

'Welcome to Shangri-La': the making of place in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan

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This paper deals with the development of ethnic tourism in 'Shangri-La', and the concomitant reconstruction of the area as a 'Tibetan' place. It discusses how the area has been 'sacralised' in the process of incorporating it into the 'sacred realm' of Buddhist Tibet, how it has been 'ethnicised' in connection with the establishment of Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and finally how it is currently being 'exoticised' with the promotion of Diqing as a tourist destination, and the renaming of one of its counties, Zhongdian, as 'Shangri-La'. The paper explores the tensions between these various 'place-making' strategies, how 'place' is reinvented, and how hegemonic interpretations of 'place' are contested. Theoretically, it brings together some contemporary perspectives on 'place making' from various different fields, including anthropological studies of place and identity, the political geography of territories and boundaries, and studies of pilgrimage and religious geography.

Situated on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau, this area has for many centuries been a part of the Tibetan cultural realm often referred to as 'ethnographic Tibet'. Khawa Karpo Mountain is one of the most significant sites in the local geography, and is also known as one of eight major mountain pilgrimage destinations ('gnas ri') for Tibetan worshippers. The worship of territorial deities, known locally as 'ri bdag' or 'mountain owners and protectors', has a long history in this area. Every village community, or even a monastic community, is responsible for maintaining a particular 'la rtse' on the top of a hill or mountain, in honor of the 'ri bdag' whose lands they live on. Whereas the 'ri bdag' is important to the local communities who acknowledge this deity ritually, the deity who inhabits a 'gnas ri' such as Khawa Karpo is important to all Tibetan Buddhists. Local Tibetans compare Khawa Karpo to a palace for the deity bDunchog, for whom offerings are performed during the Kalachakra ceremony. As interpreted in this paper, the association of Khawa Karpo with a significant deity in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon is an important way of incorporating the area into the Tibetan realm. The paper discusses this as a process in which the land itself has been 'sacralised' in new ways.

In 1957 'Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture' was established as the only 'Tibetan' area in Yunnan Province. According to the guidelines of the newly founded People's Republic of China (PRC), the boundaries of 'autonomous' prefectures were supposed to reflect the ethnographic distribution of 'nationalities', i.e. 'ethnic minorities' distinguishable from the majority 'Han' population by virtue of distinct, shared, cultural traits. The establishment of 'autonomous' administrative regions has thus been a process of 'ethnicising' the territory of the PRC. The explicit strategy of the PRC authorities was to break down the influence of the 'feudal theocracy' in the Tibetan areas. With the onset of

the Cultural Revolution, pilgrimage and the worship of territorial deities was made illegal. When these practices were again allowed in the early 1980s, they became significant not only as religious expressions, but as a way to contest the atheist ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as the technocratic 'place-making' strategies of the authorities, which failed to comply with the meanings of place that were significant to people living there. In other words, I suggest that the revival of mountain pilgrimage and the worship of territorial deities have become means of reclaiming places as 'Tibetan'. However, currently tourism development is creating new tensions, between the use of sites as tourist destinations and the maintenance of 'sacralised' notions of place.

The contemporary reinvention of the area as 'Shangri-La' builds on the 'ethnicising' processes described above, while in some respects challenging hegemonic representations of Diqing as a 'minority area'. In CCP ideology, 'minority nationalities' have been cast as representatives of less 'advanced', more 'primitive', stages of social evolution. In school textbooks as well as the media, the 'backwardness' of the minorities has been contrasted to the 'modernity' of the Han Chinese. However, currently this contrast has taken on new meanings, as urban Chinese search for the place of their dreams in the unspoiled nature and simple lifestyles of 'minority areas' such as Diqing. Tourism developers have taken advantage of this trend, and represent Diqing as an exotic 'Shangri-La', a place where people live in harmony with nature. Though its purpose is largely commercial, the mythologising game played by bureaucrats and entrepreneurs has consequences for how Diqing is understood as a 'minority' area, and a 'Tibetan' area in particular. This further affects the meanings that local Tibetans attach to the place where they live.