



## Milk and barley: folk concepts of health in rGyalthang

*Denise M. Glover*

Ethnobiological research conducted throughout much of the world has shown that traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) among indigenous groups is often highly specialized and extensive, frequently with medicinal uses of local flora and fauna being dominant in the repertoire of TEK. Yet while conducting a series of interviews among common householders in the rGyalthang area in 2001 and 2002, many people articulated to me quite directly that the knowledge of how to use local medicinal plants has faded with the introduction of hospitals and the availability of western, Chinese, and even prepared Tibetan medicines. “We used to know,” one man commented “but now it’s so convenient to just get what you need in Zhongdian that we don’t know how to use these plants anymore.”

Whether there has truly been a loss of knowledge is difficult to prove, particularly without the availability of data indicating the level of knowledge among common householders in the past several decades. Important for the argument of this paper, however, is the perception that there *has* been a diminishing of medicinal plant knowledge among common householders. Although undoubtedly in part a product of nostalgic rumination, this sentiment of lost knowledge has significant implications for a local concept of health.

Central to the theory of health among those I interviewed in rGyalthang is a conviction of the goodness inherent in milk products and barley. While not at all antithetical to canonical Tibetan medicine, which stresses the importance of proper diet as one of the foundations of good health, rGyalthang folk concepts of health seem particularly rooted in the economic and cultural life of local Tibetans. Although *generalized* markers of the Tibetan diet (and by extension “The Tibetans”), dairy products and barley are indeed dietary staples in rGyalthang. Most local Tibetan fare (even in rGyalthang, that far-off corner of cultural Tibet) *does* consist of yogurt, cheese, butter-tea, and *tsampa* (with the addition of potatoes and possibly stir-fried vegetables and a variety of meat). rGyalthang folk concepts of health, then, rely on the dietary basics.

One of the most cogent explanations I encountered about the benefits of milk products was given by a woman in her late 60s. Yeshe Drolma lives in the old part of town, Dokar Dzong, in Zhongdian. While our conversation focused mainly on the 15 different plants that she uses medicinally (she had the most expansive repertoire of locally gathered medicinal plants of all the householders I interviewed) she prefaced the interview by saying that in general her family stays quite healthy. When I asked why she responded with a well-reasoned logical argument: “We eat lots of cheese, yogurt, and milk. These products come from animals that graze in the high meadows and eat herbs with medicinal properties. Since we drink the milk of these animals, we benefit from their diet and in turn receive doses of medicine ourselves.” This was not the first time I had heard this explanation, although it was one of the most articulate renderings.

While dairy products are discussed mostly in term of prophylactics, barley was mentioned more as a remedy for certain ailments – headache, cold, and sometimes stomach problems. Often the barley is mixed with other foodstuffs, such as garlic, chili, or cheese. One man commented that if one gets a cold, it’s important to eat well – and such a diet includes lots of barley consumption. Barley gives strength, people noted; it maintains vigor and can revive a weakened body.

This paper argues that ingredients of the common diet become glorified as virtual medicines due in part to the sentiment of “lost” medicinal plant knowledge. Although unable to heal themselves with local plants, rGyalthag Tibetans nonetheless maintain some sense of control over their own health by revering the very basics of their dietary existence. Comparisons are made with other research in the field of medical anthropology (Scheper-Hughes 1996) to argue that the glorification of milk and barley may reflect the extent to which common householders feel disenfranchised from the current trend of commodification of medicines and health care in northern Yunnan Province.