places in Danba for its fertile land and high output. Now what are we like? Our bridge has been blocked for years [owing to flood damage], and people cannot transport their produce easily, so some say we are now living like in pre-liberation times. What has the government done for us?

If the tourism bureau doesn't promote tourism for us, we will do it by ourselves without their business... We must make use of our own excellent local personnel to promote ourselves...

The county always criticizes us for being filthy, disorderly and indecent [*zang* 脏, *luan* 乱, *cha* 差]. This is a typical example of "subjectivism" [*zhuguan zhuyi* 主观主义] ... The farmers have to raise livestock [which will inevitably excrete].

These comments show the members' dissatisfaction with local officials for what was deemed to be the latter's nepotism, subjectivism and dereliction of duty. However, at the same time, the members looked for opportunities to change the status quo, especially concerning the queendom dispute. Standing firmly with Uncle Pema, the tourism association members condemned the assumed complicity and favouritism of county officials for bestowing the queendom label on Zhonglu. The members of different factions were united in this campaign, including Teacher Dorje who, despite his usual passive stance, had actually become one of the most zealous participants and planners. Together with other Suopo queendom enthusiasts, they took advantage of the media to present their claim to a wider public, and initiated several collective actions such as sit-ins and petitions to the county government. The association members generally chose not to be at the forefront of any direct confrontation, and in various open conflicts they rarely acted as a collective or in the name of the association.

They were usually the ones behind the scenes mobilizing the villagers. Their cause was taken up by more and more Suopo villagers, who pressured the county to reconsider their position on the queendom issue. To prevent the Suopo people taking radical action, the county officials were forced to take their opinions seriously, and as a result, although Zhonglu township was renamed *Dongnügu xiang* 东女谷乡 (Township of Eastern Women's Valley) in 2007, this title has never been made public and the village is still officially known as Zhonglu today.

While the association endeavoured to promote Moluo and Suopo's queendom heritage and other cultural offerings as truly exceptional and unrivalled, Yeshe had other ideas. He planned to corporatize Moluo by bringing in investors and making each household a shareholder. Although his plans seemed to be too radical for most people, his insightful remarks about how to stimulate tourism in Moluo did have a certain impact on the tourism association and villagers. For instance, his suggestions to use old queendom traditions and folk songs/customs, and to establish a farming and ploughing cultural museum to exhibit the authentic traditional farming tools to tourists were well received by other association members and some villagers. The other members took pride in the queendom heritage and attached importance to preserving vanishing cultural traditions, but it was only Yeshe who seemed to know exactly how to turn queendom traditions and other cultural resources into commodities. As discussed above, it was difficult or nigh impossible for all of Yeshe's plans, especially the unconventional one of corporatizing Moluo, to be carried out in reality. However, the association and other villagers did not dismiss his opinions. His reputation in the village and township as a successful businessman and resourceful individual cemented his position on the association.

The tourism association members often made use of their personal connections (*guanxi*) with the authorities and outside world to implement their own agendas. For example, during a new year family feast in 2009, one member extracted a promise from the friend of his brother-in-law, who also happened to be the deputy head of the culture and tourism bureau, to give the association 15,000 yuan in "activity fees" (*huodongfei* 活动费) for its folk performance project. A former student of Teacher Dorje, a university official, donated 30,000 yuan to build a seniors/children's activities centre in Moluo village that would serve both as an educational venue in which to pass on traditional and religious cultural values to the younger generation, and as a cultural museum for tourists.

In line with the view that many scholars take on the hegemonic role of the Chinese state in shaping the agendas and overseeing the activities of civil associations,¹⁶ Moluo Tourism Association could be characterized as a "state-led civil society" in that its membership and objectives exhibit the strong "organization will" of the Suopo township authorities. The tourism association was expected first to assist the township in managing difficult villagers and was then allowed

16 See Weller 1999; Guo 2000; Saich 2004.

to develop its own tourism development agenda consistent with that of the township. The township did not want a repeat of the events in Jiaju, and so to preclude this from happening, the township Party secretary appointed the eight members upon the recommendations of his subordinate, Uncle Pema. However, owing to Yeshe's good connections and business acumen, he also let this potential agitator into the association. The acceptance by the association members of the new township head's claim that the association was just a temporary phenomenon best exemplifies the imprint of the state will. Nevertheless, the notion of "state-led civil society" merely represents a partial and incomplete picture of state–society relations in China. Although most members took a cooperative position vis-à-vis the township, they still managed to carve a space in which to express their negative opinions towards the local authorities, pursue the queendom agenda, and follow their own objectives. Therefore, the relationship between the tourism association and township authorities demonstrates that it would be too simplistic to dichotomize the state–society relationship or stress the hegemonic role of the Chinese state and resistance/passivity of societal sectors, as some China scholars have done.¹⁷ Moluo Tourism Association is both a quasi-state agency and quasi-civil association. On the one hand, it is authorized and regulated by the local state, but on the other, it plays a role in connecting the local society and state, and in creating a free space for voicing the grievances and pressing the claims of marginalized villagers. Therefore, the state–society relations in Danba (and in China) should be seen as a dynamic interaction with multivalent aspects.

To complicate this picture, the different attitudes of the eight members regarding the association's relationship with the local state, the existence of two different camps based on divergent interests and mutual grudges, and the contrast between conventional and modern development models, all demonstrate that society itself is internally differentiated and is composed of different sectors or individuals with various goals and concerns (as is the state). Furthermore, the dynamic interaction between the state and society is also exhibited by the fluidity of this relationship, meaning that it is subject to change. In the campaign to claw back the queendom label, the tourism association members worked together with Uncle Pema to draw up a concrete strategy and mobilize the villagers to oppose the county authorities. Therefore, it is quite possible that the confrontations and events that occurred in Jiaju will take place in Suopo if tourism grows substantially and the association subsequently plays a more active part in it. That is, the association may take a more active stance to confront the local state directly over the issues of tourism revenue distribution and tourism management. This also points to the fact that, rather than being always passively moulded, civil associations of various kinds in China may take initiatives to reconfigure and readjust their relationship with the state, depending on the circumstances.¹⁸

17 See, for instance, Weller 1999; Zheng and Fewsmith 2008; Perry 2010.

18 See, for instance, Spires 2011.

The objectives and role of the Moluo Tourism Association are both unique and not unique. They are unique because they are embedded in particular ethno-regional and socio-political contexts, and not unique because they are a reflection of the profound repercussions and implications of China's reforms and social change, as showcased by the intensified contentions between state and society and the emergence of various kinds of intermediate associations all over China. As the structure and agenda of this association are an outcome of the restructuring of state–society relations and the state policy aimed at transforming social organizations and associations, this case speaks to the status quo and trends of other grassroots associations in China, despite the fact that its activities and members' responses address indigenous specificities simultaneously. Therefore, the organization and mechanism of this grassroots society in an out-of-the-way place are global and macroscopic at the same time, and are thus able to serve as a window onto the complex landscape of civil associations in China.

Last, but not least, I want to discuss in brief the implication of my work for China studies. As a significant component of the China field, research on ethnic minorities has been growing in both quality and quantity, but many works continue to highlight the performative aspect of ethnicity to the extent that other elements or issues of a certain minority group are often inadequately addressed, as are overlapping or common characteristics vis-à-vis the Han. As shown above, the Moluo Tourism Association is merely one of tens of thousands of grassroots associations in China that possess both locally-embedded particularities and common attributes in answer to the nationwide reforms and social change. Therefore, in some respects the interests and concerns of these Tibetan villagers are not so different from villagers in other parts of China. This suggests that the ethnic dimension does not always matter in the daily lives and political pursuits of ethnic minority groups and that minorities are as “ethnic” and “other” as they are Han or Chinese.¹⁹ Having said that, caution must be taken not to take ethnicity for granted since it may constitute a part, or even the kernel, of the local peculiarities in some situations. For that reason, I propose a more balanced view of ethnic groups with regard to the difference and sameness in relation to the Han (and other minorities). This analytic approach will lead us to more sophisticated understandings of ethnic matters, especially the multidimensional interactions between minorities and the Han and the state, as well as to an enhanced engagement of ethnic research with broader China studies.

19 See, for instance, Mueggler 2001. In this work, Erik Mueggler studies the Lòlop'ò, a subgroup of ethnic Yi people, in a village in Yunnan. However, readers are not given a sense that these villagers are a “distinctive” minority group. The ethnic identity of the locals is not a pronounced theme. Instead, like other regionally and politically peripheral people who could include the Han, they are struggling for a niche “at the end of a century of violence and at the margins of a nation-state” (at 4) and are negotiating local identities with the state through a coherent set of strategies – “to subvert state projects, to enunciate calls for justice, or to open up avenues for healing” (at 3) as a way to heal the untold sufferings and pain inflicted during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. This work is an exception to the tendency to compartmentalize ethnic minorities as a self-sustained and exclusive social sector.

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Appendix

The data for this paper have been gathered from multiple long-term and short-term village-based participant observations, a research method often used by anthropologists. However, when coming to the analysis of these data, I have incorporated the theoretical approaches of political science, sociology and human geography as I find they can help to delineate a more complicated and comprehensive picture of grassroots associations and state–society relations in China. I believe that anthropology is good at dealing with often microscopic events or settings in a most delicate and sophisticated manner; however, I am intrigued with the capacity of political science and sociology to identify a panoramic view of how things are and where they are headed. Moreover, I see the importance of the geopolitical dimension of the issue in question in understanding how the locals' geographically-derived identities and political pursuits are not regionally bounded at the same time. Therefore, I am convinced that such a multi-disciplinary method will showcase a worthy effort to integrate the bottom-up and top-down approaches to Chinese politics.

I interviewed over a hundred villagers and over forty township and county cadres and officials for my book project; however, the data for this article are mostly based on interviews with Uncle Pema and the Moluo Tourism Association members. The ages of the interviewees ranged between early 20s and early 80s, but the majority were between 40 and 70. Over 90 per cent of interviewees were ethnically Tibetan, as the majority of locals, including the cadres, are Tibetan. All the others were Han.