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Water Politics and Religious Practices in Kangding

Nyimatashi (Gongwei Yang)

This case study examines the use of water in Kangding, China. Kangding is a location in the Kham Himalaya which for centuries served as a strategic border area between Tibetan and Chinese worlds. As the discussion elaborates, an examination of the way that water has been used in the past and in the present demonstrates the dynamism of the religious practices prominent in locations such as Kangding. The study of water, and of the everyday religious practices with which it is associated, also intersects with growing resource management challenges that have come to the forefront during a contemporary period of development and modernization. I suggest that the recent resurgence of religion could deepen our understandings about local knowledge of the natural environment while shedding light on some ideas about its ideal use.

Keywords: Buddhism, environmental protection, water and religion, economic development.

Water, if you do not stir it, will become clear; the mind, left unaltered, will find its own natural peace.

—Tibetan proverb

Introduction

Located at the northern tip of the Himalaya, the city of Kangding in western Sichuan Province, southwest China, is nestled on a steep valley slope, surrounded by three tall, snow-capped mountains. For centuries, irrespective of leadership and political struggles, the way of life in the city was grounded by its proximity to the surrounding natural environment, particularly its fabled rivers and lakes.¹ This relationship related to local expressions of Buddhist teachings, and was nurtured by the numerous Tibetan monasteries in the area. Since the 1990s, the combined processes of rapid economic development (especially urbanization, mass tourism, and hydro-power development) and severe weather fluctuations have threatened to sever the holistic relationship between the residents of Kangding and their natural environment. In addition to severe deforestation, water sources have become polluted, water supply systems have suffered breakdowns, the cost of water has drastically increased, and natural disasters, such as floods, snowstorms and landslides, have plagued the city.

Combining historical texts, religious sources, and Kangding-based survey work conducted in 2012² this case study explores some of the ways in which traditional attitudes towards water and present-day Tibetan Buddhist religious practices engage and respond to the overall processes of development, and the politics of water (mis) management in particular. While additional research on the subject is necessary, I suggest that the recent resurgence of religion, particularly the prevalence of traditional religious ceremonies associated with water, could deepen our understanding about the local knowledge of the natural environment. I hope that this case study can also serve as a first step to reorient the state into considering how local populations traditionally address environmental challenges.

Before elaborating on present-day dynamics, I first provide a brief background of Kangding's history and the place of water in Tibetan Buddhism.

Dartsédo: between China and Tibet

Kangding is a place of many names, including but not limited to Dartsédo (*dar rtse mdo*). It is a location that, for centuries, has been positioned as a strategic border area between Tibetan and Chinese worlds. Located on the eastern side of the Ganze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP) in what is now Sichuan Province, Kangding was a main frontier town between ancient China and Tibet. The Chinese name for the city was Tachienlu. In Tibetan, the city was (and still is) known as Dartsédo, meaning the area between the rivers Dar and Tse.

Prior to the seventeenth century, Dartsédo was the central town of the Chala Kingdom, one of the five kingdoms of eastern Tibet. In the seventeenth century, the Dalai Lama's new Ganden Palace extended its influence over the Tibetan Plateau, including the Chala Kingdom and Dartsédo. The Ganden Palace appointed a commissioner to collect taxes in Dartsédo in 1639. In 1666, the Chala king revolted against this arrangement and made an alliance with the Qing dynasty. In 1671, the Ganden Palace sent troops to conquer the Chala Kingdom and assassinated the king. The following year the Qing retaliated by assassinating the Lhasa commissioner and terminated the Ganden Palace's tax levy in the region. In 1725, the Qing's border with Tibet was redrawn with Chala no longer under the influence of the Ganden Palace; the Chala king assumed taxation power over goods transported from China. In 1729, the Qing administration set up the Tachienlu Ting (Magistrate) in Dartsédo and a city wall was constructed to safeguard the trading town.

It was during this period that Dartsédo flourished as a frontier town, with Tibetan nomads and Chinese traders converging to exchange yak and sheep hide, silver, jewelry, barley, and manufactured goods. The town was also the supply point for expeditions into Tibet. Also, a booming tea trade attracted many merchants who settled in the area and opened shops in the town. By 1895, seventy-nine percent of Sichuan's entire tea export duty to the imperial coffers came from Tachienlu (Wissing 2004). In 1903, Dr. Albert Shelton, a missionary in Tachienlu, described in detail the booming tea-horse trade and the vitality of ethnic contact in this small frontier town.

Tachienlu was like few places on earth, a point where two distinct and mutually antagonistic societies abruptly transitioned. After traveling two thousand miles across the vast bulk of the Chinese Empire, the Sheltons quite suddenly found themselves in the Tibetan world of yaks and Buddhist monks and the snow-covered Himalayas. (Wissing 2004: 23)

In an attempt to strengthen its influence over the region, in 1908 the Qing dynasty set up the Kangding Fu (the seat of government) in Tachienlu. A few years later, in 1911, the Qing's minister Zhao'Erhfeng deposed the Chala king through the 'Gaitu'guiliu' policy.³ Between 1912 and 1934, Kangding became one of the biggest cities in the China and Tibet borderlands. In 1939, Liu'wenhui, one of the Sichuan's provincial warlords defeated in the civil war, withdrew his troops further into the Kham region.⁴ He occupied Kangding city and renovated it as the capital of the short-lived Xi'kang province (1939-1950).⁵ During the Second World War (1937-1945), Kangding was an important trading post for the Kuomintang (KMT) government against Japanese military invasion. In 1950, the city of Kangding was liberated by the Chinese Communist Party. In 1955, the Ganze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP) was established in Si-chuan province of southwestern China, with Kangding as its capital and main urban center.

In addition to its role as the capital of the Ganze prefecture, today Kangding is also the capital of Kangding county which covers an area of 11,125 square kilometers. Kangding county includes three towns—Kangding, Guza, and Xindu'qiao—as well as another eighteen townships. The town of Kangding proper has a mixed population: roughly sixty percent Tibetan, thirty percent Chinese (Han), and ten percent other minorities, such as Qiang, Yi and Hui. The population is segregated, with the Chinese living mainly in the East and the Tibetan living primarily in the western parts of the city.

Tibetan Buddhism and the Intricate Dynamics of Water

Since the late 1980s, there has been a continuous movement to revitalize Tibetan Buddhism in China. Unlike previous centuries, today the historical role of monasteries as guarantors of religious authority, scholastic legitimacy, and institutional centers of traditional instruction has been drastically constrained. Yet, the growing numbers of pilgrimages, offerings to monasteries, local ceremonies and festivals, as well as the resurgence of unconventional religious communities (*chos sgar*), visionary activities, and treasure revelation (*gter ma*) speak to the resilience and adaptive capacity of Tibetan Buddhism in the face of political and economic challenges (Jacoby and Terrone 2009).

The three surviving Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Kangding are Ngachu, Lhamotse, and Dordrak. Although these monasteries belong to different Tibetan Buddhist schools, they all practice an offering ceremony or *chöpa* (*m'chod pa*) daily. This offering ceremony originated from Indian Buddhism and *chöpa* is the Tibetan translation of *puja*, a Sanskrit word associated with meanings such as honor, worship, revere, and venerate. Although the practice was inherited from Indian Buddhism, in Tibetan Buddhism it was elaborated to a greater scale of significance to become a daily routine, accompanying people through their cycle of birth and rebirth. It is performed at various locales, including the monastery, the home, on mountain tops, on passes, on lakesides, at river sources, etc. Offerings could take the form not just of donations and alms, but also of prostration, recitation, meditation, etc. As Makransky (1996: 316) notes “...giving enjoins an obligation upon human and god(s) for reciprocation. It is the act which establishes and maintains helping relationships in all realms.” What is significant about this relationship of reciprocity is that “profound spiritual empowerment requires giving much” (1996: 323).

The *chöpa* usually includes incense, flowers, food, lamps, banners, clothing, music and sutras. However, the most indispensable element of the Tibetan offering is water. This use is legendary and well-known in the history of Tibetan Buddhism: allegedly, as early as the eleventh century, the Indian master Atisha praised the water of Tibet saying that because of its eight good qualities (*yan 'la brgyad*), it could be joyfully offered to the Buddha. He thus sanctioned water offerings or *chöyön*, especially for Tibet as a substitute for other offerings that were difficult to obtain there. Similarly, in the Tibetan Buddhism mythology, many deities are associated with water, and they are believed to play an important role in dispensing fertility and prosperity.

Generally, the *chöpa* offering ceremony in the monastery includes seven material substances, water for drinking, water for washing, flowers, incense, butter lamps, perfume, food, and music. All of these offerings epitomize particular ways to pay respect to the greatness of the Buddha: Clean water symbolizes the offering of drinking and washing water for the Buddha. The offering of flowers represents pleasant colors for the Buddha. Incense is an offering of fragrance. The oil lamp indicates the brightness of the Buddha's teachings. The food symbolizes pleasant taste for the Buddha. The white conch refers to the sweet melody of the Buddha's teaching. In Kangding's monasteries, the *mantra* is the 'auspicious chant' (*bla' mai' mchod pai' cho 'ga*) for the offering ceremony. At the end of the ritual ceremony, the ritual officiant recites the *mantra* “O Ah Hum,” which means “blessing from the body, speech and mind of the Buddha.”

In my research, the abbot (*mkhan'po*) of the Dor'drak monastery emphasized that water in the offering ceremony was not just water that is physically clean in its appearance. It is infused with a religious meaning through the use of the term *dutsi* (*bdud 'rtsi*, Skt. *amrita*), which means 'essence' or 'nectar' and, in this sense, is the essence of pure water offered to the Buddha and other deities. Accordingly, a strict routine is followed: clean water is poured into seven clean and empty bowls from the left to the right; after the ceremony, some of the water is sprinkled to wipe out the external surface. The remaining water can be used to water flowering plants but it is prohibited to drink or use this water for any other purpose. At the end, bowls are dried with a cloth and placed upside down in a straight line on the offering table.

Here it is important to also underscore that the myriad meanings of water speak to the centuries-old synergy between Buddhism and local religion within the Tibetan society. Traditionally, Tibetan society associated water with two distinct yet complementary understandings revealing the connection between water, politics, and religion. In Tibetan linguistics, the character of water is endowed with the meaning 'the king's reign.' The honorific term for water (*chu*) is *chab*. Interestingly, there are a number of compound words using 'chab' associated with political rule, such as the king's reign (*chab 'srid*), official letter (*chab 'yig*, *chab 'shog*), and the king's subjects (*chab 'bangs*, *chab shabs*, *chab 'og*). The homonymic association between water and rulership, imbued the political and cultural meanings of 'chab' speak of the beneficial relationship between the king and his people. In other words, there is an ingrained understanding that the king's care and guidance of his

people should be like the flowing of water (see also Tucci 1995). Similar descriptions about the role of the Chinese emperor can be found in ancient Chinese texts such as the book of rites.

Cosmologically, water is also the habitat of *lu* (*klu*, Skt. *naga*) and other spirits. In Tibet's Bon religion, the outer world has been stratified into three parallel spheres. In some formulations, the sky is the Lar's sphere, the living being's realm is the living being's sphere, the subterranean realm is the Naga's sphere (Skorupski 1981). As *lu* and other spirits live in water, these spirits need to be pacified and people cannot be too careful in their disposal of water. Tibetans therefore sought to establish harmonious relationship with the spirits, gods and other beings in the reciprocity of offering and blessing.

Religion in Kangding Today

Everyday local Tibetan religious activities include offerings, family rituals, and participation in religious festivals. In order to understand more about religious practice in Kangding today, I conducted interviews with fifty Tibetan families in the city in 2012. Of the families surveyed, twenty-eight practiced daily meditative circumambulation. Many of the families would also purchase various religious items such as statues, lamps, bowls, Tibetan scroll paintings (*thang 'ka*), and family shrines on a regular basis. Overall, my impression is that—in the mind of the local residents—engagement in religious activities and participation in various ceremonies and offerings are compatible and run parallel with the processes of modernization and economic development. In this sense, it could be argued that religion has adapted and become intricately linked to the logic of market economy. We elaborate below.

As in many other parts of Tibet, after the 1980s, Kangding experienced a great resurgence in organized religion and religious participation. In a parallel development, this period was also marked by economic reforms and market liberalization. In various ways, religious institutions had to accommodate and adapt to the growing influence of capital market expansion and consumerism. Both the Catholic church and the mosque in Kangding engaged in commercial activities, especially in real estate (the mosque initiated lawsuits against Muslims for illegal occupation of its grounds). In 1997, the Catholic Church was reconstructed as a three-storied brick and stone building, with the ground floor now rented out to commercial establishments. The Buddhist monasteries were not far behind such trends. Capitalizing on the growth of tourism, Ngachu Monastery opened a hotel and teahouse. Lhamotse monastery began

organizing religious and cultural events like Cham dancing to expand its influence among non-Tibetans. Dordrak Monastery refurbished its buildings, and opened *tantra* classes for novice monks. This affected not only the followers of Buddhism, but also Catholics and Muslims.

Water between Religion, Economics, and Politics: Kangding's Present-day Challenges

In the center of Kangding, there is a spring (Ch. *Shui' Jingzhi*) with water originating from the 'five colored' lake in the Lhamotse mountain. In the past, the spring water was re-nowned for its sweetness and cleanliness and *Shui' Jingzhi* was one of the main drinking water sources for the entire city. The water source was also the center point for religious offerings to the *lu* during the annual Spring Festival. According to tradition, on the eve of the festival, local people would scramble for the first gulp of 'lucky' water, which was considered an auspicious blessing for the coming new year. It was also believed that such practices safeguarded the spring water against pollution and there were explicit rules to keep the water clean: for example, dis-carding waste into the stream and cleaning dirt at the spring were prohibited. To my knowledge, the spring has existed since as early as 1921: it is clearly visible on a map dating from this time, with the area marked 'spring water' (*chu' mig kha*) in Tibetan. A small stone shrine to the *lu* was built in the 1930s.

Since 1990, the local government has taken on various initiatives to renovate the spring in an effort to attract more tourists. Whereas it was previously a main water source for the city's population, now the *Shui' Jingzhi* was to become a major tourist attraction. A new platform was built with a Tibetanized incense-burning stupa. Tibetan cultural symbols were painted on two walls, accompanied by a text about the history of *Shui' Jingzhi*. A statue of a Tibetan woman carrying a water bucket on her shoulders was constructed in front of the spring, and a rotating cylinder with Tibetan scripture was installed behind the statue. As urbanization increased, multi-storied buildings, government offices, restaurants, hotels, and shops mushroomed in the *Shui' Jingzhi*'s vicinity.

In 2010, after the construction of a luxury hotel in the vicinity, the volume of water flowing from the spring decreased significantly. Also, people living upstream began washing their clothes and mops; garbage and waste could be seen scattered near the source of the spring water. In the summer, the area around the spring became marked by constant unpleasant odor. Today, local people have long abandoned the habit of drinking water from the spring.

Because the spring is now polluted, locals have reverted to the use of tap instead of spring water for the ceremonial offerings. In my interviews, some people also commented on the contradictions between the city's traditions and current developments: a water-rich area now in dire shortage of water.

In the past, water was not only a natural and necessary part of daily life for local people of Kangding, but also was worshiped as a sacred substance in religious ceremonies. Today, as a natural resource, water is tamed and commercialized—it is used as industrial water, in tourism, etc. In the process of this transformation, a dramatic increase in water-related problems have occurred, including water waste, water pollution, and floods. One way to reconstruct Kangding's holistic environment would be to reintegrate religious ethics into the strategies for environmental protection and sustainable development.

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Endnotes

1. In addition to the two big rivers that run across the city, another 140 rivers and creeks and 184 lakes exist in the surrounding area.
2. Fieldwork was conducted from March 10 to June 26, 2012 in Kangding city. I distributed fifty questionnaires

to Kangding's residents. I also organized semi-structured interviews with ten key informants, and collected a number of life stories that reflected the great changes going on in the city. Another round of research was carried out in July-August 2012.

3. 改土归流 "Replacing the indigenous leaders by government appointed officials."

4. Kham (*kham*s) is a historical region covering a land area largely divided between present-day Tibet Autonomous Region and Sichuan province, with smaller portions located within Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan Provinces of China.

5. Xikang held the status of 'special administrative district' until 1939, when it became an official Chinese province. Its provincial status was nominal and without much cohesion, like most of China's territory during the time of Japanese invasion and civil war.

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