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8 Holy Heritage

Identity and Authenticity in a Tibetan Village

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Abstract
This chapter addresses religious as well as ethnic identity and heritage in a Tibetan village in the Meili Snow Mountains, which is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site Three Parallel Rivers. It shows the complex interplay and artificial distinction between natural and cultural heritage in UNESCO’s work and its impact on a local community. The mountains are listed only as a natural heritage site, although they are holy to the Tibetans. The new heritage status ignores the mountains’ long-standing cultural significance and meaning for the local community. The listing and natural park status is also problematic since it seems to favour tourists’ experiences at the expense of local communities’ participation in and management of the area.

Keywords: Tibetan, tourism, authenticity, nature/culture, Meili Snow Mountains

Xidang is located in Meili Snow Mountains nature reserve near Deqin (Dechen in Tibetan) in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, in northwestern Yunnan. Meili Snow Mountains are part of the ‘Three Parallel Rivers’ nature reserve UNESCO World Heritage Site and the peaks of Meili Mountains, especially Mount Khawa Karpo,1 are holy to the Tibetans. Pilgrims from all over China visit this mountain every year.

1 I use the spelling ‘Khawa Karpo’ which seems to be the most frequently used version of the standard Wiley transliteration Kha ba dkar po. It is also seen in the literature as ‘Kawa Garbo’ and ‘Kawagebo’. For discussion of the Khawa Karpo versus Meili naming issue, see Litzinger 2004.
year. The site is recognized as a natural heritage site but the holiness of the mountains and the fact that thousands of people live inside the area are not recognized. Tibetan culture as such has not been listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List and many scholars, activists and the Dalai Lama regard it as being threatened (see discussion e.g. Barnett 2001; Lopez 1998; Anand 2000). China has been accused of utilizing its cultural and natural ‘resources’, depoliticizing them, and then profiting from contested heritage sites under the guise of development and sustainability (Winter and Daly 2011: 19). With the advance of tourism in Diqing, fostered by the name change of Zhongdian town to Shangri-la and the nomination of Meili Snow Mountains as part of World Natural Heritage, the policies of different actors concerned with heritage and tourism are influencing the villagers’ conceptions of their heritage and identity. So although heritage and tourism has brought many benefits (mostly economic and infrastructural) to the locals, it has not allowed more space for local voices.

The main question this chapter examines concerns authenticity and how the sense of it is created or contested by different actors involved in the tourism and heritage business at Meili Snow Mountains, especially in Xidang village. Another issue it discusses is the false dichotomy of nature vs culture which does not fit in with the local understanding of their environment. The first section provides an introduction and background information to the area and the transformations witnessed over the last decades, as well as the participation of the villagers in the tourism business. Questions such as authenticity of heritage, state led transformations of it, authenticity of tourism and tourist expectations will be examined in ‘Heritage as a resource: Tourism development and state appropriation/redefinition of heritage’. The dichotomy of culture/nature is the main theme of ‘Holy Mountains: Challenging the dichotomy of nature vs culture’, especially since the concept of nature is not universal and does not fit into the Tibetan understanding of geopiety. What is authentic nature, anyway? Authenticity in connection with identity and the role of heritage in identity construction is discussed in ‘Authenticity as a field of contestations’. This chapter is based on data collected during a three-year period between 2009 and 2015 as well as on the methods of participant observation and discussions with villagers, tourists, and people working in the tourism business. This chapter also addresses the official ambivalent view on minority cultures and the religious importance of heritage sites, topics also addressed by Cooke (on ethnic minorities in Qinghai) and Chan (on the Hungry Ghosts Festival in Hong Kong) in this volume.
Xidang village: Tourist sites/sights and the local community

Xidang village is located in the Meili Snow Mountains nature reserve on Hengduan Mountains in Diqing Prefecture. Historically, the prefecture belongs to the Tibetan area of Kham but it has been part of Yunnan Province since the 1720s and it is often referred to as an area where the Tibetan world blends with the multi-ethnic Yunnan. Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture consists of three counties: Zhongdian County (Shangri-la), Deqin County (where the Meili Snow Mountains are located), and Weixi Lisu Autonomous County. Together they have a total population of 374,500 people. Diqing Prefecture is home to eleven different minority nationalities (84 per cent), ethnic Tibetans being the largest single group with 33 per cent of the population. The majority of Diqing’s population is farmers or, to be more exact, transhumant agro-pastoralists who practise sedentary agriculture and pastoralism, moving cattle from the village to upland pastures during the summer months.

Meili Snow Mountains are a part of the ‘Three Parallel Rivers’ nature reserve UNESCO World Heritage Site. The whole area is 1.7 million hectares and consists of fifteen nature reserves. Bordering the Tibet Autonomous Region in the north, Sichuan in the east, and Myanmar in the west, the site encompasses large sections of three of the great rivers of Asia, the Yangtze (Jinsha), Mekong (Lancang), and Salween (Nu), which run parallel from north to south through the area for over 300 kilometres. The reason for the nomination as an UNESCO natural heritage site is the unique landscape of these great rivers running in deep parallel gorges with rich climatic variation making it one of the world’s biodiversity hot spots.

The case study of this chapter, Xidang village, consists of approximately 80 households, and around 350 people. Farming (agro-pastoralism) is the main source of livelihood, complemented with increasing income from tourism. The main crops are highland barley and corn and every house also has a vegetable garden for its own needs. All families also own walnut trees around the village, and walnuts and wine grapes are the money crops. From the mountains people collect mushrooms (i.e. matsutake) and Tibetan medicinal herbs (i.e. snow lotus) to sell. Although Xidang is located in the nature reserve, it is not the main tourist attraction.

Most tourists stay overnight in Feilaisi, and then hire cars to go to Mingyong Glacier or Yubeng village. Feilaisi used to be a sleepy little village facing the mountain range. It is one of the destinations along the inner pilgrimage route (kora) with an important temple that, according to legend,
flew all the way there from India, thus giving the village its name (*feilaisi*,
the temple that came flying). The main tourist attraction is the view and
there are several stupas honouring the holy mountains. In 2010 a wall was
built between the village (which is now more a cluster of hotels) and the
stupas and a RMB 60 entrance fee was set to see the view.\(^2\) Also, another
viewing platform with stupas was built in Wunongding before Deqin with
the same entrance fee. In addition to Feilaisi, Mingyong is a popular tourism
site. It is a glacier flowing down the holy Khawa Karpo and there are two
pilgrimage temples, Taizi Temple and Lianhua Temple. Finally, Yubeng is a
village between the snow mountains and to reach it tourists need to hike
or ride on mules from Xidang Hot Springs, which is the end of the road. The
main reason the pilgrims visit Yubeng is the Holy Waterfalls. For tourists,
there are also other hikes, mainly the Glacier Lake,\(^3\) Holy Lake, and a hike
back along the Yubeng River to Ninong.

Although Xidang is right in the middle of these tourism attractions,
very few tourists stay there. So far, the mule rides have been the biggest
tourism-related source of income for the villagers. There is a rotation
system in the village so that everyone gets their chance to participate in
transportation and the prices are set. In addition to tourists, all food and
other goods were also transported with mules but now the simple path to
Yubeng has been upgraded to a road. It is still not much more than a dirt
track but passable to tractors and pick-up trucks. Previously, Xidang had
a few guesthouses and small shops but in 2014 many houses were turned
into guesthouses in anticipation of the high pilgrimage season in 2015,
which happens every twelve years. Other income from tourism depends
on the family composition and resources, options being car transportation
and guiding. It is mainly men that engage in these activities (women do
participate in mule transportation if they have time off from farm work).
Older men usually stay at home and drive cars from Deqin to Xidang or
act as local guides, whereas younger men usually go to Lijiang to work for
travel agencies and participate in long-distance driving/guiding. During
the busiest tourist season there are hardly any young men left in the
village.

\(^2\) Only tourists pay the entrance fees; Tibetans can enter these sites for free. A combination
ticket to the Great Bend of the Yangtze, Wunongding, Feilaisi and Yubeng was RMB 230 in 2015
and an extra RMB 80 was charged for Mingyong.

\(^3\) Although this is officially outside the park and thus nominally off limits, it is very popular
among tourists.
Heritage as a resource: Tourism development and state appropriation/redefinition of heritage

What is authenticity in heritage? The sense of authenticity depends on the creator and the viewer. In the past, traditions and cultural practices were often condemned as backward and feudal by the Chinese government (see the introduction). For example, the Dalai Lama’s former summer palace Norbulinga was opened in 1959 as a museum dedicated to his ‘extravagant lifestyle’, an example of prerevolutionary feudalism (Shepherd and Yu 2013: 15). What makes the current politics of China different is the fact that cultural practices and materials have been redefined as resources under the guise of development, sustainability (Winter and Daly 2011: 19), and, more recently, the establishment of a ‘harmonious society’ (Coggins and Yeh 2014: 6). Thus heritage is not seen as a form of preservation against the depredations of ‘development’ any longer (Long 2012: 207). Part of the discourse of ‘harmonious society’ is the state’s emphasis on a multi-ethnic but unified cultural landscape. Sun calls this celebration of China as a
harmonious multi-ethnic community with a glorious history a form of ‘indoctrainment’ (Sun 2002: 191), and the sites include not only world heritage sites, but also scenic spots and theme parks, etc. As we can see, the government’s idea of authentic heritage doesn’t require it to be ‘original’ or unchanged. Nyíri points out that ‘tourism is seen as a two-way civilizing tool, capable of producing positive change in tourists as well as “tourees”’ (Nyíri 2009: 154). The Chinese state is quite successfully carrying this out, as government bodies are both stakeholders (co-owners) and regulators in every tourism development project (Nyíri 2009: 163). But as Shepherd points out, ‘even when cultural sites become authentic by being toured and hence consumed, state authorities can never be certain these sites are being consumed in the “correct” (state-sanctioned) way, either by local residents, domestic visitors, or foreign tourists’ (Shepherd 2006: 252). An example of this is Meili Mountains (as in all nature reserves) where it is forbidden to buy wild animals and wildlife products yet most of the things sold there, in addition to food and drinks, are mushrooms, Tibetan medicinal herbs, and wild animal products, as well as Tibetan jewellery. Not all of the mushrooms and herbs are gathered from the area but some are and families put a lot of effort into collecting them. None of the animal hides on offer are from the park as the ban on hunting is strictly enforced.

In addition to serving as a tool for enhancing development and a harmonious society, Nyíri has argued that ‘encasement and uniformity are prominent features of tourism development in China. These are related to the revival of pre-modern representations of mingsheng [famous sites], which is in turn facilitated by China’s lack of the distinctly modern, romantic, exploratory, and self-bettering discourses of tourism that emerged in the West after the Enlightenment’ (Nyíri 2006: 58). This can be seen in the Chinese tendency to travel in groups to famous sites versus the Western search for the ‘authentic’ and non-touristy places, especially in relation to nature tourism. This has led to the resemblance of nature reserves to theme parks, although there are also archetypal national landscapes in the West similar to mingsheng that draw heavily on geographical imagery, memory, and myth (Gruffudd 1995: 220). Thus, the ‘authentic’ tourism experience is heavily dependent on cultural expectations.

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4 See, for example, Yeh 2000 about claims to forest land and matsutake trade.

5 Some villagers are even complaining about the crops lost because of increasing numbers of monkeys and other animals.
With the state's appropriation of heritage for development, heritage sites are transformed for tourist consumption and their search for authenticity although the original aim of the Nature Conservancy\(^6\) was to encourage governments to adopt new models of conservation. However, in the end, many of the nature reserves emerged as mass tourism attractions (Zinda 2014: 105) constructed according to one model with an entrance gate and tourism facilities, but dressed up with Tibetan prayer wheels, prayer flags, mani-stone piles, yaks, and colourful locals. The same tendency can be seen in the ever-increasing number of ‘old towns’ springing up everywhere. Even Deqin is building an old town, which, according to the locals, unfortunately does not look enough like Lijiang which is probably the most famous old town in China and a UNESCO World Heritage Site turned into a mass-tourism site (see e.g. Su and Teo 2008, 2009). So when large-scale domestic tourism emerged, traditional famous sites remained at the core of tourism routes, but song and dance performances, staged religious ceremonies, and traditional ‘ethnic’ festivals and ‘customs’ also emerged as standard parts of tourism (Nyíri 2006: 19). Oakes describes how Chinese tourists expect a performance, while Americans and Europeans are looking for the ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ (Oakes 1998: 2). Yet even within domestic tourism there can also be observed a sort of nostalgia, a ‘longing, not just for ‘traditional China’, but also for the experience of an unpolluted natural environment’ (Kolås 2004: 273) and ‘authentic’ lifestyles. The same romanticism and nostalgia can be seen in Western views that ‘the only real Tibet one can find is in those parts of rural Tibet comparatively unaffected by the Chinese or, better still, in Dharamsala’ (Adams 1996: 521), as Lhasa is seen to be losing its authenticity because of Chinese immigration, modernization, karaoke bars, etc.

Bovair calls the Chinese government’s promotion of Tibet as a utopian Shangri-la ‘neo-orientalism’ instead of ‘internal orientalism’ (Schein 1997: 73), the difference being that the Chinese are neo-orientalizing Tibetan culture for the specific purpose of economic development while at the same time attempting to demonstrate to the world that it allows Tibetans freedom of choice to live their cultural traditions and religion (Bovair 2008: 336). But the Chinese government is hardly alone in this construction of utopia (see, for example, ; Barnett 2001; Mercille 2005; Lopez 1998) nor are the Tibetans the only minority to experience this strategy (see, for example, Oakes 1998; Schein 1997; Sofield and Li 1998). Shepherd suggests that it might be better to see the tourism policies as ‘the pacification of Tibet through

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\(^6\) TNC is a Washington, DC-based environmental organization that started the great Rivers of Yunnan project that led to the Three Parallel Rivers nature reserve.
the aestheticization of Tibetan culture, led by government directed efforts to protect this by working with [...] UNESCO to save and preserve Tibetan cultural sites from the dangers of, paradoxically, tourism’ (Shepherd 2009: 255). Moreover, as Tenzin Jinba describes, the orientalization (or sexualization and feminization) of the people ‘situates locals in an inferior position constraining their choices and neglecting their concerns, but it also sets in motion their own initiatives in reinterpreting cultural traditions and expressing their modernist pursuits as agents of local social development’ (Jinba 2014: 70). An example of this is the locals’ participation in the tourism business as guesthouse owners, guides, and drivers or even as performers. However, not all dance performances are aimed at tourists. For example, the villages’ women’s associations organize dance performances for visiting cadres in order to collect money for women’s activities, such as a holiday for the women of the villages every Women’s Day. These performances are also an important part of village celebrations in Xidang that are not tourist attractions. Villagers are also capable of inventing traditions. In Yubeng, one guesthouse owner promised ‘to preserve the tradition of dancing around the central pole every Saturday’ (Interview 5.9.2010), a tradition that actually did not exist before.

The economic importance of tourism is widely recognized among the government as well as local villagers. While Chinese tourist groups, when visiting ‘scenic spots’, expect the site/sight to be ‘developed’ (kaifa) (Nyíri 2009: 156), both the government and villagers see it as a way for modernization. Kaifa has brought with it the expansion of infrastructure and communications. There have been huge road construction projects all over Yunnan, especially to remote areas with the potential to be successful tourist destinations, but kaifa has also brought electricity, roads, mobile phone connections, and Internet to small places that previously had none. An example of this is Yubeng village, which now has electricity, mobile services, Internet, and a dirt road.7 Unfortunately, in the tourism-driven kaifa the bulk of rural investment often goes to infrastructural projects, neglecting other social services (Hillman 2003: 550). One instance of this is the discontinuation of village schools and the concentration of students in boarding schools in Deqin and Shangri-la.8 In addition, in many scenic spots this has meant the construction of cable cars or roads. For example, Mingyong Glacier had a road for electric cars constructed in 2015. The

7 Driving tourists in is forbidden but the road makes the transportation of goods easier and cheaper as well as emergency and rescue services much more efficient.
8 Previously both Yubeng and Xidang had primary schools that are now closed.
villagers receive compensation for lost income as the mule rides have been discontinued, but the road also effectively blurs the site’s meaning as a place of pilgrimage and worship. Tourism can also be of great benefit to the poor as it is often very labour intensive, thus creating jobs, and it can be developed in areas where other industries have little chance to develop, usually in poor, remote areas with outstanding scenery and ‘exotic’ cultures (Hillman 2003: 547).

However, as the number of visiting tourists increases, the religious sites and monasteries tend to be seen as lacking in authenticity. Implicit in these concerns has been the assumption that increasing tourism flows to a site will inevitably lead to a dilution of authentic cultural practices, as local residents take on performative roles and become ‘Westernized’ or, in the case of Shangri-la, sinified. Critics often point out that the real beneficiaries of the tourism business are not locals, but outsiders9 who bring experience and capital but leave with the profits. This is partly true for the most popular tourist destinations like Lijiang where most of the entrepreneurs are outsiders, but even there the locals benefit through owning property (for tourism in Lijiang, see Su and Teo 2008, 2009). Yubeng is also attracting more and more outside investors but still many of the guesthouses and restaurants are locally owned and operated, maybe not by the villagers themselves but by Tibetans from nearby villages and towns. And with possibilities for a better income much of the mule transportation in Yubeng is leased to outsiders. In Xidang all the guesthouses and shops are locally owned and operated, as is the mule transportation. Nonetheless, the better-paid positions in official agencies are often filled with outsiders, even if those outsiders are ethnic minorities from other regions. In Shangri-la many of the guides are Sichuan Tibetans who have received their education in Dharamsala and thus speak good English. At Meili the park itself employs locals only at the entrance gate and to collect rubbish.

Finally, not all the visitors to the area are ‘tourists’. During the summer of 2014 many of the houses in Xidang were suddenly converted into guesthouses in preparation for the high pilgrimage of 2015. Thousands of pilgrims were expected to arrive as the merits gained from the pilgrimage during this time are believed to be much more numerous. As Katia Buffetrille explains, the choice of the year is ‘determined by the year when the pilgrimage was opened by a great religious figure, or by the birthday of a saint or of a Buddhist event’ (Buffetrille 1998: 22). Originally,

9 These outsiders range from international capital bringing ‘McDisneyization’ (Ritzer and Liska 1997) to Han Chinese and ‘Hanization’ (Oakes 1998).
Khawa Karpo was a fierce *nyen* (Wyl. *gnyan*), or mountain demon, that was transformed into a protector of the Dharma by Padmasambhava in the eighth century (Coggins and Yeh 2014: 4). There is an entrance fee to Meili Snow Mountains nature reserve but this does not apply to pilgrims; it is the tourists that pay, but otherwise pilgrimage does not differ that much from tourism. Nelson Graburn has argued that the different phases of ritual observable in pilgrimage can also be found in tourism (Graburn 1983: 11-17). According to Alex McKay, ‘pilgrimage is generally defined as a journey to a sanctified place, undertaken in the expectation of future spiritual and/or worldly benefit’ (McKay 1998: 1-2) involving elements of time, separation from usual place, and an element of economic importance making it not so different from tourism. The routes that the tourists use are mostly the same routes used by the pilgrims, mainly part of the inner *kora*, and the most adventurous also hike the outer *kora* around the mountain range. This pilgrimage demonstrates how the Meili Snow Mountains are not only a natural heritage site, but in fact a religious and cultural site of worship.

**Holy mountains: Challenging the dichotomy of nature vs culture**

The classification of the Meili Snow Mountains as a natural heritage site reflects a Western understanding of heritage. According to Plachter and Rössler, the split of heritage into culture and nature ‘can be seen to mirror the separation of human kind and nature in the Western, Enlightenment philosophy. A Eurocentric or Anglo-American influence and an imperialist viewpoint may also be seen in the museum-like attitude to cultural objects and conceptions of “untouched” nature’ (Plachter and Rössler 1995: 16-17). UNESCO has tried to address the dichotomy between culture and nature by acknowledging cultural landscapes as one category of heritage in 1992 in recognition of the relationship between people and places. There are three categories of cultural landscapes of which the ‘associative cultural landscape’ includes landscapes with ‘powerful religious, artistic or cultural associations of the natural element rather than material cultural evidence, which may be insignificant or even absent’ (Rössler 2001: 27). At Meili Mountains (as is usual at holy mountains) the cultural part is not absent as the whole understanding of nature is imbued with culture, so much so that many natural sites have been given cultural meaning, smaller examples being springs and rocks: ‘It is said that the mantra spring was left by Padmasambhava and the front-left stone was left by the Second
Karmapa. But this cultural meaning is not just superimposed on natural places. According to local understanding, the culture/nature division has no meaning (Huber and Pedersen 1997: 590-591). Tibetan geopiety, which is also associated with theophany, means the manifestation of specific deities and spirits within mundane objects, in this case, terrestrial features such as mountains, forests, waterfalls, springs, and rocks (see, for example, Coggins and Zeren 2014).

Although Meili Snow Mountains are a designated as natural heritage sites, its religious significance is nevertheless included in the site’s official narrative. As a signboard in the park demonstrates, the most important actors in this ‘supernature’ are the mountains, glaciers and waterfalls:

The middle waterfall is Sinabaxie, meaning Fortune Waterfall, the blessed Kundika water by the Tantric Deity and his Consort (Yum). The right waterfall is Cibameibengqu, meaning the Kundika water of Amitayus Buddha. The follower will eliminate all misdeeds and wrongdoing by paying a pilgrimage to Sacred Waterfall. It is the triangle karma symbol of Vajrayogini on the right cliff. The sacred water can purify all sins and bless the reincarnation in Dhapga Khadro. The pilgrims shall prostrate themselves before the Sacred Waterfall, chanting sutra, burning incense and aromatic plant[s], praying, and bathing. According to the Chorography of Holy Kawagebo [Khawa Karpo], the pilgrim to the Sacred Waterfall will obtain blessing and longevity.

At Meili Mountains nature also has agency. The gods residing within these holy mountains ‘own’ all of the local lands and humans are guests in arable lands at their feet. Tree cutting, hunting, or fishing in sacred areas is believed to lead to retribution in the form of disease, natural disaster, or other misfortunes. The shrinking glaciers are the result of the relationship between the mountain and people (and in part the greed of the rich):

Once there was a family in Mingyong village which was so rich that they used bowls made of silver and gold to feed their animals. During these times the glacier reached all the way down to where there now is a car park. This family believed that they would stay rich as long as the glacier maintained its size. One day two deer came to their fields to eat the barley and the family decided to shoot and eat them. That night when they were

Sign on the way to the Holy Waterfalls.
Sign at the Holy Waterfalls.
cooking the deer meat they heard Khawa Karpo calling the deer by their names. And then the meat in the kettle and the hides started jumping and a colourful steam rose out of the kettle which slowly moved towards the mountain and finally went in it. Now the family realised that the deer they had killed belonged to the mountain god. After this the glacier started shrinking and the family lost its fortune.12

Meili Mountain’s designation as natural heritage thus glosses over the cultural significance of the place for the local communities. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett among others asserts that it is actually the ‘natural’ in heritage that is an inappropriate label (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004: 53). Landscapes are not only shaped by cultural practices but they are also symbolic of cultural and social beliefs (Crang 1998: 15). Despite the category of mixed heritage sites, none of the holy mountains of Tibetan Buddhism have been recognized as such, not even Mount Kailash, which is also holy to the Hindus (the Nepali side of Mount Everest is part of Sagarmatha National Park). There is also an important link between cultural and natural heritage since the preservation of a traditional way of life might be crucial to the conservation of natural heritage (Harrison and O’Donnell 2010: 98).

In addition, a dichotomy between ‘tradition’ and globalization raises questions, one of which is the assumption that global and local values, opinions, and norms are distinct and homogenous. An example of this is how the term ‘nature’, which is often interchanged with ‘the environment’, is assumed to be a universal category separate from human-shaped space. Thus, nature reserves free of permanent human presence are seen to be more authentically natural (Weller 2006: 9, 47). Shepherd and Yu see the sacralization of nature as a foundational aspect of environmentalism and the environmental movement takes for granted that all humans form a world community whose values transcend cultural norms and practices (Shepherd and Yu 2013: 34). Instead, Confucianism stresses harmony between humans (and earth) and heaven (nature), Daoism situates humans within nature, and Buddhism stresses the value of all life forms (Shapiro 2001: 213).

The Three Parallel Rivers area, for instance, was recognized by UNESCO as a natural heritage site ‘of outstanding universal value’ despite the fact that:

the area has been modified by human activities over thousands of years; note that in 2003 some 315,000 people lived inside the property, with

12 Story in Xidang.
36,500 residing inside the core zone. However, much of the site is still relatively undisturbed and continues to perform its ecosystem functions. This is partially explained by the inaccessibility of the higher slopes and the relatively light impact of the subsistence activities of the resident populations. (UNESCO 2013)

As we have seen, the Meili Snow Mountains are not uninhabited nor are they separate from human-shaped space in addition to their significant cultural and sacral meaning which goes beyond the environmental perspective. Many of the international activities have, in particular, revolved around Khawa Karpo Peak. It belongs to the classification of mountains known as ‘neri (Wyl. gnas ri), literally translated as “mountain abode”, the holiest mountains in Tibetan Buddhism, and the name denotes both the god himself and the mountain where he resides’ (Coggins and Yeh 2014: 4). Through ‘the process of Buddhicization’ (Buffetrille 1998: 21) some of these territorial gods were transformed into Buddhist holy mountains around which pilgrims perform a circumambulation. Pilgrims from all over China visit this mountain every year. In accordance with tradition, scaling the peaks would defile the deity and none of the peaks of Meili have ever been climbed (there have been attempts despite local opposition but they have all failed and the government no longer grants climbing permits to these peaks). But despite the holiness of the mountains, they have been turned into a site for mass-tourism and protected as nature. My fieldwork observations of the signs placed along the tourist routes in 2015 revealed the split of heritage into cultural and natural. Some of the signs give information about the surrounding nature but most of them are related to Buddhism, explaining the sites and sights (some of which are possibly made up). One thing to also note about the signs is that they are written in Tibetan, Chinese, and English, but the Tibetan text only names the place; all the explanations are only in Chinese and English indicating the targeted audience of these signs.

From the signs and recent road constructions we can predict that the villages of Xidang and Rongzhong (the two villages are practically merged together) are soon to be within the main tourist routes. When approaching Xidang from Rongzhong, one comes to a newly built viewing platform with two signs:

Lancang [Mekong] River Valley is a dry-hot valley since the annual evaporation is far higher than that of precipitation in foehn effect. Due to the favorable dry environment, it has formed unique dry foliole shrubbery
Xiang Wan, a counselor of King Gesar, was born in Rongzhong Village (ancient name Rongdi). It is said that the Ancient Barbican was left by the troops by clan Mu in Lijiang in the Conquest of the West in the Ming Dynasty, or built by the troops of ancient Tibetan Kingdom in south war.14

The first sign explains the view from the platform while the second tells the assumed history of the only ancient tower left in these villages (there used to be three but the others were demolished during the Cultural Revolution in order to gain more farming land). They also connect Rongzhong to the story of King Gesar, which is important to Tibetan identity (there are several stories in the villages connecting the places with King Gesar).

The arrangement of signboards and the creation of narratives is a sign of the future development of the Xidang area for tourism. A road construction project through the villages aims to connect them via Ninong village to the main road from Weixi to Deqin, enabling shorter and easier transportation times through the southern route. The starting point of the road in the north is Foshan, where there is a mine which might bring heavy traffic through this heritage site. Also, the main road through the villages to Xidang Hot Springs was widened and paved in 2014. The road conditions were a common grievance among the villagers as the park has high entrance fees but the villagers felt that the park authorities did not invest any of the profits for the benefit of the locals. Another road has been built to Bajur Temple terminating in a brand-new car park. To the left there are two large and 108 small stupas. The small stupas were built during the summer of 2009 by pilgrims from Tibet Autonomous Region and have now been named the ‘Hundred Honored and Victorious Pagodas’. Next to the stupas there is a keyhole-shaped impression on the rock. Anyone who wishes to approach the holy mountains should first perform prayers there to gain access.

The official narratives gloss over local, contested understandings of the area. The first incarnation of a local lama called Guru Dakpa, or the fourteenth, took place in a cave near the temple. The sign at the cave reads:

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13 First sign at the viewing platform.
14 Second sign at the viewing platform.
‘It is the holy land of Vajrayogini (Dakini Dorje Pakmo). Vajrayogini is the female consort of Cakrasamvara Tantra, who is an important Yidam in the Tibetan Buddhism.’ In Tibetan the sign reads *Phag-mo-gnas*, which is what the villagers call the cave, but there is no mention of the incarnation of Guru Dakpa. Most of the villagers belong to the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism but now some villagers have deserted this local Lama whom they have worshipped for generations. The reason for this is that the fourteenth incarnation propitiates a deity called Dorje Shugden (*rDo rje shugs ldan*) and the Dalai Lama does not approve of this. There have been fights and divorces resulting from this conflict, but during the high pilgrimage people reunited by refusing to discuss the matter.
Despite the conflicts surrounding the temple, Bajur is important to the locals also because of the natural rock formations made by the river. According to the sign, it has been named ‘the Dancing Hall of Rongs'a’aman, the princes of Rong Kingdom and her consorts’. I have not heard the story behind the name but the different rocks, potholes, and crannies have meaning as, for example, places to pray for the health of the sick (a large pothole in a rock with a stone pillar) or to determine whether one will return as a human in the next life (by crawling through a hole between an erratic block and the rock surface).

Villagers are especially proud that the place is not manmade but completely natural. In the local framing of the temple, there is thus no disconnect between the cultural and the natural. In fact, the last sign before starting off on the main tourist path to Yubeng aptly combines nature with culture:

The community of *Platycladus orientalis* is mainly distributed in the slope between 2,200 to 2,600 meters beside the road from Xidang Village to Reshuitai (Hot Spring Pool). It has formed small trees community in the area without human intervene. In addition to an important species in soil fixation of dry-hot valley and beautifying the environment, it is the necessary aromatic plant for burning in the Tibetan religious rites. Inexplicably, the fragrant *Platycladus orientalis* in Kawagebo [Khawa Karpo] always loose[s] the smell after transplanted in other area.  

So, as Ashworth et al. argue, there are many heritages which consist of diverse cultural knowledge, ‘the contents and meanings of which change through time and across space and are shaped and managed for a range of purposes defined by the needs and demands of our present societies’ (Ashworth et al. 2007: 36). Thus, heritage is also an economic commodity with overlapping or even conflicting roles. Shepherd and Yu suggest that the spatial segregation of either culture or nature, in the form of gated heritage sites, nature preserves, or national parks, illustrates the underlying paradox of preservation: led by UNESCO, the world heritage movement seeks to preserve cultural diversity during an era of globalization which is presumed to carry the eminent threat of cultural sameness, yet in doing so, this preservationist ideology mandates a specific spatial form of preservation that erases cultural differences and paradoxically evokes and promotes this sameness. (Shepherd and Yu 2013: 34-35)

15 Sign near Xidang Hot Springs.
Authenticity as a field of contestations

Meili Snow Mountains, including Xidang village, are thus a site where different actors such as the government and the UNESCO impose framings of authenticity, which are subsequently negotiated and contested by locals, tourists and pilgrims. While the government redefines ‘authentic’ Tibetan culture for its own economic and political purposes, local villagers also attempt to enhance their agency and have changing views of their culture.

I have alluded to the question of authenticity throughout the chapter. ‘Authenticity’ is a modern value, whose emergence is closely related to the impact of modernity upon the unity of social existence. The word ‘authentic’ conflates Greek and Latin terms that combined ideas of ‘authoritative’, something dictated from on high, and ‘original’, primordial, and innate (Lowenthal 1995: 125). Authenticity connected with identity is a cultural construct closely tied to Western notions of the individual and our search ‘for the unspoiled, pristine, genuine, untouched and traditional – says more about us than about others’ (Handler 1986: 2). To quote Charles Lindholm, persons are seen to be authentic

if they are true to their roots or if their lives are a direct and immediate expression of their essence. Similarly, collectives are authentic if their biological heritage can be traced and if the members act in the proper, culturally valued manner. From this evidence, there are two overlapping modes for characterizing any entity as authentic: genealogical or historical (origin) and identity or correspondence (content). (Lindholm 2008: 2)

Tibetan culture is not listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List but many scholars, activists and the Dalai Lama see it as threatened (see discussion e.g. Barnett 2001; Lopez 1998; Anand 2000). One of the reasons for the perceived inauthenticity of the villagers of Xidang among Western tourists is that they are communists (this is their self-definition). The Chinese flag can be observed on many of the houses and if you visit their homes, you will find an altar topped with statues of Buddha, surrounded by holy thangkas and posters of different Lamas and of Mao.

Western tourists usually assume that people are forced to display these items but that is not the case in this area. Thus, the villagers are perceived as ‘changed’; they have lost their traditions and authenticity. Why do the villagers see themselves as communists? One reason is that Xidang is a farming community where fourteen ‘original’ families previously owned all the land. People who came later worked for these families, essentially just for
food. So, the villagers feel that the communists gave the land to the people (after collectivization). In the past the villagers were also very poor. One young man told me his grandfather’s reason for supporting the communist regime: ‘I’m on the side of those who help me’ (Interview 6.7.2014). Another reason is that northern Yunnan was never really under the control of Lhasa but more a sort of warlord country where villages raided other villages (mainly for food as there was not much else to steal) (Interview 27.7.2014). So people feel that the communists brought law and order to the area. Sara Shneiderman has argued that we have failed to recognize Tibetan roles as ‘dominant orchestrators of their own ‘civilizing project’ [...], meaning recognizing the difference between ‘Tibetan’ as a dominant national identity which contains its own networks of ethnicity established through civilizing projects, and ‘Tibetan’ as a peripheral ethnic identity within other national contexts, such as China, Nepal and India’ (Shneiderman 2006: 9-10).

16 Stevan Harrell defines a ‘civilising project’ as ‘a kind of interaction between peoples, in which one group, the civilizing centre, interacts with other groups (the peripheral peoples) in terms of a particular kind of inequality’ (Harrell 1995: 4).
We tend to imagine the Tibetans as a large homogenous group and not see the many internal differences.

As mentioned above, one of the internal differences now occurring in Xidang is the conflict over the local lama (the fourteenth or Guru Dakpa). In fact, it seems that people are talking about different things in relation to this conflict; the supporters of the Dalai Lama speak about ‘a ghost’ (they cannot mention Dorje Shugden’s name) and supporters of the local lama do not talk about deities at all, but speak of the devotion of generations of ancestors, and refuse to desert their lama. So if cultural heritage is understood to be the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present, and bestowed for the benefit of future generations, then, the conflict over the local lama could be seen to be about heritage. However, ‘heritage’ is not a word the locals would use. All and all, they seem to have a very low opinion of their ‘culture’.

Authenticity in connection with tourism is closely tied to identity. The alienated modern tourist in the quest for authenticity looks for the pristine, the primitive, the natural, that which is as yet untouched by modernity. Yet tourism is said to lead to the ‘commoditization’ (Greenwood 1989: 172) of the local culture as the ‘colourful’ traditional costumes and customs, rituals, and feasts, and folk and ethnic arts become touristic services or commodities because they are performed or produced for touristic consumption, which creates ‘staged authenticity’ (MacCannell 1973: 595-596). For example, growing tourist numbers to religious sites are seen to result in the dilution of authentic cultural practices (pilgrimage vs tourism) and the construction and reconstruction of temples and stupas are viewed as the destruction of authenticity, although this might be an act of devotion such as in the construction of the 108 small stupas in Xidang. It has also been suggested that ‘authenticity’ is a socially constructed concept and its social (as opposed to philosophical) connotation is, therefore, not given, but ‘negotiable’ (Cohen 1988: 374). David Lowenthal suggests a shift of focus from some imagined original state to historical palimpsest (Lowenthal 1995: 129). Also, Littler and Naidoo have argued that the definition of heritage has ‘morphed’ over time and in this present context it can be defined as the use of the past as a cultural, political, and economic resource for the present, and we should pay attention to the very selective ways in which material artefacts, mythologies, memories, and traditions become resources for the present (Littler and Naidoo 2004: 331). Thus, the study of heritage does not involve a direct engagement with the study of the past. Instead, the contents, interpretations, and representations of the heritage resource are selected according to the demands of the present and handed onto an imagined future. Therefore, as Ashworth et al. argue,
it is meaning that gives value, either cultural or financial, to heritage and explains why certain artefacts, traditions, and memories have been selected from the near infinity of the past (Ashworth et al. 2007: 3).

Conclusion

The main question in this chapter was: what is authenticity and how is it created, transformed and contested by different actors involved in the tourism and heritage business at Meili Snow Mountains? Authenticity is not given but negotiated. The Chinese government has used the heritage of Tibetans as a resource in the promotion of development in the area. According to the government’s view ‘cultural sites become authentic by being toured and hence consumed’ (Shepherd 2006: 252), which is very different from the Western idea of authentic place and experience as well as undisturbed nature. Yet even within domestic tourism there can also be observed a sort of nostalgia, a ‘longing, not just for ‘traditional China’, but also for the experience of an unpolluted natural environment’ (Kolås 2004: 273) and ‘authentic’ lifestyles. Moreover, the orientalization of the minorities ‘situates locals in an inferior position constraining their choices and neglecting their concerns, but it also sets in motion their own initiatives in reinterpreting cultural traditions and expressing their modernist pursuits as agents of local social development’ (Jinba 2014: 70). An example of this is the locals’ participation in the tourism business as guesthouse owners, guides, and drivers or even as performers. The economic importance of tourism is widely recognized by the government as well as local villagers. While Chinese tourist groups, when visiting ‘scenic spots’, expect the site/sight to be ‘developed’ (kaifà) (Nyíri 2009: 156), both the government and villagers see it as a way for modernization. Kaifà has brought with it the expansion of infrastructure and communications. However, with increasing numbers of tourists, the religious sites and monasteries tend to be seen as lacking in authenticity the assumption being that increasing tourism flows to a site will lead to a dilution of authentic cultural practice. That is why I looked at pilgrimage as a form of ‘tourism’ that actually enhances the sense of authenticity.

The classification of the Meili Snow Mountains as a natural heritage site reflects a Western understanding of heritage separating nature from culture which does not fit in with the local understandings. UNESCO has tried to address this dichotomy by acknowledging cultural landscapes as one category of heritage yet none of the Tibetan holy mountains have been recognized as such. At Meili Mountains the whole understanding of nature is imbued with
culture, so much so that many natural sites have been given cultural meaning. I looked at the signboards placed along the pilgrimage/tourist routes by the park administration giving the sights/sites more Buddhist narrative, but which still often glosses over local, contested understandings of the area.

In addition, this chapter aimed to show how the villagers of Xidang are affected by several different processes that have affected the sense of authenticity of their identity. There has been a Buddhist ‘civilizing project’, to use Harrell’s term, incorporating Khawa Karpo into the Buddhist holy mountains. The Dalai Lama’s ongoing attempt to create a pan-Tibetan identity by forbidding the propitiation of Dorje Shugden has turned some of the villagers into outsiders in the Tibetan ‘civilizing project’ and caused some to desert the local lama. And, of course, there is the ‘civilizing project’ of the Chinese state with its development, ‘harmonious society’, and ‘ecological state’. They also have several identities as one minzu (nationality) of China, i.e. Tibetans (Zangzu), especially as they identify themselves as communists. But they can also be seen as Tibetans as promoted by Tibetan nationalism and represented by the Dalai Lama. They also have local identities, for example, as Khampas or followers of their local lama. In the end, their village is also located in the Meili Snow Mountains, part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a fact that introduces the global conceptions of heritage and preservation, not to mention the increasing numbers of tourists (both Chinese and Western) who have their own ideas of ‘authentic’ Tibetans and culture. Add to that the conceptions of the pilgrims and those who have returned from their education in Dharamsala, and we might start to understand why some of the villagers of Xidang feel that they are not ‘authentic’ Tibetans. Thus, not only the area and the culture are differently framed by different actors, also different narratives of authenticity are created. However, according to the villagers, it does not matter who you are because all people in the world benefit from visiting the holy Meili Mountains.

References


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