



HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 39 | Number 1

Article 30

July 2019

Review of *Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands* edited by Emily T. Yeh and Chris Coggins.

Elsie Love
Portland State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Love, Elsie. 2019. Review of *Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands* edited by Emily T. Yeh and Chris Coggins.. *HIMALAYA* 39(1).

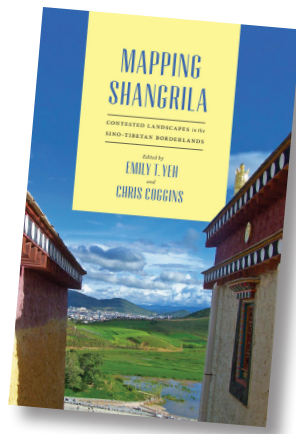
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol39/iss1/30>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.





Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands.

Edited by Emily T. Yeh and Chris Coggins. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014. 332 pages. ISBN 9780295993584

Reviewed by Elsie Love

Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands, edited by Emily Yeh and Chris Coggins, brings the reader into the Sino-Tibetan Shangrilas of the early twenty-first century. In 2002, claiming to have found the imaginary Shangri-La of James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, the People's Republic of China renamed a Yunnan county Shangrila. This Shangrila, along with parts of Sichuan, Qinghai, broader Yunnan, and the Tibetan Autonomous

Region, is now part of the Greater Shangrila Ecotourism Zone. *Mapping Shangrila* explores how what Coggins and Yeh call "shangrilization"—the re-making of Sino-Tibetan identities and landscapes through tourism development—overlaps with processes of ecological state-making and conservation, and with the ongoing evolution of ethnic and environmental subjectivities. As the ten case studies in this volume demonstrate, actors ranging from local Tibetan activists to expatriate conservation workers, from *matsutake* collectors to poets, from animate landscapes' mediums to Han Chinese tourists, are all participating in and negotiating with these processes.

Following a foreword by series editor Stevan Harrell, Yeh and Coggins present the case studies in three sections. They begin each section with a brief introduction, putting the case studies in conversation with one another and framing the section's broader arguments. While each case study can be read on its own, the editors' careful framing makes reading the volume from cover-to-cover a worthwhile endeavor.

Part I, "Shangrilization: Tourism, Landscape, Identity," explores how relationships between identities and landscapes are made and re-made through literature and tourism. Li-hua Ying analyzes the ways in which Tibetan authors use "frontier poetics" to revitalize ethnic identities connected to landscape (p. 27). Ying contrasts these frontier poetics with urban outsiders' literary portrayals of harmonious, multiethnic landscapes that connect visitors to their authentic selves. Expanding on how outsiders experience the region, Chris Vasantkumar examines state-produced tourist literature. He argues that domestic tourism in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands

Mapping Shangrila provides a rich and worthwhile tour through landscapes and identities in flux, through Shangrilas continually being made and remade through local, state, and international imaginings, practices, and governance.

Love on Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands.

creates a Tibetan dreamworld by building on long-standing Chinese traditions of miniaturization. Turning to the theme of exploration, Travis Klingberg takes the reader on three journeys through Yading Nature Reserve. Klingberg shows how through embodied practices, such as photographing scenic sites, domestic tourists engage in “routine discovery” and, in so doing, participate in transforming Yading (p. 93). Read together, these case studies show how shangrilization is “never hegemonic or complete but always in the process of formation,” here through tourists’ and locals’ imaginations, literature, and embodied practices of discovery (p. 25).

The case studies in Part II, “Constructing the Ecological State: Conservation, Commodification, and Resource Governance,” describe complex political ecologies of environmental governance. The first chapter, by environmental sociologist John Aloysius Zinda, and the second chapter, by conservation scientists Robert Moseley and Renee Mullen, both of whom worked for the Nature Conservancy (TNC) in Yunnan, provide two different perspectives on how TNC’s work in Yunnan unfolded during the early 2000s. In the following two chapters, Michael Hathaway explores the transnational linkages of matsutake harvest and consumption, while Michelle Olsgard Stewart contrasts two examples of caterpillar fungus

commons governance. A number of contributors in this and the following section work through the lens of environmental governmentality, or what Arun Agrawal calls environmentalism, highlighting the power dynamics embedded in processes of conservation, regulation, consumption, and environmental knowledge production, and the ways in which these processes in turn shape environmental subjectivities (Arun Agrawal. 2005. *Environmentalism: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects*. Durham: Duke University Press).

Building on Part II’s examination of the governance side of environmental governmentality, Part III, “Contested Landscapes: Harmonious Society and Sovereign Territories,” focuses on changing ethnic and environmental subjectivities. Coggins and Tibetan activist and scholar Gesang Zeren trace how Zeren has combined conservation and traditional Tibetan environmental perspectives. Next, Charlene Makley examines the shifting and power-imbued relationships between *lhawa* (deity mediums), *zhidak* (territorial deities), and local officials. She argues that these relationships show how increasing development has shaped competing understandings of materiality and morality. Yeh concludes the section with an analysis of the precarious emergence and ensuing downfall a new kind of environmental subject, the “Green Tibetan” (p. 255). Together, these

case studies illuminate the always-in-flux relationships between territory, sovereignty, and identity.

This volume will appeal to scholars and practitioners with diverse interests, such as ethnic and ecotourism, borderlands, participatory conservation and development, environmental governmentality, and traditional ecological knowledge. Human geography, environmental anthropology, and environmental studies professors might consider using this volume in a graduate or advanced undergraduate seminar course; it provides a unique opportunity to examine a region through multiple disciplinary and theoretical lenses, setting the stage for fruitful class discussion.

While this volume is particularly valuable precisely because of the diversity of disciplinary perspectives its contributors employ, readers uninitiated in some authors’ chosen theories may find their chapters difficult to decipher. Most authors write in accessible language; however, a few case study authors might heed Moseley and Mullen’s call for the “translation of the critical perspective of modern social theory into understandable language” (p. 148). As Moseley and Mullen point out, such translation can facilitate cross-disciplinary engagement and the application of social scientists’ contributions to conservation and tourism development in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands.

Readers lacking a strong foundation in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands' history and politics will benefit from the editors' work to contextualize the case studies in the introductory sections. However, two minor changes might have made *Mapping Shangrila* even more accessible to such readers. First, while the volume's introduction includes two maps, both are somewhat small. Map 1 depicts case study locations, the Greater Shangrila Ecotourism Zone, and the percentage of the population that is Tibetan, while Map 2 provides a close-up look at the topography and protected areas of southwest Sichuan and northwest Yunnan. Still, I found myself frequently turning to Google Earth, aiming to better situate all of the case study locations on the topography and in relation to one another. Enlarging Map 1 to take up a full one-to-two pages, adding topographic relief, and printing it in color, would make it a more useful tool, particularly for readers who have yet to develop a strong mental map of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands. On a similar note, a brief timeline introducing key policies and events, such as the stages of implementation of the Western Development Strategy and the creation of protected areas, might have helped readers more quickly understand how the case studies fit into broader governance and conservation trajectories.

These very minor critiques aside, *Mapping Shangrila* provides a rich and worthwhile tour through landscapes and identities in flux, through Shangrilas continually being made and remade through local, state, and international imaginings, practices, and governance. Shangrila, as Ralph Litzinger writes in the volume's afterword, began as a "colonial fantasy" but continues to morph into new forms (p. 286). *Mapping Shangrila* demonstrates the essential

role that ethnographic and critical scholarship plays in illuminating the lived realities of these ever-morphing Shangrilas.

Elsie Love is a MA student in the Department of Geography at Portland State University. Her master's research focuses on how government school students in rural Udayapur, Nepal interpret and move between the environmental perspectives they encounter in school and at home.