The Rise and Fall of the Green Tibetan

**CONTINGENT COLLABORATIONS AND THE VICISSITUDES OF HARMONY**

*Emily T. Yeh*

I first met Rinchen Samdrup at breakfast on the opening morning of the “Sharing, Cooperation, and Scaling Up” meeting of environmental civil society organizations in Dujiangyan, Sichuan, in June 2004. Jointly sponsored by the Conservation International (CI) China program (CI-China) and the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), the meeting was intended as a networking and exchange opportunity for environmental groups that had applied for, or would be eligible for, funding from CEPF within the Mountains of Southwest China biodiversity hotspot, which was declared in 2000. Significantly, more than 80 percent of the area of the designated hotspot coincides with Sino-Tibetan borderland areas in parts of Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai, Gansu, and the eastern Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).

Altogether there were more than 125 participants, representing about seventy projects and organizations, including nature reserves, academic research institutes, international organizations, student associations, and grassroots groups. In the crowd of activists wearing button-down shirts, slacks, and summer dresses, several Tibetan monks in maroon robes stood out, as did Rinchen Samdrup, a ruddy-faced, tall man then in his late thirties, who was dressed in a beige *chuba*, a long-sleeved Tibetan robe, hitched up at the waist with a belt from which hung a short sheathed knife with a
yak-bone handle. Curious, I sat down at his table. There was animated conversation all around him, but no one spoke to Rinchen, not even the professor who had set up his own research organization to study Tibetan sacred mountain culture, or my environmental educator friend, who had confided to me on the bus ride to the conference that the happiest time in her life had been when she lived in a Tibetan village and studied the significance of Tibetan circle dancing for her master’s degree. I found this rather surprising, as Rinchen’s self-presentation, from his chuba to his knife to his necklace of turquoise, coral, and precious gzi beads, did nothing if not announce his Tibetanness. Only after talking to him did I realize why: Rinchen Samdrup doesn’t speak Chinese.

But the Tibetan man who was sitting next to him, and who turned out to have brought him to this meeting, did. Trador, dressed in a T-shirt and black jeans, was the vice secretary of the Sanjiangyuan Environmental Protection Association. Formally registered in Qinghai in November 2001, it was one of the earliest environmental NGOs in a Tibetan area. At the plenary session a few hours later, he told a remarkable story about Rinchen’s remote village in Chamdo, a Kham area of the eastern TAR, to which his organization had recently started providing “some advice and direction.” The area, he told his audience of Chinese environmentalists, is remote and still follows many traditions; every family has its own “soul-tree” and “soul-spring,” and during the summer Universal Prayer Festival, the villagers are so consumed with religious activities that no one can be found working in the fields. In fact, he said of the villagers, “50–60 percent of their lives are devoted to their sacred mountains.” A few years earlier, Rinchen had organized the village to start rehabilitating its main sacred mountain by planting trees that had been cut down during the Cultural Revolution. In addition, the villagers had also organized sanitation efforts and drawn up a set of regulations against hunting and other actions that harm the environment, as well as a list of fines for those who fail to comply.

Trador’s PowerPoint presentation explaining these grassroots environmental protection efforts included photographs of the villagers circumambulating their sacred mountain with ritual flags and scenes of deforestation, logging trucks, Tibetan village women hauling large buckets of water on their backs up to the new seedlings, and an old man leaning on a staff, crying next to a gargantuan tree stump, all that was left of his family’s soul-tree. Trador’s narrative was well received by the audience, and his poster about Rinchen’s village won the prize for best poster presentation of the con-
ference. It seemed to perfectly embody CI-China’s goal for its new Sacred Lands program in the Mountains of Southwest China hotspot, “the revival of Tibetan cultural value towards nature and traditional land protection mechanisms.” Indeed, throughout the conference, many of the Han participants repeatedly emphasized the need to revive the ecological wisdom that traditional Tibetan culture possessed and use it, not only in the service of conserving biodiversity, but also as a model to “encourage Chinese society to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle.”

That evening, Rinchen showed me several thick stacks of photographs from his valley, and explained that the 1,347 members of Tserangding, a cluster of eleven hamlets in Gonjo County (see map 1, G), had all agreed to form an environmental protection association. He also produced a set of documents, in Tibetan, about the environment there. The first, written in 1997, was a long essay about the history of the sacred mountain and a discussion of why villagers should care for the trees on the sacred mountain in order to avoid incurring the wrath of territorial deities who could retaliate by inflicting disease and disaster. In addition, there were guidelines, written in 2003, for the members of the association, including a list of fines for violating various rules, and the names of villagers who had volunteered to take supervisory roles in the association. Also from 2003 was another essay he had authored, which further elaborated upon both the rules and the rationales for their implementation, in terms of the need to protect the natural environment for the good of humanity. It read, in part:

Our forefathers had since early times decoded the secret of the interdependency of various aspects of the environment, and hence they always took care of nature and found ways to create a balance in nature. We should pay attention to these rich traditions, which are miraculous and beneficial, worthy of experimentation, and acceptable. They have much in common with modern science. They are something that we can be proud of. . . . If promoted, these traditions might be helpful for researchers in their search to understand nature.

He had brought copies of these essays to the meeting to distribute to other interested environmentalists but was disappointed to realize there would be no point, given the language barrier. He gave me a set, however, stating that he would like these to be translated into English as part of his effort to network and make the villagers’ efforts to protect the Tibetan environment,
which he saw as being critical to the well-being of the earth at large, more widely known.

Rinchen’s essays are but a few in the proliferation of Tibetan writing in China in the first decade of the 2000s that asserts the affinities of traditional Tibetan cultural-religious idioms and concepts with contemporary environmental concerns and that argues that Tibetan culture is thus valuable for conservation. Such claims can be found in an outpouring of essays and books, in both Chinese and Tibetan, by social scientists, influential Tibetan Buddhist leaders, and leaders of new grassroots organizations (e.g., Dawa Tsering 2004; klu rgyal thar 2007; Tsering Samdrup 2004; Tsultrim Lodroe 2003). The Tibetan borderland areas of Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Gansu also witnessed a flourishing of newly formed grassroots and regional environmental protection organizations dedicated to maintaining or reviving cultural practices of conservation. The villagers of Tserangding were unique in being the only Tibetan environmental NGO formed in the TAR during this period. Much tighter political control in the region meant even stricter control of NGOs, greater fear of the state’s reaction to their formation, and thus fewer connections to domestic and transnational environmental organizations in comparison to the rest of the Tibetan Plateau.

The story of Rinchen Samdrup illuminates the factors that facilitated the emergence of Tibetan environmental associations as well as Tibetan environmental identities and subjectivities in China early in the first decade of the 2000s. A set of contingent articulations between the interests of local Tibetan communities, Chinese environmentalists, and transnational actors allowed for interethnic and translocal collaboration around Tibetan environmental protection, manifested in the articulation of a “Green Tibetan” discourse—the claim that Tibetan culture and Buddhism have traditionally fostered environmental protection. Chinese and Tibetan environmentalists came together to mobilize Tibetan culture to save China’s biodiversity, creating a space for Tibetan culture to be expressed and for Han and Tibetan actors to agree on both mutual cultural respect and coordinated activities. Thus, it created the potential for significant harmony, in the sense of living peaceably together with others, in a way that has not been adequately explored in the political ecology critique of conservation projects (e.g., Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008; Neumann 1998, 2004; Walley 2004; West 2006; Zerner 2000).

The promise of this moment is clearest in its aftermath. The space for Tibetan cultural claims through environmental protection shrank considerably after the 2008 demonstrations across the Tibetan Plateau; that is, pos-
sibilities for Han-Tibetan cooperation decreased even as the state stepped up the discourse of the Harmonious Society after 2005 (see the introduction to this volume). Thus, the trajectory of the rise and fall of the figure of the Green Tibetan, told through the story of Rinchen Samdrup, also provides a comparison between the contingent, but fragile, collaboration that emerged between Han, Tibetans, and Westerners in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands early in the first decade of the 2000s and the statist multiculturalism of the Harmonious Society, which deploys sovereign power to enforce a state-defined harmony.

ENVIRONMENTALITY, TRANSLATION, AND COLLABORATION

The emergence of the Green Tibetan, and more specifically the shift in Rinchen’s writing away from local deities and toward “environmental protection,” can be understood as a process of environmental subject formation—the production of subjects for whom the environment constitutes a conceptual category that organizes thought and practice. Two recent approaches to the formation of environmental subjectivities can be productively read with and against each other in understanding these processes in Tibet.

Developing a framework of environmental governmentality, or “environmentality,” in his 2005 book, Arun Agrawal opens with two visits to Hukam Singh, a villager in northern India who in 1985 does not particularly care about the cutting of trees but by 1993 has been converted to the cause of environmental conservation. From the perspective of environmentality, the shift from centralized to decentralized environmental regulation, and in particular community-based forest councils as a new form of regulatory community, has led to the production of environmental subjects like Singh. Participatory, decentralized management sets conditions through the arrangement of repeated, embodied action for the production of self-governing subjects who desire the right thing; through bodily participation in monitoring and enforcement of village forest council rules, the rhetoric offered by villagers for why they wish to protect the forests comes to echo precisely the objectives pursued by the colonial Forest Department more than a century ago (ibid.). In this view, environmental subjectivity through community-based natural resource management becomes, like the proliferation of conservation-and-development projects and NGOs more generally, a symptom of neoliberal governmentality, the effect of a technique of self-
government that makes subjects responsible for internalizing government desires (Bryant 2002; T. Li 2007; McCarthy 2005; Rose 1999; Sharma 2006).

Agrawal does not provide much detail about Singh; we do not learn more about him or his narrative about the specific process through which he came to articulate his interests and desires with respect to caring for the environment, or the specificities of the political economy, contingent moments in the life of social movements at different scales, or the localized categories of personhood that may also have played a role in effecting this shift. In this framework, transformations of subject positions at the scale of the individual can only be explained as “probabilistic” (Agrawal 2005, 163), an approach that leaves “little satisfying to say about the complex and deeply biographical practices through which environmental subjects ‘make themselves’ and equally ‘are made’” (Raffles 2005, 184).

Though it does not explicitly address the question of environmental subject formation, Anna Tsing’s (2005) study of environmentalism as the product of translation and the frictions of collaboration offers a different approach to this process. She suggests that the array of critical perspectives offered by anthropologists, geographers, and others on transnational conservation, NGOs and the disciplinary effects of conservation present “a historical metanarrative of imperial modernization in which nothing can ever happen—good or bad—but more of the same. Familiar heroes and villains are again arrayed on the same battlefield. It is difficult to see how new actors and arguments might ever emerge” (161, 214). What is needed instead is attention to the processes of collaboration between forest dwellers, student activists, environmentalists, aid workers, academics, and others; the unstable and unexpected outcomes of collaborations across difference produce new interests and identities. This can lead to success because of (and not just in spite of) disagreements and divergent understandings of common words and concepts. This “productive confusion” of collaboration can result from the way in which knowledge moves through processes of translation, where translation is understood as a “necessarily faithless appropriation, a rewriting of a text in which new meanings are always forged by the interaction of languages” (Tsing 1997, 253; 2005, 246). Rather than stressing the articulation of environmental interests as an effect of governmentality, then, environmentalism can be understood as an emergent cultural form, the contingent effect of global encounters and translations across difference (Tsing 2005, 3).

This chapter develops an explicit analysis of environmental subject formation, but one that stresses articulation, the contingent and conjunctural
ways in which certain kinds of discourses come to be enunciated by certain subjects in both speech and text. Details of the ways in which forms of power get translated and reworked must be attended to, in order to avoid both an uncritical celebration of the transnational, on the one hand, and the reproduction of a theory of an all-encompassing form of power in which nothing new can ever happen, on the other (Ghosh 2006, 526).

GREEN TIBETANS

Rinchen’s 2003 essay seems to echo the Green Tibetan discourse that emerged in exile in the mid-1980s and is now an indispensable element of the exile and transnational Tibet Movement’s representations of Tibetanness (Huber 1997, 2001). For example, according to a Tibetan writer in India more than a decade earlier, Tibetans—like other ecologically wise indigenous peoples—have always lived in harmony with nature because their Tibetan Buddhist outlook fostered an understanding of ecological interdependency and respect for all living things:

A general taboo against exploiting the environment was a direct result of our Buddhist knowledge and belief about the inter-relationship between all plants, animals, as well as the non-living elements of natural world. . . . Furthermore, we Tibetans have always been aware of the interdependent nature of this world. . . . [F]or centuries Tibet’s ecosystem was kept in balance and alive out of a common concern for all of humanity. (Atisha 1991, 9)

This apparent similarity between exile and PRC articulations of the Green Tibetan premise suggests that it is an assemblage (Ong and Collier 2004) or an allegorical or activist package (Tsing 2005, 234), a story or discourse that is unmoored or extracted from its original cultural and political context and reassembled, reformulated, or reattached in another political and cultural context. Such packages can be reassembled and reattached only in specific conjunctures in which they are capable of gaining traction, in part by finding a receptive audience. The first incarnation of the Green Tibetan was an intercultural production between exile Tibetans and their Western supporters. Struggles over sovereignty in Tibet and the explicit rejection within China of everything seen as emanating from Tibetan exiles and the “meddlesome” West made any kind of direct translation or travel to China impossible. The second, which emerged in China, is instead an intercultural
production between Tibetans in Tibet and Chinese environmentalists that resembles but also explicitly disavows certain elements of the earlier (and still globally circulating) version of the Green Tibetan.

This points to three key differences between the articulation of the Green Tibetan in exile in the mid-1980s and the appearance of a similar discourse in China beginning in the late 1990s: authorship, audience, and political aim. First, the authors of these narratives are different. The earlier discourse responded to the condition of exile. It could be traced back to a “very small circle of individuals that constitute a part of the exiled Tibetan political, religious, and intellectual elite in Dharamsala . . . [who] not only generate the images in question, but also continue to manipulate and disseminate them” (Huber 1997, 106; 2001). In Tibet, by contrast, authors of Green Tibetan texts are not political elites and frequently, as in the case of Rinchen, not intellectual or religious elites either.

A second related difference is the intended audience. Many of the exile Green Tibetan texts appeared first in English before being translated and edited for publication in Tibetan, which, coupled with the high production standards of these publications in comparison to others, suggests that they were intended primarily for a Western audience (Huber 1997, 111). As a result, they were at that time arguably irrelevant not only for the vast majority of Tibetans, who live within the political boundaries of the People’s Republic of China, but also for the vast majority of Tibetan exiles. In fact, in the late 1990s, other than a small circle of young, educated, and cosmopolitan Tibetans who spoke English and had frequent contact with Westerners, Tibetan refugees were neither well versed nor interested in Tibetan greenness (Huber 2001, 368). In Tibet today, by contrast, materials such as those of Rinchen are being written in Tibetan, for a local Tibetan audience, and translated only later if at all into Chinese and English.

The third major contrast is in political aims. The exile representations were quite explicitly part of a larger effort to create support for Tibet among a liberal Western audience; given the rapid growth in visibility of the transnational Tibetan struggle in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, this was quite a successful strategy. These narratives of eco-friendliness were intertwined with claims about the massive destruction that China has wrought on the Tibetan environment and heavy criticism of the Chinese government (Yeh 2009a). Thus, these narratives could not simply travel across the Himalayas to be asserted in Tibet. Instead, the Green Tibetan claims of the first decade of the twenty-first century originated from a new conjuncture in
which environmental claims were very carefully made to indicate an adherence to—rather than a protest against—the Chinese state’s laws and policies. Indeed, the very first paragraph of the bylaws of the association Rinchen Samdrup founded, the Voluntary Environmental Protection Association, reads:

Understanding the significance of the kind policies laid down by the Central Government for Tibet is very important. These policies have made our society prosper . . . by uniting people from different parts of the country . . . One should learn how to dispel superstitious beliefs and other bad customs . . . We must promote the following measures under the guidance of the Central Government.

Only after performing the loyalty of its authors to the Chinese state does the document proceed to make claims about the benefits Tibetan culture held for nature.

**TRANSNATIONAL/TRANSLOCAL COLLABORATION: SACRED LANDS AND CHINA’S ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT**

On the front cover of Conservation International’s China Program brochure when the organization first started to work in China in the middle of the first decade of the 2000s was a photograph of a fresco in a Tibetan monastery in the Kham Tibetan area of Sichuan presenting Tibetan culture as a symbol of Chinese conservation. According to the brochure, the primary goal of the organization’s Sacred Lands program was to support “the revival of Tibetan cultural value towards nature and traditional land protection mechanisms” through measures such as the following:

Understand the traditional Tibetan cultural value and land protection system; Refurbish and promote a cultural value in Tibetan communities through local social institutions such as NGOs, governmental agencies and monasteries; Legally recognize Tibetan Sacred Land Protection as a form of protected area management.

CI-China’s program resembled that of the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Nature Conservancy, which were also starting to work more intensively in Tibetan areas of China at the time. These programs were based on
the dual premise that certain forms of development had choked the “ecological vitality” of biodiverse areas and that transnational conservation organizations could ameliorate the situation by helping Tibetan communities observe their already-existing Buddhist traditions, according to which they “aspire to live in harmony with the land, treating certain mountains, forests and rivers as sacred sites.” The program became an umbrella for a number of different conservation efforts in the Mountains of Southwest China hotspot, including a survey of biodiversity in sacred mountains, in which scientists set out to demonstrate that traditional Tibetan sacred areas were more biodiverse than areas that were not protected in this way (D. Anderson et al. 2005; Luo, Liu, and Zhang 2009; Shen et al. 2012); declaration of several new nature reserves that overlap significantly or are defined by the boundaries of traditional sacred areas; and efforts to mobilize Tibetan religious leaders to promote biodiversity conservation.

Transnational actors clearly played a crucial role in the articulation of Green Tibetan identities and ideas within China (see also discussion of the Tibetan Doctors Association in the introduction to part 2 of this volume). Yet it would be a mistake to conclude, as some observers have, that transnational interest in sacred lands was no more than an appropriation of Tibetan indigenous worldviews, that they were incommensurable with Tibetan geopiety, and that the effect was simply to limit and circumscribe Tibetan identities. Instead, attention to the specificities of the emergence and effects of the Green Tibetan discourse shows it to be part of a process of global and translocal encounters across difference that contingently produced new interests, identities, and projects. These socio-natural projects of mobilizing Tibetan culture to conserve biodiversity were emergent within a historically specific conjuncture that went far beyond local people merely reacting to or parroting dominant conservationist discourses.

Indeed, CI-China’s Sacred Lands Program brochure bore a striking resemblance to the Sanjiangyuan Environmental Protection Association’s description of its own Sacred Mountains and Lakes Programs:

One of our goals is to restore and promote traditional respect for natural resources. The values reflected from traditional Tibetan culture will be carried forward. Sacred mountains and lakes will be legally established as locally-managed conservation areas.

In fact, CI-China’s Sacred Lands program was sparked by a trip by the Chi-
nese director of both CI-China and the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund in China took with Trador through Sichuan’s Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The notion of sacred lands for conservation originated much more with him than from the suggestions of international conservation actors. Furthermore, when CI-China and the Sanjiangyuan association began working together on environmental education, they found many khenpos and lamas (Tibetan Buddhist teachers) eager to take up the message and spread it to villagers as part of their religious teachings. Many of these teachers came from the Sertar Buddhist Institute in Larung Gar, which, since the late 1980s, had become not only a key training institute for monasteries throughout the Kham region but also a center for Buddhist modernist-inspired movements of radical vegetarianism and compassion toward animals (Gaerrang 2012). The Green Tibetan was thus not merely a top-down imposition by transnational conservation organizations; rather, it was forged out of the production of local and translocal Tibetan interests and identities arising out of radically different frameworks and communities (see also Yeh 2012).

At the same time, the Green Tibetan could find a receptive audience and gain traction within China only if the notion of ecologically friendly Tibetan culture was accepted and promoted by Chinese environmentalists. From the 1950s until well into the 1980s and beyond, most Han imagined Tibetans as barbaric, dirty, superstitious, and violent, based on the few representations of Tibetans available to them, such as the 1960s film The Serf (Nongnu). Exoticized images of Tibetans, particularly the “erotic ‘minority’ Tibetan girl,” began to appear in the early 1980s as part of a broader shift in the Han imagination about ethnic minorities. By the late 1990s, multiple and somewhat contradictory Chinese understandings of Tibetans existed together: Tibetans as grateful to the “older brother Han” minzu for liberation, science, and development; Tibetans as barbaric and backward; and Tibetans as primitive and erotic. Amid this heteroglossia, another Chinese conception emerged, of Tibet as a mysterious land with a special connection with nature. It entailed a sense of nostalgic longing and a view of Tibetans as repositories of ancient spiritual and ecological wisdom, symbols of a simpler, purer time. This new development resulted from a convergence of forces: state promotion of leisure culture (J. Wang 2001), tourism as a development strategy in Tibet, the rise of Chinese backpacker culture, and the search for and resurgence of religion, particularly among residents of wealthy coastal cities (Yü 2012).
This new Chinese relationship with Tibetans, problematic as it was, partially enabled the emergence of the Green Tibetan. It included expressions such as the formation of a “Love Tibet Association” in 2001 by the China Tibet Information Center. Boasting more than fifteen thousand members, its stated goal was to “construct a spiritual home for people who love Tibet.”

More specifically, it helped its members network, organized trips to Tibet, and provided information about tourism. In addition to making “a spiritual home” for lovers of Tibet, the association also promised to “serve Tibet” through activities such as organizing talks on college campuses “to spread the word about Tibet” and “Tibetan culture appreciation month.” Members also engaged in travel for various purposes, including to donate money to Tibetan orphanages and “to protect the environment” by driving their own cars to Tibet; there was even a trip for “photographers going to Tibet to rescue cultural heritage.”

Among the travelers who began visiting Tibetan areas were urban, college-educated youth who became leading environmental activists. Indeed, China’s environmental movement developed in the 1990s in relation to issues of species protection in culturally Tibetan areas. This was due in large part to the fact that wildlife conservation has been seen as a relatively non-political and thus safe issue, and culturally Tibetan areas, which cover about one-quarter of China’s total land area, have far more charismatic megafauna left than most other parts of China. Two of the earliest campaigns by China’s first prominent environmental NGO, Friends of Nature, that galvanized Chinese college environmental activists, were located in Tibetan areas: the campaign to save the snub-nosed monkey in Diqing, Yunnan, and the campaign against the poaching of the Tibetan antelope for the making of *shahtoosh* shawls in the Kekexili region of Qinghai. These campaigns also motivated the formation of Green Camps, expeditions of elite Beijing-based college students to China’s former frontier areas with severe environmental problems, including a number of Tibetan areas, from 1996 to 2006. These trips brought China’s new environmentalists face-to-face with Tibetans, inspiring many to both form their own environmental organizations and respect Tibetan culture.

A convergence of many factors thus created a receptive audience for the idea that Tibetan culture is beneficial for the environment. Among these were the travel of transnational discourses of ethnobotany, religion and the environment, and traditional ecological knowledge, which contrasted sustainable livelihoods supported by indigenous ways of knowing against the...
environmental ravages of development. The rise of independent tourism (see chs. 2 and 3 in this volume) and changing representations of ethnic minorities in China were also important. The idea that Tibetans might have something to offer mainstream Han society represented a dramatic departure from the long-standing belief that Tibetans are backward and inferior and could only be improved by becoming more like the Han (Heberer 2001). The geographic contingencies of species distribution also resulted in an emergent environmental movement developed in relation to Tibetan areas. Chinese environmentalists became increasingly interested in the potential of Tibetan culture to save China’s biodiversity (Guo Jing 2000b; Xie Hongyan, Xiaosong, and Xu 2000; Xu Jianchu 2000; Xu Jianchu et al. 2005; Zhang Shi 2000). A spate of ecological studies, by both Chinese and international scientists, sought to rigorously demonstrate the contributions that Tibetan sacred lands have made to vegetation condition and biodiversity (D. Anderson et al. 2005; Luo et al. 2009; Nan 2001; Salick et al. 2007; Shen et al. 2012).

Because of the Chinese state’s concerns about sovereignty in relation to transnational organizations (Litzinger 2006; Turner and Lü 2006), many transnational environmental and development organizations work in China with minimal expatriate staff. Thus, both transnational and translocal interest in Tibetan culture’s potential for biodiversity conservation has worked through Chinese conservation organization staff, activists, and scholars.6 This resulted not only in scientific investigations of biodiversity but also in funding for various projects and conferences that further validated the ideas underpinning the Green Tibetan. It also created opportunities for networking among grassroots Tibetans and between Tibetans taking up environmental subject positions and Han and foreign conservationists.

This wave of interest in the potential of Tibetan culture for biodiversity conservation opened up a space for the formation of a number of Tibetan community environmental protection organizations through most of the first decade of the twenty-first century, some with very direct outside support and direction, such as the Tibetan Doctors Association in Diqing and Green Kham, in Ganzi. Others, such as the grassroots association in Chamdo established by Rinchen Samdrup, formed without direct financial or logistical support from outsiders. Along with the proliferation of Tibetan writings about the environment, the formation of these organizations meant that the years from the early to middle of the first decade of the 2000s were a time of great ferment in terms of this new articulation of a Tibetan environmental subjectivity, as well as great optimism for the potential of nongovernmen-
tal organizations. Grassroots associations focused on development and the environment sprung up across the Tibetan borderland regions of Kham and Amdo. Educated Tibetans, often those with English-language training and exposure to foreigners, aspired in large numbers to form their own NGOs. The future of Tibetan environmental associations, supported by Chinese environmentalists, looked promising.

THE VOLUNTARY ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION ASSOCIATION AND THE MAKING OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL SUBJECT

An organic intellectual, Rinchen Samdrup never attended school. He learned to read and write first from his mother and then, toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, from a monk who taught children in the hamlet, hiding when state authorities arrived. Later he studied with a lama, focusing on texts from which he learned to make Tibetan medicines. He began to lead other villagers up to the nearby hills twice a year to collect medicinal plants and made medicines, which he distributed for free. He also began intensive study of the texts of Nyala Changchub Dorje, an early twentieth-century Nyingma master revered throughout the region, many of whose original texts had been buried in the village during the Cultural Revolution.

According to Rinchen, his concern for the environment was originally sparked by the local sacred mountain. As with many important religious sites in Tibet, special significance is attached to ritual circumambulation of this mountain once every twelve years. Rinchen first became concerned during the 1997 propitiation event when he saw that the mountain had not only been deforested but was also littered with garbage. This prompted him to write an essay about the history and importance of this sacred site, as well as reasons to protect it. The twenty-two-page essay quotes long passages from religious texts and is devoted to what these texts say about the negative consequences of harming the place: “Destroying mountains, blowing up boulders, defiling springs, disturbing the gnyan, logging the forests, killing animals . . . will cause fortune and power to be lost and suffering of strange diseases. . . . There will be diseases associated with disturbing the klu and the sa-bdags. . . . All of these will lead to death of livestock, destruction of crop by hailstorms, infestation of pests on the crops.” The essay is couched in Tibetan religious terms and uses the grammatical form of religious texts. It does not self-consciously present “nature,” “religion,” or “culture” as abstract concepts. Its rationales for environmental protection are specific to the terri-
terior deities and other beings that inhabit the local place, rather than based on general principles of ecology or interconnectedness.

After he wrote this essay, Rinchen Samdrup began to talk to other villagers about the need to protect the environment, but at first, nobody was particularly interested. In fact, he said, in the beginning, “they laughed at me because they said that I am a person from a small village, thinking about matters related to the world.” Two things eventually changed the villagers’ minds. First, he was persistent. Whenever he visited his neighbors, Rinchen talked about the need to protect the environment, and “since we all have good relationships, they were willing to listen at least. Gradually, they started to agree.” The other catalyst was a visit by his younger brother Karma Samdrup. Karma had left home at an early age to become a gzi (precious agate bead) trader and eventually became a very wealthy businessman. He also founded the Sanjiangyuan Environmental Protection Association, though Trador did most of the day-to-day work. When he visited home and spoke with his older brother, he learned of Rinchen’s essay about the sacred mountain and sent it to Trador. In 2003, Karma and Trador returned to the village together. By that time, most of the villagers were on board and had begun some small-scale tree planting and were trying to stop outsiders from fishing (fishing is taboo for religious reasons, but the high-altitude fish had become a delicacy for local officials). However, they were concerned about attracting too much attention, fearing possible punishment from the government for doing anything out of the ordinary. Trador discussed his environmental organization with Rinchen and the villagers and assured them that environmental protection work was in fact supported, not punished, by the government.

The visit solidified the villagers’ determination, and soon all of the adult residents of Tserangding agreed to organize themselves into the Voluntary Environmental Protection Association. They drew up a detailed list of regulations and developed a plan for major afforestation efforts on previously deforested land. The first two years alone, they planted a total of four hundred thousand sea buckthorn saplings, forty thousand spruce trees, and sixty thousand poplars, all with village labor, with a goal of planting twenty thousand trees per year for the next ten years. After the second year, they began to receive sea buckthorn and spruce saplings free of charge from the County Forestry Bureau, which had saplings available as part of the Sloping Land Conversion Program but few takers among other townships and villages.

Other activities taken up by the association included community garbage cleanup activities, monthly wildlife patrols against poaching, and
monitoring wildlife with binoculars, supported indirectly by CI-China. Monitoring fit especially well with CI-China’s goals, given that the area’s extraordinary biodiversity included endangered and threatened species such as black-necked crane, blue sheep, musk deer, gazelle, lynx, and brown bear. Beginning in 2005, the community association organized environmental education activities during the annual summer festival, when the entire community gathers together for about ten days. They asked the abbot of the local monastery to give teachings about the relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and environmental protection and also to voice his support for the association’s activities. The villagers organized a quiz program, essay contests, and role-playing skits about the environment.

An important principle of the association since its formation has been to inextricably intertwine their environmental protection work with the broader goal of promoting Tibetan culture. As a sixty-year-old association member told me, “Our main purpose is to promote Tibetan religion and the customs of the place, and on the side, we stop hunting and plant trees.” Similarly, Rinchen stated, “Cleaning garbage and other activities are branches of our work. The most important goal is to protect our culture.” Thus, along with the group’s tree-planting work, Rinchen from the very beginning also organized the compilation of a Tibetan-language environmental journal. Key association members selected excerpts from historical Buddhist and Bön texts with implications for environmental protection, quotes from Chinese laws and leaders from Mao to the present day, and essays about environmental protection by well-known khenpos and local villagers. They also established a Tibetan-language website on environmental protection and tried to set up a rural Tibetan-language library.

Rinchen continued to write, though after the formation of the association, much of his effort was directed toward the journal and various brochures and booklets for association members. There are a number of noticeable differences between the language he chose after 2003, compared to his earlier essays. While the 1997 essay mentioned the term “environmental protection” only once, the terms “environmental protection,” “natural environment,” “balance,” and “interdependence” appear frequently later. His earlier work is fundamentally concerned with specific types of illnesses and harms that can result from the disturbance of local territorial deities. His more recent work (quoted above), by contrast, emphasizes the conviction that traditional Tibetan practices are both similar to, and will eventually be evaluated very highly by, scientific research. The former also is concerned primarily with a
detailed history of a local place, while the latter emphasizes that protecting these local places “also benefits the world.” Even the term “culture” appears only in the latter documents, which build on the ideas expressed in a localized and specific vocabulary in the early writings but rearticulate them in a way that is self-consciously environmental.

Rinchen’s contact with Trador in 2003 catalyzed both the formation of the association and the process of his becoming an environmental subject. Trador served as a cultural and linguistic translator of Rinchen’s concerns to a broader Chinese public, bringing him to training workshops and meetings, where he met Chinese environmentalists and journalists. A few Beijing-based environmentalists traveled to Chamdo to learn more about the group’s work and successfully nominated the association for several national-level environmental awards; it won third place in the national Alax SEE environmental award in 2005 and, in 2006, first place in the Ford Motor Company’s China Environment and Conservation Grant competition. This national-level recognition brought the group the funds to continue its work, as well as further recognition among Chinese environmentalists who were enthusiastic about its work and about the broader potential for similar groups to mobilize traditional Tibetan culture to preserve biodiversity.

Although Rinchen and others like him insisted that Tibetan culture had always had the concept and practice of environmental protection, even if the term itself was new, they also maintained that there were clear differences between the ways they understood the environment and its protection and the way it was understood by the Chinese and foreign conservationists they encountered. However, by aligning themselves with conservationists and their discourses and institutions of science, Tibetans simultaneously distanced themselves from the possibility of their cultural practices being labeled as “superstition,” and thus dangerous, illegitimate, or anti-state (see ch. 9 in this volume). What their collaboration in conservation efforts produced, then, was not only better conditions for the survival of other species but also a space in which Tibetans could make a bid for the legitimacy of cultural practices in a way that had been unthinkable (and would soon be so again).

FRAGILITY AND LIMITATIONS

Translocal and transnational collaborations can work not just in spite of but also because of differences and the inevitable slippages and faithless
appropriation that characterizes all translation (Tsing 1997, 2005). In some circumstances, however, these slippages can also make the resulting collaborations fragile. Even in 2004, at the workshop that first brought Rinchen Samdrup into contact with broader environmentalist networks, the limits to the depth of intercultural collaboration were apparent. Rinchen and others like him were, like foreign and Chinese environmentalists, genuinely interested in the protection of “nature.” At the same time, however, their environmental subjectivities were constituted in part by the fact that the environment provided a way to talk safely about other aspects of Tibetan life and culture that were too politicized to discuss on their own terms. Han proponents of the Green Tibetan discourse saw Tibetan culture largely as a way of protecting the environment, whereas Tibetans saw the environment not only as something to be protected but also as a way of making space for Tibetan culture.

The depth of their collaboration in the middle of the first decade of the 2000s was limited in part by the fact that some of the political constraints faced by Tibetans were virtually invisible to non-Tibetans. For example, on the second day of the 2004 conference, about fifteen people, half of them Tibetan and half Han, participated in a working group on “remaining problems in traditional culture and environmental protection.” One participant was a Beijing University student, a serious-looking young Han man, who was very adamant that “the real root of all environmental problems is the loss of traditional culture.” He raised numerous examples to support his point, such as the fact that the traditional Tibetan reluctance to eat fish, once seen as superstition, is now recognized as environmentally friendly. Other Han participants proposed that the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund should “spread information about the ways in which Tibetan culture is good for the environment” and “support monasteries.” Their basic message was summarized in the statement of one Han environmental activist: “Our goal is to change the minds of policy-makers by spreading the word about the good aspects of traditional culture. We should protect cultural diversity, and we should use Tibetan religion for environmental protection.” They enthusiastically agreed on the use of traditional religious practices for environmental protection and that they should promote the legal recognition of Tibetan sacred mountains as a form of protected area management.

After almost an hour of discussion, one of the quiet Tibetans finally spoke up, trying to explain that this would be more difficult than some of the activists seemed to believe. He didn’t mention that many traditional practices,
such as rituals to prevent hail, are regularly labeled superstitious and thus are seen as a threat to the state. He did explain, however, that there are still restrictions on monasteries. In the past, he stated, monks set aside certain areas as sacred mountains and forbade logging in those areas. Now, however, monks and lamas are authorized by the state to be involved only in those activities that the state deems to be “religion.” This means, he explained, that they certainly do not have the right to tell citizens whether or not they can cut down trees; lamas no longer have the right to declare sacred mountains. None of the participants followed up with a comment. Indeed, it was as if no one had heard his remarks. The conversation continued with more declarations about the importance of traditional culture.

After a while, another Tibetan spoke up in flawless standard Chinese. “Look—the problem is politics . . . Before I came to this conference, I was warned that I should be very, very careful about what I said here.” The Tibetan who had spoken up earlier looked relieved, as this was the point he had tried to convey. He added, “Probably, it’s we Tibetans that understand this best. There are still some things that are very hard for us to do.” Their comments were again met with silence—not a hostile silence, but one that suggested a lack of comprehension, as if these Tibetans, in talking about the constraints that they might face in trying to implement the Han activists’ optimistic goals of “reviving local religious culture in service of the environment,” were speaking a language that the Chinese environmentalists could not or would not engage with at the time.

THE CONJUNCTURE BREAKS APART

The political terrain shifted dramatically for Tibetans after the unprecedented wave of more than one hundred protests that swept the Tibetan Plateau in 2008 and unleashed a torrent of Chinese nationalist backlash (see Barnett 2009; Yeh 2009d). During the Olympic Games, hotels in Beijing were not open to Tibetans (or Uyghurs). Even afterward, Tibetans often found that as soon as they showed their identification cards, previously vacant hotels mysteriously became full. Taxi drivers and restaurants refused to serve them. The Tibetan Plateau entered a state of lockdown, with People’s Armed Police soldiers stationed on every street corner of Lhasa, new surveillance technologies, and helicopter patrols of the city. In Lhasa, residents reported a noticeable worsening of interethnic relations. The extensive policing, surveillance, and always-tight political control in the TAR was extended across
cultural Tibet, permeating the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, which witnessed a horrifying series of self-immolations beginning in 2011.

Contact with foreigners became a liability, making transnational collaborations dangerous. Foreign NGOs that had long done development work in Tibetan areas were declared to be enemies, and local residents were banned from receiving any kind of foreign money. NGOs in general became suspect, first in Tibetan areas and later, in 2011, with democratic protests breaking out across North Africa and the Middle East, throughout all of China. No longer able to function without funds, local civil society organizations fell apart. Tibetan aspirations to found or work for NGOs fizzled in the face of this severe political pressure. Many young English-speaking Tibetans, once motivated to improve the environment and local livelihoods and revive local culture went to work as civil servants, including, in some cases, Public Security Bureau officers. Others, citing the impossibility of doing anything through civil society, turned toward a business model and the language of social entrepreneurship. International NGOs that found a way to continue working in Tibet also did so by switching their model away from development, environmental protection, and culture and toward business development and ecotourism. The emphasis shifted to turning Tibetans into successful entrepreneurs. The language of sustainability and the new exalted figure of the entrepreneur fit well within China’s larger turn toward an increasingly neoliberal form of governance, in which all citizens must cultivate themselves to become more rational actors and better entrepreneurs of themselves, so that China may gain its rightful place of domination in economic globalization (Yan 2008; Zhang and Ong 2008).

SOVEREIGN POWER AND HARMONY IDEOLOGY

However, a far worse fate than the withdrawal of funding was in store for Rinchen Samdrup and the Voluntary Environmental Protection Association in Tserangding. Rinchen and his younger brother Chime Namgyal were detained in August 2009. Chime was sentenced without trial to twenty-one months in a labor camp on charges of endangering state security by having “illegally compiled three discs of audio-visual materials on the ecology, environment, natural resources and religion of Chamdo Prefecture,” illegally possessing materials from “the Dalai clique abroad,” and “supplying photographs and material for the illegal publication ‘Forbidden Mountain, Prohibited Hunting,’” a reference to their Tibetan-language environmental
protection journal. Furthermore, he was accused of having broken the law by assisting Rinchen in applying for registration for their environmental NGO. Chime had been partially handicapped before his detention and was reportedly tortured and beaten to the point of being unable to walk or eat without assistance (ICT 2010).

Rinchen was held without trial and without being officially charged for almost one year, when he was sentenced to five years in prison on charges of “incitement to split the country.” His lawyer stated to the Times of London that the main charge centered around the posting of an article on the environmental association’s website that indirectly mentioned that the fourteenth Dalai Lama had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Rinchen denied in court that he had posted it. None of the activities that Rinchen and Chime were accused of are in fact against the law. The association applied repeatedly for official registration but was consistently denied. When Chime was sentenced, however, these attempts at legal recognition were simply declared illegal. Similarly, there is no law in China against possessing or posting photos of the Dalai Lama or making references to him, certainly not references as obscure as the one Rinchen Samdrup was accused of having posted. Yet this, too, was simply declared illegal.

In the aftermath of 2008, even as state authorities stepped up calls for a “harmonious society,” sovereign power marked Tibetans as always already guilty subjects. In their position, guilt is not about transgression of the law. It does not refer “to the determination of the licit and the illicit, but to the pure force of the law, to the law’s simple reference to something” (Agamben 1998, 27), which makes an actual violation of an actual law irrelevant. Giorgio Agamben further writes that the “almost constitutive exchange between violence and right that characterizes the figure of the sovereign is shown more nakedly and more clearly in the figure of the police than anywhere else” (ibid., 104). Thus, it is not surprising that Rinchen, Chime, and a number of other villagers were subject to police violence and that their troubles actually began with the police. Though the environmental protection association had long had good relations with Forestry Bureau officials, it also had a long-standing enmity with the (Tibetan) head of the County Public Security Bureau. An essay published in the association’s journal indicated that things started to go poorly for them in 2005, the year the Harmonious Society was declared. Villagers accused the official of sending people to hunt wildlife that they were trying to protect and of beating them when they tried to prevent poaching. There were other disputes related to grassland bound-
aries, sacred mountains, a village deity, and compensation for the trees the villagers had planted for the Sloping Land Conversion Program, along with further poaching and beating of villagers. The members of the association eventually attempted to bring their local police chief to court and to petition regional and national levels of government. Retribution from officials who had been petitioned against or embarrassed by the process, or from their political patrons, led ultimately to the arrest and sentencing of the environmentalists on state security charges. Karma Samdrup, Rinchen’s other younger brother and a very well-known environmentalist, philanthropist, and businessperson, was also arrested and sentenced to fifteen years in 2010 as he sought to mobilize support to help get his brothers out of detention.

These arrests and the state violence mobilized against the members of the association ended their ability to do environmental work, let alone continue to realize their goals of cultural revival. While Chime and Rinchen were detained, Chinese environmentalists worked behind the scenes to demonstrate the brothers’ innocence, highlight their environmental protection contributions, and secure their release. In doing so, they were forced to navigate the new precariousness of their own positions, as Tibetan environmental protection became a dangerous rather than celebrated cause. These efforts were unsuccessful. In the meantime, both transnational environmental organizations working in China, and domestic NGOs, have largely moved on from their focus on sacred lands and indigenous knowledge. The combination of shifting donor priorities within transnational conservation finance, increased Chinese state regulation and pressure on NGOs, and the shift toward a greater emphasis on sovereign power in the sovereignty-discipline-government triad after 2008 led away from sacred lands and toward issues of adaptation to climate change, payments for ecosystem services, and more generally “selling nature to save it.” Though the Chinese environmentalists who had been involved in championing a space for Tibetan cultural assertion did not themselves change their minds or start seeing Tibetan culture differently, the Chinese public at large became less willing to trust Tibetans or believe in the positive potential of Tibetan culture. Thus the space that once existed in which the Green Tibetan could gain traction and produce material results in the world closed down even as the Harmonious Society was being heavily promoted.

A number of scholars have read the interest of transnational conservation agencies in sacred lands as an appropriation and closure of indigenous territoriality, an extension of the territorialization and enframing of space.
that comes with the declaration of new ecoregions. Still others have interpreted the emergence of local environmental NGOs and the production of environmental subjects as the carriers of new forms of imperial sovereignty and neoliberal governmentality. While this perspective is a useful corrective to the triumphalist mainstream literature that reads Chinese NGOs only in terms of their potential for Western-style democratization, the possibility of recognizing change is foreclosed by too insistent a reading of the emergence of subjects who care for and guide their own behavior in particular ways in relation to “the environment” as merely a new form of government “acting at a distance.”

While the emergence of the Green Tibetan in China may be these things, it is also much more. Rinchen Samdrup’s essays before and after his engagement, through a cultural and linguistic translator, with translocal and transnational understandings of environmentalism and Tibetanness reveal how concern for a local place and its territorial deities were reworked and re-presented as concern for the world’s environment. At the same time, the program activities of a transnational conservation organization meant to protect sacred mountains and lakes were formed very much in relation to the concerns of people like Rinchen. These encounters were thus cultural productions, resulting in new identities and interests for all of their participants. For a brief period of time, the productive slippages of translated interactions with distant others created a space in which Tibetans could not only actively argue for nature protection but also articulate claims about the inherent value of their culture. However, this conjuncture proved fragile and fleeting in the face of the state’s reassertion of sovereign power as a favored mode of governing Tibetans after 2008. Ultimately, contingent collaborations of Chinese and Tibetan environmentalists in mobilizing Tibetan culture to conserve biodiversity were far more beneficial for interethnic harmony than the state-led project of a forced harmony ideology.

CHAPTER 10. THE RISE AND FALL OF THE GREEN TIBETAN

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1 A “soul tree” (Wyl. bla shing) is one that stands in sympathetic relationship with a particular person’s or clan’s life force.

The full name of the organization is (in Wylie transliteration) mdo smad ahn chung seng ge gnam rdzong rang mos skye khams khor yug srung skyong mthun tshogs, or Voluntary Association for the Protection of the Natural Environment of Domed Anchung Sengge Namzong (a local place-name).

A khenpo is an advanced degree given in the Nyingma school in the study of Tibetan Buddhism.


By “translocal,” I refer to connections as well as unevenness and inequalities linking localities within China. See Oakes and Schein 2005.