

Article

Sacred Watersheds and the Fate of the Village Body Politic in Tibetan and Han Communities Under China's *Ecological Civilization*

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Abstract: The “spirit” in spiritual ecology is an active political force deserving sustained scholarly analysis and public recognition. This article reports on 15 years of field research on “animate landscapes,” associated with gods and spirits in Tibetan communities, and “vital landscapes” associated with *fengshui* in Han Villages. Despite a century of dramatic sociopolitical change across rural areas in the People's Republic of China, many villages maintain significant geo-phenomenological connections between body, mind, and land, comprising a body politic maintained through ritual cycles and dwelling practices that uphold the sanctity and integrity of vital watersheds. Comparative analysis of Han and Tibetan spiritual ecologies reveals that cosmological landscapes comprise the armature of relational ontologies grounding and informing everyday life, livelihood, and power relations. As dynamic, emergent, and flexible systems of socio-ecological adaptation that both shape and are shaped by regional and transnational media, they play significant roles in policy initiatives associated with *Ecological Civilization* and hold potential for broadening the horizons of Anthropocene scholarship, socio-ecological activism, and meaningful settlement in a profoundly unsettled world.

Keywords: Ecological Civilization; anthropocene; animate landscapes; vital landscapes; watersheds; geopietiy/geopolity; common property regimes

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is “in power” we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with... disappears, ‘his power’ also vanishes.

Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*

1. Introduction

Recent discourse on spiritual ecology empowers scholars, activists, conservationists, indigenous peoples, and others to act in concert toward the realization of transformative ecological, cosmological, economic, and political reconfigurations of life systems worldwide (Taylor 2010; Verschuuren et al. 2010; Sponsel 2012; Miller et al. 2014; Duara 2015; Verschuuren and Furuta 2016; Verschuuren and Brown 2019). Following Hannah Arendt's (1970, p. 50) definition of power as the property of a group when it “acts in concert,” we see that the potency of spiritual ecologies lies in their capacity to convene a multiplicity of beings and forces in the production and reproduction of space, place, community, and ecology. I pause intentionally, momentarily, to focus on a modernist definition of power here, because of its anthropocentric definition of “a group,” to emphasize how recent scholarship on animist and vitalist ontologies (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Bird-David 1999; Bennett 2010; Taylor 2010; Descola 2013; Kohn 2013) sheds light on far more socio-ecologically complex conceptions

of *Mitsein* (“Being-with”) than those espoused even by some of the most prominent philosophers of the twentieth century (Heidegger [1929] 2019; De Beauvoir 1971; Levinas 1987). The “ontological turn” in philosophy and social thought (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Latour 1993; Haraway 2016), anthropology (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Descola 2013; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), geography (Massey 2005; Braun 2006; Sullivan 2010; Castree 2012; Lorimer 2012), and other fields, drawing heavily from ethnographic work on indigenous cosmology, has altered some basic existential tenets. “Facticity”—our “thrownness” into an absurd (and anthropocentric) world neither of our choosing nor fully under our control—is now recognized as a rhizomatic, non-hierarchical, multi-species, spatially foliated condition in which we have not only “never been modern” (Latour 1993), but we have also “never been human” (Haraway 2008). Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) and Philippe Descola (2013) delineate significant structural symmetries that differentiate modern, Western, *naturalist* ontology from “Amerindian” (indigenous Amazonian) *animist* (perspectivist) ontology. In the former, humans share biological continuity with other species but possess culture as their own exclusive property. In the latter, humans share cultural continuity with other species but are separated from them by biological embodiment (the covering or “clothing” of the body is “the nature” that separates beings and endows each with a species-specific cosmological “perspective”). In the mythological past all species could communicate freely, but under normal, current conditions, only shamans can safely cross the communicative boundaries. Thus, while the anthropocentric cosmology of modern naturalism interpellates its subjects into the existential peril of solipsism, indigenous animist ontologies common to venatic (hunting) cultures engender subjects who face the imminent peril of cannibalism and must perform rituals ensuring the mollification or desubjectivization of their prey (Viveiros de Castro 1998). Other field researchers who seek to establish ontological groundings for “animist” phenomena warn against excessively structural assumptions, and I would add that this may be especially important in regard to societies that have undergone violent, sustained, or rapid structural change (Da Col 2007; Quijada 2018).¹ In China, the reconfiguration, recovery, or reinvention of spiritual ecologies with roots in pre-industrial times, traditions that were more or less effectively banned between 1949–1979, offer particularly challenging scenarios.

In this article, I recognize the analytical clarity and potency of “cosmological” models of animism and vitalism, while arguing that the degree of intricacy and structural regularity in such systems may be a function of the intensity of socio-ecological disturbance (Weller and Wu 2017). The objective of my field research has been to analyze the manifestation of spiritual beliefs within and by way of specific landscapes, particularly those that constitute essential foundations for the lifeworlds of communities. For this reason, I have focused on socio-ecological features produced by both humans and non-humans in cultural contexts in which both “animism” and “vitalism” figure prominently in the worldviews held by many community members, although certainly not by all or in the same ways. I follow Sponsel in noting that animist cosmology and practice assume that every “thing” that humans encounter could potentially be a person or the manifestation of more-than-human forces of social concern. Sponsel (2012, p. 12) states that “Animism merits far more recognition and appreciation than it has received in the past as *the* world religion and also for its very substantial ecological relevance [italics mine]. It generates a relationship with other persons, using the term *persons* in the broadest sense, which is genuinely respectful, reverential, and responsible.” Animist ecological conduct is, thus, fundamentally structured around reciprocity and mutual regard between living humans

¹ In a special edition of *Anthropological Forum* focusing on contemporary indigenous spiritual phenomena in western China, Da Col (2007, p. 308) states that the contributors refuse “... to engage with the concept of animism or subscrib[e] to totalising ‘cosmologies’ ... prefer[ring] to extract the eventfulness of haphazard and uncertain interaction with spirits. The articles suggest that rather than relying on an ideal typification of ontologies of nature in Philippe Descola’s sense, or developing an alternative mode of identification encompassing China’s cosmologies ... through the notion of ‘homologism’—one should ethnographically accept that borderland societies discussed in this issue do not appear to present a unitary conception or ‘cosmology’ of what nature is.” Similarly, Quijada, a scholar-researcher of current Mongolian shamanic practice, views animism as a flexible “strategy or tactic” rather than a cosmology.

and non-human organisms (both plants and animals), the spirits of the dead (who may occupy a variety of spaces), and the spirits and deities who animate various landforms, places, and even spaces more abstractly defined. Through rituals, stories, and informal everyday actions, indigenous and other profoundly place-based people maintain a world of existence-with a plethora of other beings who play critical roles in prevailing structures of power and the fortunes that emanate therefrom (Allerton 2009). Bron Taylor (2010) extends the purview of animism far beyond the indigenous cosmological realms to encompass modern, secular, naturalist thought, as well as its supernatural corollaries, all of which constitute what he calls “Dark Green Religion.” In a remarkable rendering of biophilic and topophilic beliefs, tendencies, and practices within contemporary post-industrial societies, he shows how both animism and organicism (which he calls “Gaian Earth Religion”) are strangely pervasive and yet hidden in plain sight. In short, both animism and Gaian organicism have supernaturalist and naturalist varieties (Taylor 2010, pp. 14–16), the first as “spiritual animism” and “Gaian spirituality,” the second as “naturalistic animism” and “Gaian naturalism.” Taylor’s capacious categories of animistic experience and practice help open both the conceptual categories in the study of animism, and the terms of religio-political discourse onto new horizons of spiritual ecology as an active social force in the Anthropocene. This is especially important as we consider the fate of indigenous spiritual ecologies within authoritarian governance structures such as we find in the PRC under Xi Jinping today, but equally important in the study of indigenous and other spiritual ecological movements under neo-liberal fossil-fuel capitalist regimes such as we now face in the United States.

In this research, I show that the “spirit” in spiritual ecology is immediately active in a political sense when we see polity and ecology as mutually constitutive. Robbins (2011) elucidates the problematic nature of apolitical ecologies—ecological explanations that elide human variables, power relations, and the cultural construction of nature. The strength of political ecology as a disciplinary perspective and activist research agenda lies in its insistence on unveiling ontological, discursive, and institutional forms of power deployed on behalf of “nature” and “environmental norms,” both degradative and supposedly ameliorative, especially when these disguise violence against people and other beings. In other words, ecology, as a practice and a field of subjects and objects, cannot be legitimately depoliticized; both institutional knowledge practices and ecological entities are wrapped up in, saturated with, or understood by way of social relations involving dominance and subordination. Even in “pure” forms of disinterested research on organisms and their myriad interrelationships with the environment, it can be difficult (and many would say impossible) to disentangle the viewer/researcher from the subject to a point that transcends distinctively idioanthropic interests and concerns. While this position has proven to hold potent analytical power, I contend that politicizing ecology is insufficient in the face of the climate emergency and cascading socio-ecological crises of the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, or Chthulucene (Haraway 2016; Moore 2016; Tsing 2015).² Rather, in concert with politicizing ecology, we must ecologize politics by problematizing non-ecological politics, specifically politics reifying a transcendent subject disconnected from the myriad ramifying connections, forces, influences—sensual, ideational, somatic, and more—by which and through which human being takes place moment-by-moment. There has never been a purely human, purely social (in the sense of *inter-personal* relations), or purely *cultural* being. Although this would seem obvious, holding it in mind can be difficult under the barrage of assumptions that define possessive individualist personhood engendered by industrial consumer capitalism, authoritarian socialism, and other productivist *ideo-material* complexes of late modernity.

As a geographer, I focus on animate landscapes and vital landscapes, specifically places endowed with supernatural and more-than-human essences, without romanticizing them, but (much like Haraway, Taylor, and others), with eyes, mind, and heart open to alternative modernities based on reciprocity between humans and myriad more-than-human subjects that assume multiple forms,

² Literature on the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene, and other related terms designed to capture the massive anthropogenic transformation of global biogeochemical processes exceeds the scope of this paper. I cite several relatively recent works that take rather eclectic and expansive perspectives on this subject.

both transcendent and immanent. In this paper, I examine the ecology and polity of two kinds of sacred space and the complex geopieties³ and geopolities that animate them. One involves a distinctively Tibetan form of geo-animism, found in what I call “animate landscapes,” which include “god mountains” (a placeholder for Tibetan *gzhi bdag*, *yul-lha*, and *gnas ri*, Chinese *shenshan* 神山) (Karmay 1994; Ma and Chen 2005; Coggins and Zeren 2014; Yeh 2014a, 2014b; Smyer Yü 2015). The god mountains exemplify what Mircea Eliade would call theophanies—manifestations of the sacred (hierophanies) involving the presence of an anthropomorphic spirit or deity (Eliade and Sullivan 1987). I reference Eliade’s term with the caveat that the deities (*theós* θεός) involved, in this case, are local, specific to particular places, endowed with distinctive personalities, and far from omnipotent, and in that sense, the term *theós* would be lexically interchangeable with what the ancient Greeks would call *daemons* (δαίμονα). The second is Han Chinese vitalism, as seen in village *fengshui* landscapes that include *fengshui* forests (Chinese, *fengshuilin* 風水林). *Fengshui* forests, and the landscapes of which they form a critical component, are what Eliade would call kratophanies—manifestations of the sacred presence of supernatural power but not endowed with (super)personhood or anthropomorphic essence (Eliade and Sullivan 1987). The goals of this study are, first, to initiate a broader dialogue on how these two relational ontologies continue to animate the spaces connecting body, mind, land, and polity; and, second, to show how these sacred spaces consecrate village community watersheds as enduring territorial common property regimes (CPRs) (Ostrom 1990). I argue that in *all* cases, this localized, collective form of geopietiy/geopolity evolved in conjunction with community protection of local watersheds beyond the reach, or at least the full regulation, of the state and its systems of hydrological control. Keeping in mind Ostrom’s eight design principles of long-enduring CPR institutions,⁴ and that these institutions comprise socio-ecological adaptations by small communities to specific places and their enviroing topographic, hydrological, and other ecological features, I conclude that cosmologized landscapes (in this case animate and vital watersheds) encompass human and more-than-human forces acting in concert to ensure the persistence of beings-in-place over generations in temporal perpetuity. Assessing these conclusions with care requires rethinking the discursive and conceptual foundations of “landscape,” as I discuss below.

A watershed consists of an area of land that topographically channels the flow of water to a specific point on the landscape. Although their borders are typically defined by high ground separating different streams, rivers, basins, or seas, every point on the earth’s land surface has its own specific watershed, and thus they are fractal in nature. Human history has largely been defined by contests over major drainage basins, the fertile lands in and around their floodplains, and their upland resources—forests, pastures, fuels, wildlife, minerals, and other assets essential to grain-based, socially stratified civilizations (Scott 2017). Interstate wars and infra-state political contests over resource access have normally been contingent upon who counts as fully human within the symbolic, ideological, and aesthetic regimes determining caste, property, fate, and other essential ontological conditions that structure the hierarchically stratified urban networks comprising states. The earliest narratives of statecraft in China were premised on the moral imperative to conquer large watersheds and their tributaries by subjugating their human and non-human denizens within a growing urban network built on systematic taxation and tribute. Thus the Great Yu (Da Yu 大禹), the “tamer of the floods” credited with establishing the semi-mythical Xia Dynasty (ca. 2070–1600) (now believed to

³ Geopietiy, a term once popular in the field of cultural geography, denotes reverence toward, and worship of, terrestrial features (Wright 1966; Tuan 1976; Cosgrove 2000). In my work, geopietiy and geopolity are interchangeable. Although the term may be dated, I use it as a placeholder for both “animate landscapes” and “vital landscapes” in order to mark a distinction between the two.

⁴ In concise terms: 1. Define clear group boundaries. 2. Match rules governing use of common goods to local needs and conditions. 3. Ensure that those affected by the rules can participate in modifying the rules. 4. Make sure the rule-making rights of community members are respected by outside authorities. 5. Develop a system, carried out by community members, for monitoring members’ behavior. 6. Use graduated sanctions for rule violators. 7. Provide accessible, low-cost means for dispute resolution. 8. Build responsibility for governing the common resource in nested tiers from the lowest level up to the entire interconnected system (Ostrom 1990).

be associated with the Longshan Culture), reigned over a resource-hungry state that systematically marked out the boundaries of watersheds across the Loess Plateau and much of the North China Plain in order to incorporate them. Each section of the classic *Tribute to Yu* (禹貢) in the *Book of Documents* (尚書) describes how specific drainage basins are delineated, deforested, and cultivated; sacrifices are offered to the gods of rivers and mountains to ensure political order; native “barbarians” are conquered; soils are graded based on their suitability for the grain crops used for taxation; rivers are rerouted for irrigation and transport; tribute items (minerals, wild plants and animal parts) are enumerated; and riverine or interfluvial trade routes are established. The following is simply one of many examples in the text, and each follows the same order with disciplinary exactitude:

“Yu divided the land [and] following the course of the hills, he cut down the trees. He determined the highest hills and largest rivers (in the several regions) . . . [to mark off boundaries]. The Min and Bo hills were cultivated, the Tuo and Qian streams routed through their proper channels, and sacrifices offered to the Cai and Meng hills for the regulation of the surrounding country. Lands of the wild tribes around the He (Yellow River) were successfully subdued. The soil of this province was greenish and light. Its fields were the highest of the lowest class; and its contribution of revenue was the average of the lowest class, with proportions of the rates immediately above and below. Its articles of tribute were the best gold, iron, silver, steel, flint stones to make arrowheads, and sounding stones; with the skins of bears, foxes, and jackals, and nets woven of their hair. From the hills of Xiqing they came by the course of the Huan River; floated along the Qian, and then crossed the lands to the Mian; passed to the Wei, and (finally) ferried across the He.”

By the time China’s first empire was established in the Qin Dynasty (221–207 BCE), this form of statecraft was well established. After two millennia of imperial political ecology, one might assume that no watershed within the Han-dominated ethnolinguistic region remained beyond the reach of the state. In fact, the devastating ecological consequences and violent social conflicts marking the “progress” of dynastic growth and contraction are well documented by [Elvin \(2004\)](#) and [Marks \(2012\)](#). I will argue that many communities in the higher elevation areas of southern China were partial exceptions to the rule. As James C. [Scott \(2009\)](#) has shown, the trialectic of property, identity, and personhood plays out quite differently in the upper reaches of river basins, where imperial, or colonial, or national conquest has often been incomplete. While his mapping of “Zomia”—a region of largely autarkic “hill peoples” existing beyond the reach of valley states—overlaps with what is today upland Southeast Asia, southwest China, and northeast India, I contend that many upland communities in southern China also maintained a comparable (although not the same) degree of independence, despite the incorporation of their members as imperial subjects. In villages formed within the watersheds of first, second, and sometimes third order streams—the highest reaches of their respective drainage basins—CPRs have long been, by necessity, the constitutional form par excellence of local resource management. Where there are no communities upstream (or none more powerful than one’s own), a given polity must by necessity take control of the lands, waters, fauna, and flora upon which their collective lives depend. The same holds true for Tibetan villages and the communities of myriad groups in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands ([Yeh and Coggins 2014](#)), in fact many communities in those regions could be counted as “Zomian.” In fact, Tibet’s lack of a tradition of state-controlled irrigation projects and other forms of large-scale water management is worth additional analysis, especially because at least one version of the nation’s founding narrative suggests that this was a conscious choice.⁵

⁵ The classic, *dBa’ bzhed* (an account of the advent of Buddhism to Tibet) describes how Padmasambhava attempted to create what appears to be a series of water control projects within the kingdom. These were rejected by King Muné Tsenpo (late 8th century), who feared that the tantric warrior’s power would become too great if he was allowed to orchestrate the rerouting of rivers and other waterways. In the *dBa’ bzhed*, his exhortation to Padmasambhava expresses significant anxiety: “The bTsan po [Muné Tsenpo] presented the mKhan po [Padmasambhava] with many offerings and said: “[Reverend]

This brings us to the present, and speaking broadly, while looking globally, we, as members of fractured and beleaguered collectives, must now reckon with our own long-term patterns of ecological degradation throughout watersheds worldwide. How we choose to face this task will determine the quality of life for all species on earth, as global warming, habitat loss, and resource shortages challenge polities of all sizes. Rethinking the political ecology of watersheds in ways that connect appropriately placed polities within their watersheds in a system of mutually supportive commons may turn out to be part of a long-term strategy for environmentally just sustainable resource use in the Anthropocene. Watershed-based CPRs represent a far more profound form of ecological ultimate concern than the political institutions by which we are subjectivized in consumer capitalist societies, providing models for contemporary activism around the rights of nature and the attribution of juristic personhood to terrestrial features, such as mountains and rivers, which compose multispecies, watershed-focused CPRs (Studley and Horsley 2019). In the conclusion, I examine the ways that the government of the People's Republic of China, despite sharply different ideological foundations and pragmatic interests, has partially embraced these village-level ecological polities in its campaign to promote "Ecological Civilization" (*Shengtai Wenming* 生态文明). I also consider how these spiritual landscape ecologies may be taken up within what Prasenjit Duara (2015, p. 59) calls "circulatory histories" in which "[e]vents simultaneously disperse across a variety of human and non-human orders, triggering and creating new events and processes. Historicity, narrative and power are, among other things, human modes of responding to this openness to time." In other words, the power of "spiritual ecology" to shape national policy or transnational socio-ecological movements should not be prematurely dismissed as merely an aspect of ephemeral subcultural and counter-cultural formations.

2. Methods

Between 2004 and 2011, I conducted multiple rounds of intensive fieldwork on village sacred landscapes in nine villages in Shangrila County, in the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (DTAP) of Northwest Yunnan Province (Figures 1 and 2). Having completed dissertation research that included preliminary work on *fengshui* forests in the mountains of western Fujian Province in 1994–1995 (Coggins 2003), I wanted to conduct comparative research on sacred forests in other culture regions of China. I soon discovered that I could not limit the scope of the investigation to forests because they were not, in themselves, the sites or landscapes of ultimate concern to Diqing Tibetans, rather, forests were protected (along with lakes, springs, streams, caves, and other terrestrial features) due to their association with deities who dwelled within the landscape, including sacred mountain abodes. I worked closely with Tibetan colleagues from the Diqing Institute of Tibetan Studies, The Nature Conservancy's Deqin Office, and Hamugu Village. All were fluent in both Mandarin and the Diqing Tibetan dialect and trained in a variety of specialties, including ethnography, conservation biology, animal husbandry, and Tibetan Buddhism. Their professional expertise, traditional environmental knowledge (TEK), and enthusiasm were of enormous benefit to the project. The fact that they believed in and practiced indigenous geopiety was a true blessing.

mKhan po! You let the holy doctrine come to the country of Tibet. You have already achieved what was in my mind: you are bound by oath the gods and nāga and so on. That is enough. It is not necessary that the sand of Ngam should be covered with meadows and that springs appear. It is enough that there is the river called Yar khyi in my own land. [Acharya] please, please return to [your] homelands!" After this admonition, some twenty of the king's minions attempted to assassinate Padmasambhava as the latter was returning to India, but they "... were frozen like paintings, unable to speak and move, and he passed straight through them ..." (Wangu and Diemberger 2000, pp. 58–59).

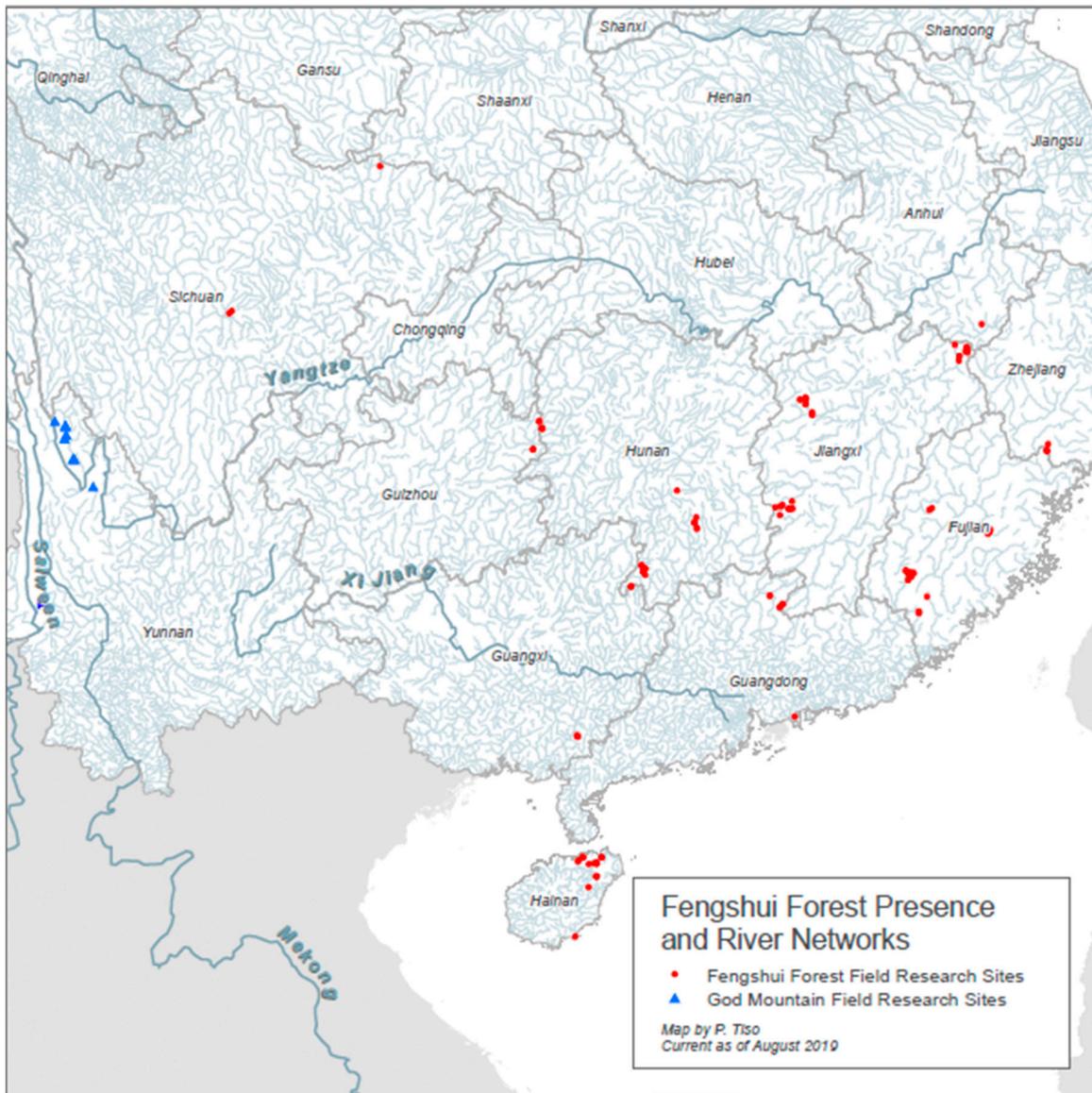


Figure 1. Map of rivers and field sites showing locations of 80 villages in 10 provinces where research on *fengshui* forests was conducted and 10 villages where research on Tibetan sacred landscapes was conducted.

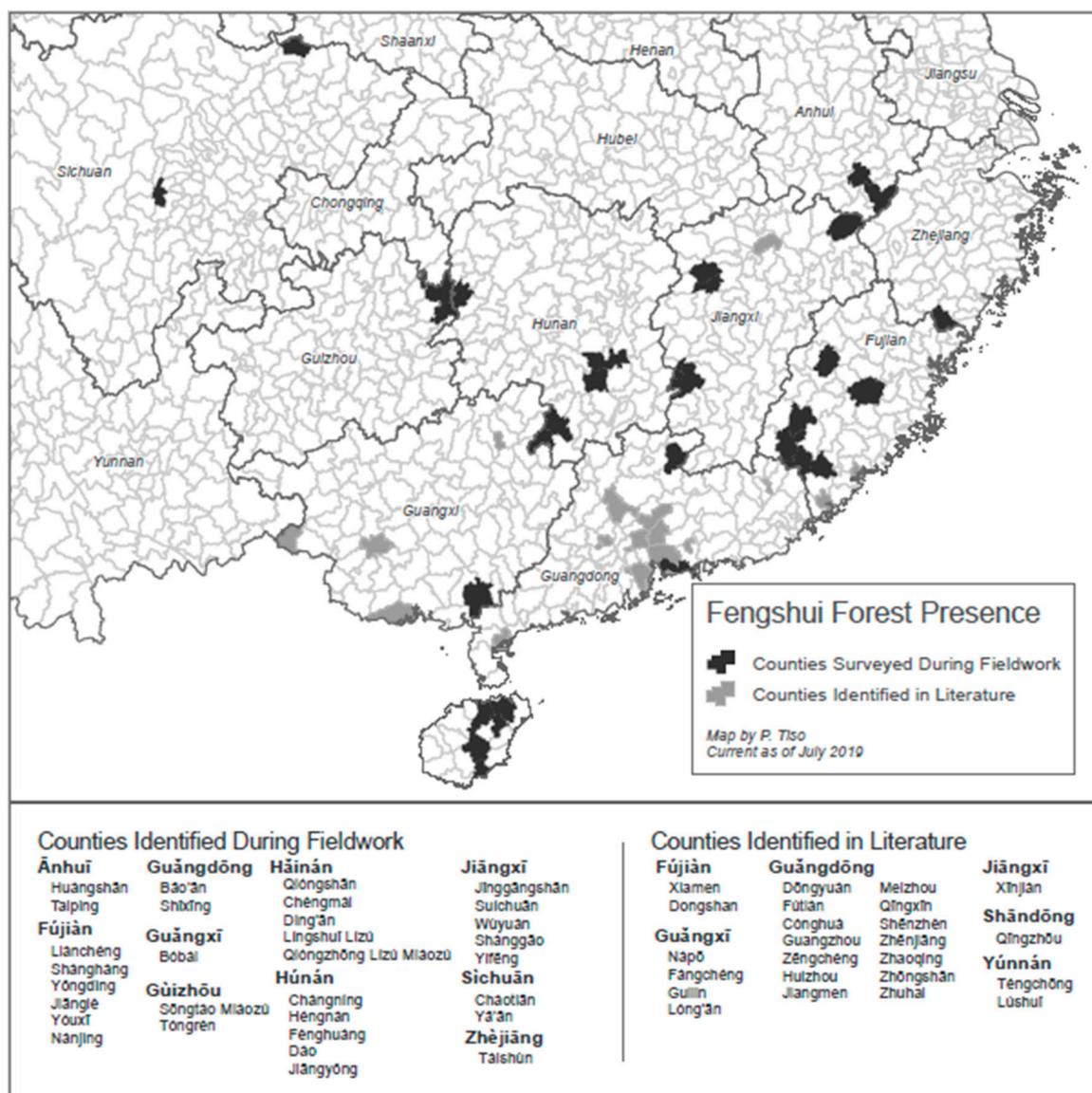


Figure 2. Map of counties where *fengshui* forest research was conducted and where *fengshui* forest research has been conducted by Chinese botanists (as seen in the literature).

My research took place during a period of unprecedented economic development in northwest Yunnan, throughout most of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, and across many other parts of western China. Before 1949, Tibetans considered Northwest Yunnan a southeastern extension of Kham, a region of southeastern Tibet that included today’s western Sichuan, southern Qinghai, and the southeastern Tibet Autonomous Region. From the early 1950s until 1979, the region was subjected to the same policies of collectivization and communization that transformed relations of production, cultural landscapes, socio-ecologies, and cosmological values in communities across China. During the 1980s and 1990s, with the spread of the Opening and Reform policies and the decollectivization of production, the area was subjected to intensive logging by county and prefectural government units and private entrepreneurs. In 1997, the Central Government declared a logging ban on the upper Yangzi River and the middle and upper Yellow River, which had dramatic impacts on employment patterns for Tibetans and other minority nationalities. In 1999, the Great Western Development Strategy (*Xibu Da Kaifa*) was initiated to accelerate economic growth based on sustainable development and a turn away from extractive industries such as forestry and mining. In 2001, China’s State Council announced the “discovery” of Shangri-la in northwest Yunnan. This was based on research by more than 40 scholars

from Yunnan and other provinces that “proved” that the region served as the setting of James Hilton’s 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon*, which was purportedly drawn from landscape descriptions penned by Joseph Rock, the famous early 20th century botanist and ethnographer. In May, 2002, Zhongdian County was officially renamed “Shangrila” (Xianggelila). Jiantang, the county seat and site of the DTAP government, became the showpiece for the Greater Shangrila Ecological Tourism Zone (GSETZ), which extended across the Sino-Tibetan border areas of the Tibet Autonomous Region, Western Sichuan, and southeast Qinghai. The regional economy was reconfigured around a nascent ecological and cultural tourism industry that was growing exponentially by the time I arrived in 2004 (Litzinger 2004; Kolas 2008; Yeh and Coggins 2014). In 2002, representatives of the Nature Conservancy, the World Wide Fund for Nature, Conservation International-China, and more than eighty Chinese and foreign experts convened to develop policy initiatives for a newly declared conservation hotspot called “The Mountains of Southwest China,” which largely overlapped with the GSETZ (Yeh and Coggins 2014). By 2006, planning experts in Diqing celebrated the advent of a new form of political economic governance embodied in “the ecological state” (*shengtai liguo* 生态立国), an idea whose time had come; in 2007 Hu Jintao announced plans to base China’s national development on “Ecological Civilization.”

It was in this context that I conducted research on sacred landscapes and the impacts of eco-cultural tourism in the DTAP. I focused mostly on Shangrila County, and all nine villages described in this study are located there. These communities are small cluster villages, called “natural villages” (*ziran cun*) in the national administrative lexicon, with an average of 119 residents per village. Despite the small size of these settlements, each encompasses large landholdings, especially in the context of the “administrative villages” (*xingzheng cun*), or groups of natural villages, of which they are a part. Most of the informants I spent time with in the villages spoke Mandarin, some did not, and though my colleagues did not speak English, they were adept at translating Tibetan terms into Mandarin. Very few people in Diqing can read or write Tibetan, and local Tibetan dialects are deeply influenced by long-term cultural exchange with Han Chinese who have lived in the region in substantial numbers for many centuries. Many local traditions are influenced by Han culture, including burial and funerary customs and the use of *fengshui* (all of the villages in my surveys but one reported using *fengshui* for house siting and planning). My translation of Gesang Zeren’s geographic guides to Hamugu village also provided a deep sense of how Diqing’s animate landscapes resonated in the lives of its people and how challenging it can be to translate cosmological concepts from Tibetan to Mandarin, as well taking the additional leap to English (Coggins and Zeren 2014). My mentor-collaborators generously devoted time to exegetical work required when specific terms and ideas defied translation, and several led me on numerous field trips into remote villages throughout the region. By 2006, I had conducted intensive research in all nine villages. Standardized semi-structured and unstructured interviews on sacred sites, village cultural ecology, forest management, and environmental history were conducted in each village using snowball sampling. These included indoor discussions and field site visits in sacred landscapes in and around each community. The focus of this research was on the intersection of sacred sites, indigenous landscape management, and environmental change. While anthropological research on the phenomenological dimensions of animism has been conducted in Diqing (Da Col 2007) that was not the focus of this project. I discuss several relevant findings from this ethnographic work on animism below, especially as it pertains to sacred space and spiritual landscapes. From 2004–2011, I conducted a long-term study of conservation initiatives and local development impacts in Hamugu village. Immersion in the political ecology of one community provided a strong foundation for understanding changes that were affecting many other communities in the DTAP during the seven-year-period of research.

From 2011 until 2018, I conducted field research on *fengshui* forests in 80 villages in 10 provinces across southern China, spanning from Fujian in the southeast, to Hainan Island in the southwest, and to Sichuan in the far west of China Proper—the Han Chinese cultural realm (Figure 1). During this time, I led or co-led seven team-based, multidisciplinary research trips involving professors, students, and forestry officials from China, the US, and Japan. The Jiangxi Province Forestry Bureau has

repeatedly offered hospitality and logistical support. In 2014, Bureau Director, Yan Gangjun, invited me to the capital, Nanchang, to address forestry bureau representatives from all 62 counties and a number of county-level cities and districts on our findings. Collaboration with Jiangxi forestry officials, especially in the field, has provided important information on how the local, provincial, and national state regard *fengshui* forests in the context of conservation planning for Ecological Civilization. In all 80 villages, we conducted research on *fengshui* forests and other sacred sites (temples, shrines, and other religious features), cultural ecology, and environmental history using semi-structured and unstructured interviews. We conducted forest surveys, identifying the species of the five largest trees found in each *fengshui* forests, measuring their dbh (diameter at breast height) and their height, and recording the forest management strategies and economic activities in each forest patch. In most villages, we also gathered data on aquatic ecology to determine the effects of *fengshui* forests on water quality. The methodology deployed to study aquatic ecology will have to be refined in future studies, so data from our preliminary efforts have not been useful for systematic analysis. Finally, we recorded village landscapes and interviewees with videos and photos, including drone use to record patterns of landscape ecology.

3. Results

3.1. Animate Landscapes and Environmental Activism in Tibetan Communities of NW Yunnan

In each of the nine villages in Shangrila County where I conducted field research, villagers had revived watershed common property management systems based on traditional spiritual ecologies. These consisted of two kinds of sacred mountains and associated forests, along with water source protection systems associated with streams, springs, and wells, along with individual trees and groves that served to protect them. Before describing these features in detail, it is critical to understand regional geographic patterns, land use history, and essential cosmological features of the Tibetan “landscape.” The DTAP is a land where snowcapped peaks loom above wet prairies in the broad valleys that are known locally as “seas” (*hǎi* 海). These grasslands provide pasture for yak, cattle, goats, horses, and pigs. Following the summer rains, the prairies begin to flood, forming wetland habitat for the autumn waterfowl migration. Black-necked cranes and bar-headed geese feed among the livestock or find refuge in deeper waters. In the dry cold season, the floodwaters seep into subterranean limestone fissures and caverns, making their way down into the hot, dry gorges of the Yangzi, Mekong, Salween, and their tributaries, where cacti and other drought-resistant plants form scrublands that contrast sharply with the humid upland temperate forests nearby. Before collectivization and the imposition of a command economy in the early 1950s, seasonal cycles of village land use and labor composed regular rhythms within the longer, broader patterns of regional production and trade. From at least the first century, horse husbandry was important in the local economy since horses were the key to transportation and a major trade item on the Ancient Tea-Horse Road (Chámǎ Gǔdào 茶馬古道)—a trade route with branches extending from Vietnam and Laos, north through Yunnan, and west to central Tibet and India. In addition to raising and trading horses for the long-distance trade network, Diqing Tibetans have long practiced agropastoralism, growing barley, buckwheat, potatoes, turnips, maize (in the dry valleys), and other crops, while also raising yaks, sheep, and goats in a transhumant system involving seasonal movement of stock from high mountain pastures in summer and fall to valley pastures in the colder months. Transhumant agropastoral production requires local common property management of watersheds. The classic village site lies on the edge of a broad valley backed by mountains and streams (Figure 3). Following streamside trails up a gorge, herders reach the warm-season grazing meadows situated among high cirques and terraces with tarns (glacial lakes) serving as water sources. Men, women, and sometimes children live in log herding huts over the course of the warm season, before returning downslope to the permanent settlement, where stock graze in the broad, wet grasslands in winter. Each village community makes use of this complex altitudinal zonation, depending on a variety of landscapes, from dry river valleys, to high valley

wetlands, to alpine forests, and up to the montane tundra above the tree line. As with Tibetans of other regions, Diqing residents believe that deities reside within the land, the waters, the sky, and the subterranean realms (Karmay 1994; Huber and Pedersen 1997; Da Col 2007; Coggins and Zeren 2014; Studley and Horsley 2019).

Powerful spirits and deities pervade Tibetan landscapes, and they have done so for over a thousand years, predating the advent of Tibetan Buddhism in the seventh century CE. In fact, the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet entailed the subjugation of chthonic deities and demons by the Indian Tantric warrior-sage, Padmasambhava, in the 8th century, and their conversion to protectors of Buddhism (Beyer 1978; Huber 1999; Wangu and Diemberger 2000). The land of Tibet is traditionally conceived as the body of a demoness, *Srinma* (an incarnation of Tara also known as Jetsun Dölma). This geobody is never fully pacified. In fact, Diqing Tibetans such as my collaborator Lazong Ruiba, attributed the Great Wenchuan (Sichuan) Earthquake of 2008 to Srinma's restless movements caused by the rapid and irritating construction of roads, railroads, and cities throughout Chinese-controlled Tibet (Ruiba 2008). For interpretive purposes, the English word "landscape" is simply inapplicable, related as it is, to the Dutch *landschap*, and the connotations of an area of land that is visible from a particular viewpoint, and can be mapped through cadastral surveys, commodified as property for capitalist markets and private owners, and fetishized as "nature" within schools of painting that arose in the course of early modernity. According to Tibetan folk tradition, the land is a layer of the cosmos teeming with untamed and partially tamed gods, demons, and other spirits. The cosmos encompasses three realms: the sky or upper region (*nam*; Wylie *gnam*); the atmosphere or intermediate space (Wylie *bar*); and earth (Wylie *sa*), which includes lakes, rivers, and the underworld. These realms are not strictly demarcated and separate. There are several types of deities associated with local sacred mountains, *zhidak* ("lords of place") and *yullha* ("base owners"). These terms are sometimes interchangeable, but all of my collaborators in Diqing confirmed the differentiation between the domains of local tutelary deities associated with indigenous practices that predate Buddhism, on the one hand, and the larger "abode mountains" *neri* (Wylie *gnas ri*), those associated with Buddhism as protectors of the Dharma (Karmay 1994; Huber 1999⁶). As Karmay (1994, p. 115) notes,

"... the mountain cult ... belongs to what I call the 'unwritten tradition of the laity.' This is because neither Buddhist nor Bonpo clergy have any significant role in the cult, although it represents a supremely important element underlying Tibet's national identity. By the mountain cult I mean particularly the secular worship of the mountain divinity (*yul-lha*, *gzhi-bdag*), who is usually depicted in the style of a traditional warrior and is worshipped as an ancestor or an ancestral divinity for protection."

There are also several other types of beings who occupy the mountain abodes. One class of beings is the fierce *nyen* (Wylie *gnyan*), who are yellow in color and usually associated with mountaintops, where they live among trees and rocks. The other, the *tsen* (Wylie *btsan*), comprise powerful beings dwelling in the atmospheric realm, where the sky touches the ground, primarily at the mountain summits or inside rocks. *Nyen* and *tsen* are among the most feared and respected deities in the region. They can become *yullha* and *zhidak*, but more research is needed to determine how this process transpires. Even those that lack the status of tutelary deities are an important part of everyday life. A Tibetan healer from Adong Village in Deqin County explained that they have the power to shoot holes into offending humans, causing more than 1500 kinds of disease. While *nyen* and *tsen* traverse the three realms, and *lha* (higher deities) inhabit the sky or specific terrestrial sites or objects, the *lu*

⁶ Huber (1999, p. 23) makes note of "two types of cult mountains in Tibet: "In addition to *neri* mountains ... there exists a widespread cult mountain type identified more exclusively with the *yullha* ("god of the locale") and *shidak* ("owner of the base") deities. These *genii* are generally understood as local and regional territorial gods and goddesses, whose worship apparently predates the intensive introduction of Indian religious systems into Tibet." See Huber (1999, pp. 23–25) for a thorough delineation of how the former are "mandalized" (Buddhized) syncretic cults that include many features of the latter.

(Wylie *klu*) abide solely in or near water sources and trees. While residing in specific places any spirit may be called a *sadak* (Wylie *sa bdag*) (“master of the soil”) (Ruiba 2005; Wang 2006; Dorje 2006; Paba 2006).

Sacred precincts within deity-mountains are roughly demarcated by a boundary or transition between the upper and lower elevation zones around midslope called a *rigua* (Wylie *ri 'gag*), “door of the mountain” or “barrier.” Very roughly speaking, below the *rigua* lies the mundane world of humans, while above it extends the divine world of deities at the higher elevations (Litzinger 2004; Moseley et al. 2003). Humans are forbidden from appropriating any resources lying above the line from the mountain god’s domain; the deity plays the role of host and may exact revenge for property transgressions of any kind. Since the line is not usually clear, sharp, or straight, human settlements below the line still lie within the mountain abode, thus they must maintain a contractual relationship of reciprocity with their hosts, the deities. Tree cutting, hunting, or fishing even in certain sacred areas below the *rigua* line typically leads to retribution in the form of disease, natural disaster, or other misfortunes (Coggins and Zeren 2014; Huber 1999; Ma and Chen 2005; Moseley et al. 2003; Zeren 2005). All nine villages in this survey protected forests on the slopes of at least one of their *zhidak* and *yullha*, or had recently restored the practice of forest protection. Forest protection measures promulgated by county forestry bureaus also include fines for tree cutting. Villagers are permitted to cut trees for their own use or collective use, with official permits. Most of the sacred mountains in this study lay within village collective lands (sheyou tudi 社有土地 sheyou tudi) rather than national or provincial lands (guoyou tudi 国有土地), so CPR decision-making processes are important determinants of forest condition.

As mentioned, certain mountains have been incorporated into the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, as their associated *zhidak* or *yullha* are said to have been conquered by Padmasambhava in the 8th century and converted into Dharma protectors who inhabit “abode mountains,” or *neri* (Wylie *gnas ri*) (Karmay 1994; Huber 1999). While Mount Khawa Karpo is the only *neri* in Diqing, there are hundreds of other sacred mountains in the prefecture that date from Tibet’s pre-Buddhist cultural foundations in the Tibetan imperial era. Mountains associated with *zhidak* or *yullha*, specifically where *nyen* and *tsen* deities reside, are classified as male or female, and often nuns or monks. These mountain deities are worshiped by, and associated with, specific groups of villages, individual villages, or even individual households (Abe 1997; Huber 1999; Paba 2006; Coggins and Hutchinson 2006; Coggins and Zeren 2014). In the nine villages surveyed, informants tended to use the word “*zhidak*” more frequently than “*yullha*” when referring to the sacred mountain abodes most important to their communities. In this sample, there was an average of 3.9 *zhidak* per village (with a range of 2–6), and each of these mountains was worshiped by all of the families in a given village. Some were male, some female, and generally female villagers could not join ritual processions on male mountains under normal circumstances (see below). Three villages were said to also have mountains associated with *yullha*, which were worshipped by individual families and small groups of families. Of these villages, one had 38 *yullha* (one per family), one had 24 *yullha* (one per family), and one had six *yullha* (several of which were shared by groups of families). More research needs to be conducted to ascertain the essential differences between *yullha* and *zhidak*, and to determine whether the familial associations with the former holds true for the entire DTAP and beyond. Since the gods residing within these mountains “own” all of the local lands and have retreated to their mountain strongholds to allow humans to settle as guests in arable lands at their feet, humans are required to behave as one would with the master of a household in which one is a visitor. For this reason, I refer to village communities in the DTAP as “guest-host polities.” The geopious structure of regard assumed by guests is enacted through communal and individual rituals. Unlike the *neri*, the *zhidak* are not pilgrimage destinations. They compose a less literary, more oral, and yet universal Tibetan territorial practice. Their ecological significance is evident by the fact that although most of the Zhongdian basin was severely deforested by national timber-cutting operations from the 1970s to the 1990s, *zhidak* and *yullha* mountain forests are plainly visible on slopes behind many villages across the basin. Some are forest patches that survived intensive logging due to

their locations within *rigua*; others have been planted or have regenerated following the restoration of traditional religious practices since the 1980s. Lower elevation *zhidak* mountains typically have sacred forests on their slopes and summits. Higher elevation *zhidak* mountains rise into the alpine tundra zone, but also have sacred forests on their slopes. The forests are as closely associated with the *zhidak* and *yullha* deities as the mountains themselves, and these locales serve as refugia for spruce, larch, pine, oak, rhododendron, birch, and other subtropical and temperate tree species.

For each mountain deity, there are also specific prayers for specific occasions, many of which have been preserved in ritual texts called *songyi* (Wylie *bsang yig*). On the first, eighth, and fifteenth day of every lunar month, people visit shrines in the forests or at the foot of the mountain, where they offer barley, rye, wheat, buttermilk, wine, incense, and other items to the gods, who can be quite vicious when offended. The largest ritual occurs just after the Tibetan New Year, when each household sends at least one male representative to join a procession that ascends the *zhidak* mountain, starting before dawn and often not arriving until the afternoon. Each man inserts a bamboo pole representing an arrow into a stone ritual cairn (*zangbon*; Wyl. *rtse phung*), barley wine and barley grains are thrown into the air, and prayers specific to the abiding deity are recited. These acts bind families and individuals within community and cosmos, leaving the visible symbolic mark of cairns and arrows atop numerous peaks in the region through all seasons. Due to traditional assumptions that women are ritually impure, most villages still forbid them from ascending summits of major male god mountains; females can ascend with males during the New Year renewal ceremonies only if a family has no male representative. In some communities, they can also climb mountains associated with female *zhidak* for ritual or other purposes. A forty-nine-year-old woman from Jisha Village told me that the restrictions seem fair to her; women conduct the main rituals at *lu* worship sites (discussed below), give offerings to the *zhidak* and *yullha* at household and community shrines in the village, and, as she said, “Men have to leave the village to work, and they need more protection (Yangzong 2006).”

The forest and wildlife conservation function of traditional sacred geography is inseparable from hydrological conservation. God mountain forests not only conserve water in catchment zones above village settlements but also help prevent flooding during periods of high rainfall or snowmelt. Maintaining a supply of clean drinking water in dense settlements with an abundance of human and livestock wastes provides a strong impetus for forms of geopiety that protect community water sources. To this end, every village in my survey not only worshiped *zhidak* and *yullha*, but also maintained community and household sites for the propitiation of *lu*. In the village center and its immediate periphery, individual families or groups of families manage small groups of trees as abodes for *lu*. Snakes, frogs, and other reptiles and amphibians are associated with *lu*, either as guardians, possessions (so-called “livestock”), or representatives. At least five of the villages had individual *lu* sites for each family (one village had 39 individual sites, each associated with a different tree). It is not difficult to imagine that the presence of healthy individuals or populations of reptiles and amphibians near wooded water sources might be associated with the “wealth” of the *lu* and, in modern ecological terms, the quality of the water source. *Lu* are also considered guardians of secret treasures. Ritual acts at the familial *lu* sites are often prescribed by a local reincarnated master or *tulku* (Wylie *sprul sku*), or by traditional medical practitioners as a means of curing illness. *Lu* are closely associated with diseases of the skin, such as leprosy, and an offense against the *lu*, which can include contaminating a waterway, will lead to retributive illness. To cure a family member afflicted by a *lu*-related disease, of which there are more than 420, a person can bury tricolored cloth, grains, and other offerings in a cooking vessel at the base of one of the trees in the grove. As a Tibetan doctor and ritual master in Deqin County explained, “When the *lu* is sick, people can get sick.” At such times, offerings can be made to the *lu* in order to heal it, just as herbal medicine is given to the patient (Dorje 2006). The human body-mind exists in physical and psychic continuity with land-as-spiritual-abode, which carries moral dimensions made manifest via immediate physical and mental consequences.

In addition to familial groves, there are also larger communal *lukong* (Wyl. *klu khang*), “palaces” or “temples” for the *lu* in the form of small stone altars or cairns near community wells, springs,

ponds, streams, or other nearby water sources, and these shrines are associated with water sources and surrounding groves and forests larger than those of household *lu* sites. All nine villages had *lukong*. Here, members of each family burn incense and make other offerings at regular intervals, and in spring and early summer, when barley crops are young and vulnerable, women gather in festive celebration to sing prayers for rain (*nianjing* 念经 or *qiuyu* 求雨). Women are said to be the primary intermediaries with *lu* because they are traditionally the water bearers, but this is an association that needs additional investigation. In any case, there is an association not only between women, the *lu*, terrestrial hydrology, and the cultivation cycle, but also between these deities of the aquatic realm and atmospheric sources of precipitation (Huber and Pedersen 1997). As a whole, geopiety in the form of *lu* worship, with its water-related concerns for purity and danger, provide a microgeographic CPR management system linking spirits, waterways, weather, animals, crops, human health, and community wellbeing. In summary, watershed CPRs are maintained not only through long-term patterns of land use and frequent religious rituals, but also through direct communications with, and the agency of, the spiritual powers of the landscape and its collectivity of beings.

Although this research did not focus on cognitive or ideational dimensions of animate landscapes, it is notable that animism involves the transmission of interiority from one exteriority (a physical body or object) to another (Descola 2013). *Diqing* landscapes, weather, and other environmental realms and processes are animated by the actions of gods and spirits, in ways that are related to, and analogous with, their involvement with human bodies and minds. Da Col (2007) notes that in Tibetan cosmology, humans and non-humans both possess consciousness (*rnam shes*). He describes, as many of my informants have, how mountain deities can see one another, communicate, marry, form alliances, and more. Humans can, and often do, interact directly with *zhidak*, *yul-lha*, and other deities, both intentionally and unintentionally. In the first case, through prayer and ritual acts (especially by leaving offerings, as described above), but also by serving as mediums (*lhawa*, in *Diqing*, *Meimo*) to bring them into public ritual spaces, channel their powers, and harmonize with their wills (Coggins and Zeren 2014; Makley 2014). Unintentional encounters include incidents such as one described by villagers in Hamugu.

“The mountain can hide/conceal (*cang* 藏) people who enter its domain. The *zhidak* can cause you to be lost in the mountains for 6–7 days or more and you never get hungry. You are under a kind of enchantment. The deity/spirit (*shen* 神) captivates you. Horse, cattle, and yak droppings turn into momo (steamed buns) that you can eat. You come out 6–7 days later convinced that you were in a kind of paradise. Two American doctors had this happen in 2003 when they were trekking here in Hamugu. They were lost for 3–4 days with a guide from Weixi County, and they said they never felt hungry. They even came back the next year! Two people from the village next to ours, a woman and her grandson, were “hidden” in the 1980s. Everyone thought they died, but no. They were lost for about a week or two.” (Zeren and Ruiba 2004)

Comparing Tibetan perspectivism to that of indigenous animists in Amazonia (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Descola 2013), Da Col holds that the latter is defined by its spatiality whereas the former is defined by temporality, and this throws an important moral dimension into the complex syncretism comprising animism in *Diqing*. To summarize, in Amerindian perspectivism, a soul’s location in the body of a particular kind of being—e.g., human or jaguar—determines the individual’s perception of reality. Since all beings of significance have culture, their inner worlds are essentially the same but their objective, outer worlds manifest differently (thus Viveiros de Castro’s argument for “multinaturalism” as a defining characteristic of animism). In contrast, Da Col sees Tibetan subjectivity as a form of temporal perspectivism in which a subject’s karmic conditions are activated by particular events that crystallize the self’s conception of their location in the moral and ontological temporality determined by karma. As he puts it “A ‘Tibetan’ object-event will agent a point of view which will . . . define one’s subjectivity in opposition to an Other (human, divine or demonic being [for example]) and give hints

about one's position in the cycle of reincarnations. The 'someone' [whom] is seized by an event becomes a local configuration of a greater nexus of circumstances, a singularity which will unfold a higher set of powers and karmic connections (Da Col 2007, p. 218)." While I concur with this assessment, I would add that the spatiality of unintentional possession in the *cang*, relates directly to one's location in the *rigua*, a liminal space for humans because it is part of the inner sanctum of the *zhidak*/*yullha*. In regard to the moral dimensions of these encounters, we can see that these are comparable to Obeyesekere (2002) contention that reincarnation is ethicized under the influence of Vedic thought and the laws of karma; Da Col sees the syncretism of animism and Buddhism as generative of subject formation through events that bring "fields of fortune" into clear and conscious realization. Karmic fields of fortune are evident in mountain deities themselves: while the Dharma protectors associated with the *neri* embody the ethical duty to guard Tibet as a Buddhist realm, the less exalted *zhidak* and *yullha* have idiosyncratic agendas and consistently protect their own, limited territorial domains. The following account shows how human conduct precipitates particular fields of fortune that include bodies, minds, landscapes, mountain spirits and the body politic in a network of socio-ecological relations. While I was interviewing two seventy-five-year-old men who had been well-known hunters in Hamugu for many years, I asked a number of questions about their encounters with local wildlife, apparent population decreases within certain species, and other topics that might provide a more complete picture of ecological change in the village watershed. My friend and collaborator, Lazong Ruiba, a former lama in Songzanlin Monastery, seemed uneasy with all the hunting stories, and he felt it necessary to intervene with an interpretation of their true significance:

"These old men started hunting before Liberation because their families were poor—their living conditions were difficult, so they took up hunting. They hunted mostly musk deer and bears because of their high value, and this allowed them to make a go of it. At the age of sixty they stopped hunting. Now they regret having done it. Over the years their families and their livestock have suffered misfortunes of various kinds. Divinations at the monastery show that they've been punished for not respecting the *zhidak*. [In similar fashion] government-organized timber-felling destroyed thousands of ancient trees—a serious misfortune. We now protect the forests and I am very happy; not destroying the sacred mountains and lakes is excellent. We Tibetans believe that wild animals living in the realm of the deity-mountain have relationships with the *zhidak*, the ecology, the local people, and nature that is like the relationship between you and me. All are living beings. Conflicts between animals are like conflicts between people; if you violate someone they will take action against you . . ." (Ruiba 2006)

Lazong Ruiba went on to explain how a local project involving the construction of a cable car to the summit of the village's main *zhidak* was already having severe effects on the community, which he rendered in conventional religious terms representing invisible, subjective, spiritual agency and modern scientific terms representing visible, objective, environmental phenomena in a holistic vision of moral ecological development.

"The cable car system that is being built on Shika mountain is already having severe environmental impacts, and when droves of tourists ride up to the summit there will be destruction that takes forms not immediately visible to the eye. Already there are mudslides occurring in several nearby villages and the destruction is about to increase. Only by protecting the ecology, the *zhidak*, and the sacred lakes can there be peace, and only after there is peace can there be prosperity."

Tibetans living as far away as Chezong Village, on the other side of the Zhongdian Basin, agreed that the desecration of Shika was causing a regional drought, and Shika is not one of Chezong's *zhidak* (Deng 2005). Local narratives foregrounding fateful events play a critical role in the transmission of information regarding the relational web of animate landscapes and their inhabitants. The narratives

assume two forms, the first consists of grand genealogical legends on how the *zhidak* and *yullha* mountain gods came to settle in the landscape, and these stories perform a cosmogonic function for the community while explaining local sacred geography. Second are the everyday stories told by villagers about incidents that show how the gods continue to exercise their powers by meting out justice. Sometimes divine action is ferocious and sometimes it is kind, but however idiosyncratic the gods' behavior may seem, they are generally believed to keep the interests of the guest-host polity in mind as long as the guests exhibit gratefulness and good (ecological) conduct. In terms of the two kinds of narratives, the first explains the origins of the *genii loci*, and the mythico-geography of Hamugu village provides an excellent example. As Gesang Zeren explained shortly after I met him in 2004, the primary village *zhidak* consist of a male and a female who were lovers in real life, but who were unable to consummate their marriage.

"Shika and Chuji came from the holy land of the Ngari (Chinese Ali) region, in western Tibet. Shika was a handsome, talented young nobleman, sincere and upstanding. From a young age, he loved his homeland dearly and reveled in a free life of adventure on the high plains and snow-mountains, where he grew to be strong and hardy. Influenced by his social and physical environment, he understood the hardships of pastoral life and enjoyed helping the poor. Chuji was an upright and beautiful admirer—simple, hardworking, and diligent—a very good young woman who was born into the poor class of herders. All of her family worked as laborers on Shika's family estate. From a tender age, Shika and Chuji played together happily, riding horses, herding livestock, and growing as close as kin. Reaching adulthood, they had developed a deep affection for each other but never dared to express their love—such sentiments could not be shared between people of such different classes . . . Shika realized deep in his heart that it didn't matter whether Chuji was from a poor family of serfs; there was no more beautiful and virtuous woman in the world. Perhaps through the work of the gods, the young people of the village arranged to have a tea party, where Shika found Chuji. They expressed their mutual love and, determined to stay together, cut ties with their respective social classes and decided to elope.

The next day, before dawn, they traveled to Yamdrok Lake to pray for the blessings of the Buddha. After several hours, a *dakini* emerged from the surface of the lake and said, "You two are of one mind in your mutual love, and you seek the blessings of the Buddha. If you can spend fifteen days and nights together, and keep the yaks with you, you will reach a land of clear streams, splendiferous flowers—a magical pureland. That is where you will establish your treasured home." She also added that if they could not spend fifteen days and nights, the marriage bond would fail. Before departing, the *dakini* gave them a pair of yaks, some yak butter, and fried noodles. After that, the two rode the yaks day and night without stopping. Crossing snowy mountains and fording three rivers [the Yangzi, Mekong, and Salween], they traveled for exactly fifteen days, and [traveling up Duji Sacred Gorge] they finally arrived at a place with level ground and dense forests—a veritable sea of green—with a cliff emerging above the trees. Just below the top of the cliff lay a cave resembling a Buddhist temple. The two lovers wondered whether this could be the holy land that the *dakini* had described. The sun was just setting behind a mountain to the west. Shika untied the yaks' halter ropes and began to tie the yaks to a tree branch. The two lovers also began to prepare a fire and haul water. Before dark, a thunderbolt rang out, the sky turned black, and a huge downpour began. The yaks, spooked by the lightning and thunder, broke the ropes and fled into the forest. Shika bolted after them, searching high and low. He searched until dawn but could not find the yaks. His efforts to manage the yaks for fifteen days and nights had failed; he lost his chance to secure the bonds of matrimony with Chuji, and he was heartbroken. Remembering what the *dakini* had said, he wondered how this could possibly be his fate. He vowed never to marry, and then he turned into a *zhidak*. When Chuji realized that Shika would never return from chasing the yaks, she wailed loudly, crying ceaselessly. Her tears formed the Rising Sun Spirit Lake. This beautiful and virtuous herding girl, having lost her lover, prayed daily for Shika's good fortune and health. Afterward, she, too, turned into a *zhidak* [near Shika], the Chuji Spirit Mountain that lies just behind Hamugu Village." (Zeren and Ruiba 2004).

Each of the geomorphic features mentioned in this story—the gorge, the cave, and the lake, are deeply familiar to the people of Hamugu, whose village occupies the mouth of the gorge. The mountains themselves—Chuji and Shika—are the most prominent landforms and determine the paths of watercourses that run through the gorge to sustain the crops, livestock, and people (Figures 3–5).

Everyday stories of the mountain gods' acts of retribution for transgression are common. The following story from Hamugu is a good example:

“Two or three years ago, a family with a nine- or ten- year-old boy was pulling trees down the mountain; the mother was down below collecting firewood, and a tree slid down the mountain, killing her. Later, through ritual [involving a medium], we inquired about the situation, asking, “Do you think the *zhidak* has been offended?” and the voice of the mother coming off the mountain said that it was so . . . So now we say, the *zhidak* will always demand its debt from those who offend it.” (Zeren and Ruiba 2004)

These moral tales reinforce the regulatory functions required for sustaining watershed CPRs. As Gesang Zeren and Lazong Ruiba explained, “In terms of our ecological protection and our educational system, no other *minzu* (nationality) has this [particular] traditional protection system. It is built into our culture. We don't need the government to invest a bunch of money in it. That would be ineffective. We ourselves have a traditional conservation system.” (Zeren and Ruiba 2004).



Figure 3. Hamugu village with Mount Chuji in the background. The recently restored sacred forest is visible on Chuji's slopes. (Photo by the author, 2004)



Figure 4. A view of Hamugu village from high in the Duji Sacred Gorge. Hamugu sits on the edge of Napahai, a wet prairie, where livestock are grazed. The Napahai Nature Reserve provides habitat for migratory waterfowl. Rising Sun Spirit Lake is a wetland lying within the prairie. (Photo by the author, 2006)



Figure 5. Mount Shika, the male zhidak of Hamugu village and Yak herding huts next to a sacred tarn (glacial pond). (Photo by the author, 2006)

3.2. Vital Landscapes and Environmental Activism in Han Communities in Southern China

Fengshui forests became primary components of southern China's cultural landscapes in the first millennium CE, as Han settlers adapted to and altered the rugged landscapes of the tropics and subtropics using *fengshui* principles to develop sustainable settlements based on wet rice agroecosystems (Coggins 2014; Guan 2012). These zones are characterized by high rainfall, ranging from an annual average of 800 mm (31 inches) along the Qinling-Huaihe ecotone marking the boundary between the subtropics and temperate climates in the north, to 2000 mm (79 inches) along the southern coast. Average annual temperature shows a similar north-south increase, ranging from to 14 °C (57 °F) at the Qinling-Huaihe ecotone to 24 °C (75 °F) along the southern coast. Environmental hazards include annual subtropical storms bringing high winds, heavy precipitation, and severe erosion, especially on steep and denuded slopes. In this biophysical context, *fengshui* comprises an ancient yet dynamic composite of indigenous cosmological beliefs and landscape management strategies focusing on topographic features and frequently utilizing groves and forests to enhance resilience at the scale of village watersheds. In the long history of Han Chinese migration and colonization of the mountains, valleys, and hills of the southern frontier, which peaked between the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and the Song (960–1279 CE), this system evolved as a means for locating ideal settlement sites and designing built environments and wet rice agricultural zones in close proximity with forests, meadows, and other upland resource utilization areas. *Fengshui* lore and literature provided both cognitive maps and graphic diagrams to guide this process, and *fengshui* masters have long supplied specialized expertise in choosing auspicious sites and in modifying the built environment.

Fengshui (風水) literally means “wind-water,” but in addition to denoting crucial climatic elements of the living environment, it refers to a constellation of ideas and techniques for harmonizing human activities with the terrestrial and celestial forces that govern them (Bruun 2008; Feuchtwang 2002). Often translated as “geomancy,” it is a form of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) best understood as a form of cosmo-ecology in which the optimization of universal vital life force (*qi* 氣) is contingent on human design in harmony with more-than-human powers. A complex set of formulas and guidelines direct ongoing individual and collective involvement with vital landscapes through active manipulation and management, observation, reflection, divination, and continuing adaptive response to both anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic environmental change. My research shows that *fengshui* practice at the landscape scale—within the geographic context of villages and their immediate watersheds—is a cohesive and collective undertaking with centuries of precedent and the time-tested logic of trial and error. As an ethnogeographic practice, it encompasses a complex panoply of spiritual beliefs and magical practices involving supernatural forces and agents, including gods, ghosts, ancestors, and impersonal chthonic forces. Thus, there are strong animist and shamanic elements in Chinese folk religion as well. These have survived the bans on “feudal superstition” associated with the utilitarian, industrial, scientific ideology of the Maoist period (1949–1976), but not without changing and adapting to new social and environmental conditions.

Jane Bennett (2010) has rekindled an interest in vitalism within social theory, where it has gained traction among post-structural theorists of materialism. She invites us to rethink the notion that matter is passive and inert (in Heglian terms, devoid of *geist*). “This habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings) is a “partition of the sensible,” to use Jacques Rancière’s phrase. The quarantines of matter and life encourage us to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations, such as the way omega-3 fatty acids can alter human moods or the way our trash is not “away” in landfills but generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane as we speak (Bennett 2010).” In studying *fengshui*, we do well to follow her lead in using Latour’s (2004) conception of *actants*—humans or things that are sources of action—that have “efficacy, can do things, [that have] sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects alter the course of events (Bennett 2010, p. viii).” In studying *fengshui*, we are challenged to rethink the material agency or “effectivity” of nonhuman or not-quite-human things (Bennett 2010, p. ix). In striking contrast to the agency of *zhidak*, *yullha*, *lu*, *nyen*, and other chthonic beings that inhabit the landscapes of Tibet as

agentive, idiosyncratic quasi-persons, *qi* is an agentive ideo-material force devoid of anthropomorphic traits but susceptible to channeling by human intermediaries. This is true not only in landscapes as conceptualized in *fengshui*, but also in Chinese medicine, qigong, acupuncture, and other specialized techniques in which *qi* is a force that links mind and body and can be “mastered” for the cultivation of “extraordinary powers” (*teyi gongneng* 特异功能) (Chen 2003). In summary, *fengshui* is the landscape architecture of *qi*—a force that vitalizes mind, body, and polity in a collectivity of people, other beings, forces, and things.

This includes trees, which are both producers of *qi* (Chen 2003) and channelers of its flow via wind and water in and above the earth’s surface. Village *fengshui* forests (*fengshuilin*) are important components of rural cultural landscapes representing not only nodes of connection between *fengshui* culture and ecology, but demonstrating the intricate connection between village *fengshui* and watershed conservation. In wet rice producing villages, watersheds comprise the infrastructure of life for humans, the non-human organisms upon which they consciously depend, and the complex biological assemblages that may not be well understood but are often no less crucial (Fan 1992; Hase and Lee 1992; Coggins 2014; Chen et al. 2018; Coggins et al. 2019). It should be noted that complex symbolic elements of *fengshui*, including its grounding in correlative cosmology (Henderson 2010) and its global proliferation have ensured that many of its practices, particularly in urban, metropolitan, and international contexts far exceed contemporary conceptions of “ecology,” “environment,” and indigenous sense of place. This has led many to assume, quite reasonably, that *fengshui* has little to do with the environment. An understanding of the role of *fengshui* in village landscapes belies this misapprehension of the vital role that it plays in cluster villages of southern China, which I call “wind-water polities” to denote the ultimate importance of their spiritual ecologies for community livelihood and sustainability.

The ideal village *fengshui* landscape consists of a nucleus of houses known as the “lair” (*xue* 穴) that is nested within a small drainage basin (Figure 6). The village rests on a slope above the floodplain croplands below, in a site where *yin* and *yang* energies are believed to be in, or close to, natural balance. Streams descending the slope on both sides of the village provide water for the irrigation of rice paddies in the valley floor below, in which terracing can be kept to a minimum. Since China is in the northern hemisphere, it is considered best to “sit in the north facing south” (*zuobei chaonan* 坐北朝南) with villages and individual houses “facing” the sun. Direct sunlight promotes the growth of rice crops, which are ideally (but certainly not always) located in a broad floodplain south of the village, and the sun’s rays provide warmth for the village in winter, while mountains “behind” the village to the north block cold continental winds of the winter monsoon. The fertile and generative *xue* is surrounded and protected by the master mountain in the north, and spurs or ridges to the west (the white tiger, *baihu* 白虎) and to the east (the azure dragon, *qinglong* 青龍). This general crescent-shaped configuration can be replicated at all scales of the built environment, including tombs, shrines, temples, and homes. Higher mountains extending farther north from the master mountain include the parent mountain, grandparent mountain, and ranges extending to the Kunlun Mountains at the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. This series of mountains replicates the ancestral lineage structure and metaphysically connects distant villages to the sacred originary point of gods in the Daoist pantheon. In fact, the ancestral record for Gonghe village, in Meihuashan region of Fujian, notes that the dendritic pattern of *qi* flow into the village originates in the Kunlun Mountains far to the west (Coggins 2003).

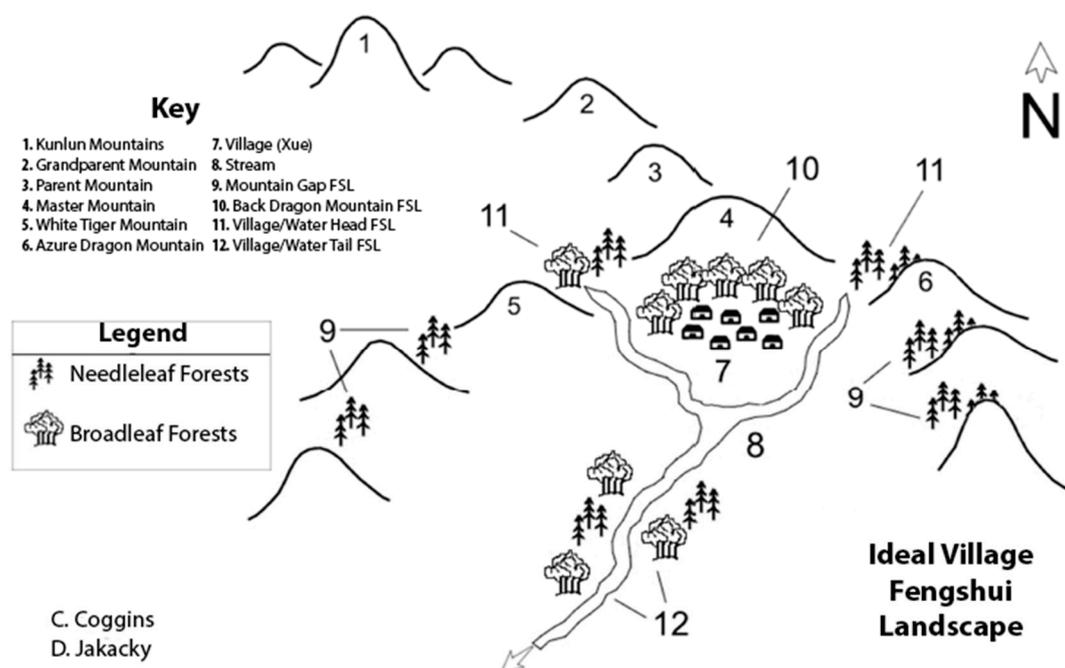


Figure 6. Village *fengshui* features, including landforms and *fengshui* forest types. (Coggins and Jackaky, 2016).

Flourishing natural vegetation is a crucially important element of the ideal *fengshui* landscape, as exemplified in this passage from the *Book of Burial* (*Zangshu* 葬書), the seminal text of the Forms School (*Xingshi* 形式) of *fengshui*. Written in the fourth or fifth century as a commentary on the now lost *Classic of Burial* (*Zangjing* 葬經), this passage contains the earliest use of the term “*fengshui*” in extant documents:

“The *Classic* says, *qi* rides the wind and scatters, but is retained when encountering water. The ancients collected it to prevent its dissipation, and guided it to assure its retention. Thus it was called *fengshui* (wind-water). According to the laws of *fengshui*, the site that attracts water is optimal, followed by the site that catches wind . . . Terrain resembling a palatial mansion with luxuriant vegetation and towering trees will engender the founder of a state or prefecture.” (Guo Pu, *The Book of Burial*; Zhang 2004)

As a practice that evolved in conjunction with cults of ancestor worship, the burial of the dead and their treatment after death play critical roles in linking and sustaining minds, bodies, and lands on behalf of lineage prosperity. In Chinese cosmology, the souls of the dead contain both *yin* and *yang* elements; the concentration of *yin* essence forms the *po* (魄), a semi-material body that if not cared for through sacrifices by descendants can develop into a dangerous ghost (*gui* 鬼). The concentration of *yang* essence forms the *hun* (魂), a lighter more ethereal body that if cultivated through sacrifice becomes a powerful and beneficent spirit (*shen* 神). *Fengshui* is as much about caring for the “homes of the dead” (*yinzhai*) as it is about caring about the “homes of the living” (*yangzhai*), because the two are continuously connected through the flow of *qi* in the landscape and probably other media as well. This is why Guo Pu also wrote that “Life is the condensation of *qi*. That which is coagulated becomes the bone, which remains after death. Therefore, to bury the dead is to obey the principle of returning *qi* to the bones, thus creating life out of *yin*” (Zhang 2004, p. 55). The continuity between the living and dead is thus not only experienced through memory, sacrifice, and the continuing presence of ghosts and spirits, but also through wind, water, and land, including the configuration of tombs, houses, shrines, and other human alterations of the landscape.

Tens of thousands of southern Chinese villages still show evidence of this idealized cultural model, even after a multitude of rural structural transformations entailed by the systematic development

projects associated with *xiandaihua* (现代化 modernization). Thus, in both its ideal and instantiated forms, the village *fengshui* landscape exemplifies a stable and longstanding socio-ecological system. Within the village *fengshui* landscape complex, *fengshui* forests play a key role in maintaining the durability of the village-scale polity and its vital ecology through their material effects on flows of wind and water, their amelioration of erosion, their enhancement of biological prosperity, and their symbolic representation of ancestry and lineage.

Within the village *fengshui* landscape complex, *fengshui* forests are typically situated immediately behind and upslope from the village, on what is called the *zhushan*, or master (also “host” or “owner”) mountain. Since the forests are located adjacent to human settlements in order to enhance the physical and spiritual qualities of the local environment, they are considered by current Chinese scholars as “pieces of history—living, cultural, biological, and ecological fossils” (Li 2011). Although imbued with spiritual significance, the forests are also subject to a wide spectrum of human management and influence, with some *fengshui* forests undergoing understory clearing, bamboo harvesting, and the gathering of herbs and mushrooms, while others are granted nearly total protection.

Although formal writings on *fengshui* forests are scarce in the classic *fengshui* guidebooks, a well-developed folk taxonomy quickly became evident during my early research in Fujian in the mid-1990s. In short, there are four types of *fengshuilin* according to the typology used by villagers in western Fujian. These are partially accepted as standard in other regions, but the only more-or-less universal type was number 1 (below). This forest type was observed in all study areas. The four types are: (1) *Houlongshan fengshuilin* (後龍山風水林), which are immediately behind and upslope from the village, protecting it from erosion caused by overland flow, helping ensure a year-round supply of ground and surface water, and protecting the watersheds of the incoming streams which comprise the primary water supply for crop irrigation and everyday use. Similar forests are often found behind village ancestral temples (*citang* 祠堂) (Figure 7). All of the *houlongshan fengshuilin* observed consisted of broadleaf forests or predominantly broadleaf mixed forests. (2) *Shan-ao fengshuilin* (山凹風水林), which block winds that enter the valley through wind gaps (*shan'ao* 山凹). In Fujian these consist almost exclusively of Chinese cedars (*liushan*, 柳杉) growing in saddles and along the streams that descend from them, and these trees are said to have been planted by village ancestors. (3) *Shuitou* (水頭) or *cuntou* (村頭) *fengshuilin*, which consist of Chinese cedar or broadleaved forest located where streams enter the village from higher elevations. (4) *Cunkou/wei* or *shuikou/wei* (村口/尾 or 水口/尾) forests, which are typically broadleaved forests located downslope from the village, either along a stream or along a path exiting the village, and these are believed to “hold in” the village’s wealth and prevent it from flowing away with the water or wind that exit the village space down-valley (Figures 8 and 9). The concept of “holding in village wealth” is an apt metaphor describing how these forests prevent back-cutting erosion along stream banks and slopes that could rapidly destroy the cropping areas in front of the villages.

Each of these forest types provides not only hydrological services by improving the acquisition, retention, and slow release of ground and surface water, but also ecological services deriving from enhanced biodiversity. This includes the maintenance of plant and animal resources for food, fiber, medicine, building material, and more.



Figure 7. The main ancestral temple (*citang*) of Gonghe Village with a small, crescent-shaped *houlongshan* (back dragon mountain)-type forest protecting it. The ponds in front of the ancestral temple represent the seven stars of the big dipper. A classic *fengshui* feature, these pools hold heat in the winter and cool the area in the summer. (Drone photo by the author, 2018).



Figure 8. A *shuikou* (water mouth) *fengshui* forest below Sanjiaoqiu village, Zhejiang. This view is from downstream and shows a bridge temple in the foreground. (Drone photo by the author, 2018)



Figure 9. The same shuikou forest in Sanjiaoqi village taken from slightly upstream and showing an ancestral temple nestled along the edge of the forest. (Drone photo by the author, 2018)

4. Discussion

In 2007, Premier Hu Jintao announced that China would become an “Ecological Civilization” (*Shengtai Wenming* 生态文明) (Yeh and Coggins 2014; Geall and Ely 2018; Goron 2018; Frazier et al. 2019). In 2012, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopted Ecological Civilization as an explicit goal in its national constitution and in its Thirteenth Five-Year Plan (2016–2020). General claims and objectives include embracing social and environmental reform as a new foundation for national development, and to develop new forms of human civilization to adapt to and mitigate global anthropogenic climate change. In short, Ecological Civilization is meant to signify a synthesis of economic, educational, political, agricultural, and other reforms designed for comprehensive, socially just sustainability based on a national land use planning system based on “functional regions.” As the first chapter of the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan states,

“New progress has been made in the construction of ecological civilization, the main functional area system has been gradually improved, the discharge of major pollutants has continued to decrease, and the level of energy conservation and environmental protection has improved significantly.” (CTB 2016)

Although it is difficult to gauge the degree to which ecological civilization will take precedence within the diverse set of national, regional, and international policy initiatives that vie for attention within a complex governance system, there has indeed been tremendous investment of fiduciary, institutional, and educational resources in the development of a national protected area system, one that has undergone remarkable expansion in recent decades (Coggins 2017). Key features of Ecological Civilization in the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan include a national zonation system for environmental management that is designed to “simplify the ecological security mechanism.” Although the language deployed in the Five-Year Plan is turgid, technocratic, and general, the overall goals are fairly clear—delineate ecologically important areas for protection; manage these zones strictly; regulate the zones through a system of incentives, taxes, and fines; and establish an environmental damage monitoring protocol:

“Strengthen the construction of an ecological civilization system, establish and improve an ecological risk prevention and control system, enhance the ability to respond to sudden ecological environmental incidents, and ensure national ecological security . . . Implement ecological space use control, delineate and strictly observe the ecological protection red line, ensure that ecological functions are not reduced, the area is not reduced, and that natural conditions are not altered. Establish a total forest, grassland and wetland management system. Accelerate the establishment of a diversified ecological compensation mechanism and improve the linkage mechanism between financial support and ecological protection effectiveness. Establish a green taxation system covering the exploitation, consumption, pollution discharge and import and export of resource products. Study and establish an ecological value assessment system, explore the preparation of natural resource balance sheets, and establish physical volume accounting. Implement the audit of the loss of natural resources assets of leading cadres. Establish and improve the ecological environment damage assessment and compensation system, and implement the lifelong investigation system for damage liability.” (CTB 2016)

With a national nature reserve system comprising 2671 reserves (at all administrative levels) protecting 14.8% of the country’s total land area by 2015, China was well on its way to developing a comprehensive biodiversity conservation strategy (Coggins 2017). A serious shortcoming of the system is the lack of support by local people, who continue to poach and to collect wild plants to meet domestic commercial demand. Tibetan god mountains and Han fengshui forests provide excellent models of local CPR management through spiritual traditions. Although they have functioned primarily to meet the immediate and long-term needs of small communities, they can serve as culturally meaningful models for active watershed and forest management. By granting special protection for *fengshui* forests, *zhidak*, and other landforms preserved by local geopiety in community-based conservation areas (officially designated “miniature nature reserves,” *baohuxiaoqu* 保护小区), as I have observed in many provinces, the central and local state establishes compacts with local people to work cooperatively to protect natural resources and to enhance common understandings of the role of ancient spiritual landscapes in emerging visions of “ecological civilization.” In 2014, as I was consulting with the Jiangxi Province Forestry Bureau to suggest effective methods for protecting the province’s many *fengshui* forests, they initiated a conservation program to offer state support for the protection of existing *fengshui* forests and the improvement of degraded forests (Yan 2014). Since they were concerned about the negative political implications of the term “*fengshui* forest” due to the association of *fengshui* with “feudal superstition” (*fengjian mixin* 封建迷信) they deployed the similar but safer term *fengjinglin* (scenic forest or landscape forest) in all official transactions (Yan 2014). In 2015, they had begun the process of establishing 100 Model *Fengjinglin* (Scenic Forest) Villages” and an “Ecological Civilization Vanguard Demonstration Areas” system (Figure 10) across the province.

While this may show that provincial governments will augment the management of local spiritual landscapes, especially those with value for nature conservation and the preservation of cultural heritage, scholars within and beyond China are struggling to ascertain the scope and intent of Ecological Civilization policies. As Goron (2018, p. 40) notes, “[Some have argued] that Ecological Civilization has increasingly tended to restrain both public and scholarly debate within discursive boundaries controlled by CCP propaganda, hindering capacities to engage critically with capitalism, democracy, and other [essential categories in] green political thought. However . . . many Chinese scholars, while paying lip service to [official] Ecological Civilization discourse, have remained committed to their academic research agenda and have continued to press for the development of their disciplinary contribution to the global scientific discussion on sustainability.” An intriguing example is found in the radical eco-socialist thought of Huan Qingzhi, a researcher in comparative politics at the Research Institute of Marxism in Beijing. Arguing that “ . . . to make socialist eco-civilization our green future, we need to work simultaneously at three levels: identifying and defining a full set of key values or beliefs for socialist eco-civilization, such as social justice or equity, ecological

sustainability, economic well-being or sufficiency, which should be mutually consistent or supporting; envisioning a real alternative institutional framework of socialist eco-civilization, characteristic of the ecologically civilized economy, politics, society and culture fundamentally different from capitalist ones; analyzing and encouraging all kinds of mechanisms conducive to socialist eco-civilization, such as the demonstration areas of eco-civilization construction at the different administrative or spatial levels, introduction of the green evaluation index of economic and social development and multidimensional eco-compensation systems, etc. (Huan 2016, p. 63)” In 2015, with an eye toward radical reconfiguration of existing socio-ecological conditions in China and beyond, Huan established the China Research Group on Socialist Eco-civilization. Their primary foci for the first years of research included “... eco-Marxism and socialist eco-civilization theory and case studies of eco-civilization demonstration areas in China (Huan 2016, p. 63).”



Figure 10. Students at the entrance to Tangcun Village, Jiangxi, which is designated a “Model *Fengjinglin* (Scenic) Village” and an “Ecological Civilization Vanguard Demonstration Area.” Detailed information on village history and ecology is shown on kiosks. (Photo by the author, 2015)

5. Conclusions

A transnational ecological politics for the Anthropocene requires new forms of imaginative synthesis and alternative ways of being within and knowing the world in all of its spiritual and ecological complexity and richness. These must be grounded in collective and individual experience with, and knowledge of, local environments, in a world that is becoming increasingly unsettled by a climate crisis precipitated, for the most part, by the dangerous promises of anthropocentric, fossil-fuel-based capitalism. How might more meaningful and sustainable settlement practices evolve in response to the “unthinkable derangements” of the anthropocene (Ghosh 2016)? Village and community polities linking mind, body, and land in creative and experimental fashion may be the “order of the day,” an order with the capacity to absorb, and even venerate and celebrate the powers of disorder and the truths of cosmic indeterminacy. Recognition of the radical agency of things and beings deemed “non-human” in conventional Western thought may enhance our great potential for a new political ecology of the Anthropocene that is inclusive of both advanced environmental science and ancient modes of communication and experience. We will do well not to take for granted the sources of the energy that animate our cities, towns, villages, homes, and, by way of food, our very bodies and those of our fellow sentient beings. How can we more fully recognize the ultimate source of most of the energy that makes all life possible—the sun? How might we rethink our connection to the “stuff” we create, consume, and, despite its many afterlives, call “waste?” Finally, how might we rethink the ways in which we dwell within watersheds, the sources of life in a world in which melting ice caps, falling water tables, and rising sea-levels seem to be trying to teach us about the error of our ways? I conclude that despite their significantly different cultural ecologies and land-use traditions, the Tibetan and Han communities described in this study have maintained, to a remarkable extent, practices of geopiety that constitute indigenous multispecies CPRs and safeguard the watersheds upon which they depend for long-term socio-ecological wellbeing. These body politics will continue to be severely challenged as China continues to undergo rapid and extensive urbanization. I will also point out that despite profound differences in the property rights regimes of post-enlightenment possessive individualist societies and the ancient customary community rights that coalesce around particular terrestrial spirits, forces, and deities, the latter systems are increasingly informing contemporary legal initiatives to grant juristic personhood to rivers and other landforms in order to protect “the rights of nature” and communities in diverse socio-cultural contexts around the world. As Youatt (2017, p. 39) says of this nascent global movement, “[r]ather than assuming international space to be largely populated by state persons who in turn grant personhood to nature, these cases suggest that it is more productive to start by asking what kinds of collective persons populate world spaces, and in what ways they are made political.” In this context, official PRC discourse on Ecological Civilization (*Shengtai Wenming*) provides a specific historical framework for analyzing the harmonies and conflicts that emerge when the contemporary nation state makes space, however tenuous, for spiritual ecology in conservation discourse and practice. As Prasenjit Duara (2015, p. 288) notes, emerging international laws of the commons represent “a force that posits inviolability without significant military backing and pursues its case through rational and responsible argumentation.” He adds that “The custodians of this sacred space . . . are turning out to be the networks of hope constituted by the coalitions of civil society, local communities and their allies . . . In many respects they represent a weak force but can be sufficiently resilient to outlast the strong. One of their great strengths as a moral force is their ability to mediate the sacred with the rational. Armed with scientific, legal, technical and, not least, local knowledge, these coalitions represent our principal hope.”

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