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Letter: Modernising Shangri-la

Lin Gu, a writer based in the Chinese capital, Beijing, travelled to the remote and beautiful mountainous region bordering Tibet.



A Chinese area near Tibet has renamed itself Shangri-la

The area has been named a World Heritage Site and is now attracting tourists from home and abroad. But their arrival has sparked heated arguments amongst the Tibetan locals.

“Shangri-la - the word, coined by novelist James Hilton in 1933, evokes the mystery and romance of an earthly Tibetan paradise. And last month, I went there.

Nestled in the mountains of south-west China's Yunnan Province bordering Tibet, is a region which assumed the name Shangri-la in 2002, in an extravagant ceremony.

The message was clear: this place is heaven, and it wants the world to come and see.

In fact, tourism has become the cornerstone of the local economy.

And last year, this picturesque mountain region, where the Yangtze, Mekong, and Salween rivers zigzag through green valleys, was named a World Heritage Site.

It's a designation which has encouraged more tourists to travel here.

“ I know it's ugly, but that's reality now - you've got to accept it ”

Cering Puncog

But this newly acquired status is already under threat. At last month's World Heritage Conference held in Suzhou, China, environmentalists were warning that unchecked dam-building and tourist development will cause irreparable damage to Shangri-la.

The night after I arrived in Shangri-la, when I still felt dizzy at the high altitude of 3,500 metres, I went to a downtown Tibetan-style bar with a group of American travellers.

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Local scenery

There we were given a slide show of the extraordinary local scenery.

All the pictures were taken by Cering Puncog, a Tibetan photographer. I was struck by the originality shown in these pictures, and learnt that Puncog has never received any formal training in photography.

I asked him about one photo that had caught my attention: a tree-covered mountain and a lake veiled by an ethereal light morning fog - but jutting from the top of the mountain was a telecommunications tower.

"Why did you photograph that?" I asked.

"I know it's ugly, but that's reality now - you've got to accept it," he replied.

On the rest of my two-week trip I saw similar conflicts between nature and modernisation.

When Puncog took me to his village of Jisha, I was intoxicated by the evergreen alpine grassland, dotted with numerous flowers.

But right in the middle of the village a huge billboard blocked the otherwise magnificent view of the Haba Snow mountain.

The billboard marks the planned entrance to a large tourist park, which will encompass the village and much of the Qianhu mountain range that lies behind.

Sacred to locals

The mountains and lakes are considered deeply sacred by Tibetans, who believe they are the home of the gods.

The real estate company behind the tourist park idea is based in the provincial capital Kunming.

It contacted the local government five years ago. Since then government officials have worked hard to convince the locals that if they let the company develop the area, more tourists will show up.

In fact, the same is happening nationwide. Five years ago the national government introduced a policy to develop the west of the country by pumping money into the region



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Debate rages over how to develop the real-life Shangri-la

into the region.

The village of Jisha is divided in its response to the changes: Some say development will help to shake off poverty, while others like Puncog worry about the potential threat to the environment, especially their sacred mountains.



Lhasa, Tibet's capital, has been transformed in recent years

It is not the first time the mountains have been under threat.

More than 20 years ago, when Puncog was just 12, a great number of lumberjacks sent by a state logging company suddenly came and settled down right in the middle of the village, and a large-scale logging campaign ensued.

Huge trees were cut down and transported by trucks to the outside world.

The logging plan was sanctioned by the state - the official owner of all the lands and forests.

'Like killing'

The logging was totally against what Puncog's mother had always taught him: Never cut a tree from the sacred mountain, for it's like killing a monk.

But as time went by, as his mother's advice grew more distant, Puncog joined the logging business and made a fortune.

At that time, local governments were also assigned a logging quota and villagers were mobilised to join the work.



Mountain trees are considered sacred

But eventually most villagers found themselves losers, not only financially, but also environmentally.

In 1998, China's central government issued a nationwide logging ban in the wake of the great flood along the Yangtze River of that summer.

The lumberjacks disappeared as quickly as they had arrived, leaving the villagers to cope with their legacy: shrunken primitive forests, more pests and less produce from the rangelands.

Local villagers view this damage as punishment from the gods who are angry that the sacred mountains have been violated.

In the same year, Puncog met a photographer who had arrived to capture the beauty of the mountains.

The realisation that others saw beauty in his homeland inspired Puncog to spend some of his fortune on a set of expensive cameras.

the real me Shangri-la

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Paradise on Earth

He volunteered to be a guide for professional photographers who visited the area. In return, they would give him photographic tips.

Now, six years later, in the small Tibetan bar slide show, I could see the results.

One professional photographer in the audience was impressed with Puncog's skills: He shoots with his heart, not just his eyes, the photographer commented.

So far, Puncog has solely focused on revealing the natural beauty of this land through his lens, but now he's considering moving on to the people living here.

“ Why hadn't villagers been consulted? ”

Puncog, local photographer

He is applying for international funds to chronicle changes in the lives of the people of Shangri-la. Puncog was inspired to start the project by a friend of his - the local environmentalist Li Bo.

When Li Bo first arrived in the village of Jisha in 2001, he wholeheartedly agreed it was paradise on Earth.

But he was also concerned about the rights of the villagers, and wanted to work with locals to improve the quality of their lives.

Li Bo's first concrete plan was to build a Tibetan-style guesthouse for backpackers from home and abroad.

One afternoon Li drove me to the construction site of the guesthouse. It's a two-storey wooden house with a beautiful view of meadowland.

Besides the rooms with bunk beds, it has a huge Tibetan sitting room with a separate meditation chamber. The building is almost finished.

Gaining trust

I could sense Li Bo's mixed feelings when he recalled the negotiations with villagers over the building.

The biggest obstacle turned out not to be the money - a Dutch organisation agreed to sponsor the whole project.

But a much tougher mission was to win the trust of the villagers, and convince them that the guesthouse would be a common property shared by everyone instead of a privileged few.

“ But is there any legal reason why these villagers must benefit from our future project? ”

Development company representative

And after the lessons learned through more than 20 years' logging, the suspicion of any outsiders is deeply rooted in the

logging, the suspicion of any outsiders is deeply rooted in the village.

Few locals benefited from logging financially, and that has increased their mistrust of the village council.

That's why every meeting called to discuss the guesthouse turned into a shouting match.

An exhausted Li Bo finally realised that the guesthouse provided a ready excuse for villagers to vent their long-suppressed frustration.

Then came the real estate company, which challenged the guesthouse, claiming it - not the locals - had the exclusive right to develop property.

The village was again divided, and doubts set in as to whether the locals were capable of managing the project.

Speaking out

Pressure from the local government increased, and in 2002 the real estate company won the right to a three-year trial run on preliminary development in the Qianhu mountain area.

Half a year later, Li Bo learned by chance that besides the three-year term, the county government had also given the company the right to develop the region for a total of 40 years.

Puncog was furious and challenged local officials: "Why hadn't villagers been consulted?"

It turned out that they had, but in a place where most people are illiterate, they had been unable to read the contract that signed away their land.

Everyone felt a great sense of betrayal again. But Li Bo remained determined.

He provided those who could read with law books and encouraged them to share the knowledge with others.

However, challenging the government through the law was an alien concept to locals, and some feared they would be imprisoned for speaking out.

Li Bo explained to them that they were entitled to all the rights enshrined in the constitution and other laws.

Public debate

On a rainy day in late July, Puncog and many of his fellow villagers gathered together in front of the guesthouse.

After a long day's debate, for the first time in history they had a legal adviser of their own: a young lawyer from the provincial capital Kunming.

Representatives from the government and the company were

also present, both sides later told me.

The lawyer challenged the legitimacy of the company's claim to develop the land.

He later wrote to the company and the county government casting more doubts on the legality of the developers' claims. So far he has had no response.

But the company representative did ask the lawyer during the meeting, "Can you clarify to these villagers if there is any legal reason why they must benefit from our future project?"

The lawyer's reply was brief and emotional: "Simply because generation upon generation have called this land home!"

The company representative later told me that they couldn't understand the logic behind this reply, and declined to comment on whether the villagers should benefit from the development or not.

With their yaks and crops of barley Tibetan nomads have survived the harsh life here on the plateau for centuries, but can they survive modern development?

I have my fingers crossed and wish them good luck. ”

Lin Gu is a feature writer for China Features, which provides feature stories and photographs on China to overseas publications.

Letter is a new BBC World Service series in which one of a panel of international broadcasters reflects on the latest political, cultural or social developments in their region.

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