



Wine village in Deqin, Yunnan.
Photo: South China Morning Post

Protecting Sacred Commons:

Balancing Commodity Viticulture Economies with Ecological Health in Shangri-La

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This essay explores a particular kind of local viticulture in Tibetan communities in northwest Yunnan province. While mainstream wineries emphasise modernity at any cost without much concern for the environment, the rural Tibetan grape growers examined in this article pursue an ecologically-friendly agenda meant to protect ‘common’ sacred landscapes. Reasons for this choice include observations of chemical degradation of the land, Buddhist ethics, and new conceptions of how ethnic representation can be exemplified by more ecologically-friendly forms of commodity production.

This essay explores a particular kind of local viticulture in Tibetan communities in China, which is different from mainstream wine industries within the larger Shangri-La area in northwest Yunnan province. While mainstream wineries are based on historical recreations of past missionary work and regional identities, and adopt narratives that emphasise modernity at any cost without much concern for the environment, the rural Tibetan grape growers whom I examine in this article pursue an ecologically friendly agenda meant to protect ‘common’ sacred landscapes. Reasons for this choice include observations of chemical degradation of the land, Buddhist ethics, and new conceptions of how ethnic representation can be exemplified by more ecologically friendly forms of commodity production. Recognition of these problems is meant to create what some villagers call a ‘real Shangri-La or Shambala’, that is a place of divine serenity in Tibetan Buddhism.

While government incentives aimed at supporting an emerging wine industry in Shangri-La through the promotion of new forms of agriculture and commodity schemes for growing grapes have tended to overlook ecological health and sustainability, awareness of such issues can be found among villagers. In some cases, these new state-

based schemes are altered and challenged at the grassroots to promote ecologically sound practices and healthy living meant to protect common landscapes and resources. In Deqin county, the area where I carried out my research, some individuals interested in sustainability and ecological health further adapted viticulture and wine to indigenous cosmologies to protect common sacred lands, which they view as belonging to everyone and worthy of preservation.

Though wine from Deqin county has been marketed as ‘natural’, ‘green’, and ‘ecological’, the emergence of this industry has actually led to widespread use of agricultural chemicals introduced by wine companies and government officials, the effects of which are not lost on local communities. To understand how villagers perceive these changes, in what follows I will analyse how they have developed their own understandings of concepts such as ‘organic’ and ‘ecological’, and how these have been influenced by their Buddhist beliefs and their interest in preserving common sacred space.

I will tell this story through the eyes of Ani Dom, one individual in Deqin county who has become recognised locally and even nationally for his environmental and community work. Given both its local and transnational environmental and religious significance as the home of Khawa Karpo, one of the most sacred mountains in Tibetan Buddhism, Deqin has produced many local environmental activists interested in preserving local cultures and ecosystems. Among them, Ani Dom from Bu Village, the site of a major winery, has dedicated particular attention to viticulture. Over my two years in the field between 2014 and 2016, I visited him and lived in his village on multiple occasions.

Of Sacred Mountains, Buddhism, and Chemicals

I first met Ani Dom in 2014, shortly after

arriving in Bu village. I planned to remain in the village for an extended period of time as it was the site of a large winery and a base for the production of sweet ice wine. On the day of my arrival, after my field assistant and I had made ourselves comfortable in a village home and were chatting with our host there, Ani Dom, an extremely talkative elderly man in a wide-brim hat with a beautiful stand of Tibetan prayer beads (*mala*) in his hand, appeared and explained that he had heard that a foreign visitor had arrived in the village. At that time and during many subsequent visits, I would listen to him talk about the region, the sacred mountain Khawa Karpo, Buddhism, the forest, his previous life as a hunter, and the horrible pollution that was occurring due to the chemicals used in viticulture.

In my days in Bu Village, Ani Dom spent much time telling me about local Buddhist practices and the cosmologies surrounding Khawa Karpo, which is the name of both the mountain and the god after which the place is named. As a Buddhist with a deep reverence for life, the mountain, and the local environment and culture, Ani Dom regularly shared his strong feelings about viticulture and what he perceived as excessive agricultural pollution that was killing the mountain, its spirit, and the surrounding sacred landscape. However, Ani had not always been a Buddhist: it took a near-death and highly spiritual experience to turn him into a believer. Before 1986, he was known throughout Deqin as a great hunter, perhaps the region’s most famous according to his daughter Zhouma. That year, during a twenty-five-day sleepless trance brought on by a heart attack, he dreamed that the spirits of all the animals that he had killed had come back to exact revenge on him. In that vision, the god Khawa Karpo came to his rescue, and he then decided to devote the rest of his life to the preservation of the area. The god told him to throw his hunting dog in the river—which he did—and he also turned in his gun to the police.

Today Ani Dom’s life is quite different,

a matter of unending concern for his own family members and many other villagers in Bu, including the village leaders, who find him a nuisance for interfering in their economic activities in the wine industry. As the village chief explained to me, he really does not get along with Ani Dom due to his resistance against wine companies and their chemicals. As leader of the community, the chief is primarily concerned with income and livelihood, so he does not see anything wrong with the current practices of the wine industry.

A Mini-Environmental Movement in the Making

Today Ani Dom devotes all of his time to working with both international and domestic NGOs to preserve Khawa Karpo and the village environment. He is perhaps best known for his work protecting a sacred old juniper grove in the village, where he has also built a small temple dedicated to the god Khawa Karpo. He was able to do this mostly thanks to funding that he personally collected through donations from NGOs and Buddhist monasteries, but the village as a community also contributed a significant amount to the enterprise. Much of Ani Dom's daily routine involves morning and evening walks to the temple to pray and perform circumambulations around it. These were the times when I would typically join him to discuss his ideas about Buddhist philosophy, conservation, and the changes brought to Deqin by viticulture and other forms of 'modernity'. He had many stories about his work with various environmental and cultural NGOs and his Buddhist teachings, and every day he had something new to share.

During my very first discussion with Ani Dom, he talked extensively about his various projects. He had recently set up a seniors' association to protect both the environment and the grape plantations—the Khawa Karpo

Traditional Knowledge and Ecological Conservation Association. One of the goals of the group was to teach villagers to plant grapes more organically and sustainably. A Hong Kong NGO sent an expert to help Ani Dom set up the organisation and provided some training on sustainable methods to grow grapes. As Ani Dom explained to me, the excessive use of pesticides for the grapes is very bad for walnuts and other fruit trees, and the soil has progressively degraded for many years. This is the reason why he is advocating for organic wine, against the wishes of his fellow villagers. In his own words:

Pesticides are harmful for the air, earth, soil, water, and all other forms of life beyond just humans. To care about these things is what traditional Buddhist philosophies teach us; all life is sacred. Before we planted grapes, our fruit and walnut trees were much healthier and now people even get skin diseases because they don't know how to properly use the pesticides.

When I asked him what he thought about Shangri-La Wine and other local wines that were promoted and marketed as natural and as part of the Tibetan culture, he replied:

Grapes and wine are not part of the traditional Tibetan culture. This culture has been lost to the chemicals and waste that come with grapes. Grapes and wine are from foreigners. The grape production here in Bu village is low, but our quality is good. Buddhism promotes no-killing, so we are working to pilot grapes with no pesticides for people to enjoy.

As for the future of the link between grapes and Tibetan identity in Deqin, he said: 'If the usage of pesticides continues, things will be bad and the soil will be destroyed. I don't think the grape industry is promising for Deqin's future.'

Ani Dom's story is illustrative of a mini-environmental movement that grapes and viticulture have contributed to in Deqin. Some local people fear that most villagers in the region have fallen out of touch with Buddhism and local ecology in their pursuit of economic prosperity through chemically-intensified grape production. Motivated by this overall concern for ecological health and Buddhist ethics, Ani Dom and a few others like him have launched their campaign against agrichemical use in viticulture. Indeed, in recent years they have worked quite actively with the Hong Kong NGO mentioned above to organise special training sessions on organic methods for grape vine care and pest management. To its credit, the NGO in its work with Ani Dom has done extensive research, even bringing experts familiar with organic methods used in Bordeaux to teach to villagers.

Appeasing the Wrath of the Gods

Ani Dom regularly portends that the pollution coming from viticulture makes the god Khawa Karpo very unhappy. Evidence of his wrath includes the retreat of the Minyong Glacier, the mountain's largest. While photo documentation shows that the glacier has been retreating for over eighty years, the rate of retreat continues to increase, which for Ani Dom is certain proof that the god is being harmed by both pollution and lack of devotion. Another example given by villagers of the dramatic consequences of failing to appease the god is a doomed attempt by Chinese and Japanese climbers to reach the summit of the mountain in 1991. Back then, an avalanche killed the entire expedition, a tragedy which was interpreted by local villagers as the response of the god Khawa Karpo to people trying to conquer his sacred domain.

Today, the quality of life and standard

of living in Deqin are heavily driven by economic gains, more specifically by success in producing grapes. Major shifts have also taken place in the cultivation of crops such as wheat and barley, traditionally grown for subsistence and for religious and cultural practices. These are now being abandoned in exchange for more lucrative agricultural products. What is quite clear throughout Deqin, though, is that engagement with outside markets through agriculture and forest products is coming to redefine local perceptions of, and connections to, the Khawa Karpo landscape. In this context, the practices of Ani Dom and a few other villagers represent a form of resistance to these changes, an attempt to maintain a balance with Khawa Karpo and its spirit world to protect these sacred commons.

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