

Cover Essay

Habitat of Tibetan Nature and Culture

*The heaven of snow land.
The sacred mountain takes care,
The high places are our sacred landscape,
Om Ma Ni Be Mei Hong for all life forms¹*

Standing at the edge of a deep mountain valley, we, as modern scientist, might be forgiven for gazing across the middle distance, thinking that, at the dawn of the 21st century, we have finally arrived at some sort of enlightenment. Stripping away the soul of the world, we see great massifs of stone and ice, trees clinging to the slopes, people and other animals scraping away a living. We think we are seeing the world as it really is. The Tibetan cover art and words above offer some alternative insights.

Several decades of logging operations and the more recent mass tourism development have combined to have major socioeconomic and ecological impacts on the communities in northwest Yunnan. As the result, the intrinsic connections between nature and local communities have become fragile and threatened. As enlightened practitioners of health and sustainability, we might think that we can help these people, that what they need to learn has something to do with efficient and sustainable resource use.

Jisha, pictured on the cover, is one such threatened village where the Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (CBIK) has worked. A Tibetan community of 90 households located in northwest Yunnan, Jisha nestles within the recently nominated Three Parallel Rivers World Nature Heritage Site. As modern ecohealth practitioners, we can talk about the health of the high plateau in terms of community-based sustainable natural resources management and alpine wetland ecosystem protection. In our at-

tempts to be holistic, we might even speak about local well-being as something more than, say, desirable agriculture and livestock production, but also including secured senses of place, guaranteed rights and accesses to resources, and the respect for, and protection of, sites of cultural and religious significance. All of these things are good, and certainly an improvement over some of the rude ways that landscapes have been treated for the past hundred years nearly everywhere in the world.

Yet, if sustainable management and good health are the outcomes of our modern view of life, then how is it that so many traditional rural societies have managed to maintain and portray sustainable and convivial relationships with their environments for hundreds of years before the modern era? If we listen carefully to their stories, we may also learn something and, together, nurture a world that is better than could be imagined possible without the other, such as researchers, environmental activists, development workers, and policy makers.

As high mountain dwellers, mountain worship is the most characteristic cultural belief and practice of Tibetan peoples. The spread of Buddhism on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau imbued their sacred mountains with new or even more important significance. For Tibetan people, the scale of the mountain is significant. Songre is a little peak designated for the spirit, with small shrines but no residential houses, worshipped only by a small village or even one or two families. Nieda/Reda (some use them interchangeably) is a whole mountain body, bigger than Songre, and shared by larger village communities within a small region; people may live on it, though some Tibetan communities view such a mountain as very spiritually sensitive. Nieqian/Niere is a holy mountain highly regarded by the Tibetan community at large—it refers to the entire mountain. Nieqian is a respectful term such as Nieqian Qomolangma (Mt. Everest).

¹Translated Tibetan text from base of cover art.

In northwest Yunnan, local Tibetans believe that the land, animals, and people are governed by mountain gods residing on the peaks. There are over 15 sacred mountains found in the region, among them, the Meli Snow Mountain (Khabadkapo), the highest peak in Yunnan. Each year, thousands of believers from Yunnan and other parts of the Tibetan region make pilgrimage to the mountain.

The Tibetan people have named and classified spaces into internal and external worlds. The internal world or human community resides in the village—the people name each piece of land and each house on that land, then they adopt the name of the house as the family name. The external world, outside of house or house wall, consists of arable lands, wild lands, lakes, and forestlands with plants, trees, fish, rocks, wildlife, etc. The sacred objects such as incense-burning podiums, pagodas, and *mani* stones function as places for Tibetans to have dialogue with life and spirits in the external world. The graveyard is considered a transitional place between early life and transcending into the “world of the next life”; the external world is controlled by spirits.

In Tibetan culture, there is no beginning and ending for life; life is a cycle and nonmaterial. Humans must cultivate wisdom, and the behavior of a person determines his or her next life. A life-form is cause and effect—a human is intractably a part of nature, a part of biodiversity. Belief in reincarnation has played a major role in the preservation of plants, animals, and the environment in Tibetan culture.

As a local reincarnated Buddha teaches Jisha villagers: All life-forms show respect to each other and serve their own purpose. Just as the livelihood of Tibetan farmers depends upon their food crops in the field and alpine rangeland for grazing, the spirits living on the sacred mountains and lakes take all sorts of vegetations as their crops, and wildlife as their livestock. Only by showing respect and stewardship to lives in the mountains can villagers maintain good relationships with their sacred land and, hence, a good living for the villagers.

Words like “respect,” “sacred,” and even “stewardship” do not come easily to the lips of modern managers. Yet, when we say that human and animal bodies decompose and return to the earth, what are we saying that is different from the ancient view of the cycle of life? Do we not all return to the earth? And does not that earth then nurture us again? When we speak of protecting the high watersheds which give us water for drinking and for agriculture and industry, how is this so different from saying that these places are, in a deep biological sense, homes of the gods? For without that water we could not live. The

mountains, in a real, scientific sense, give us life, just like the gods of ancient beliefs. Perhaps, as scientists, we need to recover our sense of being mediators between the natural world and the social world. In so doing, we might learn something about respect for natural things, and for each other, and not to belittle the knowledge of indigenous peoples because we are uncomfortable with the religious language they use. In many ways, this is the new role for arts and humanities in helping us learn our way to a sustainable life on this planet: to speak, dance, draw, and perform music across language and cultural barriers.

The Tangka painting (Tibetan traditional religious painting) on the cover is a joint effort between the Jisha project and a local Tangka artist, hoping to capture the connections between, and interdependence of, the health of the high plateau and local well-being. The painting has been used to highlight the senses of place for consensus-building among community members, and awareness-raising with outsiders.

Modern societies, technologically sophisticated but ecologically disastrous, have a lot to learn from a rural Tibetan community, such as Jisha village. A first step towards sustainable livelihood is well-illustrated by those villagers in their visual message to us: to show respect and gratitude in everyday life to the mother earth, the very reason and means for all existence.

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Cover Art

Habitat of Tibetan Nature and Culture by Lobsang Kedrup

ABOUT THE ARTIST

The concept of the painting was developed as part of the project on “Culture-based Approaches for Resource Gov-

ernance and Livelihood Development,” implemented by the Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (CBIK), a Chinese nongovernment organization based in southwest China (<http://cbik.ac.cn>). Designed to express the linkage between nature and Tibetan communities, the painting was illustrated by a Tibetan artist, Mr. Lobsang Kedrup, who is originally from Litang county of the Ganzi Khampa Tibetan area, Sichuan Province of China. It

was completed in September 2003 in watercolor. CBIK’s perspectives on rural livelihood derive from recognizing, understanding, and strengthening the linkages between nature and human societies, which have evolved for generations in those place-specific rural communities.

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