

7. Local Cultural Inclusion and Partnership Assistance to Tibet: A Case Study on Lunang Township's Tourism Development Project

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Abstract: The large-scale development of tourism projects in ethnic border areas involves the tolerance of local ethnic cultures. Provinces, cities, and related enterprises, as well as individuals in the “Partnership Assistance to Tibet,” are involved in local ethnic culture projects. The Lunang International Tourist Town, a project of “Partnership Assistance to Tibet,” shows that sponsors and investors face great difficulties in the definition of local ethnic culture. There are significant discrepancies between the perception of “authentic” culture by locals and by enterprises trying to serve the expectations of tourists. The case of Lunang demonstrates that investors are sometimes more inclined to protect local ethnic culture than locals, and high-level government leaders are more inclined to protect local ethnic culture than lower-level leaders.

Keywords: authentic culture, Lunang International Tourist Township, Tibetan culture, tourism development, Nyingchi Prefecture, cultural protection

The Third Tibet Work Forum, held in 1994, specified a program of “two or three provinces providing targeted assistance to one prefecture or city in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)” (*neidi liangsange shengshi duikouzhuyuan Xizangyige dishi*). The resulting policy, “Partnership Assistance to Tibet” (PAT; Ch. *duikou yuanzang*; Tib. *kha gtad bod skyor*), was characterized by “division of responsibility, partnership assistance, and periodic rotation” (Yang 2019). Three years later, in 1997, the policy of “Partnership Assistance

to Xinjiang" (*duikou yuanjiang*) was implemented with the same approach and methods as PAT. In order to form a nationwide partnership assistance system, the central government partnered relatively developed provinces and municipalities, state-owned enterprises (SOE), and central government agencies with administrative subdivisions in TAR. In the same year, seventeen provinces committed to offering long-term PAT to fifty-seven counties in TAR, and central government agencies started aiding local government departments of TAR at different levels. Since 2001, seventeen central SOEs have been engaged in assisting seventeen counties in the TAR. In terms of development, the PAT policy features a contracting system. In addition to sending personnel to TAR, external partners provide financial and other necessary support. This is no longer mere "moral" assistance but a "material" influx to develop TAR's economy (Yang and Zhang 2016; Xu 2012). After the Fifth Tibet Work Forum, in 2010, some provinces implementing targeted aid to TAR chose areas with good resource development conditions to promote industrial development in the recipient areas. Lunang (Tib. Klu nang; Ch. *Lulang*) was the region selected by Guangdong Province to assist Nyingchi Prefecture (Tib. Nying khri; Ch. *Linzhi*) in developing tourism resources (Yang and Zhang 2016).

Lunang is located in Bayi District of Nyingchi Prefecture and is home to beautiful landscapes including glaciers, high mountains, gorges, meadows, forests, rivers, and lakes. Lunang Township borders the Pagsum Lake Scenic Area (Ch. *Basongcuo*; Tib. Brag gsum mtsho) to the north, and less than one hundred kilometers to the south is the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon (*Yalongzangbu daxiagu*). Lunang has become accessible for tourism development thanks to a highway running through the township—the national Chengdu-Lhasa-Yadong Highway (*Chuanzangxian*; National Highway 318), built in 1954.

Since 2010, Guangdong Province, one of the most developed provinces in China, has been partner-assisting Lunang to establish itself as a tourist destination (Jinwei 2010). In 2012, a comprehensive development plan, Lunang International Tourist Township (LITT; *Lulang guoji luyou xiaozhen*), was approved by both the TAR government and the Guangdong provincial government, and a large project was initiated in the township covering an area of about 86 hectares (1,296 *mu*). Guangdong Province has invested RMB 1.3 billion from its PAT budget, which is the 1 per mille of Guangdong's provincial budget revenue which has to be allotted as stipulated by the central government regulations. Meanwhile, commercial investors, including Poly Real Estate Group, Evergrande Real Estate Group, Guangdong Pearl River Investment, Guangdong Provincial Tourism Holdings, Guangzhou

Pharmaceuticals Corporation, and other enterprises, have been encouraged to invest an additional RMB 2.5 billion collectively. From a capital investment perspective, Lunang follows an unorthodox model where a partner province uses its governmental funds and engagement to attract commercial capital participation in the economic development of TAR. The role of partner provincial government is critical in encouraging, engaging, and supporting provincial SOEs to invest in the Tibetan region, where short-term investment returns are generally lower than in developed regions.

This tourism project has been regarded by Nyingchi local government as a new stimulus for the local economy. Tourism development is based on the utilization of natural and cultural resources in destinations. Some studies have shown that it is not uncommon for development projects to exclude local people's voices and be disrespectful of local culture (Schein 2000; Yang 2008; Li 2010). Therefore, it is very likely that tourism development projects funded and implemented by external stakeholders unfamiliar with local culture would suffer from such shortcomings (Ai and Shen 2018). As a large-scale tourism development project, the LITT project would inevitably have impacts on different aspects of the local community, including its local ethnic culture, social setting, economic structure, and natural environment. It may lead to the loss of some features of local ethnic cultures, undermine competitiveness in existing economic sectors, detract from the social environment through a shift in the principles of social fairness and justice, and cause damage to the natural environment. The balance between economic development and cultural/ecological protection in tourism development has come to the attention of local communities. There are concerns among scholars, government policymakers, and local residents, especially local elites, about how tourism development can effectively protect local culture and engage local participation while also generating economic benefits for local communities. This chapter explores these concerns and demonstrate how the LITT project has addressed them. The findings will provide some lessons and implications for similar projects in the future. The chapter answers the following questions: How is the consideration of local ethnic culture reflected in the LITT project? What are the local perceptions of commodification of culture in tourism development? Who is protecting local ethnic culture? And finally, what factors influence the protection of local ethnic culture?

Some existing research has analyzed the impact of tourism projects in Tibet on local communities. Chen et al. (2017) found that tourism development impacts local livelihoods based on a case study of the Lunang tourism development project and suggested that the most important forms of capital

affecting livelihood strategies and livelihood outcomes are human capital and social capital, followed by material capital and natural capital. Sun and Wang's (2017) research focused on the role of National Highway 318 in tourism resource centralization and revealed that Lunang and the surrounding communities relied on this road to participate in tourism development. Yang et al. (2016) suggested that Lunang's tourism development and the accompanying eco-migration initiative had a significant impact on the local natural ecological, social, and cultural environments, and the economy.

Methodology

Main data used in this chapter were collected during fieldwork in the TAR. Between May 2014 and September 2019, Yang Minghong visited Lunang Township to undertake a series of surveys to track the development of the tourism project. Interviews with project designers and planners, construction teams, and local officials were conducted to understand the history and current situation of tourism project development, the implications for local society and culture, and the local economy and environment (Yang and Liu 2016; Yang et al. 2017). A research group led by Yang Minghong made field visits to PAT program implementation sites in Lhasa, Shannan (Lhoka), Shigatse, Nyingchi, and Chamdo prefectures. This allowed us to communicate with local people, officials at all levels, and other stakeholders including diverse government agencies of TAR so as to obtain firsthand comprehensive information about PAT. Yang Minghong further discussed the findings with scholars and aiding cadres in August 2019 in Lhasa. Through interviews with local villagers, we collected information about their understanding, participation, expectations, proposals, and complaints regarding the LITT, as well as social and economic development in Lunang (the fieldwork was carried out from July 3 to August 1, 2014, from September 1 to 8, 2015, and from April 30 to May 4, 2016). Through consultations with the TAR government (during workshops held on August 12, 2017, July 8, 2014, and September 9, 2015 in Lhasa, Nyingchi and Lunang, respectively), we received information regarding the whole process of PAT, specific policy implementation, innovative practices, and the results as perceived by the government. And through discussions with aiding cadres from Guangdong and other provinces, we obtained insight into their understanding of PAT, their efforts in LITT management and the aid outcomes from LITT (these interviews took place in August 2014 in Lunang, in September 2015 in Nyingchi, and in August 2019 in Lhasa).

Identifying Local Ethnic Culture

The understanding of local culture varies among different stakeholders in the LITT project. Lunang Township is located in the southeast of the TAR. It is a multi-ethnic region inhabited by populations of Tibetan, Monpa, Lhoba, Dengba, and other groups. The local culture is not purely Tibetan but rather a mixture of several cultures. For political-economic purposes, however (i.e., in order to conform to the requirements of PAT), Tibetan culture is emphasized, and the mixed local culture is promoted as “Tibetan.”

Lunang: “Non-typical” Tibetan Culture

Historically, Nyingchi was part of the Gongbo region (Ch. *Gongbu*; Tib. Kong po). Stretching over the Yarlung Tsangpo River bend and Nyang River valley, Gongbo was suitable for farming. It was also rich in natural resources such as timber and iron ore. Nevertheless, due to its remote location on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, it was regarded as an “uncivilized” region. This perception has persisted, and today the region attracts few new residents. Although nowadays Nyingchi is promoted as “Tibet’s Paradise” (*Xizangde Jiangnan*), the number of inhabitants is still small. Therefore, effecting population growth has been one of main goals of local development in the region.

From the point of view of the locals, the reason for the lack of newcomers in Nyingchi is a “lack of culture.” Bayi, the capital of Nyingchi, does not look particularly “Tibetan” at first glance, and people prefer to move to Lhasa, 400 kilometers further to the west. In fact, people associate the presence of “culture” with religion, believing that the flourishing of religious culture means that “the place is cultured.” Today, Nyingchi City has ninety-seven religious sites, including forty-nine monasteries, twenty-one scripture halls, and twenty-seven places for monks to practice. These monasteries accommodate 609 monks and nuns, accounting for 0.44 percent of the total population in the region, while the proportion in Tibet as a whole is 1.4 percent (SCIO 2019). Religious sites are generally major tourist destinations; their absence thus inhibits local tourism development. This is particularly true in a place where tourism is evolving around local “ethnic,” i.e., Tibetan, culture, which is strongly related to religion (Liang 2018).

The ethnic diversity of Nyingchi Prefecture is another challenge for the development of tourism, as it is not easy to define one culture that represents the local cultural landscape. Nyingchi Prefecture is made up of the counties Gongbo’gyamda (Ch. *Gongbujiangda*; Tib. Kong po rgya mda’), Mainling (Ch. *Milin*; Tib. Sman gling), Medog (Ch. *Motuo*; Tib. Me tog), Bome (Ch. *Bomi*;

Tib. *Spo mes*), Zayu (Ch. *Chayu*; Tib. *Rdza yul*), and Nang (Ch. *Lang*; Tib. *Snang*). From the perspective of cultural zoning, Lhoka culture (considered to be the same culture as in Lhasa) predominates in Nang County, Gongbo culture predominates in Gongbo'gyamda, Khumba culture predominates in Bome and some parts of Zayu, Lhoba culture predominates in Mainling, Monpa culture predominates in Medog, and Dengba culture predominates in some parts of Zayu. As mentioned above, the "Tibetan" culture the tourists are seeking is underrepresented and the cultural diversity of Nyingchi has therefore not been sufficiently commodified and promoted. Instead, in order to attract mainstream tourists to Tibet, Lunang's tourism development has been designed to showcase "Tibetan" culture, and the development of local native traditions and cultural expressions has been neglected.

Multi-Ethnic Cultures

Although there are local peculiarities in Nyingchi, both Nang and Gongbo County lie in the Tibetan cultural landscape. The Monpa and Lhoba are officially recognized nationalities with their own spoken languages and various religious affiliations other than Buddhism. Many Monpa and Lhoba also use Tibetan for communication and there is a long tradition of interaction and intermarriage among both groups and Tibetans. The ancestors of the Lhoba in Nyingchi had long been living in the Yarlung Tsangpo valley. Before 1959, they mainly practiced slash-and-burn farming, weaving with waist looms, and other traditional crafts. The Monpa are the most populous group of the Yarlung Tsangpo valley. The Dengba are the least populous ethnic group in Tibet and speak a separate language. Before 1959, the Dengba resided in mountains and forests. Their traditions and customs were similar to those of the Lhoba. Unlike the Monpa and the Lhoba, however, the Dengba were not officially recognized as a nationality. In contrast to Tibetans, the Monpa, Lhoba, and Dengba are grouped among the PRC's "less populous nationalities" (*renkou jiaoshao minzu*).

From the distant perspective of the state administration and non-local officials responsible for the development of tourism, the Nyingchi culture is summarized as "non-typical" Tibetan culture, as opposed to the "typical" Tibetan culture understood as culture centered around Lhasa. The local blend of religious rituals, ancient legends, myths, folk customs, and totem worship in Nyingchi reflects what Louisa Schein (2000, 101–6) has described in her research as "internal Orientalism." To stimulate tourism and meet visitor expectations, the authorities represent these practices as "mysterious," "simplistic," "beautiful," "backward," "ignorant," and "feminist." Once local ethnic minorities abandon their traditional practices, they are considered

“polluted” or “dangerous.” The locals’ aspirations for a modern life contradict the expectations of the tourists. Moreover, most tourists coming to TAR expect to experience the Lhasa-centric “typical Tibetan culture,” which differs significantly from the Tibetan culture of Nyingchi. The competing goals of attracting tourists, maintaining traditional culture, and accepting outside influences to advance development caused a major dilemma in the design of the Nyingchi LITT project.

The “Tibetan” Culture of Lunang: Neither Fish nor Fowl

Tourism development in Lunang is meant to be based on rich local cultural and ecological resources. For the abovementioned reasons, it is challenging to define, identify, and commercialize these resources. The promotion of Lunang’s unique Gongbo culture and the development of local ethnic spectacles could be attractive not only to tourists from outside TAR, but also to Tibetan tourists. It might therefore be prudent to focus on the development of local Nyingchi cultural traditions to be showcased to tourists in Lunang rather than the so-called Tibetan culture of other regions. The local cultural diversity, however, is not easy to grasp.

Cai Jiahua and Zou Jiahua, both PAT personnel from Guangdong Province, served as Nyingchi County’s CCP deputy secretary and the deputy head of Nyingchi County government, respectively. They initiated tourism development at Lunang (Yang 2015). The main purpose of Guangdong’s PAT program was to promote economic development in Nyingchi. In this tourism development project, the idea was “for tourism to make full use of the rich resources of Gongbo culture, Bon, and eco-tourism.” As claimed by Cai Jiahua, this project had to “dig deep into the abundant Gongbo culture and integrate the local culture into eco-tourism development.” Although Cai Jiahua recognized Gongbo culture as dynamic and complex, he failed to clearly define it, instead vaguely expressing that it is part of Tibetan culture. In order to create attractive tourist spots, the PAT personnel decided to rely on two elements—culture and nature. To rely solely on local Gongbo culture was regarded as insufficient and a decision was made to integrate the diversity of all Nyingchi ethnic groups and their traditions into the Lunang tourism development. Cai Jiahua confessed that the resulting cultural agglomeration of “Tibetan culture” turned out to be “neither fish nor fowl” (*sibuxiang*). At the same time, the attempt to showcase cultural inclusion by integrating cultural characteristics of the Tibetans, Monpa, Lhoba, Nu people, and other minority nationalities seems to have failed. Although the designer of this project had originally hoped to avoid flattening out Tibetan culture, the result was the opposite.

Staged Culture versus Authentic Culture

The culture imagined or designed by tourist developers in Lunang can be seen as “staged culture” (Wilke 2010). John Urry (2011) created the concept of the “tourist gaze” to express the most fundamental characteristics of tourism. Tourists construct this “gaze” through the consumption and collection of tourist experiences. As a tourist product, culture is increasingly staged for tourists and decorated so as to look authentic; however, it loses real meaning for the locals (Kithiia and Reilly 2016). Musapir (2020) has examined complex religio-cultural traditions that have been transformed into simplified and exoticized patriotic “song and dance performances,” seen by the community elders and cultural practitioners as fake. Qin Beishou (2017) believes that the tendencies towards cultural assimilation and vulgarization that appear in Yunnan’s ethnic stage performances have damaged the original ecological characteristics of minority cultures and that the assimilated performance forms have had an impact on the effectiveness of cultural inheritance. On the other hand, an authentic culture is vivid and runs through the daily lives of local people. Tourism promotion would ideally integrate both staged and authentic culture. In developing culturally appropriate ethnic tourism experiences, it may be difficult to navigate between staged and authentic culture, and between culture as everyday life and as commercialized tourist product.

For example, the components of everyday life that represent authentic local customs and lifestyles and other cultural features are sometimes not included and showcased effectively. This is not because local residents do not have the means or the right to commodify their culture, but because they sometimes don’t know how to do so. Only when a local ethnic culture is confronted with other cultures can it be highlighted and an appropriate market operation be implemented to convert it into marketable products and services. Although backpackers went to Tashigang Village to live in homestays and experience local ethnic culture before LITT started, they only explored local ethnic culture as tourists, not as local residents exploring products and projects from their daily lives that had some kind of market value. We visited local residents, and they always told us that “these tourism products and services need to be gradually developed during our interactions with tourists.”

Gradually, some elements of everyday culture are transformed into staged culture as tourist products. Stone pot chicken (*shiguoji*) is a good example. The local tradition of using a stone pot to cook food dates back thousands of years. In addition to the stone pot’s fast heat conduction and non-stick and color-change resistant properties, the natural texture of stone mixed with

boiling soup offers a stunning flavor (Yang et al. 2021). This dish is heavily promoted as an iconic food of the region. In contrast, other local products, such as the Tibetan “three treasures” (i.e., buttered tea, *tsampa*—roasted barley flour, and highland barley alcohol), are rarely visible at tourist sites, and tourists who want to sample them must visit guest houses opened by residents.

Theoretically, the staged culture developed to attract tourists might distort the local culture. As an example might serve Philip Xie’s (2010) observation of ethnic tourism to Indonesian community on Hainan Island showing significant distortion of local culture due to a lack of understanding of the community’s perceptions of authenticity. There is always a gap between the authentic everyday culture and the commercialized staged culture. Therefore, while it is important to ask who should be responsible for protecting local culture in an authentic way, it is equally important to examine the debate on authentic vs. staged culture in a nuanced manner.

Protection of Tibetan Culture

Recruitment of a Foreign Company

The LITT program in Nyingchi initially defined Lunang as an “international tourist town featuring rich Tibetan culture, natural ecology, holy tranquility, and modern fashion.” Based on an open bidding process, the project initially commissioned a foreign tourism design company—Leisure Ques (LQI) from the USA—to lead the project design. It was assumed that LQI would bring its expertise and reputation in tourism development to the project. However, from the very beginning, there was a debate about how to showcase local “Tibetan culture.” A proposal tabled by LQI at a planning evaluation meeting in April 2011 stated the ambitious goal that LITT aims to build “a world-class, the largest, most fully featured and highest-profile tourist reception center in northeast Tibet.” However, the experts attending the meeting believed that the design did not sufficiently prioritize the inclusion of local ethnic cultures. Although the proposed plan was eventually endorsed for implementation, the failure to fully express local culture, which could have been due to LQI’s lack of awareness of the local culture and inadequate understanding of the local context, was seen as potentially fatal.

When the governor of the Guangdong Province Zhu Xiaodan inspected the LITT project after the endorsement, in May 2011, concerns were raised again by local stakeholders. Zhu suggested that the project should “highlight local ethnic culture and fully respect the lifestyle of local Tibetans” in order

to show his idea of aiding Tibet by respecting local culture. He insisted that the project should pursue its initial goal of focusing on “making Lunang a tranquil, holy, picturesque, modernized international tourist destination with Tibetan traditional cultural characteristics and customs, and the harmonious relationship between humans and nature” (Hua 2012). Obviously, the difference in the understanding of local culture and cultural protection between LQI and Chinese stakeholders, and especially the Guangdong provincial government as the PAT investor, was the decisive factor. As the most important result of fulfilling Zhu’s vision, ultimately Guangdong Province officially revoked its approval of the LQI proposal and recruited China Urban Design Research Center led by Chen Keshi instead of LQI as its project partner.

Recruitment of a Domestic Company

In the following stage, Zhu Xiaodan had a design company with Chinese localization experience take over the design of the LITT project. In May 2011, Chen Keshi, a well-known Chinese urban planner and designer, was commissioned to lead a new proposal. He involved his China Urban Design Research Center, based at Peking University, and the technical implementation was by China Reconstruct (Chen et. al. 2017). In April 2012, having been endorsed by the government of Guangdong, the overall goal of the cultural development of LITT was set as showcasing “southeast Tibetan culture” and the “Gongbo architectural style.”

It is critical for tourism development to protect local culture while making use of it. In practice, developers often focus more on economic development than on protecting local culture (Zhu 2008; Ai and Shen 2018). The case of Lunang provides a good example of the importance and necessity of government intervention. It is worth noting that LITT is a project assisted by Guangdong Province for the TAR, with funding from Guangdong. Moreover, since Guangdong Province is not providing this assistance to generate economic returns for itself, it mainly completes the assistance tasks assigned by the central government. From the decades of implementation of aid projects in Tibet, it can be seen that the provinces functioning as aid donors do not transfer their investments to the TAR, but rather organize the construction and implementation of the projects. If Guangdong as the aid provider directly transferred these funds to Nyingchi prefecture, it would actually be a horizontal transfer payment, and no system of horizontal financial transfer payments has been established in China. The main purpose of the central government’s establishment of a corresponding aid system for TAR is for the aid provider to utilize

their funds, along with their advantages in engineering technology and management, to assist the recipient areas in building infrastructure and developing projects such as Lunang. And for development projects like Lunang, the benefits accrue to the recipient, not Guangdong as the aid provider.

In tourism development projects in other regions of China, the main purpose of being an investor is to gain benefits from the operation after the project is completed. Although the developers and operators of these projects make verbal and even written promises to protect cultural heritage and ecology, they often betray the expectations of local residents. Due to the costs involved in protecting culture and ecology during project development, the protection of local cultural heritage and ecology is often ineffective in non-targeted aid projects. Fortunately, though, this has not been the case for LITT in Lunang.

Architectural Decoration and Finishing

Architectural decoration and finishing reflects the designers' idea of Tibetan culture. Whether or not the architecture in tourist destinations is able to showcase Tibetan cultural characteristics as perceived by designers eventually depends on the decoration and finishing, which is also an important element for local communities to get involved in. In fact, a large number of skilled craftspeople from local and neighboring regions have been hired to contribute to architectural decoration in Lunang.

Many ethnic groups in TAR have acquired thangka painting skills in a monastery. The drawing of thangka is a process of endowing and displaying religious values, including the dissemination value of religious doctrines, the worship value of religious relics, the practice value of religious practice, and the value norms of religious aesthetics (Ma 2007). Thangkas that depict deities are not merely decorative; they can be "animated" by clergy to make it an actual representation of the depicted deity in a monastery. Therefore, using thangka techniques just for "art" is, arguably, an appropriation of the practice. In the LITT project, these skills are important for decorating tourist architecture in a way that showcases local Tibetan traditional arts. As a unique traditional skill, this style of painting can seldom be applied by outsiders and provides an almost exclusive opportunity for local Tibetans. Compared with other jobs, painting pictures on buildings is highly technical and, therefore, local painters earn much higher salaries. In recent years, local communities have used more and more steel and cement to build private houses; however, they still prefer to decorate them with locally inspired

Tibetan paintings. The decoration of buildings is certainly an important cultural expression of local people and, in this case, an expression of local Tibetan culture. It is important to highlight that the active participation of local Tibetan people in architectural decoration in the LITT project significantly contributes to the recovery and retention of local Tibetan culture.

Participation of Local Villages in the Project

Designers have taken into consideration the inclusion and benefit sharing of stakeholders, particularly local communities, in the LITT development. While four administrative villages—Norbu, Dumpatshal, Tashigang, and Stongjug—are located within the planned LITT zone, four other villages—Klumo, Badkar, Lagdong, and Balmo—are far away from the project zone, at a distance of thirty-eight to fifty-eight kilometers. To include these four outer villages in the project, designers have assigned a commercial plot within the LITT zone especially for these villages to run independent development programs. This specially assigned plot is located in the proposed tourist services area, where typical tourist services will be set up. Importantly, providing villages with a land plot outside their administrative boundaries is a policy breakthrough (to some extent) with governmental support and approval. The offer of land development rights not only opens a window to showcase the economic and cultural characteristics in these villages, but also gives these communities an opportunity to share the benefits of tourism development in the region. On the other hand, this will also bring commercial benefits to developers as it introduces more diversity of culture, services, and products to the tourist attraction.

Village	Number of households	Population (people)	Distance* from Lunang Town (km)
Tashigang	64	302	2
Norbu	70	327	3
Dumpatshal	30	157	10
Stongjug	21	99	21
Klumo	18	76	55
Badkar	20	129	38
Lagdong	33	119	58
Balmo	26	124	42
Total	282	1,333	

Figure 7.1: Population and Location of Eight Administrative Villages in Lunang Township. *The distance from Lunang Town is the distance from the location of Lunang People’s Government

A Dilemma for Local Residents: Economic Development or Cultural Protection

Generally speaking, local residents are living carriers of local ethnic cultures. Although there are Monpa, Lhoba, and Dengba living in Nyingchi besides Tibetans, the tourism development project in Lunang town hopes to display and protect the local Tibetan culture. Investigation of the participation of locals who are Tibetans in the project can provide an insight into the protection of local culture to some degree. It is challenging for local residents to find a balance between embracing the economic benefits that this project is likely to bring and protecting the details of their own specific culture so that they remain present and visible within the larger concept of “Tibetan culture.”

Guest Houses: A Rapid Growth Trend

As previously mentioned, in some villages, such as Tashigang Village of Lunang Township, guest houses were operating before the LITT project started. In 1998, backpackers began to pay to stay overnight at the homes of villagers in Tashigang. Puncog, known as “Uncle Puncog” by tourists, was the first person to provide guest house accommodation services in the village. In 2003, Tang Tsering, another Tibetan in Tashigang village, where most residents are Tibetan, transformed his family house into a Tibetan guest house and received an incentive subsidy of RMB 43,000 from the government to decorate it. Since then, guest houses have developed rapidly, partially due to encouragement and support from the government.

By 2010, twenty-six households, i.e., 50 percent of all households that consist of Tibetan families, had opened guest houses in the village. The profits from guest houses significantly contributed to household incomes. On average, the revenues from guest houses accounted for a quarter of total household income in 2010. The revenue of the guest house of Uncle Puncog reached RMB 200,000 in 2010, making up more than 50 percent of his total income. The success of private guest houses in some villages inspired Guangdong Province’s PAT initiative to redirect the focus of its aid effort from infrastructure projects, such as building roads and schools, to tourism development, and thus the LITT project has become one of its most prioritized projects. Tourism development in the region has further stimulated the local guest house business, which has already expanded to Bumpatshal, Mamgling, Dumpatshal, and other small villages. The rapid growth of guest houses has brought more income to local communities. For example, by 2017, out of sixty-eight Tibetan households (312 people in total)

in Tashigang village, forty-eight had opened guest houses. Collectively, they received 71,000 tourists, and generated a total income of RMB 2.91 million.

The development of guest houses gets more and more local residents directly involved in tourism. The six key components of tourism, i.e., eating, living, transport, traveling, shopping, and entertainment, create economic prosperity in local communities. In fact, with the development of tourist services, including guest houses, food services featuring local cuisine such as stone pot chicken and sales of local specialty products, household income has increased significantly, with tourism being the main income generator. Importantly, in order to showcase local culture to tourists, local communities began to recover some original traditions—to stage existing everyday culture. For example, local Tibetans display and share their understanding of traditions and lifestyles with tourists, such as day-to-day Tibetan clothing with local characteristics, handmade buttered tea, digging up matsutake mushrooms, milking yaks, and other examples of everyday culture. Through these activities, tourists can experience and appreciate the local ethnic customs that are embedded in the open-ended concept of Tibetan culture. The purpose of these activities is also to promote the retention, recovery, inheritance, and protection of traditional culture, yet the effect is not always significant.

Choices of Guest House Styles: Conflicts between Tradition and Modernity

Generally speaking, local ethnic groups tend to support and protect their local culture, given that they carry it with them and care about the multiple dimensions of connection with it. However, cultural protection is always a complex issue, especially in the context of a less developed economic background and a pluralistic cultural environment. In the development of family-run guest houses in this region, one issue has been that local households seem not to pay enough attention to cultural protection. The rapid growth of the guest house business, without a comprehensive plan, has stimulated more and more households to convert traditional residential properties into commercial guest houses. During this transformation, many features of traditional architectural styles and locally embedded Tibetan culture have disappeared.

For example, many locals learned that most tourists (so far, they are mostly domestic tourists) prefer a modern room layout. They made the judgement that tourists do not like traditional Tibetan rooms, as they have a wooden structure, small windows, low ceilings, and poor natural light. To make their properties more attractive, local people generally choose

to renovate their rooms using modern styles and architectural design. In practice, local guest house owners renovate their guest rooms in several ways. The most popular way is to renovate existing rooms by enlarging the windows to let in more natural light and installing new bedding to make the room more modern. Another way is to rebuild the property, demolishing the original building to construct a modern-style hotel. For example, Pasangs, the Tashigang Village head, built a small hotel beside his house with a sign on the roof that read “Ggrongsmad Guest House.” The two-story hotel has more than thirty standard rooms little different from those in a city. Only the exterior is in a local Tibetan style. We visited several newly built hotel-type guest houses which were independent from the owners’ residential properties. All these buildings are in a modern style, comparable to standard urban hotels, although their external appearance is “Tibetan” in style.

It is understandable that local residents choose to satisfy tourists’ needs. However, in the long run, this will likely damage local culture and eventually damage economic growth in the region. While balancing immediate economic benefits and long-term cultural conservation is challenging, as mentioned previously, it could be managed more effectively with a comprehensive understanding of tourism itself, including tourist markets and business management. Assistance from the government is necessary to guide and regulate the development of tourism, including the guest house sector. The PAT initiative and its LITT project have the potential to play a significant role. For example, the government should encourage tourist management authorities to educate tourist developers and local ethnic groups that tourists visit Tibet for a Tibetan cultural experience and not for luxury hotel rooms which they could find just as easily in big cities. This would help prevent local residents from making such culture-demolishing changes when renovating their houses. It appears that the government has already noticed the problem and taken steps to reverse the trend. The local government has required existing guest houses to retain and recover their Tibetan cultural features and stopped approval for new guest houses. We understand from the field survey that local people have started to adhere to the requirements to improve their guest houses.

As well as struggling with guest houses, local people are also facing challenges in their religious beliefs to some extent. For example, when tourists order freshly made stone pot chicken on no-killing days (when people are traditionally not allowed to kill living creatures), locals will hire non-locals to kill chickens for them. That is to say, they are struggling to balance their pursuit of commercial opportunities and their existing beliefs and lifestyles.

Commercialization of the Paper Flag Formation

On the top of a hill in Tashigang Village, there is a prayer flag formation. The prayer flags surround a small forest on the top of a small hill and can be seen from the main road one kilometer away. They are made of materials such as cotton, linen, silk, etc., and feature five colors: blue, white, red, green, and yellow, symbolizing the sky, auspicious clouds, flames, rivers, and the earth, respectively. Tibetan Buddhism also gives the meaning of these five colors as five Buddhas and five kinds of wisdom. The rules are that all homestay tourists from Tashigang Village can enter the prayer flag formation for free, while others need to pay ten RMB per person. In order to collect the entry fee, the villagers have built a fence around the formation, and at the entrance, there is usually a burly young man responsible for the collection. Visiting prayer flag formations does not require payment elsewhere. Charging people to see them is a typical case of the commodification of religious culture. After the LITT project started in Lunang, Tashigang Village also attempted to turn some of the village's objects into ethnic spectacles to be gazed upon by tourists. For example, an old house whose owner fled to India in 1959, which had been vacant for decades, was renovated as an "ancient house" for tourists to visit. Local villagers refer to this old house as the "landlord's house." The renovation of the house was completed by a village organization with the aim of adding traditional cultural elements to the village.

Jointly Built Guest Houses

The considerable profit from operating guest houses in Tashigang Village has not only incentivized local residents to expand their guest houses but has also ignited investment interest from outsiders. Gradually, joint ventures between local villagers and external investors to build and run new guest houses have emerged, for example in Tashigang Village. Our field survey reveals different "co-operative" mechanisms largely based on a "local land plus external capital" model, which was not related to LITT. Usually, local households offer the right to use their contracted land (farming or pastoral land) to external investors for a fixed term (e.g., twenty years) at an annual fee of, e.g., RMB 30,000, while investors from outside invest to build and run new guest houses. The investor will independently operate the business until the end of the lease period, when the right to use the land and any assets on the land reverts to the local household with no fee. The investor will usually invest around RMB four million to set up a new guest house business.

However, according to current legislation, such land transfers are illegal. Related laws and regulations do not permit farming and pastoral land to

be repurposed to build commercial facilities.¹ We found from the survey that the local government noticed the construction of illegal buildings and took some action to prevent it in the early stages but failed to do so consistently. Consequently, more illegal guest houses have been built and opened for business, although the process was delayed by the governmental interventions. It is important to note that local households have various perceptions of this cooperation between locals and external investors. Most households would be in favor of stronger governmental action, as they generally regard this cooperation as stimulating cut-throat competition and stealing the benefits of tourism from local people.

Local Views on Cultural Protection

As discussed above, members of the local community have gradually formed their own views regarding local cultural protection in the LITT project. Our field survey of local community members found that local villagers generally hold positive views towards the project, while they have been cautiously trying to achieve a balance between economic benefits and cultural protection.

In May 2015, we conducted interviews with twenty-seven households, i.e., 42 percent of the total of sixty-four households, in Tashigang Village, to understand their perception of the LITT project, which had helped the locals to convert their houses into guest houses, and associated cultural protection issues. The survey suggested that all interviewees welcomed tourism development at Lunang and were keen to share in the economic benefits of tourism. They did not necessarily oppose the development of tourism activities by external businesses in local villages, as long as these external businesses did not compete directly with local family guest houses. They expected their own guest houses to be protected in some way. However, they did not really have an idea of how to protect their interests by preserving local culture. When we came back to the same village in May 2016 and July 2019, we found some encouraging changes. While they were still passionate about participation in tourism development, the locals were more experienced in tourism operation. One obvious piece of evidence was that almost all the guest houses had set up wooden signs to advertise their services. This suggested that they had now started to learn about tourism management and engage with tourist markets. Meanwhile, many

¹ Tashigang village leader told me confidentially that local government repeatedly informed the villagers about all relevant laws and regulations ahead of the start of the cooperation between locals and the external investors.

guest houses had been renovated to highlight the “Tibetan architectural style,” and local households had more initiative and willingness to show their original authentic lifestyle to visitors. Undoubtedly, this change reveals that local communities perceived tourism as an important development in their villages and that cultural protection and cultural presentation have become more and more critical for attracting and retaining tourists. The gradual change in local people’s perception of tourism and the role of local culture in tourism development will benefit sustainable cultural tourism development in the region.

Factors Directing the Protection of Local Ethnic Culture

Decision-Making and Implementation

While Guangdong Provincial Government has invested enormous amounts in personnel and capital, non-governmental capital makes up a substantial proportion of the overall investment. Therefore, these PAT partners have a larger stake in decision-making. In this regard, it is important to explore the role of PAT partners in protecting local ethnic culture. Two key persons have played a critical role in LITT decision-making and project implementation. As the governor of Guangdong Province, Zhu Xiaodan is the top decision-maker for LITT. His aim for the project in relation to cultural protection is to “protect the local environment, respect local culture, and protect local Tibetans’ interests” (*baohu dangdi shengtai, zunzhong dangdi wenhua, weihu dangdi Zangmin liyi*). Zhu has visited Lunang three times and met with the chief designer Chen Keshi sixteen times to facilitate project development. Cai Jiahua, heading the Guangdong PAT initiative in Nyingchi Prefecture and commanding LITT on the ground, has been implementing the project following the decision made by Guangdong Provincial Government.

We made several visits to the construction headquarters of the LITT project located in Norbu Village and interviewed Cai Jiahua and Huang Zhiming, who served as the deputy county governor (originally from Guangdong Province for PAT). Interviews and group discussions suggested that they were conscious of the importance of protecting local Tibetan culture. They indicated that “as a PAT project, it should do well to local residents and defend their interests including local hybrid culture, otherwise this project is meaningless” (Chen et al. 2017).

In May 2016, at the construction headquarters of the LITT project, Cai Jiahua shared a story of architectural decoration with us. When building the roof of the tourist distribution center, the construction team did not follow

the blueprints. The construction supervisor reported this to Chen Keshi, the chief designer of LITT, who insisted that the roof had to be rebuilt, as if it were left in its current state, the whole building would lose its Tibetan style. Rebuilding would cost more than RMB fifty million, which was expensive. The initial choice of Chen Keshi as the project design supervisor of LITT did not take into account whether a local Tibetan was needed. The main consideration was that the LITT investment was the largest project among all the PAT projects, which indicated that LITT's design supervisor needed to be a highly experienced expert in the early stages. Chen Keshi achieved great success in the early stages of other project designs and accumulated substantial experience. Therefore, his request to rebuild the roof received support from the local government and Guangdong Province, which is providing assistance to Tibet. The construction companies were reluctant to rebuild it and tried hard to persuade Cai Jiahua to accept the existing architecture. However, Cai Jiahua was determined to support Chen's advice. This story reveals that the chief designer responsibility system guarantees the protection of Tibetan culture during the process of construction, which depends on the people in charge.

Channels of Local Participation

During interviews and group discussion, we acquired information about local participation in the LITT project. During a conversation with Chen Keshi in May 2015, we understood that the daily work of Chen and his team was to oversee project sites at Norbu, Tashisgang, and other villages. They talked with local people, collected suggestions and advice from them, and integrated the information into the project design and implementation. This was a way for local residents to engage and participate in the development of LITT. In fact, throughout the project, the managers and those in charge (including Cai Jiahua and Chen Keshi) had been living in local villages. This suggests that local people were listened to and encouraged to participate.

In the PRC, only land expropriated as state land can be used for commercial development. This land acquisition has always led to conflicts between stakeholders. In many places in interior provinces, there have been a large number of incidents where farmers fought fiercely against such land acquisition. These incidents reflected the refusal of land "owners" (local households, who possess land use rights) to accept the mandated price at which land allocated to private households would be converted into state land, and their desire to sell their land to property developers. The LITT project also needed to expropriate the land of local people, but

this land acquisition did not encounter any obstacles, according to Cai. He suggested there were two reasons why local residents were willing to accept the land acquisition: firstly, because the price offered was relatively high, and secondly, because local people extensively participated in and benefitted from the project.

Considering the large scale of the project, however, the benefits experienced by local communities through participation remain limited. The total investment in this project was RMB 3.8 billion, but local people could only be involved directly in very limited activities. For example, they exclusively supplied the gravel needed in the construction. According to Cai's estimate, gravel supply would generate a total of RMB sixty million, at a unit price of RMB sixty-five per cubic meter, across the entire project. This is indeed a substantial income for villages with small populations. However, considering the huge total construction cost and annual (not total) income from the gravel supply business, this is still only a small proportion of the total cost of the project. Obviously, more active participation is an important way to increase local people's benefit share. The challenge here is that local people have a very limited capacity to do the necessary jobs—especially the skilled jobs required to build complex structures. It is therefore important to engage residents in activities they can feasibly carry out—for example, those which require local cultural awareness and local knowledge, such as local material supply and traditional painting of buildings, as mentioned previously. That is to say, the construction of these projects requires the employment of professional and technical personnel from outside the region, but this is not inconsistent with the employment of local residents to participate in the construction.

Cultural Consciousness of Investors

Multiple investors have been involved in LITT. Guangdong Province invested in building infrastructure, Evergrande Real Estate Group invested RMB 700 million in building a “courtyard-style hotel” (*yuanluoshi fengge binguan*), Guangdong Pearl River Investment invested RMB 700 million in building a “palace-style hotel” (*gongdianshi fengge binguan*), Poly Real Estate Group invested RMB 700 million in building a “villa-style hotel” (*bieshushi fengge binguan*), and Guangdong Provincial Tourism Holdings invested in building a “tourist center” and a “commercial street.” From the perspective of commercial gain, these companies consider how to attract more tourists to their hotels and attractions, assuming that tourists come to Lunang for its unique local culture and natural landscape rather than

for luxury hotels. Consequently, they exploit local “ethnic culture” for own commercial benefit.

Conclusion

Tourism development in ethnic areas always requires attention to cultural inclusion. This involves not only recognizing, respecting, and protecting local cultures but also promoting cohesion among different ethnic groups. Protecting the unique Tibetan culture is especially important for successful tourism development in the region. The LITT project is an example of a successful collaboration between different stakeholders, including Guangdong Province, Nyingchi Prefecture, and local businesses and communities, resulting in greater cultural cohesion. However, the case of Lunang highlights the need to prioritize local cultural protection, as local communities are the primary bearers of ethnic culture. While local government officials and communities should have a strong commitment to cultural protection, they may sometimes prioritize economic benefits over cultural preservation. Interestingly, external providers of aid and government officials seem to place more emphasis on local cultural protection than local stakeholders, perhaps reflecting a difference in understanding between insiders and outsiders. To bridge this gap, the LITT project has attempted to integrate local and stereotypical views of Tibetan culture, incorporating everyday cultural products, such as local food and architectural styles, into the local cultural presentation.

The perception of local ethnic culture in Lunang varies greatly between external stakeholders and local residents. While the external stakeholders view the culture from a tourist perspective, the locals see it as an integral part of their day-to-day lives. This difference in perception makes it challenging for the project designers and constructors to determine what kind of “Tibetan culture” Lunang should display. Consequently, conflicts arise among local residents, who struggle to balance the protection of their culture with the pursuit of short-term economic interests.

Despite these challenges, the large-scale tourism development in Lunang has shown a commitment to cultural inclusion by external donors and investors, as well as the government. At a micro-level, policy makers have made efforts to engage local communities in project activities and consult with experts and locals to adhere to the principle of cultural inclusion. However, irrational short-term behavior poses a significant challenge to cultural protection in this complex process. The LITT project, as an aid

project, prioritizes local ethnic cultural inclusion and seeks to benefit local communities and promote regional development. This project highlights the importance of active local participation, which is necessary, important, and feasible for similar aid projects. Despite its positive impact, the LITT project presents challenges to local cultural security that cannot be overlooked. First, although LITT is an aid project to Tibet, it is also a commercial venture, and commercial goals may conflict with local cultural safety goals. This problem has been evident to some extent since the establishment and operation of LITT. Second, marketization in the region is advancing rapidly due to LITT's influence. For traditional societies like Lunang, adapting to rapid modernization and marketization poses significant challenges to local residents. Resistance to modernization and increasing cultural awareness of protection have led to the risk of social instability. Third, although the donor governmental bodies and the local government have made efforts to protect the local ethnic culture from commercialization during the building of LITT, after its completion, commercialization and marketization will inevitably accelerate. If government bodies reduce their efforts to assist locals and allow the market to penetrate the local area completely, the impact on local residents will be even more significant.

Overall, the large-scale tourism development project in Lunang has had significant economic, cultural, and social impacts on local residents. For example, Tibetan Buddhism is a fundamental aspect of Tibetan culture, but with the involvement of local residents in LITT, the change of local religions has become increasingly apparent. The rapid social changes brought about by tourism development, especially in the promotion of the LITT project, have altered the society in which local residents live and have led to the commodification of some elements of Tibetan Buddhism. As an example, religious rules that were once considered sacred, such as prohibitions on killing living beings, have been relaxed, taking on a more flexible form, religious objects have been turned into commodities for profit, and religiously significant paintings have been used to decorate ordinary buildings. These changes will impact the protection of national culture.

The LITT project was completed in October 2017 and underwent trial operation in May 2018, which was reportedly successful. However, since its opening in February 2020, the project has faced significant operational challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the situation remains unstable in 2023. Moving forward, there are various associated issues that require further exploration, such as the management performance of different tourist projects, local resident participation in business operations, and potential sociocultural changes and impacts on local lifestyles.

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