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## Shangri-la: From Utopia to Wasteland?

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### **Acknowledgements**

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# Shangri-La: From Utopia to Wasteland?

## Case Study

Li Bo

The rapid urbanization movement in China's uplands and up-streams, home to ethnic groups, are problematic for ecological and cultural reasons. Shangri-La County in southwest China is one such destination that has experienced such environmental and sociocultural challenges. The scale and speed of urbanization that has occurred in Shangri-La has outpaced what local communities can adapt to. As a consequence, a significant regional wetland as well as a culturally important water burial site are in serious distress.

**Keywords:** urbanization, Yunnan, China, Napa wetland, water, religion.

### Introduction

In 2008, Shangri-La Prefecture (Yunnan Province, People's Republic of China) completed a sewage treatment plant with the help of a Dutch government donation. The much-needed facility was expected to have treatment capacity of up to 10,000 tons per day, double the amount of the 2001 treatment plant completed by the prefectural government. Yet, the new treatment facility failed to perform up to capacity for a number of reasons. First, the current sewage pipe system cannot accommodate rapid urban expansion; and second, the local government has poor mechanisms for the collection of wastewater treatment fees, both from commercial and residential taxpayers. Currently, rain and melted snow water are not separated from municipal wastewater. The malfunctioning of the treatment plant necessitated that urban waste be dumped into the Nachi River. This river was consequently widened and diverted into a cemented swage canal that discharges sewage water deep into the adjacent Napa wetland.

In the past few decades, rapid urbanization in the Himalayan region has led to significant damages to the natural environment and has severely undermined the living conditions of local populations, particularly in adjacent suburban and rural areas. The negative impact of urbanization on both the environment and local communities calls for greater attention to strategies that can both alleviate problems of pollution and disease and restore balance to regional ecosystems. In this case study we will not address the broad subject of urbanization and environmental deg-

radation. Instead, we bring attention to various cultural and religious practices and customs that have benefited from close connection with the surrounding environment and guided local communities for centuries. Importantly, these practices have allowed local communities to maintain a holistic and harmonious relationship with what we might call 'nature.' Although we focus on the case of Shangri-La and the adjacent wetland in the Napa valley, our intention is to speak to the broader dynamics of urbanization and environmental degradation that are impacting the Himalayan region. We suggest that traditional practices and local self-governance can serve as a foundation for a holistic and ultimately sustainable approach to development of the region.

## Background

Shangri-La County, formerly known as Zhongdian in Chinese or Gyalthang in Tibetan, is part of the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan, China. It covers an area of over 1.1 million hectares (4408 square miles), most of which is at an altitude of 11,000 feet (3,500 meters) above sea level. The county seat is in the ancient town of Dukezong founded in 1493, during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Situated along the ancient 'Tea-Horse' trade route, the town gained great economic, political, and religious importance. As an interim trading station throughout the centuries, it became home to various ethnic groups whose religious and cultural traditions were interwoven within the fabric of the community. In addition to local Tibetans, Dukezong attracted the Hui Muslims from Shanxi Province, the Naxi from Lijiang, and the Bai from Dali.

Dukezong's prominence and prosperity also made it target of bandits and looting. In response, and despite their different cultures and religious preferences, the town's residents self-organized and jointly collaborated in protecting the town from external invasions by constructing a town wall and fortress. As stories and legends have it, internal collaboration and self-governance were crucial for repelling invasions. Conversely, local discord would often have disastrous consequences, as it would weaken the town's ability to resist invasions and destruction.

The Gyalthang/Zhongdian region was first officially opened for international tourism after a 1992 government decree. Prior to that, the region's economy was heavily dependent on government subsidies and timber revenue that led to significant deforestation. The region further gained visibility in 2001, when it was renamed Shangri-La. The name, taken from James Hilton's fictional novel *Last Horizon* and the later eponymous movie, was part of a

government strategy for economic promotion (Hillman 2003). The extensive controversy over the name change did not prevent the significant increase in tourism: Both international and domestic tourism has increased from a mere 28,800 visits in 1994<sup>1</sup> to 1.45 million in 2005<sup>2</sup> to 6.13 million in 2011.<sup>3</sup> These numbers were also boosted following UNESCO's 2003 declaration of the Three Parallel Rivers as a World Natural and Cultural Heritage Site. The emphasis on tourism and world heritage sites boosted Dukezong's economy.

## Religion, Spirituality, and Water in Shangri-La

For Tibetans in the Shangri-La region, spirituality and religion permeate everyday existence and inform both secular and sacred activities. Perhaps the best testimony to this fact are the multifaceted connections between formal religious institutions and everyday local practices. Throughout the year a great number of Buddhist ritual services are conducted both in local villages and in monasteries. Village ceremonies require that high-ranking Lamas travel to rural areas and engage in religious teachings and offerings. Thus, members of religious institutions do not function in a vacuum, but, on the contrary, maintain interactions with everyday laymen. In addition to conducting major religious ceremonies, many monks, especially the elderly ones, often journey to their home villages to spend time with their families. During those times, monks deliver religious services on various occasions, such as the inauguration of new structures, animal herding, disease healing, and meditation of family conflicts. Conversely, villagers also travel to the monasteries for festivals such as the three-day Luo-Nai ritual to honor all gods residing in sacred sites, and the Za-Hou-Luo ritual to drive away evil spirits, etc. Local residents also visit monasteries to consult with religious masters on various matters, from day-to-day problems to requests for the name of a newborn. Previously, many villagers would also send young men to the monasteries for religious training. This practice, however, has declined significantly in recent years.

Similarly, everyday religious activities permeate the lives of local villagers. This is especially evident in pilgrimages to the holy mountains such as Niegqian Qumalangma (Mt. Everest) or Niegqian Kangrinboqê (Mount Kalish), and sacred waters. As long-distance pilgrimages cannot be undertaken on a daily basis, the journey is performed by the everyday circling around a sacred site known as *reda*, thereby fulfilling one of their core spiritual missions as if they were circling around a sacred mountain. These *reda* are shared by a cluster of communities living within the proximity of one water source. The shared experience of

the physical site allows residents of nearby communities to develop a sense of mutual belonging and common spiritual dialogue with nature. Notably, central to this dialogue are the mountain and water sources. It is, in other words, the vitality of the ecosystem that allows people to engage in and maintain harmonious wellbeing. The maintenance of the ecosystem, particularly of the surrounding sacred sites, is thus central to the life and daily existence of people in the area. Thus, there are voluntarily observed restrictions followed by the villagers such as restrictions on the times of logging and harvesting in order to allow for the natural resources to regenerate.

Many of the restrictions are evident in sacred water sources, as locals consider sacred waters to be infused with the spirit of *lu*, a deity believed to live underground or to embody various animals, but that does not appear as a physical or material figure. *Lu* are often present in water sources such as rivers, lakes, and glaciers. Usually, each village can trace a *lu*'s origin to a number of original ancestral family clans that would have designated *lu* sites. In honoring and preservation of the family heritage and tradition, new family members also pay respect to these *lu* sites. The omnipotence of *lu* extends beyond familial and ancestral affairs. *Lu* can influence changes in the weather and the amount of rainfall, and they can also bring prosperity or disease. The association of *lu* with health and wealth and the common belief that *lu* resides in water sources, make for various restrictions associated with water. As sacred sites of *lu*, water sources should not be polluted, the soil around the source should not be dug up, and plants in the area of the water source should not be cut off. It is commonly believed that any of these activities could bring bad luck, misfortune, or poor health. Significantly, Tibetans associate *lu* with over 400 diseases, including leprosy and smallpox.

Given the significance of *lu* in the Tibetan lore and spiritual practices, we highlight the current disjunction between local beliefs and urban development by briefly considering two cases: the drying up of the traditional water source of Dukezong, the old town well; and waste dumping in the Napa Valley wetland.

### The Dukezong Well

The Dukezong well contained natural spring water and was traditionally the only source of water for daily use in the community. Built atop of an ancient spring, it was situated at the foot of a local monastery, and was a landmark for community gatherings. Women would travel to the well up to fifteen times a day, both to attend to household needs and to socialize. A cleaning ceremony was officially

initiated every April and ceremonies were conducted under the auspices of both *lu* deities (as a Tibetan cultural framework) and the Dragon King (a Han cultural framework). The well was thus a symbolic expression not only of ecological sensitivity, but also of the town's self-governance and collaboration between the different ethnic groups. The self-governing caucuses and other ethnic representatives had also reached an ancient agreement that no individual family, irrespective of wealth or class status would be allowed to dig family wells, as such action would upset the water deity and mountain spirits.

In 2003, the well dried up. According to the local annals, this was a first ever occurrence for this centuries-old water source. The town's elders attributed the problem to tourism and urban growth. Tourism development did aim at restoring and expanding water structures as part of the overall tourist attractions agenda. However, these plans coincided with increased urbanization and increased community reliance on tap instead of spring/well water. Contrary to the well-intended tourism development plans, the water restoration project destroyed the aquifer of the spring water and water disappeared before the project was even completed. The community was very concerned and worried about the consequence. The county government commissioned enhanced drilling in the area and water was eventually found 616 meters below sea level. The well was replenished with water but, in the mind of local residents, this water was no longer the same as the one they had used for generations. Thus, today, local residents no longer use the new water for their everyday needs, and the tradition of the cleaning ceremony in April no longer takes place. Religious ceremonies and water worship have continued, but mostly as a tourist attraction.

### The Napa Valley

With the arrival of tourism and urban expansion in the Napa Valley, there was a hope that a wetland conservation site, an urban sewage dump, and a water burial site within local religious tradition could co-exist, but this was only wishful thinking.

The Napa Wetland Protected Area, renamed the International Ramsar Wetland conservation site in 2005, is only five kilometers from the Shangri-La County seat. In addition to the fourteen villages and nearly 3,000 households to which it is home, the marshy areas are also the ecosystems of a number of protected species, such as the black neck crane (*Grus nigricollis*), the black stork, the grey crane, and the Himalayan griffon. Typical of riparian wetlands, the area becomes inundated with water during the rainy

season. The excess water has to sieve through nine caverns at the northern end of the valley; it then travels underground for approximately 13 to 16 kilometers before joining the Jinsha-Yangtze River. The slow pace of filtering through the congested cavern channels has often caused flooding problems inundating adjacent barley fields and houses. In the past, villagers would mobilize to clean up the caverns' passageways and ease congestion.

In order to control flooding and reduce damage to the villagers around the Napa wetland, the county government implemented a technical solution. The intention was to unclog and dam the passageways so that water diversion could be managed when there was an excessive amount of water. However, the plan failed to account for a number of external factors such as the growing volume of untreated urban sewage water being directly discharged into the wetland. Also, a scenic road scheduled for construction around the wetland took a tremendous toll on the wetland water system. In particular, the increased soil erosion further damaged the precarious waterways. As a result, cementing the passageways did not alleviate the flooding. Yet, it prevented the local villagers from partaking in their traditional cleanup efforts.

Kesong Village is located at the juncture where the Nachi River meets the wetland; it is the closest village to Dekezhong town. Traditionally, the river course developed large winding curves, which became small marsh and water ponds in the dry season. These were convenient spots for herding village livestock. However, ever since the municipality began using the Nachi river as the primary sewage carrier for the rapidly expanding town, the residents of Kesong and other villages lost their privileged access to water in the natural curves of the river during the dry season. The villagers have also lost a large number of animals to the polluted waters and water-borne diseases. Similarly, family wells in the villages have become contaminated, severely limiting the residents' access to fresh drinking water.

The environmental transformations in the region have also had a profound impact on the local population's worldview and their ability to cope with the life-death cycle. In Tibetan culture, life and death are not separate events, but are part of a continuum. As death is certain to occur, one also has to be mentally and spiritually prepared for its arrival and has to have a clear mind at the time of its occurrence. The latter is essential for the processes of reincarnation and entry into future lives. For this reason, the observance of particular burial rituals is of particular importance. However, in recent years, such rituals have

been disrupted by severe environmental degradation. For example, the sky burial ritual relies on vultures to eat away the body. But the dwindling numbers of birds make such ritual difficult to observe. Similarly, the water ritual is meant to connect the diseased body with the natural universe as a passage into the process of rebirth. However, the amount of sewage along the Nachi river has completely altered the villagers' mindset with respect to water burial rituals and what is possible in their place. The river is now associated with the death of domestic cattle killed by polluted water and not with the sacredness and purity of one's passage into the afterlife.

## Conclusion

In the Shangri-La region, religion and spirituality create a degree of ecological sensitivity that have both guided inhabitants in their everyday interactions, and have informed the activities of the local self-governing bodies. Even if faith-based cultural or communal practices cannot address the larger urban and environmental challenges, they have been the locus of community-generated approaches to development. As the history of the region shows, adherence to local practices and reliance on local management might be the best way to address the present day economic and environmental calamities in the Shangri-La 'paradise.'

**Li Bo** has a lifetime of experience researching the intersection of environment and economics. Mr. Li grew up in Dali, home to the Bai ethnic group in Yunnan Province. In 1994—before a nonprofit sector in China existed and when the private sector was on the rise—Mr. Li left his government job. After a brief stint in business, he found his home in a nongovernmental organization devoted to reducing poverty in the mountains of southwest China. Over the next decade, as witness and participant in a drastically changing Chinese society, he has been involved in the work of diverse NGOs with different missions: rural livelihoods, indigenous knowledge, natural resource management and world heritage management in Yunnan, community-based tourism, biodiversity conservation, and NGO-led advocacy for transparent dam site decision making in southwest China. In 2001, Li Bo completed his master's degree in natural resources management at Cornell University. He spent the next five years living with a Tibetan community in northwest Yunnan within the Three Parallel River (Yangtze, Mekong, Salween) World Heritage Site. This experience exposed him to issues of community subsistence and sacred land culture, world heritage management and tourism development, village democracy, and environmental justice in China's vast western provinces. Li Bo currently works part-time with the Stockholm Environmental Institute-Asia (SEI-Asia) in Bangkok as a research associate at the Center for Human and Economics Development Studies at Peking University, and as an adjunct researcher of environmental justice at the Institute of Environmental Laws at Zhongnan University of Economics and Law in Wuhan, Central China. He is also Editor-in-Chief of the Green Paper Book Series of the Annual Review of China's Environment, jointly published by Friends of Nature and the Social Science Academic Press in China, and has been a Fellow at the India-China Institute of the New School for Social Research in New York City.

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## Endnotes

1. The Tourism Analysis of Zhongdian County <[http://news.idoican.com.cn/diqrb/html/2009-12/31/content\\_48748124.htm](http://news.idoican.com.cn/diqrb/html/2009-12/31/content_48748124.htm)>.
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