Minzu, Market, and the Mandala

National Exhibitionism and Tibetan Buddhist Revival in Post-Mao China

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Mini China welcomes you!
Is it possible to walk the length and breadth of China within a single day?
One place you could do just that is at the Chinese Ethnic Culture Park, south
of the Bird’s Nest and within the Olympic Green. The huge park has been a
place of awe and precisely re-creates life in all 56 of China’s ethnic groups.
—China Daily, 13 July 2008

The Chinese government’s frenzied preparations and unprecedented spend-
ing for the Beijing 2008 Olympics represented the culmination of national
exhibitionism in a new global era. That process of state and corporate collab-
oration in packaging and branding a newly cosmopolitan city and nation-
state would become inevitable in the world’s fairs and expos of old. Yet, as
the excerpt above points out, the traditional allure of ethnic tourism still plays an
important role in offering visitors a state-sanctioned vision of the substance
and reach of the host polity. Indeed, the display of China’s colorful ethnic off-
ers figured prominently in the massive opening ceremonies of the Olympics.
Like the Midway displays of ethnic others outside the 1893 Chicago World’s
Fair, the Chinese Ethnic Culture (or Minzu) Park next door to the new Olympic
grounds in Beijing sells tickets to view ethnic “villages” and “landscapes”
representing the fifty-six “nationalities” (Ch. mien) that constitute the mul-
tinational PRC (Ch. zhong guo). The park would seem to instantiate nicely the themes of national harmony and market-based development that
accompany the Olympic brand. But those claims were strongly countered in,
another sense, the unprecedented scope of unrest and protests in Tibetan
regions just months before the opening of the 2008 Games.
The extraordinary events of 2008 gave me new impetus for thinking through the meanings and implications of Chinese ethnic tourism parks, and in particular, the display and commodification of religion as a feature of ethnicity. My interest in this was first piqued during my fieldwork on Tibetan Buddhist revival in the PRC in the 1990s and early 2000s (see Makley 2007). At that time, I met several young Tibetans from where I was living in Amdo regions (now the PRC's western provinces of Qinghai and Gansu) who told me about their experiences working at the ethnic theme parks in China's rapidly developing eastern coastal cities. In the summer of 2002, I finally had the chance to visit the Beijing Ethnic Culture Park and experience for myself the context in which those young Tibetans' tourism work took place. On a pleasant Sunday in early June, I strolled around the extensive grounds. They seemed strangely empty because the few Han Chinese couples and families exploring the exhibits and taking pictures there seemed dwarfed in the wide pathways and carefully labeled "plazas" (Ch. guangchang) between the exhibits. I chatted with some of them and talked to young Amdo Tibetan and other minority workers as I viewed the exhibits myself. Over the course of the day, I felt strongly that this park, built at precisely the time of my 1990s fieldwork in Amdo, encapsulated a cultural politics of the nation-state that had been profoundly reshaping Amdo Tibetan households hundreds of kilometers west. And that contested process arguably came to a head in 2008 when for the first time large numbers of Tibetans in Sichuan, Qinghai, and Gansu provinces (that is, Tibetans living outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region) participated in anti-China unrest.

ETHNIC TOURISM PARKS AS TRANSACTIONAL ORDERS

In this chapter, I draw on my research in Tibetan regions of the PRC to interrogate the Chinese state's social, economic, and political interests in the national exhibitions of the Beijing Ethnic Park. I do this by focusing on the implications of Tibetans' own participation (as workers and performers) in the park. After all, since the 1990s especially, Tibetans' eastward migration to work in the Buddhist-themed Tibet exhibits of the park, along with the westward travels of Han urban tourists to Tibetan regions, embodied the ongoing links between inter-ethnic and political economic interactions in the nation's capital and those east-west (see Oakes and Schein 2006; Schein 2000; Oakes 1998). By considering this central tourism site from the perspective of the Tibetan Buddhist frontier, I treat it not, as the state would have it, as a benign, even trivial sideshow in Beijing, but as an important site for reframing and incorporating Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism within the post-Mao PRC nation-state, a project that participates in the ongoing clash (and mutual constitution) of social orders that has characterized Inner Asian politics since the late Qing dynasty especially.

In this light, rather than see them as benign backdrops for selling experience of the ethnic or alternatively as sinister sites for the destruction of ethnic authenticity, I take national ethnographic exhibits like the Beijing Ethnic Park to be important means by which state officials, park investors, and designers attempt to define and instantiate certain transactional orders, or institutions for producing and channelling the circulation of people and values, that are deemed essential to nation-state building. The Ethnic Park then (must be seen as an ever-evolving attempt, in the face of the actual uncertainties of real people, to structure and render pleasurable citizens' and visitors' participation in the core categories, hierarchies, and thus values of the ascendant PRC. Even in such hypergroomed spaces, value, as social relations of evaluation and exchange, is always in the making. To be more specific, in the extraordinarly didactic design of spaces and architecture, flows of people and money, displays of persons and objects as evidence and ideal types, and interactions between spectators and exhibited persons, such exhibitions are transactional orders in which park officials attempt to recruit people to embody the objectifications that make national governance and economies possible (see Hinsley 1991; Macdonald 1998). In fact, perhaps even more than state-sponsored social science, ethnic parks and museums work to instantiate the all-pervasive, yet abstract secular space of the "social" (distinguishable from "religion," "economy," and the "state") because they mediate between elite and popular or "public" forms of realism knowledge, while grounding the very situated (and state-sponsored) nature of that knowledge (Asad 2003, 191–92). In China's ethnic parks, the common sense subjectivity of the citizen on offer for participants was that of minzu ("nationality") identity.1 That designation, embolded on all citizens' state identity cards, was supposed to represent one's primary loyalty to the state's secular policies over the commitments and dispositions associated with "religion" (Ch. zhonggong). However, by considering parks and their participants as dynamic transactional orders, I argue that the Tibetan exhibits at the Beijing Ethnic Park did not guarantee such a neat confinement of religion. Thus I focus on Tibetan performers and workers there as historically situated people with the capacity to divert meanings and values along alternative lines, even as they cope with the often crushing weight of shifting state and market forces (see Oakes 1998). For as we will see, the dangers of tourism participation for Tibetans in the PRC hinged on complex value shifts, which no one completely controlled, that were emerging in intensified competitions for newly mobile and trans-
MINZU AND THE MANDALA

Contrary to recent popular notions of Tibetan Buddhism as an eminently peaceful, individualist or ultranationalist set of philosophies, Tibetans had adopted specifically tantric forms of Buddhism from India that, especially with the rise of the Dalai Lama's Geluk sect, amounted to highly hierarchical, even martial, institutions and forms of governance. Indeed by the waning years of the Qing dynasty, Tibetan Buddhist institutions in many regions represented full-scale alternative political entities, formidable opponents to Chinese would-be modern state builders. As Tomi Hutter (1999) and others have pointed out, the Qing court hinged on the uniquely Tibetan subject of the Incomparable lama (Tib. sprul sku). As the incarnation of both a Buddha and a predecessor lama, incarnate lamas were heirs to both political economic estates (Tib. bla brang) and the tantric Buddhist capacity to violently tame enemies of the Dharma and command legions of protector deities. Thus, through close alliances with their subordinates, lay male leaders, and through elaborate ritual pagaents and everyday worship practices, the Geluk sect thrived in the frontier zone, sought to "mandalaize" the region. That is, they worked to construct their jurisdictions as Buddhist polities and patronage centers on the model of a transcendent tantric Buddhist mandala palace—mandalas laid out as ideal transactional orders for human affairs under Buddhist auspices. In the principal tantric rituals (Skt. sahāna, Tib. grub shabs), lit. means of achievements), accessible only to initiated lama, mandalas were essentially repertoires of ordering tools for emplacing and exherting vast pantheons of deities as coparticipants nonetheless subordinated to the current event and goals of a practitioner (see Makley 2007; Berger 2003, 89; Hanks 1996, 180). Divine leaders also worked to posit natural correspondences for people between micro- and macroeconomic spaces. From the 1950s on, they countered Geluk mandalization efforts in the frontier zone by creating competing transacational orders aimed at marginalizing Tibetan incarnate lamas and establishing rival authorities as commarcked, that is, disembodied or all-pervasive disciplinary and arbitrating agencies, centered nonetheless in Beijing (see Makley 2007). For example, the authority of the local officials of the new Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB, now the State Administration for Religious Affairs) was supposed to supersede that of local lamas, yet RAB officials' authority was grounded in the secular offices of the Beijing State Council. For CCP leaders all along, but especially after the 1980s reforms, the category of minzu was pivotal in their attempts to establish competing intermediary frameworks for embodying Tibetans as citizens of the new PRC nation. State-sanctioned minzu identity as Tibetan "minorities" (Ch. Zangzu), one of fifty-six recognized groups, was supposed to be the ground of membership in a new "multietnic" national community, and the basis of Tibetans' participation in new local state careers. As an alternative secular identity, minzu was also a dangerous and shifting category of new national personhood for CCP leaders vis-a-vis Tibetan authority. It promised to liberate non-Han men from local hierarchies (Sino networks of kinship, prestige, and Buddhist patronage) in new institutions and careers for men's translocal and social mobility. And yet I argue that it was most importantly a category designed for the ideal "incorruption of the native" (see Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Malkki 1997, 52)—not only as less civilized, tradition- and place-bound inhabitants of marginal regions targeted for resource extraction, but also as limited political actors confined to local minzu "autonomous" (Ch. zizhi) districts, where a majority of the government (not necessarily party) cadres were supposed to be Tibetan. At the same time, defining Tibetans as Zangzu lent state administrative weight to a translocal identity that had arguably never existed among Tibetans.

A STATELESS NATION: MARKETING MINZU

With the 1980s economic reforms and subsequent "consumer revolution" (Davis 1999) in the PRC, ethnic theme parks in Chinese cities began to proliferate (Hai Ren 1999, 2). At that time, hundreds of young Tibetan men and women, a large number of them from Amdo regions, were recruited to work and perform at the parks. The Folk Cultural Villages in Shenzhen, which included a Tibetan "village," was in 1991 the first of the ethnic theme parks to be built on a large scale. At that time, it rivaled the massive theme park in the same city opened two years earlier called Splendid China (Jinxiu Zhongguo), which featured among China's wonders a miniature replica of the Dalai Lama's Potala Palace (see Anagnost 1997, 163; Oakes 1998; Hai Ren 1998, 1999, 2007).
The theme park that presented itself, however, as the culmination of this 
vaulted "museumization" of ethnicity in China was the huge park built on 45 
hectares at the northern perimeter of Beijing. This park, begun in 1992 and 
completed by 1996, was structured as a combined Chinese Ethnic Museum 
(Zhonghua Minzu Bowuguan) and Chinese Ethnic Culture Park (Zhonghua 
Minzu Yimin). Park planners, a consortium of state work-units and entrepreneurs 
in Hong Kong and Taiwan who took advantage of China's bid for the 2000 
Olympics to pitch for a national showcase park next door to the new Olympic 
grounds, explicitly announced the park (at a projected cost of 120 million yuan) 
as a more comprehensive and "accurate" exhibition than the Folk Cultural Vil-
lages in Shenzhen, and claimed that it would encompass all fifty-six minorities in 
the PRC (Hai Ren 1998, 81; Anagnost 1997, 214; Gladney 2004, 78).

Of course, the revolutionary and modern secularist rhetoric of CCP nation-
state builders notwithstanding, the decision to locate such a park in Beijing 
strongly recalled the empire-building strategies of the Manchu Qing emperors 
at court. The Beijing Ethnic Park recalls Qing emperors' efforts to construct 
an overarching social order by bringing the peripheries to dynamic centers in 
ethnically unified imperial villas (see Foer 2000; Berger 2003). Such alternate 
capitals, as James Hevia describes them, were elaborately arranged to construct 
the Qing empire as a realm of multiple lords, and to orchestrate hierarchical 
encounters establishing Qing emperors as superior overlords and visiting ethnic 
casters as subordinate, tribute-paying lords and subjects (1995, 32).

And yet, as many have pointed out, Tibetan Buddhist lamas, as incarnate 
Buddhas and exclusive purveyors of tantric prowess based in particular mon-
estery, situated themselves as superiors in "patron-preceptor" relations (Tib.
yon sogs) with emperors, relations that in turn stood for relationships be-
tween entire regions (Potech 1950). Thus, within the intricate orchestrations 
of guest ritual at Qing courts, tributaries and emperors "vied to hierarchize each 
other" (Hevia 1995, 48) by asserting the transcendent of the transactional 
orders they embodied to a variety of ends, even as they recognized each 
other as powerful men—that is, as commensurate agents operating at the up-
per reaches of authority and mediating the highest forms of value. A kind of 
"calculated ambiguity" (Berger 2003, 184) was essential in the negotiations 
of Chinese and Tibetan authorities.

In important ways then the main state disciplinary effort of Qing imperial 
ethnic capitols was reproduced in the Ethnic Park under CCP auspices in 
the 1990s: juxtaposing spaces representing selected, discrete, ethnic others 
at the regime's center were efforts in time-space compression—visualizing 
and materializing an impossibly massive realm while inserting the primacy 
of state authorities' agency to define and arbitrate ethnic diversity within it 
(Hevia 1995, 48). This logic of privileged knowledge and vision of the other

is perhaps what most strongly linked Han CCP authorities' jurisdiction claims 
over Tibetan regions with those of past dynasties, allowing them to locate 
themselves and Tibetans in an unbroken "Chinese" legacy of definitive histo-
riography and rule.

Indeed, just as Qing emperors initiated encyclopedic projects based in the 
capitals to map and know the empire (see Pordage 2005; Hanleter 2001; Milli-
ward 1999; Elliot 2000), the Ethnic Park's colorful brochure and ticket tout 
it as an "anthropological museum" and research institute, heir to some fifty-
ears of CCP state-directed social science research on China's "minories." 
And the park motto, prominent on both in large, bold letters, proudly pro-
claris that one can "see in one day 10,000 km of rivers and mountains" 
and that "all of China's 56 minorities are in one park!" Finally, the park's main 
didactic function vis-à-vis the nation and the world is encapsulated in the 
principal slogan leading up all printed materials and reproduced throughout 
the grounds: "Let the world experience/know China, let us recognize/know 
ourselves" (Ch. xiang shijie xiantai Zhongguo, rang wome andren xinshi zi/ze).
In many ways, then, the park's remarkably explicit project to define and shape ethnic identity and thus the nation is a gesture back to imperial efforts to define dynastic realities. Yet the spatial politics of the Beijing park, and its representations of Tibetanness, also constitute the very different ideology of citizenship and political authority of a nation-state, one which Chinese leaders sought to characterize as explicitly post-Mao and economically developed or "civilized" on a par with other "modern" nations (see Enloe 1989, 31). Indeed, such an elaborate effort at ethnographic exhibition in reform-era China must be seen as taking up the modernist project of competitive national exhibitionism that was first institutionalized and universalized in the mid-nineteenth century with the rise of World Fairs in Europe and North America (Hinckley 1991, 344). Crucially, the secularizing and relativizing detachment of the modern citizen from such sites offered to visitors was effected through the display of "primitive" others from the colonial peripheries juxtaposed with the wonders of industrial machinery exhibited there.

As a site for the ideal consumption of ethnicity in a depoliticized public space, the Beijing Ethnic Park is a paradigmatic transactional order for experiencing a reform-era stateless nation as itself a collective market subject aspiring to modern knowledge and comfortable living (see Munson 1999, 1; Dunn 1993; Fitzgerald 1996). Indeed, in addition to its association with the international image politics of the Olympics, the park was established just after Deng Xiaoping, faced with increasingly public discontent among the citizenry after Tibetan demonstrations in Lhasa and Chinese students' demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, attempted to divert attention from the state's military crackdown on those demonstrations and urged the populace to "jump into the sea" (Ch. xia hua) of the market economy. In the wake of such unruly popular aspirations in the midst of market reforms, it is easier to appreciate the extremely regulated nature of the exhibits at the Beijing Ethnic Park.

Unlike other types of ethnographic display (like some dioramas) in which human subjects are presented with minimal framing, leaving wider leeway for viewers' interpretations, the Beijing park's minzu "landscapes" are meticulously labeled in signage and ubiquitous public media—this transactional order is meant to generate particularly regulated consumption on behalf of a national economy. In fact, the collaboration of state officials and Han entrepreneurs in establishing such a park was enabled by the new national "visual language" (Dias 1988, 49) of ethnicity since reforms that depicted various minzu groups as clusters (or better, packages) of visible features of language, lifestyle, and beliefs fixed in particular loci (see Gladney 1994; Schein 2000; Bulag 2002). Thus, in contrast to the conflicts between nineteenth-century social scientists and capitalist investors over the nature of ethnographic visibility at the World Fairs (i.e., in contextualizing museum exhibits vs. exotizing carnival displays; see Hinckley 1991), the Beijing Ethnic Park design reflects a deep national consensus over the visual terms of ethnic difference in the post-Mao PRC—ethnic groups, for example, should have colorful costumes and dances, a set of festivals, and distinct forms of local architecture.

The park then does for ethnicity what Dai Jinhua (1996, 32) argues was happening all over China in the 1990s: it displaces the revolutionary plaza for the (orderly) shopping plaza as the preferred venue for bringing the masses (Ch. quanzhong) "face to face with themselves" (Benjamin 1968, 224) in a new multilayered synaesthesia that yet remains under CCP rule. That is, the design of the park works to recruit citizens to participate in the new commonsense frameworks of a market secularism that allows for a sense of relative autonomy from state discipline (see Asanzo 1995; Schein 2000; Dunn 1998; Yang 1999).

My encounter with the young Tibetan workers in the park's Zangcu Landscape Area (Ch. Zangcu Guanjing Qu) clarified for me the dilemma of an internationally oriented transactional order presented to minority citizens. I arrived at the Zangcu area just as the Tibetan workers were finishing their afternoon circle dance for an audience of Han tourists in front of the centerpiece of the Zangcu exhibit: the large and meticulously rendered replica of the great Jholung (Sakyamuni Buddha) Temple in Lhasa. I sat on a bench with the other tourists, behind a young, pinly faced red-robed monk, and watched as the four pretty young women in matching Lhasa-style dresses and a single young man in thigh-length robe halfheartedly danced to recorded music, arms flapping lazily, making no eye contact with each other or the tourists, even when a few Han women got up to join the dance.

When the brief dance ended, the dancers unceremoniously scattered, and some congregated around the table manned by other young Tibetan laymen, to watch as tourists stuffed over to the gift shop or tried on Tibetan cloths for pictures.

I got up and followed the young monk, who had crossed to the bench in front of the temple building and sat listlessly watching the courtyard. After his initial shock at being addressed in my news Tibetan, he and I chatted as some of the other Tibetans came to listen with great interest. Akhu Tenzin told me in his nomad-accented Amdo dialect that he was one of only two monks at the park, and he had only arrived three months earlier, having accompanied this group of about ten young dancers (all nineteen years old) from the country song and dance troupe in Qinghai's Chabuir (Ch. Guinan county seat). Just as I had heard from other young workers at the park, Akhu Tenzin said they made only 300 yuan per month in wages (less than a quarter of Beijing average monthly incomes then), and lived in dorms provided by the park organized by minzu category and sex. Akhu Tenzin's job was to take tourists on
tours of the Jokhang building (built, he said, in 994) and he dutifully got up to show me around.

The Zangzi area, with its Jokhang replica, pilgrim path, Khampa village house, Lhasa Barkhor street, a row of prayer wheels, a pile of rocks carved with mantras, garden, and the requisite gift shop and ethnic clothing photo-op booth, is the first and largest of the minzu exhibits; its main exhibits were among the most elaborate in the park. That day I noticed that whereas many other exhibits stood empty, their colorfully garbed workers idle, the Zangzi exhibit was bustling with visitors. Recalling the importance of Tibetans at the Qing court, the high status of the exhibit in the park also reflected the refigured prominence of Tibetanness in PRC nation-state building, especially after Tibetans in the diaspora organized to counter CCP narratives about the natural incorporation of their homelands.

But the spatial organization of the exhibits as icons of minzu categories reflects an effort to domesticate Zangzi ethnicity in an absolute and all-pervading nationalist narrative dominated by Han as the unmarked norm. Thus, for example, the park’s main museum hall was located in the center of the “southern” section of the park and contained an assortment of objects representing Han history as “our” quaint, rural legacy (“The Common People: Our History, Our Roots”). But the park itself is a geographic hodgepodge. The “north” and “south” halves of the grounds refer not to the homelands of minzu groups, but to the cardinal orientation of the park itself in Beijing. Inside them are juxtaposed exhibits for wildly different and distant groups of people (mostly from China’s north-south frontier zone in the western provinces), presented in bullet-listed signs as precisely enumerated minority populations living in particular provinces, each represented by selected cultural icons, a language, a “religion,” and a “festival.” Most are associated with a characteristic landscape so that representations of mountains, rivers, loess plateau, farm fields, village busts, and monuments intermingle in a fantastical pastiche of a space ultimately referencing nowhere but itself.

And yet, as against the more common pattern among Tibetans of narrower translocal migration routes that ranged mostly across the western provinces, Beijing Tibetans Park recruiters had succeeded in bringing Akhu Tenzin and his young peers from their largely nomad region hundreds of kilometers east to participate in their own embodiment as “Zangzi” in a radically objectified way. Indeed, the cosmopolitan aspirations of the young Tibetans I met in 2002 had followed the state-sponsored linear-urban mobility—into a hypermarginal space constituting a translocal order of consumption (Hai Ren 1999, 24) that subordinated them as underpaid workers and objects of tourist voyeurism. Their “the people” directly addressed by the park exhibits did not include them. As against their own aspirations, their job at the park was to literally embody the new visibility of colorfully backward ethnicity that constituted the invisibility or unmarkedness of both civil and Chinese state authority (see Yang 1999, 50; Oakland 1998, Schefer 2000).

In this way, the young Tibetans’ move to Beijing countered those of millions of domestic migrants from poorer western and central provinces in China. The unmanageable movements of those migrants in search of work in urban areas in the past had been unleashed by the market reforms of the 1980s, in which economic development policies privileged eastern cities (Marshall and Cooke 1997, 1340; also see Wang and Hu 1999). In the context of Han urbanites’ anxieties and intensifying policing strategies directed at the unsightly backwardness of rural-ethnic others in cities (see Dutton 1998), the young Tibetans’ participation in the park, despite the tactical defiance expressed in their bored and haphazard dance, was markedly accommodating.

REVALUING TIBETAN DIVINITY

The park also features live cultural performances. Every morning real lamas from the Tar Monastery of Qinghai province chant Tibetan Buddhist sutras to pray for peace at the Tibetan monastery, while a doghga priest blesses income and says his prayers at the Naxi village.

—China Daily, 15 July 2008

But such cheesy objectifications of ethnicity for Han audiences as staged folk dances, I argue, had far less potential to transform Tibetans’ worlds than Tibetans’ own participation in transactional orders that erased or compromised Tibetans’ own vividness and relationships through sharing experiences and collective representations of “Tibetan men’s privileged relationships to divine agencies. Those, in fact, were the presence and audience that had undermined the power of many Inner Asian polities. My awkward tour of the park’s ‘Jokhang Temple’ with the young monk Akhu Tenzin pointed this up for me. I had been on many monastery tours in Arinde regions, but none prepared me for the radically reorganized nature of that space in the Jokhang replica. Akhu Tenzin ushered me into the echoingly empty main hall first. As he led me into the first room to the left of the main door, a space that in the Lhasa Jokhang should have been a deity shrine (see Larsen and Sindling-Larsen 2001), the young monk was proudly telling me that even though there were only two monks here in the park, we were “real monks” (Tib. nga run yo), unlike the fake ones who had led tours in previous years. I was listening and was thus unprepared for finding myself in the strange environment of that room. We had stepped directly from the main hall through a doorless opening into a well-lit exhibit of five wrathful protector deities. Two of them I recognized
as worldly gods (one a zhidak or mountain deity, the other a red-faced rnam, and the other three were tantric protector Buddhas. All five of the large statues, their ferocious faces, popping eyes, and bared white fangs glittering in the stark electric light, were of similar size and were arrayed not on altars, as in the main images residing in monastic protector deity shrines or in the Bhuta Jokhang, but side by side against bare walls and on a raised platform with no other accompanying context.

An important part of my status as a female in Tibetan regions was that I had never been inside a protector deity shrine before. Those dark and guarded spaces in revitalized Tibetan Buddhist monasteries out west were strictly off limits to all but (initiated) males. However, I knew from descriptions and occasional glimpses from outside them that this was an extremely disorienting way to encounter such deities. After all, protector deities like those were supposed to be “under the feet” of innominate lamas, tamed and subdued by lamas’ tantric ritual prowess to serve Buddhist orders.

With Akuu Tenzin watching, I was completely nonplussed. I had no idea what he expected me to do. We looked at each other and I stammered that I had never seen such deities this way before. Akuu Tenzin explained dryly that whereas in home we (including himself as a neophyte monk) could not enter such a temple, here this is a site for tourist looking. The Tibetans neologism for tourist site he used (the shar lieu site, ll. site for tourist looking) emphasizes the core activity of veyuramor which distinguishes tourism from Buddhist pilgrimage especially (Tib. great shag pro po, ll. go to encircle stoors of Buddhist divinities; see Hunter 1994b; Urry 2002). Like the tourist I was in that space, I asked if I could take a picture, and with only a slight hesitation, the young monk said yes. As I quickly and shamefacedly snapped two, I noticed that even though there were no altars, people had nonetheless placed a few palty offerings of artificial flowers and small change in front of each. Perhaps thinking that this would negate what I had just done, I awkwardly placed a few yuans in front of each, explaining to Akuu Tenzin that I was worried about a relative’s health. I was touched when he, without comment, obligingly re- clined a prayer for me.

Exposing the Tibetan protector deities to the mass gaze of tourists in the nation’s capital seemed to me to epitomize the secular displacement of Tibetan Buddhist authority in post-Mao China. Here the protectors were disclosed outside the expert nasions of Tibetan lamas and initiated monks and lamas. The five statues, unremarkable for their craftsmanship, were not displayed as individual examples of “primitive art.” Instead, as a group, they stood as icons of an ideal type, a class of Tibetan deities that in turn indicated not divine agency, but the ethnographic expertise of the exhibit designer (see Kirshenblit-Gmbology 1991, 1996). Just as the Jokhang exhibit arrayed the worldly deities as categorically equivalent objects alongside their superiors, the Buddhist protectors, all in turn accessible to me, a foreign female, this reordering threatened, in some ways more than direct state violence, to eradicate the visual mandalic hierarchy that before and after reforms had positioned Tibetan lamas and incarnate lamas in the frontier zone as exclusively empowered defenders of local interests centered on monasteries (see Maldey 2007). Thus, while Chinese tourists are generally not put off by, or even expect, the “raided authenticity” (Oakes 1998) of ethnic tourism sites as part of the festive re-creation that they pay for, Tibetan workers like Akuu Tenzin could be very concerned to emphasize the “realness” (Tib. nor ma or klo thog) of Buddhist commitments and transactions in those settings.

I argue that this was so not because such exhibits reduced Tibetan deities to “inauthentic” commodities separated from Tibetan ritual use, but because they constituted a crucial value shift in an increasingly diversified and capitalist transactional system in which everyone was arguably caught up (cf. Lopez 1998, 153; Maurer 2006). That is, the transactional order of the Beijing Minzu Park is ultimately geared toward exploiting ethnic visibility in order to accumulate investment capital and to attract the increasingly mobile global capital so vital to China’s reforms (see Hai Ren 1999; Oakes 1998). As Oakes (1998) and Ansorg (1997) point out, under globalizing competitive pressures in the 1990s, the main role of theme parks organized at a variety of administrative scales in the PRC was to provide visual “enforcement” for longer-term capital investments in the relevant region, always in complex alliances or rivalries with other regions (see Oakes 2000). Thus Tibetans’ participation in the national minzu park, even their countermoves, worked to incorporate them into a new transactional order in which translocal capital under central state auspices displaced local place-based tantric practices at the highest state. Indeed, according to Hsu Ren, 85 percent of the total capital for the initial construction of the park came from two wealthy businessmen from Hong Kong and Taiwan, while the rest came from various Chinese government agencies in Beijing (1998, 35).

In other words, we should consider the “Jokhang” protector deity exhibit not as an objectification that ruined some original, authentic presence (see Benjamin 1968). Instead, it epitomized the capitalist imperatives of a new minzu “aesthetics of decontextualization” (Appadurai 1986, 28) in China in which the value of certain objects and persons, their exoticism, is enhanced by the way their surface features seem to indicate their distance from an imagined and raffed original ethnic context.

I was struck by the variety of ways Akuu Tenzin positioned himself counter to this effort throughout our tour, for example, by proudly insisting on the realism of his monastic commitment and interceding via prayer in my
offering-exchange with the protector deities, even as these very efforts seemed to enhance park officials' claims that they had captured authentic ethnicity in the exhibits. But his most important countermove came significantly as soon as we left the disorienting protector deity exhibit. Akhun Tenzin made sure to point out the disorienting protector deity exhibit. Akhun Tenzin made sure to point out the shiny color photograph (strategically?) placed on the wall right outside it. As he helpfully explained, the photo depicted lamas and monks from the nearby state-sponsored central Buddhist Studies Institute in Beijing in the midst of conducting a rapnay ritual, the final consecration, or better, veneration ceremony, inside the meticulously crafted Kalacakra (Wheel of Time) mandala temple that stood outside in the center of the Zanggu exhibit.

The Kalacakra temple was the first structure erected in the Zanggu exhibit, and it was funded by a wealthy Hong Kong businessman in 1993 and constructed by monk artisans under the direction of a lama from Lhasa at the Beijing Institute. It is said to be the only Kalacakra temple in the PRC outside of Tibetan and Mongolian regions. Notably, the mandala temple, its circular outside walls painted with gorgeously rendered protector Buddhas, was the only building I saw on the entire park grounds that had no signage and was closed to tourists that day.

The rapnay ceremony so conspicuously displayed in the wall photo was the process through which the preceding lama, a young incarnate lama, according to the photo's caption, from a Geluk monastery in Sichuan, invited the central deity Kalacakra (along with his retinue) to inhabit his statue in the center of his newly constructed three-dimensional mandala palace. Among Tibetan Buddhists, rapnay ritual must be done in order to transform a building, sculpture, or image from an inert object to the abode (or "support," Tib. men) of a divine presence, thereby establishing it in the history and transactional order of a particular incarnate lama (see Bentor 1993, 1997; Hober 1994a; Lopez 1998). Even though Tibetan Buddhists exorcize downsplays such material abodes as expedient means for ordinary minds who cannot perceive the abstract omnipresent presence of Buddhas (see Bentor 1997, 234), in rapnay ritual, incarnate lamas (the preferred ritual agents for important abodes like the Kalacakra temple) assert the tantric prowess of lamas by mandalaizing representations of Buddhas. That is, as in all tantric ritual, here the lama officiant, appropriating the subjectivity of the central deity, transforms the deity's omnipresence into an emanation localized in a specific representation, thus also subordinating him or her to the contemporary event and to those of future acts of worshipful transmission (Tib. nyal ba).

In this sense then, the most important omnipresent divine agent established in rapnay ritual is the incarnate lama, not the deity. Thus we could see the Kalacakra rapnay at the Beijing Ethnic Park as a key countermove on the part of Tibetan lamas in the PRC. As Akhun Tenzin's reverent reference to it years later indicated, it was in part a successful effort to replace the secular market transactional order of the park with a Buddhist mandalaic one. That is, the Kalacakra rapnay ritual was an attempt to displace unmarked secular state authority at the park as the main arbiter of transactions there for that of embodied lamas instead. In effect, after the rapnay ritual, the divine presence of Kalacakra under the auspices of lamas mandated the Zanggu area of the park, reorienting vital hierarchies of divine agencies for Tibetans (thus for example closing off the deity from unregulated viewing and putting the protector Buddha back in their proper peripheral positions guarding the mandala palace of the central deity).

Indeed, as Dr. Gladney reports, during his visits to the park in the fall of 1995, he met with Tibetan monk workers from what must have been one of the first Tibetan contingents at the park after the Zanggu area opened. According to the monks, they were recruited and paid monthly wages (300 yuan/month) like all the other minor workers, but unlike other minor groups represented, Zanggu were represented by a group of fifteen young monks from the great Geluk monasteries of Sera and Drepung in Central Tibet. Most importantly, the monks Gladney spoke with, along with his Yushu park guide, insisted that the Zanggu site, and especially the Kalacakra temple, were "real religious sites." In addition, the monks went further than the tour guide and insisted that the Zanggu area was not part of the park (2004, 46). From this
perspective on transactional orders as people’s efforts to regulate the circulation of values, we would have to see such statements not as mere assertions of “religious” authenticity countering secularizing commodification, but as themselves (counter)circulations of value on behalf of particular Tibetan agendas. The conflict set up for Tibetan participants at the Ethnic Park was not essentially one between religious versus secular realms, but between competing institutions facilitating asymmetrical exchanges across value registers (see Maurer 2006, 22).

To appreciate this, we need to see the cultural politics of Buddhist transactions within a much broader history of South and Inner Asian political economies. As Benevides (2005) points out, the rise of Buddhism from its inception in India has been bound up with centralizing states and shifts to monetized economies. From this angle, we could understand the historical capacity of Buddhist orders to translocalize (to make Buddhism, as some call it now, a “world religion”) as in part due to the capacity of the transactional systems of Buddhist ritual to commoditize different scales of time and space in particularly compelling ways. That is, through the ubiquitous and constant exchanges and circulations of values in Buddhist rituals, Buddhist acts and offerings, just like modern forms of money, operate as hinges between worldly and transcendent spaces, and between short- and long-term transaction orders (Maurer 2006, 24).

This is one way to understand the ongoing and pervasive practice of the pious copy among Tibetans (see Borger 2003, 161; Bentor 1993, 119). The most important aspect of many Buddhist representations for Tibetans was not their authentic originality, but their exchangeability for the long-term and lifetime-transcending reward of karmic merit (Tib. dge po), but also for other mundane and relatively immediate social or bodily values (see Ohrama 2005). Indeed, it was this capacity to offer both transcendent and immediate worldly values mediated and embodied by the incarnate lamas that made Tibetan forms of tantric Buddhism so vital in the political economic transactions of late imperial and Republican-era China (see Tuttle 2005). And this, I would argue, is at least one important reason why Tibetan forms of Buddhism have been so highly amenable to the capitalist reorderings that are part and parcel of its contemporary global appeal.

Thus in the case of deity images, lamas’ tantric rituals does not just render deities present in them, but it also transformed them into potentially Buddhist transactional fields, opening the way to their mediation of the highest values of Buddhist registers of exchange, linking short- and long-term goals (see Bentor 1993, 112). Deities for Tibetans, materially manifest in the image, could be both autonomous agents in exchange as well as relative objects of exchange, depending on the relevant spatiotemporal framework (see Mills

GLOBALIZING THE MANDALA

In effect, in the Kalachakra repose and its wall photo display, Tibetan lamas vied with state officials and private entrepreneurs to attract and channize mobile global capital by appealing to the aspirations and acquisitive desires of both tourist-consumers and patron-investors (see Oakes 1998). In the context of increasingly mobile capital flows and broadening transnational Chinese business networks in the 1990s, we have to consider the particular threat of such Tibetan Buddhist mandalization efforts at the Beijing Ethnic Park.

As Oakes (1998) and Ong (1999) argue, the main conflict in emerging forms of Asian capitalism and modernity is between central PRC state officials and increasingly cosmopolitan Chinese businessmen over the control of both fluid capital and the moral shape and geographic center of a “Greater China” (see Young and Shi 2004). Hence the first major theme parks as sites for the entrenchment of foreign direct investment in the PRC were in Shenzhen, that special zone of precariously unregulated transnational capital, and they were owned by a Hong Kong–based firm (see Hai Ren 2007). The decision a few years later to allow a major ethnic theme park to be built back up north in the nation’s capital could then be seen as part an effort to repackage investment flows to the nation-state’s center in anticipation of the turnover of Hong Kong to CCP rule and the 2000 Olympic bid. And still, as Gladney notes, the PRC Minzu Affairs Commission participated only to approve the construction, while the park itself was established as a profit-seeking joint venture between government units and Hong Kong– and Taiwan-based entrepreneurs (2004, 41).
The entrepreneurial efforts of Tibetan Buddhist lamas to mediate private capital flows from overseas Chinese patrons thus threatened the precarious balance between state and transnational Chinese capitalist interests in such settings. And this process, I argue, was playing out not only abroad, but across Tibetan regions of the PRC by the mid-1990s (see Makley 2007, 2005; Zablotski 2005; Morin 2004). For example, Arjia Tashi, the central trulku at the famous Gelug sect Kundun Monastery in Qinghai, was one of the most prominent Tibetan Buddhist trulku in the PRC in the late 1980s and early 1990s, holding several political appointments in national and Qinghai provincial bureaus. Known especially for his skills in mandala design, as abbot of Kundun in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he designed and built there what is considered to be the largest three-dimensional Kalačakra mandala in the world. He was also particularly active in embracing the mysticism of Tibetanness as an (oppositional) "pedagogy of the people," helping to construct exhibits on Tibetan Buddhism in several Chinese cities.

In addition, in the 1980s and 1990s, increasing numbers of wealthy Han and overseas Chinese urbansites became disciples and patrons of Tibetan lamas in the PRC, a phenomenon that had much to do with the remarkably vigorous reconstruction of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Amdo by the mid-1990s. We could then see the Beijing park’s Kalačakra temple, as well as Arjia Tashi’s museum efforts throughout the PRC, as different bids in Gelug Tibetan lamas’ very successful efforts to expand their “patronage spheres” (Lopez 1998, 206) in the 1990s and thus to globalization of the scope of their mandalaization efforts (see Zablotski 2005; Morin 2004). In this light, the choices of Kalačakra as the mandala temple for the park becomes very significant. This is so because the utopic frameworks offered in the Kalachakra teachings for the triumph of Buddhist authority over multilekhlk lay subjects would seem to be ideally suited for appropriation by Tibetan Buddhist incarnate lamas faced with their compromised positions under the CCP.

Indeed, as one of the few Indian Buddhist tantric lineages that in Tibet came to be associated with mass empowerment ceremonies (in which the lama officiates tens of thousands of people to the mandala), the Kalačakra in recent years has been the preferred transnational order for global mandalaization efforts among Geluk lamas especially, both inside and outside of the PRC. As Lopez (1998, 207) and others have noted, the fourteenth Dalai Lama encouraged its practice in the diaspora in a way to both teach the world about Tibetans and contribute to world peace (see Samuel 1993; 517; Bryant 1993; Kebs 1997; Anderson 1998; Huber 1994b; Zablotski 2005). Beginning in the early 1970s, he has given the Kalachakra mandala and mandalas. Over the past few decades, his audiences have expanded to include hundreds of thousands of attenders from all over the world.\(^\text{7}\)
initiated the ten-year-old Gongtang, expressly charging him with the task of disseminating that lama’s teachings (1995, 4).

Gray Tuttle’s recent work (2005) has shed new light on the later life of the ninth Panchen Lama, himself exiled from central Tibet in the early 1920s after clashing with the Tibetan government in Lhasa ever control of his estates. From Tuttle’s account, at that time of great political upheaval, it seems that the Panchen Lama played crucial roles in collaborating with Chinese Buddhist leaders, and eventually with Chinese government leaders, as well as in helping to organize an unprecedented boom in popular Chinese interest in Tibetan Buddhism by the early 1930s. Key to the Panchen Lama’s politics in Chinese regions as he maneuvered to return to Tibet was his expanding use of mass Kalacakra empowerment rituals. In the face of nationalist gov-
CONCLUSION: THE DANGER OF BEING DEFANGED

In 1994, the Kalacakra temple rapay in the Beijing Ethnic Park took place just weeks before Gongtang Tshang’s mass Kalacakra empowerment began high on Labrang’s Sangskok grasslands. Together, the two events encapsulate well the cultural politics of revitalizing Tibetan Buddhist divinity in post-Mao China. The state violence of the Maoist years and the late 1980s had demonstrated to many Tibetans the precarious status of minority minority identity in the CCP-ruled nation-state. And by the 1990s, the ongoing incursion of Tibetans as Zanggu in the PRC hinged on renewed efforts to domesticate Tibetan masculinity via the allure of a new market secularist “aesthetics of decontextualization.”

While the Ethnic Park in the latter’s capital could be said to be the ultimate transactional order for such state-sponsored projects, Gongtang’s mass Kalacakra was a culmination of Geluk tsulkus’ oppositional mandalaization efforts on an unprecedented scale in Amdo Tibet’s homelands.

In the light of this article’s analysis, we can better appreciate the multiple dangers inherent in Tibetan Buddhist lamas’ various efforts to reassert their tantric prowess under the press of CCP-sponsored capitalism in tourism sites. As before, the main effect of the power of incarnate lamas was to (re)enchant the spatiotemporal frameworks of exchange and circulation and their appropriate agents in a mandalic transactional order under the lama’s all-pervasive presence and authority. But the exigencies of capitalist exchange under a repressive state meant that tsulkus’ oppositional participation could also be the “tragic horse

Figure 5.4. Monks look on at Gongtang’s Kalacakra empowerment ritual on Sangskok grasslands west of Labang, Gansu Prov., China. Tourism brochure photo. Summer 1994.
cens of well-off urbanite consumers and to the political loyalty expected of Tibetans by the state—an absolute dichotomy between apolitical "religion," individual consumption and (legitimate) politics was eminently suited to the exigencies of the post-Mao Chinese state.

Explored and packaged as tourist objects (even though animated by elites), the devoutly protective in the Zangpuk exhibit illustrate well the dislocating of Tibetan Buddhist authority, a process that threatened the foundation of Tibetan monastic revitalization back in Arndos. Despite the heavy pressures of a world geared to global capitalism, the capacity of Tibetan leaders to arbitrate transactional orders for value creation and circulation had been grossly curtailed. Indeed, the everyday pulse of activity in and around the park's Jokhang and Kalacakra temples was not that of lamas, monks, or by-nom-shippers, but that of Han tourists and, importantly, young Tibetan laywomen whose secular aspirations had brought them hundreds of kilometers away from their Arndos homelands to participate. And even though Chinese state leaders seemed absent from the Ethnic Park grounds or from the [2] mandala: order that Arja Tshang was helping to rebuild at Khamsum, it was said by others that the Dalai Lama came to a head in 1995 over the choice of sixteenth incarnation of the Panchen Lama.58

The expansion of Geluk monastic revitalization efforts in Tibetan regions, such as Arja Tshang and Gonggang Tshang in the early 1990s, helps explicite state anxieties over the outcome of the Panchen Lama decision, a process that had dragged on for some five years. While I was in Labrang, state officials' rejection of the Panchen Lama recognition by the Dalai Lama in 1990 and his replacement with a state-arbitrated candidate illustrated to many in state's willingness to radically reorder older patron-preceptor transcendental (see Lopez 1998, 207; Goldenstein 1997). As one monk remarked to me off-the-record during our discussion about Tibetans' avoid interest in the Panchen Lama affair that year, whereas the Qing emperors who donated monasteries to the Dalai Lama in the late 18th century as a way to secure religious power in Tibet had been true believers in Buddhism, so that Tibetans had their monasteries in emulations of the Bodhisattva Manjushri, now the government was just "exploiting religion" (Ch. mongsog zongso). In this context, Arja Tshang discovered that the obligations conferred in his creative CCP-arbitrated transactions of the early 1990s emulated his public worth of the incorporation of religion in a display of his political loyalty to the state. In the end, he found that he had entered into a very different relationship with religious leaders than had his Qing counterparts—in this case, the "calculated ambiguity" of Sino-Tibetan transactions had betrayed him. In his later account of those years, Arja Tshang expresses his great indignation at having been forced to assist the state's recognition ceremony for the Panchen Lama in Lhasa despite his official protest. During the "patriotic education" campaign in Tibetan monasteries launched in the aftermath of the Panchen Lama affair, Arja Tshang and monks at Khamsum, as elsewhere, were required to publicly denounce the Dalai Lama. As he tells it, this was ultimately too close an imposition, which meant "participating in government practices that went against my religion and my personal beliefs" (Liu 2000) and he secretly fled to the United States in 1998, leaving behind the monastic community he had worked so hard to revitalize.54

One of the first things Arja Tshang did when he arrived in the United States was to complete a gorgeous three-dimensional model of the Kalacakra mandala, which he presented to the Dalai Lama. It now resides in another key site for a national pedagogy of the people: the American Smithsonian museum in Washington, D.C.

NOTES
1. Here I agree with Steven Harrell (1995) that the Chinese term minsheng, with its long history of appropriation from Japanese contexts, and its multiple connotations of "race," "ethnicity," "lineage," and "nationality" is virtually untranslatable in English. I thus choose to leave it untranslated.

2. As Frederik Palmén, the ethnologist in charge of the human displays at the 1933 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago put it, "After such a stroll amid the scenes of [native peoples living in their natural habitats] one will visit the other departments of the Exposition . . . with an appreciation which could only be aroused by such contrasts" (cited in Hosley 1991, 348).


4. The Kalacakra temple is also the only conspicuous structure in the park's ticket map that is unlabeled.

5. Note that the photo was captioned in Chinese, not Tibetan. And the name of the preceding traffic had been ripped off. Perhaps the monk's comment that the Lama was new in the United States had something to do with that.

6. Thus as Chua Harris (1999, 83) rightly points out, Tibetans long ago developed forms of mechanical reproduction (the woodblock, the stamp, the stencil) in order to efficiently produce multiple copies of texts, clay tablets or stupas (Tib. noe bu), or stencil paintings of deities and mandalas (Tib. dngos brnyad) as meritorious acts and offerings, as well as objects for sale or for personal exchange.

7. Abraham Zablotski (2002), in his fieldwork in Taiwan in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as did Peter Morris in Nepal (2004), found a surge of interest among Taiwan Chinese in Tibetan forms of Buddhism. He found that most Chinese devotees and popular consumers of Tibetan ritual items were most interested in the tantric ritual efficacy promising worldly wealth and well-being that they associated with Tibetan lamas. Further, in what seems to be an unprecedented development, Zablotski found that it had become common practice for businesses to hire Tibetan Buddhist monks and lamas to perform offering rituals for prosperity on their premises.
8. Arjia Tshering is of Mongolian descent and is recognized as the incarnation of the father of Tsongkhapa (hence his Tibetan title of "A rgya," meaning Father).
9. There is even a website dedicated to the Kalachakra mandala called the International Kalachakra Network.
10. Dandu and Wang (1993, 235) state that in the first half of the twentieth century, the Gesanggo estate included 506 patron households, about 300 acres of land, 3 regions of forests, 600 head horses, 3,000 cattle, 500 sheep, and over 1,000,000 yuan of capital accumulated from trade and loan business (see Zhu Zha 1993; Liu 1993; Der Zhi 1993; Wang 1997).
11. The Panchen Lama gave mass Kalachakras to huge crowds in Inner Mongolia in the late 1970s, he gave another in Beijing in 1931 as "state protector" (Ch. guanxi) within the Forbidden City itself, and another for seventy thousand Chinese students in the erstwhile Chinese Buddhist zone region of Jiangnan (Tuttle 2005, 165).
12. Importantly, the timing of Gesanggo's Kalachakra empowerments, all supposedly given upon the invitation of lay and monastic subjects, coincide with the years building up to the CCP takeover (and the sudden deaths of the fifth Jamyang Simpson) and then the subsequent crackdown on Tibetan resistance to collectivization and property expropriation. According to Wang Yunfeng, Gesanggo gave Kalachakra empowerments in Lhasa and surrounding areas and parts of the monastery in 1942, 1943, 1949 (just a month before PLA troops arrived in the valley), 1956, 1957, and 1958 (1997, 542).
He was arrested two months after his final one.
13. The tenth Panchen Lama, so beloved in Amdo especially for his courageous advocacy of Tibetan issues during the later Maoist years and during the early reform years, died at only age fifty-one in 1983. As I discovered when I arrived in 1993, one of the most popular Tibetan songs at the time was a lament and prayer for the Panchen Lama, grieving over the loss of the tethin and praying for his speedy reincarnation.
14. In the light of the expanding power of Gesanggo Tshering at Labrang during the 1990s, it seems possible that CCP leaders were actually cultivating Arjia Tshering and Khamtso to a regional and national counterweight to Labrang, the erstwhile and revitalizing monastic power center of Amdo. Indeed, by late 1995, Gesanggo had unambiguously refused the state's demand that he himself choose a Panchen Lama. As a consequence, in the late 1990s he was increasingly surveilled, his political positions removed and his movements limited. He passed away in 2001. His incalculable, the seventh Gesanggo trulku, was finally discovered and confirmed by a joint trio-state official commission in 2004.

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Economic Development and the Buddhist-Industrial Complex of Xishuangbanna

Susan K. McCarthy

In late October 2008, an entourage of senior Thai officials visited a Buddhist temple in the village of Manchanman, located in the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture in China’s southwestern province of Yunnan. Manchanman is a village of about five hundred people, all of whom are Dai; the Dai are one of China’s fifty-five minority nationalities and are related to the Tai peoples in Thailand, Laos, and the Shan State of Myanmar. The visit by the Thai officials was no ordinary sightseeing tour. Instead it was a monitoring event during which an envoy of Thailand’s King Bhumibol donated royal vestments, ceremonial objects, and funds for temple upkeep. This was the third such royal donation ceremony held in Xishuangbanna, which many Thais view as an ancestral homeland. In 1998 and 2004 envoys of King Bhumibol donated similar gifts during ceremonies at Xishuangbanna’s Central Buddhist Temple, the most important Buddhist temple in the prefecture and the highest-ranking Theravada temple in China.

Accompanying the Thai entourage this day were several Chinese officials. Among these were Dao Shuren, deputy secretary of the national Buddhist Association and the head of its Yunnan branch; Ai Xiangzai, head of the Minority and Religious Affairs Bureau in Xishuangbanna Prefecture; and Yang Sha, deputy chief of the prefectural government. Also in attendance were eighty-one monks and over a thousand laypeople from Manchanman and nearby communities. The monks chanted sutras, while visiting dignitaries and laypeople made offerings of cash, incense, lotus buds, food, and other objects in addition to the royal gifts. The event was both a religious and a political ceremony, one that reaffirmed Sino-Thai relations. As the deputy chief of the prefecture explained, the ceremony would strengthen communication