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Sacred Trash and Personhood: Living in Daily Waste-Management Infrastructures in the Eastern Himalayas

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ABSTRACT

Different interpretations of what constitutes “trash” can reveal complex interactions between Tibetans and Han Chinese in the Eastern Himalayas. This article adopts the term “trash talk” to illuminate how the Tibetan practice of depositing garments as offerings to sacred mountains has become a center of Tibetan-Han debates about ethnic identity, morality, and personhood. Establishing the contours of waste-management infrastructure in a Tibetan area of Yunnan, China, that has been developed for tourism, this article examines the Tibetan term *dreg pa* དྲེག་པ (pollution), a morally laden notion of impurity. The author highlights how Tibetans seek to avoid *dreg pa* and achieve a reciprocal balance with “mountain-persons” (mountains as sacred beings) by making offerings of personal garments. The Han Chinese waste-management sector’s perception of these garment offerings as litter creates a dispute between Tibetans and Han as to what is sacred and what is trash. Drawing on field research, the author argues that the offered garments should be seen not as trash but as people—active entities that mediate the reciprocal relationship between humans and the environment. Further analysis of the experience of two Tibetan informants reveals how the issue of used garments and *dreg pa* can even form a basis for personal transformation and the reinvention of personhood. These linkages among the local notion of *dreg pa*, uncertainties surrounding used garments, and personhood suggest that waste-management policies must take local notions of waste into consideration in

order to be both efficient and culturally sensitive, especially in the current troubled trash politics of mass tourism and global environmentalism.

KEYWORDS: waste management, personhood, sacred trash, trash talk, Tibet, China, Yunnan, ritual offerings, tourism

INTRODUCTION

The development of tourism as a top priority of local governments has led to friction between Tibetans and Han Chinese. Ethnic Tibetans have long regarded the snowcapped mountains of the Eastern Himalayas as personifications of deities who have the power to protect people as long as they are worshipped with actions that include the bestowal of material offerings. The recent burgeoning of the Chinese economy has enabled numerous Han Chinese tourists to not only “worship” these mountain deities alongside Tibetans but also litter the environment with plastic waste. The Han perform a cosmopolitan imaginary of sacred and ethnic subjectivity while consuming this imaginary through activities such as taking photos and depositing their own material “offerings.” This consumption has created conflict regarding how to define these objects—conflict that can be illuminated through an understanding of what constitutes “trash.”

Compared to the Chinese socialist notion of “humans conquering nature” prevalent in the Mao era, a consumerist and capitalist notion of nature in mainland China has emerged in the early twenty-first century (Shapiro 2001; Weller 2006). The simultaneous development of environmentalist discourses and tourism has thus inevitably generated one of the primary consequences of the consumption of nature: the generation of waste. Especially in Tibetan frontiers of China’s southwest, where mountain forests and wildlife have yet to recover from decades of destruction, the opportunities and challenges of mass tourism are linked to the emergence of a singular waste problem.

Within this context, the friction between Tibetans and Han Chinese manifests itself in two different understandings of what constitutes a moral approach to the environment and thus what constitutes a moral or “good” person. On the one hand, the Tibetan idea of mountain deities, or

“mountain-persons” (mountains as sacred and sentient beings), has been revived along with the discourse of environmentalism. On the other hand, the notion of “untouched and veiled mountains” has gained popularity along with the growth of tourism and consumerism. One type of “good person” maintains a reciprocal relationship with “mountain-persons” through a ritual action of leaving objects as offerings on mountains. Another “good person” enters into a hierarchical relationship with mountains by consuming the objects of the mountains, a consumerism framed as the performance of a cosmopolitan appreciation of Tibetan ethnic subjectivities. Both activities generate excess objects in the mountain landscape, but interpretations of these objects are politically and morally divergent.

TRASH TALK: AN INTRODUCTION

This article uses the term “trash talk” to show how talk of waste and personhood reveals the complex relationships between Tibetans and Han Chinese under conditions of mass tourism and its associated problem of waste. What characteristics do these forms of “trash talk” have, and how do they shape people’s understanding of the forms of personhood that are generated in the space between “mountain-persons” and “consumer-persons”? This article attempts to answer these questions with ethnographic data drawn from fieldwork conducted in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan, China, from 2011 to 2016.

To understand trash talk, it is important to compare the customs of Tibetans and Han Chinese who visit the Eastern Himalayas. Wishing to collect merit from mountains and maximize benefit for their families, Tibetans usually travel long distances in family units or multifamily groups. They make these pilgrimages carrying as much food, bedding, silk scarves, prayer flags, and incense as they can. Often, the Tibetans who own the guesthouses give discount rates or accommodate the travelers for free, on the condition that the travelers take prayers with the hosts’ name with them to the sacred sites. By contrast, Han Chinese visit the mountains either as individuals or as groups assigned by tourist agents according to age, profession, hobby, or common origin. They are all well equipped with bottled water, oxygen inhalers, walking sticks, and clothes made of waterproof and cold-resistant fabric. Han Chinese do not usually benefit from merit-making exchanges

with Tibetan hosts; their discounts come from online booking agents or reduced group rates earned by traveling in large tours. To a great degree, the comparison of Tibetans and Han Chinese is a comparison of the rural versus the urban. The numbers of Tibetan pilgrims and Han Chinese tourists also fluctuates in different patterns. In general, Tibetans visit throughout the year, with peak attendance in the Year of the Ram because the main mountain-person of this region, *Khawa Kharpo* (the white medicine god), was born in that year.¹ A visit to the mountain-person in the year of its birth multiplies the traveler's merit by twelve. Tibetan individuals also might visit at significant times in their life, such as births, weddings, and the deaths of family members. By comparison, Han Chinese crowds usually visit during legal holidays such as the National Day holiday (October 1 to October 7), winter and summer school breaks, and individual yearly vacations, except for retirees who are likely to visit anytime in the warmer months.

Talk of waste abounds in both groups. Once Tibetans arrive at the sacred mountain, they offer articles of clothing at specific sites. These garments may be their own or those of a family member or friend. The articles of clothing are offered as sensory receptors through which the mountain-person may hear, see, touch, and feel the presence of the devotees in hope that these garments will encourage the mountain-person to respond to the devotees' requests. As they make these offerings, Tibetans talk among themselves about how the sacred sites are being trashed by Han Chinese who leave behind everything from plastic water bottles to nylon socks, forms of *dreg pa* རྩོལ་པ (pollution or disruption in social order) that the Tibetans claim will offend the mountain-persons.

Conversely, while Han Chinese arm themselves against unsafe drinking water with plastic bottles, they talk about Tibetans being problematic in terms of their hygiene and untrustworthiness, the latter assessment being based on the suspicion that they are charged higher prices than Tibetan visitors. Han talk of *laji* 垃圾 (waste) involves characterizations of Tibetans as lazy welfare riders, beneficiaries of state ethnic policies, and receivers of favoritism in education, birth, and other fields, even as the Han ignore the marginal position that Tibetans have had collectively occupied in the course of state-supported development in China (see Fischer 2013). These forms of talking about each other may seem mundane, even minor, yet they mask powerful ways of creating and maintaining inequalities.

Anthropologist Emily McKee (2015) coined the term “trash talk” to examine the social, economic, and political orderings produced through everyday talk related to trash in multiethnic societies. McKee suggests that trash talk between ethnic groups normalizes certain distinctions through labels of “dirty” and “disorderly,” and also naturalizes “links between dirty people and the need to remove (or reform) them” (2015, 734). In this article, I adopt McKee’s term “trash talk” and its variation “talk of trash” in order to analyze the social, economic, and political underpinnings of Tibetan and Han tensions surrounding trash. My analysis amplifies McKee’s concept to encompass specific forms of waste as the material foundation from which such trash talk emerges. I also foreground talk of “What constitutes trash?” side by side with talk of “What constitutes a good person?” using interviews with key informants to illuminate the way these two questions inform and create each other. Through this juxtaposition, I call attention to the complex role of trash talk in shaping interethnic tensions, which, I argue, center around definitions of personhood that oscillate between the poles of “mountain-persons” and “consumer-persons.”

To accomplish this analysis, I rely on two bodies of literature: waste studies and studies of changing morality in contemporary China. Anthropological waste studies seek to identify “what specific capacities and affordances characterize waste materialities, their management, and their meaning” (Reno 2015, 558) by delving into the economic, political, and aesthetic aspects of the socially constructed worlds of waste. In contemporary society, “making waste is part of what makes us the ethical selves we want to become” (Reno 2015, 559; cf. Hawkins 2006). The consumeristic wasteful self with its ever-shortening cycle of product purchase and disposal is a trademark of late capitalism in the West, where there seems to be a cultural mandate to buy new smartphones and throw away (or “recycle”) perfectly functioning old ones. Arguably, however, any understanding of the relationship between waste-making and the modern ethical self requires a look at non-Western contexts. My examination of a crucial Tibetan cultural context makes a contribution to this effort. In this cultural context, the ethical dimension of waste involves the practice of making material offerings as way to avoid pollution—a cultural mandate for individuals who seek to establish reciprocal relationships with mountain-persons.

The second body of relevant literature explores the dynamic morality of Chinese contemporary society. As studies have shown, the moral motivation of ordinary Chinese today is shaped by money, religion, market, and the state (Kleinman et al. 2011; Stafford 2013; Weller 2018) and is marked by the rise of individualism (Yan 2003; Xu 2017). Recent studies on Chinese morality have emphasized how asymmetries between moral imperatives have been mutually produced through various divisions within Chinese society: rural vs. urban, ethnic minorities vs. Han, marginalized laborers vs. formal employees, and so on. This literature includes some discussion of waste. Research on Chinese trash pickers on the outskirts of Beijing has suggested that the informal laborers associated with such work are regarded as untrustworthy and undeserving of quality education (Wu and Zhang 2016). Other research has highlighted how the cremation of bodies, considered a moral responsibility in Yi culture in Sichuan province, was treated as a crime when Yi urban migrants cremated a deceased friend's body on open land (Liu 2011). My inquiries into the trash talk between Tibetans and Han Chinese build on these insights but seek to complicate simple binary divisions.

The division between Tibetan hosts and Han tourists might seem to boil down to the sacred versus the secular, and some may consider that their trash talk is precisely about that dualism. *Dreg pa* is a Tibetan word meaning “pollution” or “disruption in social order” (Mills 2003). Tibetan hosts identify as *dreg pa* certain behaviors of Han tourists, including shouting at sacred sites where water and mountain deities live, buying more than they can consume, and ignoring bodily gestures to show humility while making offerings to deities.² Han tourists often talk about the unclean habits of Tibetans, including poor body hygiene, use of unfiltered drinking water, and littering—secular distinctions that are meant to define Tibetans as the opposite of the “modern and clean” Han. However, talk of trash stems less from distinctions between the sacred and the secular than from inequalities in access to resources within the tourist economy. If we automatically impose an imagined binary of “secular Han” and “sacred Tibetan,” such inequalities in earning opportunities are disguised. Trash and trash picking are crucial issues for Tibetans whose income is dependent upon a continuous influx of tourists. Han tourists, after all, come to the Tibetan areas of Yunnan province expecting to see a pristine, pollution-free, and sacred world

that they can consume. Moreover, even an abstract concept such as *dreg pa* is embodied through daily experiences (cf. Wikan 2012). It is important, then, to examine actual waste-management infrastructures in the Eastern Himalayas, and to understand the ways that waste intersects with and shapes the daily lives of local residents.

In this article, I examine the social transformation of trash into trash talk, and of the environmental and material into the social and political. The article analyzes trash talk in three sections. The first section lays out the waste-management infrastructure that has been set up in tourist areas of the Eastern Himalayas. The next section discusses the material makeup of “trash” and “not-trash” within local communities. In the third section, I tackle what being a good person means as manifested in environmental acts aimed at cleaning up trash, and I reflect on how a locally informed personhood takes shape through the fraught politics of waste.

THE WASTE-MANAGEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE OF SHANGRI-LA

Diqing Tibetan Prefecture 迪庆藏族自治州, which has three counties—Deqin, Weixi, and Zhongdian—is located in the northwest tip of Yunnan province in Southwest China (figure 1). To the northwest, the prefecture faces the Tibetan Plateau; to the west lie the thick forests of northern Myanmar; to the northeast, the prefecture is bordered by Sichuan province. For centuries, Diqing had been a node in the horseback trade that brought Sichuan silk and tea to Tibet and artisan products from Tibet to Sichuan. Diqing had been under the rule of chiefs of Tibetan or Naxi origin with some periods of integration into the central empire before it officially became a prefecture of the People’s Republic in 1957. It was not until the early 2000s that this borderland prefecture underwent transformation as a tourist site under the Chinese state scheme known as *Xibu da kaifa* 西部大开发 (West development project). In the past few years, the prefecture government has branded local railroad and highway construction projects as key components in the new state scheme of “*Yidai yilu*” 一带一路 (One belt, one road). Over the course of nearly two decades, Diqing’s prefectural seat has been transformed into the so-called Tibetan paradise of Shangri-La, a name borrowed from British author James Hilton’s 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. In 2001, Zhongdian County was renamed Shangri-La County, and the prefecture’s capital,



FIGURE 1. Map showing the location of Diqing Tibetan Prefecture, Yunnan, Southwest China, and neighboring India and Myanmar. Shangri-La and Lijiang are two neighboring prefecture seats at the northwest tip of Yunnan. Kunming and Chengdu are the provincial capitals of Yunnan and Sichuan, respectively. In Diqing Prefecture, popular tourist destinations include the Mount Meili region for its glaciers and mountains and Xiao Zhongdian Township for its meadows of wildflowers. Yubeng Village in the Mountain Meili region is also a pilgrimage destination due to its many sacred sites. *Source:* Map by Bo Wang.

Zhongdian, was renamed Shangri-La City. The town took tourism seriously by crafting the land according to the novel's script, building abandoned gold mines, reconstructing plane crash sites, and launching dance shows that retell the story of Westerners' early encounter with this imagined Tibetan sacred place. The tourists who come to experience the fantastic views of this Tibetan town, however, are mainly Han Chinese seeking to escape air pollution and stress. The Han tourists consume the "local culture," along with the beautiful mountains and waters of the area's natural environment. By 2016, Shangri-La City, with a population of only fifty thousand, received over nineteen million tourists and earned 14.1 billion yuan (Diqing Statistics Bureau 2016).

This high volume of tourists has generated a constant stream of plastic water bottles, tin cans, waste paper, and other objects, creating a solid-waste crisis for the vulnerable highland ecosystem. Although nature-tourism has been seen as the exploitation of the notion of “nature” by capital and the othering of Tibetan people in a Han-dominant Chinese economy (Litzinger 2004), the most pressing issue now lies in this solid-waste crisis. Three factors make up this crisis. First, it is clear that the municipal solid-waste system is working beyond the capacity of a midsized city. Even though sanitation workers are on eight-hour shifts and are alert about random waste on the ground, the waste bins on the streets are often full if not overflowing. In 2012, a landfill was established about six miles south of Shangri-La City to hold the city’s waste, along with that of two other county seats and several other rural areas with tourist attractions, but this landfill could not process waste produced in Yubeng Village due to a section of unpaved roads (figure 2). Second, the formal waste-management sector lacks a government-run sorting system. Instead, more than a dozen family-run workshops across the city process the metal, glass, paper, and plastics from construction waste, used home electronics, and food and hospitality businesses. Although the informal economy of recycling is affordable for the municipality and sensitive to market fluctuation, it focuses only on a highly selective segment of profitable materials. In my interviews, several workshop owners shared that they were quitting the local business and joining their relatives in the provincial capital Kunming due to a slight decline in tourism in Shangri-La. From their perspective, there had always been a steady flow of beer bottles, tin cans, and cardboard from food and hospitality businesses, but a downturn in tourism caused a loss in profit. Some informants related this downturn to a recent state anticorruption campaign that, since 2013, incidentally blocked the group tourism usually sponsored by government agencies or state-owned enterprises. According to my informants, group tourism makes up 80 percent of all tourism and individual tourism makes up the rest and has remained steady, or has even increased, over the past few years. The third is that the tourist attractions are in rural areas far away from central processing locations, thus resulting in high transportation costs. A controversial issue in these remote rural sites, and the focus of this article, is the accumulation of used garments on mountain paths. Seen as sacred offerings by some, these garments can also be seen as a crucial part of the area’s waste problem.

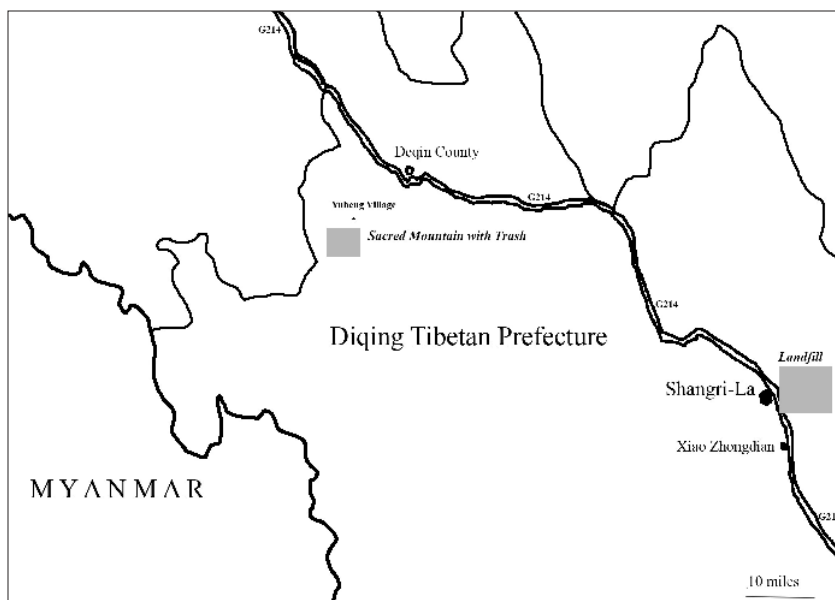


FIGURE 2. Map of the author's main research sites, Yubeng Village and Shangri-La City in Diqing Tibetan Prefecture. G214, the main artery for local transportation, is the state highway connecting Yunnan with Qinghai in the northwest. It has undergone major transformation in recent years, with new pavement and bridges, cutting travel time in half. The smaller gray cube represents the accumulating trash in Yubeng Village, where waste management is limited and partial. Some of the area's recyclable trash is brought out by mule to the nearest paved road, then taken in trucks to G214 and, finally, to Shangri-La City for further trade. By contrast, an award-winning landfill site near Shangri-La City absorbs almost all of the municipal solid trash as well as trash produced in major tourist sites such as Xiao Zhongdian Township. *Source:* Map by Bo Wang.

My specific study sites include Shangri-La City and Yubeng Village, located in Deqin County southwest of the county seat (figure 2). Yubeng is nestled in Mt. Meili National Park where tourists and pilgrims come to visit and present offerings to the mountain-person Khawa Kharpo. Yubeng has a population of about 140, with a recent addition of four business owners of local hospitality services. It is a very remote village; children must travel by both motorbike and car to attend schools in the county seat six hours away.

Yet, this tiny town received more than ten thousand tourists and pilgrims in 2015. The local villagers own about thirty-five houses, which they run as hostels with restaurants that serve home-cooked meals. Since 2009, Yubeng's tourist sites have been managed by the local government-backed Meili Tourist Corporation (MTC). MTC used bank loans to invest in infrastructure and staff training for locals and set up a ticket office. As of 2016, the entrance fee was 247 yuan (about US\$40) per person.

MTC has also arranged for sanitation services at the sites. At first the company paid for three regular staff members who rented rooms in Yubeng and whose main responsibility included the removal of the solid waste collected from bins along the mountain paths. A temporary staff member worked at the entrance of Yubeng, charging each visitor a 25-yuan (US\$4) cleaning fee. Negotiations between Yubeng villagers and MTC ensued. The villagers wanted a percentage of the ticketing revenue, but MTC rejected this request on the basis that it had not been able to make any profit due to the large sum of investment of roads, electricity, cellphone towers, and other elements of infrastructure. Despite this deficit, the income generated from Yubeng alone makes up a significant portion of the company's revenue. Nevertheless, MTC has found a money-saving solution to the waste dilemma: it pays each household in Yubeng 10,000 yuan (US\$1,500) per year to cover the cost of waste disposal. In return, each household must provide the labor to pack empty recyclable plastic water bottles for shipment in the company's trucks. In addition, once a year they must gather recyclables from waste bins on the three mountain paths that lead to the sacred sites.

At first, this compromise seemed to succeed: MTC saved money by selling the recyclables to dealers in the city, and the villagers earned extra income by collecting and packing empty bottles from the tourists staying in their homes. But following the initial negotiations, the villagers of Yubeng had to struggle for fair payment. Waste management at the village level had been reduced to a bare minimum, with just enough bins to collect trash and without an effective method to transport trash out of the mountains for further processing. Changing state policies toward tourism and development created an uncertain atmosphere; it was unclear whether MTC would hire more sanitation staff or pay the villagers to do more frequent trash collection. Within the context of these struggles about waste infrastructure, a "waste conflict" emerged between villagers, tourists, and

MTC about the nature of used garments deposited at sites along the mountain paths.

USED GARMENTS AS NOT-TRASH AT SACRED SITES

Pilgrims and local villagers have long offered used garments at sacred sites in order to ward off *dreg pa*, which they consider a form of harm that can be produced by demons hiding in the trees and waters of the local terrain (da Col 2012). However, to attract Han Chinese tourists, MTC advertised this practice as something quite different: an activity akin to accumulation of blessings through material offerings. In my fieldwork in 2015, I noted that Han tourists tended to be confused at first by the piles of used garments they saw in the mountains, but they quickly learned from their tour guides or other Han tourists that as long as they offered something of their own they would receive blessings. Hence, Han tourists add scarves, bracelets, hats, and even shoes to the piles of used garments they encounter in hope that their prayers would be received by the local deities. I overheard a mother teaching her son that offering used garments to deities was respectful behavior and not a form of littering. Many Han tourists come with their families in order to appreciate natural beauty and encounter a local culture that they assume is imbued with a “pure and religious quality.” Other groups of Han tourists visit as a component of their “patriotic activities.” Even though these trips are awarded to them by their employers, these tourists also expect to experience a somewhat religious journey. Seeking to earn merit and accumulate blessings, they also join in offering garments.

Anthropologist and cultural theorist Mary Douglas’s (1966) insight that dirt is only dirt in the eyes of its beholder can help us understand the cultural conflict in Diqing. That is, what Tibetan locals regard as “sacred trash”—used garments to be discarded in order to avoid bad fortune—has become treasure for Han tourists who sometimes take them home as souvenirs. In addition, the local government and the Chinese state have adopted the strategy of making that which is Tibetan appear sacred, exotic, and religious in order to stimulate the growth of touristic consumption. This strategy includes the crafting of a narrative of “spiritual” Tibetan locals who possess knowledge that is sacred and unknown to the secular Han. However, from the perspective of Tibetan locals, people live in an environment filled with

dangerous influences from demonic powers, and thus they must conduct daily activities to ward off “cosmic pollution,” a form of *dreg pa*. Without the Tibetan belief in the power of “sacred trash,” Han tourists, the local government, and researchers would not understand cosmic pollution and its accordant remedies, and would instead see only a social world of consumption, development, and cultural practices. By contrast, Tibetan locals and pilgrims understand cosmic pollution from demonic powers as real and frightening threats that they overcome through interactions with used garments. Within the field of Yubeng’s waste-management infrastructure, these competing cultural interpretations become highly personal dilemmas. Even while promoting the practice of garment offering among Han tourists, the tourism development authorities in Yubeng insist that local Tibetan trash collectors must remove excessive accumulations of garments or old piles that are beginning to rot. This combination of waste crisis and cultural interpretations of trash/not-trash have become a common concern in the daily talk among people in Yubeng, as illustrated by the following vignette.

On April 20, 2015, local people gathered at eight in the morning in the Yubeng village square to learn about their trash-picking duties for the day. One of the residents, Dolma, asked her visiting cousin to go with her.³ Holding onto a scrap paper with a number on it, Dolma waited for the matching number to be called to learn which section of the mountain path would be her responsibility. She hoped to be assigned to a nearby section so that she could finish the job quickly and return to her regular chores of making beds and preparing food at her parents’ house-hotel. Dolma had been feeling unwelcome since her divorce last year. As a twenty-eight-year-old divorcee living with her parents, Dolma was being pressured by parents and relatives to remarry before she turned thirty. She was told by a lama that she needed to accumulate fortune to change her life path and must prevent contamination by avoiding contact with any form of *dreg pa*.

When their number was called, Dolma and her cousin were assigned to pick up trash along the path close to the mountaintop where there were numerous offering sites for mountain deities, often waterfalls and streams. Visitors usually take home a bottle of water and immerse themselves in the waterfalls while praying. These sites were also filled with prayer flags and used garments left by people who wished to receive fortune through such

personal offerings. Yet the company insisted that these sites be cleaned up. Working around these sites would have been a beneficial job, had the task been pleasing to the deities. However, removing the objects, which would take the rotting material offerings away from the deities, might cost the trash collector a great deal of fortune due to the harm that breaking the linkage between people and deities might bring. Using bribes and promised favors, Dolma and her cousin begged their close friends in the village to swap sections. They feared that by picking up trash that was not-trash, they would cause *dreg pa*, or cosmic pollution.

This fear of producing cosmic pollution leading to “avoidance of contaminating *dreg pa*” originates in the material of the not-trash. That is, the kind of material that comprises the category of “offerings to deities” shapes how the deities mediate the social relations between people and the environment. The action that most worried Dolma and her cousin was the collection of used garments that had belonged to specific Tibetan owners and had certain significance to them, such as a scarf blessed at a temple or garments once worn by a family’s baby. The material was unique because of the personal connections made through it. As theorists Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel insist, things are social facts that have “agency, fear, and feelings,” and an object-oriented understanding of material requires us to ask, “How do . . . [things] assemble, and around which matters of concern?” (Latour and Weibel 2005, 16). I extend this question to focus on how used garments might cause fear of cosmic pollution and how things in general have affective power (see Ingold 2012; Chu 2014).

Further complicating the avoidance of contaminating *dreg pa*, waste-management officials have exploited used garments in the rapid expansion of tourism in the sacred landscape of Tibetan areas (figure 3). As mentioned earlier, tourist companies like MTC collaborate with local county governments to scale up the scope of offerings to deities by advertising these places as sacred sites for the making of cosmic good fortune. As a result, entire mountains in Tibetan areas such as southern Sichuan have been covered with used garments and colorful prayer flags (Zhou 2015, 110–113). The government’s excessive focus on garments is generated by the desire to create the appearance of sacred sites, that is, sites filled with colors, symbols, and Tibetan script, in the hope that these features will generate



FIGURE 3. Old clothes offered by pilgrims and tourists on a sacred tree, 2012. *Source:* Photo by Bo Wang.

money. In a 2015 interview, one government official told me, “We are putting a capitalist spin on Tibetan religious practices and making them the source of profit.”

However, we must view these garments through a different lens. Used garments promise another kind of profit for those who understand offerings to deities as the production of cosmic capital within Tibetan “cosmo-economics.” Dechenwa (people from Deqin County) have a comprehensive system of cosmoeconomics, or fortune-making that includes both economic and cosmic exchanges, with complicated methods of gaining profit (da Col 2012, 75). Among these methods, avoidance of contaminating *dreg pa* is a significant factor that motivates people, because Tibetans attempt to ward off harm (*gnod pa* གནོད་པ་), the harmful beings from earth (*sa bdag* ས་བདག), water and trees (*klu* ལྷ), and mountains (*btsan* བསྐྱེན, *gnyan* གཉན), or deities residing in a community’s territory (*yul lha* ཡུལ་ལྷ, *gzhi bdag* གཞི་བདག; for details, see Huber 1999). Take the example of parents whose children died before coming of age. The parents hang the used garments of their deceased children on the mountain paths, to encourage the deities to guide the young spirits through the dangerous landscape crowded with frightening beings before they are



FIGURE 4. A hidden offering site not contaminated by tourist waste, with white scarves and necklaces left by local Tibetans, 2014. *Source:* Photo by Bo Wang.

reincarnated forty-nine days after bodily death. Hence, these used garments cannot be classified as trash objects in the waste-management policies of tourist companies. Rather, used garments represent fear of, and protection against, cosmic pollution and thus must be understood as actors that take part in the making of divine worlds.

Used garments have a vital materiality and possess thing-power, partly because they generate “lively” streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane when they deteriorate (Bennett 2010, vii–viii, 6). They are lively matter also because of their social potential to mobilize people to conduct social change. Dissatisfied with the commodification of sacred sites and mountain culture, a group of young local Tibetans has begun to appropriate new and hidden sites exclusively for Tibetan cosmo-economic activities (figure 4). Only items left by local Tibetans, such as traditional robes in Tibetan styles, can be found in these new sacred sites. According to organizers and volunteers, deities can recognize these kinds of used garments better than the nontraditional clothes worn by Han tourists, and therefore using these sites will deliver more effective protection against cosmic pollution.

The concept of “used garments as not-trash” not only exposes cultural conflicts within tourism waste policies: it also redefines the criteria by which a person is considered good, injecting the question of whether one is able to recognize the thing-power inherent in used garments as part of the Tibetan struggle for fair development. The thing-power of used garments includes what the garments can mean and do on two levels: waste management and indigenous personhood. Commodities that are or can be trash have been used as reflections of ethical personhood. For example, sociologist and cultural theorist Gay Hawkins revealed that the plastic bags floating in the 1999 film *American Beauty* could be seen as representing the “wastefulness” of middle-class American life and values—a waste object announcing a kind of degraded personhood. On the level of indigenous personhood, the idea of a good person representing a “sacred” native culture can also be the result of the capitalist development of that culture (Hawkins 2001; 2009). Following anthropologist and globalist Arjun Appadurai’s understanding of “the social life of things” (1986), anthropologist Martha Kaplan revealed that the commodity of the “Fiji brand” of bottled water “evokes nature, health, purity and a remote, indigenous origin” (Kaplan 2007, 695). Bottled and packed on indigenous Fijian land, the water became a luxury consumption item on a nearby island where five-star hotels hosted Hollywood celebrities. The water then entered the worldwide market and branded the consumption of a pure Fijian culture through the consumption of water.

Benefiting from a perspective that insists on the significance of local cosmologies (de Castro 2004), I believe that examining personhood through used garments and trash talk between Tibetans and Han Chinese can help us make sense of the local cosmological understandings of the problem of waste. For two decades in the Tibetan areas of Yunnan, local governments and tourist companies have deployed discourses of the Tibetan environment as “sacred” nature without contamination and Tibetan culture as unsullied by market competition. Talk of nature has remade the relationship between villagers and agents of development, and increased social differences through economic means (Litzinger 2004). Within these processes, however, Tibetans have not been passive participants; they have created their own forms of trash talk related to self-fashioning.

The decision-making arcs of two key informants in my fieldwork can help us analyze how talk about used garments as not-trash inform the idea of whether someone is a good person in indigenous Tibetan social worlds. These Tibetan informants are Tenzin, in his late fifties and at the height of his career as a government consultant, and Choephel, a man in his seventies who has a busy agenda of giving public speeches after retiring from farming and hunting. Their life stories and involvement with the development and tourist transformation of their hometown offer local examples of how the Chinese state “gives” Tibet development as a “gift” (cf. Yeh 2013).

In the five years from 2011 to 2016, Tenzin transitioned from being a proponent of the tourist transformation of Tibet to a person with considerable doubts about that process. At first, employed by the prefecture government office for development, he guided a team of designers in the mountain paths and told stories of mountain and water deities conquering demons and protecting local villagers. The design firm was supposed to turn his stories into a cultural project with multilingual interpretive storyboards placed along mountain paths, but the contract fell through and the storyboards were never erected. Instead, in those selected sacred sites, large waste bins were set up to collect plastic refuse and the overflow of offerings to deities. To most villagers, the project’s failure was due to a lack of investment. But for Tenzin, this failure was due to Han ignorance of the local cultural view of used garment offerings as not-trash. In a 2016 interview, he made the following comments:

How can these [used garments] be *laji* [waste]? They are people! People remember their loss by putting garments there. Garments disappear. People still live. Now all kinds of garments are here and there. They become anonymous, empty, and nonhuman. A kind of *dreg pa* occurs. We talk about *huanjing*, *huanjing*, and *huanjing* [环境 environment]. Do we care about *huanjing* of people? We don’t. I am disappointed. I consulted with my great-uncle about the *fubu* [腹部 abdomen] of the mountain deities, Khawa Kharpo and others. I recorded their stories. I looked for the possible locations of the *fubu* of the mountains. I have found some. I asked my nephew to take pictures for me. I wrote up the stories and published them as a pamphlet. We want to make these new places required for all the tour guides. But not really. We want people to know the mountain as spiritual. You can see that in these new places of the deities’ *fubu*, far away

from the busy tourist mountain paths, several sets of used garments have been presented. They are handmade garments crafted by Tibetan grandmothers. They won't be there forever. They disappear. Not like the nylon garments that turn into *laji*. Of course, we picked locations well hidden in the woods, suitable for us Tibetans, the mountain people.

Tenzin was frustrated about Han ignorance of the “more-than-human” perspective (de la Cadena 2015), that is, the Han inability to see used garments as people and the mountain as a living being. In Tibetan areas, although not every villager would be able to name all the deities living in the mountain, it is common for people to recognize the mountain as living and lively and understand the necessity for humans to interact with deities because of the fear of pollution. In such a mindful social world, punishment from contaminating pollution may come in various forms, including the loss of money, unsuccessful family relations and marriage, and even death. Family members worship local mountain deities twice a month to ward off pollution and avoid punishment. Once they have enough money, they might launch a pilgrimage to visit greater deities in the temples of famous mountains and cities such as Lhasa. Such travel helps not only the travelers but also their relatives to stay away from pollution and danger. Travelers are considered good people and thus receive assistance from others. From this perspective, removing the used garments as if they were waste would cancel the work of the travelers, causing many people to lose protection against pollution.

Tenzin highlighted *huanjing* as encompassing both physical and mindful environments and defined *ren de huanjing* 人的环境 as a “human moral environment,” meaning a moral environment for humans. Bringing the physical and mindful environments together with the human moral environment is the task of a good person. Moreover, Tenzin's view of a humanized environment entails a more-than-human element: he stated that used garments are people rather than *laji*. *Laji* is sometimes used as a metaphor for something or someone that has an unpleasant quality. For example, *laji shipin* 垃圾食品 means “waste food,” or food high in calories but with low nutritional value. Another example is *yang laji* 洋垃圾 (foreign waste)—foreigners with bad manners living in China. But *laji* cannot convey the meaning of used garments as something set out by a good person to fight against pollution. Because used garments are at the core of various everyday practices

that sacralize the landscape, they become people, as Tenzin claimed. Rather than a medium or a representation *of* some people, used garments *are* people, in part because they demand that humans take responsibility for both the physical and mindful environments.

Tenzin transformed himself from a supporter of government development policy to a person who delivered a message that mountains are lively and used garments are people. Similarly, Choephel transitioned from being a hunter to a public speaker for environmental protection. Choephel had been the best hunter in the area until he quit hunting after having a frightening dream in which he saw the spirits of animals chasing after him. He believed this dream signaled that he needed to stay away from the *dreg pa* produced through his years of killing wild animals. In another dream, he was with a lama who, like him, had been a meat eater. They both decided to change their ways. When they reached a cliff, the lama jumped off and returned as a “new person,” a vegetarian. But when Choephel jumped, he died. He said that he was not a good enough person compared to the lama, so he did not have a second chance at life. After these dreams, Choephel had an epiphany. In a 2016 interview he told me that he decided to quit hunting and protect the environment as a way to work on becoming a good person and achieve a possible “second chance” at life. Choephel launched a second career as a public speaker in various forums on indigenous cultures, environmental management, and religion, and often shared the details of his dreams in his speeches.

Not only did Choephel’s transformation into a good person with environmental values receive publicity through his speeches, it also influenced pilgrims and tourists who came to visit Yubeng village on a mass scale. As 2014, the Year of the Ram, was the zodiac year of Khawa Kharpo, it was believed that walking around the sacred mountain paths would bring twelve times the merit because the Year of the Ram comes only once every twelve years. Indeed, between May and October that year, the number of pilgrims and tourists was larger than usual, reaching almost two hundred a day at peak times. With the help of Tenzin and many others, Choephel self-published four thousand copies of a book about the proper way of walking and the appropriate manner of dealing with deities. The books were sold at the Yubeng ticketing office and came with free garbage bags and locally made walking sticks. Coming to realize that his knowledge of the deities would

play a part in reducing solid waste, as well as explaining the tradition of used garments, Choephel has begun to plan his next book of songs and verses that should be sung while walking the sacred mountain paths.

What Tenzin and Choephel have in common is their understanding that being a good person involves fulfilling a responsibility to care for the mountain and its people. Used garments are among the mountain's people. They are not just trash. A good person is one who understands the trash problem, transforms himself or herself, and participates in creating solutions from a more-than-human perspective. For them, talk of trash not only involves being a good person in relation to waste; it also involves cleaning up the waste that humans leave behind.

CONCLUSION

This article unpacks the relations between talk of not-trash and personhood among Tibetans and Han Chinese in the context of waste. Because the sites where tourist waste accumulates are held sacred, the categories of both waste and personhood are challenged and destabilized. First, used garments gather in these sacred sites, in part because Han tourism authorities advertise such offerings as activities to acquire blessings. However, according to local custom, used garments are what Tibetan people place in the environment in order to ward off pollution and achieve protection. Within newly established tourism infrastructures, used garments gather and grow and become objects of solid-waste management that need to be removed. Yet removing used garments as *laji*, pollution or waste, is actually removing the guard that people have established between demons and themselves in order to avoid *dreg pa*, cosmic pollution. Hence, the locals' refusal to clean up this not-trash appears as a refusal to participate in modern waste management. Second, the idea of what constitutes a good person changes over time; some Tibetans have transformed from being proponents of tourist development to being skeptical about the process. The trash problem offers an opportunity for Tibetans to tackle personhood at its core and ultimately pushes them to develop the view that "used garments are people." As Tenzin and Choephel shaped their life stories by embracing a more-than-human perspective, they renewed personhood by introducing ordinary objects such as used garments as people—entities that are active, even proactive.

The significance of used garments also plays a crucial part in renewing traditional knowledge of local deities, sacred mountains, and the culture of cosmic pollution. From this perspective, we can see that efforts to solve the local waste problem solely within the framework of modern waste management are less effective than projected. Instead, local cultural experts are currently taking the ethics of deities, the thing-power of used garments, and ideas about what makes a good person vis-à-vis trash and working them into daily “sanitation” teaching for Tibetan pilgrims and Han tourists alike.⁴ Solutions that keep sacredness at center stage rather than offstage seem to be more effective in solving the dilemma surrounding personhood and sacred trash. This is an instructive case comparable to other culturally sensitive waste-management practices around the world (Al-Mohammad 2007).

Talk of trash has emerged with the rise of tourism as Han Chinese assume and consume the “timeless sacredness” of Tibetan culture. At the same time, local Tibetans have developed new ways of talking about cosmic pollution, such as the “human moral environment” and “used garments as not-trash” or even “used garments are people.” They use these new forms of “trash talk” to guide themselves through daily negotiations that oscillate between the poles of “mountain-persons” and “consumer-persons”; these are the dialectics between an inner yearning for an environment made pure against cosmic pollution and the drive for accumulation within the neoliberal market that is China. A further examination of trash talk might reveal what Prasenjit Duara, a historian of China, has called “a more viable cosmological foundation for sustainability” (2015, 2) in Asian contexts, especially among indigenous communities.

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NOTES

1. In the Tibetan/Chinese zodiac, twelve animals designate the year of birth. Each designated year recurs every twelve years. The Tibetans assign twelve mountains as mountain-persons, each with a birth year of one of the twelve animals. In an interview during my field research, I learned that the mountain-person born in the Year of the Ram is called Khawa Kharpo. The most recent Year of the Ram was 2014.
2. For example, it is common for Han tourist groups to point with excitement at statues of deities or at the sacred sites and shout for their family and friends to make offerings. Tibetan families, even in larger groups, generally respond in quiet manner: instead of pointing fingers they put their hands out, palms up, raised above their heads, and avoid direct looking at the statues.
3. The names of all interviewees are pseudonyms.
4. For example, Tenzin and Choephel compiled and copublished two books of songs to sing while circumambulating sacred peaks, as well as a smaller leaflet with smaller selection of songs. They gave these free leaflets to pilgrims and tourists, along with walking sticks they had made from the branches of dead trees. Visitors who purchase the songbooks get a trash bag made from recyclable materials with the logo of the Khawa Kharpo Cultural Institute on it.

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