

Truth and Indigenous Cosmopolitics in Shangrila

Abstract

As this article shows, cadres involved in the ‘discovery’ of Shangrila in Yunnan were well aware of the fictional origins of the name. In arguments for changing the name of Zhongdian county to Xianggelila, scientific facts were coupled with literary truths about the Shangri-La of the 1930s novel *Lost Horizon*, grounded in material reality. In their efforts to make Shangrila meaningful locally, cadres associated Shangrila with the hidden land of Shambhala, appealing to a spiritual reality ultimately knowable only to visionaries. We can thus talk about three different logics of truth (scientific, literary and visionary) and two different realities (material and spiritual) of concern to the ‘making up’ of Shangrila.

Key words: truth; reality; fictional; scientific; visionary; genre; spiritual; virtual

Introduction

When the Chinese State Council gave its approval to rename Northwest Yunnan’s Zhongdian county Xianggelila (the pinyin spelling of Shangrila), this was the result of a fiercely contested lobbying effort on the part of the prefecture’s cadres, headed by an ethnic Tibetan named Qi Zhala. Then governor of Diqing (Tibetan: *bde chen*) prefecture, Qi Zhala was born in the old town of the capital of Zhongdian (Tibetan: *rgyal thang*), later renovated to become an ethno-cultural showcase for tourists.

Key to the name-changing endeavor was to establish beyond a doubt that Diqing prefecture was the location of Shangrila, or the site that inspired the British author James Hilton when he wrote his novel *Lost Horizon* (1933) in which the name Shangrila (or Shangri-La) was coined. In addition to countering the claims of their rivals, the lobbying cadres had to convince authorities of the Communist state that a

Tibetan area, known as a feudal theocracy prior to its ‘Peaceful Liberation’, could safely be represented as an earthly paradise and source of eternal youth.

While studies of the politics surrounding the discovery of Shangrila in northwest Yunnan tend to highlight tourism governance and sustainability challenges (Cater 2001, Hillman 2003, Yeh and Coggins 2014), the present study takes a different approach, considering the discovery of Shangrila as an opportunity to examine negotiations over truth-claims as a form of indigenous cosmopolitics (De la Cadena 2010, Stengers 2005, 2011). The politics of the discovery of Shangrila is thus seen as *pluriversal*, in the sense that stakeholders trying to establish the true location of Shangrila drew variously on different logics of truth-telling; literary, scientific and visionary, in which truth was constituted differently. As will be explained, local cadres and commissioned experts were concerned with scientifically proving the ‘true’ location of Hilton’s Shangri-La during the lobbying process, studying the novel *Lost Horizon* carefully to find similarities between the local topography and the scenery in the book. Local cadres would simultaneously make reference to the hidden land of Shambhala in their efforts to make Shangrila meaningful to the county’s own inhabitants. The cadres thus adhered to explicitly scientific methods in the reports that accompanied the name change application, though their point of reference was a work of fiction. Simultaneously, they worked within a very different logic, or what I will call ‘genre’ of truth, in their efforts to establish an authoritative or credible account of the new name that might be accepted as such locally, especially in the eyes of the Tibetan population.

The term ‘genre’ is used here in the sense of recognizable patterns of communicative practices. I argue that the naming of Shangrila gave rise to local debates in which a key issue was the authority to name, and that the ‘truth’ in these

debates should be understood as the authoritative account, contingent on the narrator as well as the form and content of the narrative. As Alessandro Duranti (1993: 236) suggests, truth should be seen as a process ‘whereby members of a given society produce acceptable versions of reality [...] embedded in local theories of what constitutes an acceptable account and who is entitled to tell the facts and assess their value and consequences’. Citing Michel Foucault (1973, 1980, 1989), Duranti (ibid.) refers to the definition of truth as ‘part of the local technology of power’ and ‘part of the battlefield where the social system is tested’. This approach is significant in that it shifts the question from ‘what is truth?’ to ‘how is truth produced?’ which invariably highlights contests over definitional power,- especially the power to define what truth really is or should be. A key contribution of Foucault was thus to reframe the analysis to truth ‘in the making’, or the discursive construction of truth(s) by the power of persuasion as well as force, and later to redirect attention to the ‘fearless’ truth-teller in the genealogy of the critical tradition (Foucault 2001).

Unlike Foucault’s account of the ‘fearless’ truth-teller in his discussion of Parrhesia (Foucault 2001), the view of truth as a matter of genre opens up for an unproblematic coexistence of multiple truths, or truth-telling in the plural, in which the truth-teller derives his or her authority, recognition or reputation from different sources depending on the genre. Multiple truths can thus be told credibly, and verified or validated, each within their own separate logic, without incommensurability problems arising. Within the scientific genre, facts are decisive, and the narrator’s authority relies primarily on his or her ability to produce verifiable evidence, though a degree or recognition as an expert usually helps. Within the genre of fiction, literary truth or plausibility is a key criterion of good story-telling, while internal consistency within a literary work is an important tool in convincing the reader that the plot of the

narrative is plausible. This is often secondary to the question of whether or not the fictional story could have happened in real life. Within what I refer to here as the visionary genre, the authority of the truth-teller lies in the identity of the visionary, and the truth is contingent on the recognition, accomplishment or reputation (Tibetan: *gtam*) of the visionary, who is most often a reincarnate lama (Tibetan: *sprul sku*).

As the cadres developed their Shangrila story for government and tourist consumption, it was difficult to ignore a recent surge of interest in the land of Shambhala among Diqing Tibetans. A prophecy (Tibetan: *lung bstan*) was being circulated, spreading from Tibetan communities in India, Nepal and the West, to Tibetans within the PRC, including Diqing. The story was not only spreading by word of mouth, it was also disseminated over the Internet and through widely distributed videos. The key elements of the new prophecy about Shambhala were as follows: In the future there will be increasing conflict, and two great powers will engage in warfare, one good and one evil. After the evil power has won the battle, it will be the only remaining superpower. Subsequently the Buddhist people of Shambhala will rise up against this superpower, led by the Panchen Lama. The technology of Shambhala is not developed as in the modern world. However, the people of Shambhala control the forces of nature, and in this way they are able to win the battle. Finally, Buddhism prevails in the entire world, and Shambhala becomes a true land of happiness. Significantly, this prophecy was pronounced by several reincarnate lamas living outside Tibet, regarded as highly accomplished, who provided detailed descriptions of Shambhala after having made visits to the realm in visionary travels.

Cadres involved in the 'discovery' of Shangrila were familiar with this prophecy, and so were the local reincarnate lamas whom they would consult. Nevertheless, in their official arguments for the name change they made no mention

of Shambhala, but adhered strictly to science and literary truth. Their reports were thus grounded within the explicitly atheist Communist structure of authority which would reject as superstition (Chinese: *míxìn*) any belief in the magical (see Anagnost 1987) or in a spiritual reality such as Shambhala. As will be explained, we can thus talk about three different truths and two different realities of concern to the discovery or ‘making up’ of Shangrila in northwest Yunnan.

By investigating the politics of truth-telling, this study complements existing literature on the discovery and mapping of Shangrila, simultaneously offering new insight into indigenous cosmopolitics. The term cosmopolitics re-envisages politics as ‘a relation of disagreement among worlds’ (De la Cadena 2010: 346), in which ‘cosmos refers to the unknown constituted by these multiple, divergent worlds and to the articulation of which they would eventually be capable’ (Stengers 2005: 995). For Stengers (2011: 359), ‘The cosmopolitical question is not about “reenchantment of the world” but the coexistence of disparate technical practices corresponding to distinct forms of reciprocal capture, characterized by different logical constraints and different syntaxes.’ This describes perfectly what is going on with the multiplicity of disparate coexisting logics of truth-telling in Shangrila.

The discovery of Shangrila

In December 2001 the Chinese State Council approved an application from local authorities to change the name of Zhongdian county to Xianggelila (hereafter Shangrila). The original Shangri-La was the name of a monastery invented by the British author James Hilton when he wrote his best-selling novel *Lost Horizon* (1933). In 1937 Hollywood director Frank Capra made a film adaptation of the novel, and since then the name Shangri-La or Shangrila has been associated with a wide variety

of constructions, enterprises, products and productions, including numerous pop songs and albums, hotels and tourist resorts, and even a US presidential retreat (now known as Camp David). Reference to Shangrila has been widespread in the marketing of tourism south of the Himalayas, and became equally popular as a branding device in the later development of tourism in Tibet. Popular as the name may be, the official renaming of a place as Shangrila is (so far at least) unique to China (Cater 2001, Hillman 2003, Kolås 2007, Yeh and Coggins 2014).

The discovery of Shangrila in Diqing prefecture was the result of years of competition between Zhongdian county and several rivals among neighboring administrative units, particularly the bordering Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County.¹ Other contenders to the name of Shangrila were Muli (Tibetan: *rmi li*), Derong (*sde rong*) and Xiangcheng (*cha phreng*) counties, all designated as Tibetan and all in Sichuan province. Hilton himself never revealed the ‘location’ of Shangri-La, or the sources he had drawn on when writing his novel. It is probable, however, that Hilton had read the accounts of American and European travelers to Tibet, and especially a series of articles in *National Geographic* magazine written by the Austrian-American botanist Joseph Rock, published in the 1920s and early 1930s.²

The transformation of an imaginary site described in a novel into an administrative unit highlights the potential collision between bureaucratic formalism and administrative requirements on the one hand, and the creativity of applied fiction on the other. On a practical level, it is difficult for administrators to deal with a

¹ By the mid-1990s Lijiang was already a well-established tourist site. In 1996 the town was hit by an earthquake which damaged many of the old houses, but a new boost to the travel industry came in 1997 when the old town of Lijiang was added to the UNESCO list of World Heritage sites.

² Rock lived in the Lijiang area on and off for more than 20 years, between 1922 and 1949, and traveled extensively all over eastern Tibet. He visited and wrote about places such as the Amnye Machen Range, Mount Minya Gonkar, the kingdom of Muli and Chone Monastery, as well as Mount Khawa Karpo in present-day Diqing (see Kolås 2007).

number of different places carrying the same name, and it was obvious to the rivaling parties that if Shangrila was to become an official name, it had to be identified in a unique location. It was simple logic that the Shangrila label and the ensuing commercial benefits would be monopolized by the winner of this contest. If the higher-level authorities were worried about the local rivalry, the easiest way out would have been to deny all requests for a formal name change. As we know, this did not happen, and Zhongdian eventually won the ‘race’ in 2001.

In the lobbying effort for the renaming, Diqing prefecture and Zhongdian county officials made use of every promotion opportunity and drew on all their contacts and networks of patronage. Among the key achievements was a 1996 investigation tour to search for Shangrila, organized for a group of Singapore reporters, and representatives of the Singapore State Broadcasting Company, Yunnan Overseas Tourism Company, Yunnan Airlines and the Singapore Tourism Board. According to the prefecture yearbook for 1997-98, when the tour was completed ‘all members of the group undoubtedly recognized that Shangrila is in Diqing’ (Si 1998: 160). The officials followed up this success story by establishing an interdepartmental ‘expert group’ to conduct comprehensive ‘scientific studies’ of the location of Shangrila. The Tibetan Studies Office (Chinese: *Zàng xué yán jiù bàn gōng*) under the prefecture government played an important role in these efforts.

In order to credibly identify Zhongdian as the ‘true Shangrila’, a key task of the expert group was to document similarities between the Diqing area and the setting of Shangri-La in *Lost Horizon*. For this purpose they read the novel carefully (in several Chinese translations),³ taking note of geographical features such as the three

³ A Chinese translation of *Lost Horizon* was already available from a Taiwanese publishing house when the first PRC translation, *Xianggelila*, was published in 1991 by Guangdong Tourism Press. In 2000, a second PRC translation was published by Haitian Publishing House, entitled *Xiaoshide dipingxian*.

rivers running through the area, the characteristics of the novel's Valley of the Blue Moon and the snowcapped mountain towering above. The three rivers of *Lost Horizon* were easily identified, since the Nu (Chinese: *Nujiang*), Mekong (*Lancang*) and Golden Sand (*Jinsha*) all run through Diqing. The mountain in Hilton's novel was assumed to be Khawa Karpo (Tibetan: *Kha ba dkar po*). In *Lost Horizon* the hero of the story is taken to Shangri-La after the airplane he is traveling in crashes in the mountains. The expert group documented that an airplane (an American transport plane) did indeed crash in Zhongdian as well, although not until World War II, years after the novel was published.

As for the social context, the experts had no trouble establishing that Diqing prefecture, just like Hilton's Valley of the Blue Moon, is a 'multicultural and multiethnic area' (Chinese: *duo wenhua duo minzu de difang*). They also argued that Diqing is a 'multi-religious area' where adherents of Tibetan Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and the Naxi Dongba religion 'live harmoniously together', just as Hilton suggested. When I interviewed the prefecture governor and leaders of the Tourism Department and the Tibetan Studies Office, they had different views on the 'real-life equivalent' of Hilton's Shangri-La monastery. Some associated it with Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, especially Gaden Songtseling (Tibetan: *dga' ldan srong btsan gling*) and Dondrupling (*Don grub gling*) while others reasoned that since the abbot of Shangri-La was a Catholic monk, Cizhong Catholic Church was the best match.

In addition to documenting the similarities between Hilton's novel and the Diqing area, the team of government cadres assembling the evidence initiated a linguistic study to establish whether the word 'Shangrila' might be associated with a local Tibetan expression. This study was carried out by the Tibetan Studies Office, affiliated with Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, lending it scholarly clout. It

concluded that in the local dialect the Tibetan term ‘semkyinyinda’, meaning ‘sun and moon’ (*nyi ma zla ba*) ‘of the heart/mind’ (*sems kyi*), was once pronounced ‘shangelila’ and used as an expression for saying goodbye. As described in the *Shangrila Guide’s Handbook*:

According to the specialists, academics and scholars, their research provided proof that in the Tibetan dialect, Shangrila means the sun and moon of the heart. This is how the English word Shangrila is pronounced in the Tibetan dialect of Zhongdian. [...] It was thus proven in detail that Shangrila was in fact in Diqing. It was proven that James Hilton used Diqing as a model to write *Lost Horizon* (*Xiaoshide dipingxian*). (Lean 2000: 6-7)

The name Semkyinyinda, which was hence coined as the new Tibetan name for Shangrila, was promoted in the subsequent speeches and writings of the cadres, who also made efforts to associate Hilton’s Valley of the Blue Moon with local place names, giving rise to some extraordinarily creative reinterpretations of history (c.f. Lean, Yang and Zhou 1999).

The facts assembled, Diqing prefecture officials were ready to make their next move, which they scheduled for the 40th Anniversary of the founding of Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. This was to be celebrated on 13 September 1997. To coincide with the anniversary, Diqing was hosting the second Khamba Regional Arts Festival, which brought together Tibetans from all of Kham, comprising Diqing in Yunnan, eastern areas of the Tibet Autonomous Region, Yushu prefecture in Qinghai and Tibetan areas in Sichuan province. The festival was a grand event staged at the racecourse, and included dance performances, horse racing and even a fashion show with models heavily dressed up in ‘traditional Tibetan’ costumes. As a government-sponsored and official cultural event, representatives of all the areas competing for the

Shangrila name were naturally invited as guests of the prefecture. The vice governor of Yunnan, Dai Guanglu, was the most high-ranking official present, and the key speaker at the anniversary celebration. It was no small victory for the local cadres when Dai Guanglu announced, in front of all their contenders, that ‘Shangrila had been found in Diqing’. After the speech was delivered, Diqing governor Qi Zhala and his team immediately staged several press conferences to secure media coverage, declaring that the lost paradise of Shangrila had now been found, and (not the least) that the Yunnan provincial authorities had certified that it was in Diqing. With the province thus recruited as a stakeholder in the Shangrila competition, approval from the central government was within reach.

The Shangrila story propagated by the officials was, of course, in perfect agreement with the state’s key ideological approach towards ethnic minorities (Chinese: *shaoshu minzu*), epitomized in the concept of ‘unity among nationalities’ (*minzu tuanjie*). The very essence of Shangrila, as explicated by the officials, was harmonious co-existence and ‘eternal harmony between people and nature, harmony between the world of the heart and the world of outward appearance, and harmony among peoples’ (Lean 2000: 6-7). The Shangrila story that was constructed by the lobbying cadres and their allies drew not only on their creative reinterpretation of *Lost Horizon*, but also on the well-known story of another hidden paradise: the ‘otherworldly peach garden’ (Shiwai Taoyuan) described in the classical Chinese story *Peach Blossom Spring* (*Taohua yuan ji*).⁴ This story is about the discovery of a beautiful hidden land, where people live harmonious, simple lives and happiness prevails. As with the Valley of the Blue Moon, Shiwai Taoyuan is a land in which the inhabitants have chosen voluntary isolation so as to keep their home protected from

⁴ The author of *Taohua yuan ji*, Tao Yuanming, lived c. 365-427 AD.

the evil forces of the outside world. The ‘otherworldly peach garden’ can also be seen as an alternative utopian world, and the story itself as an expression of a utopian longing or desire for a better way of living (Levitas 2013). Those of my interviewees who compared Shangrila with Shiwai Taoyuan pointed out the similarities between the hidden lands of *Lost Horizon* and *Taohua yuan ji*, suggesting that the Chinese classic was a possible source of inspiration for James Hilton.

In the Shangrila story that was propagated to local audiences, the cadres also made frequent references to the land of Shambhala (known in Tibetan as *bde 'byung*, or ‘source of bliss’), a land where Buddhism prevails, and where all struggle, conflict and suffering has been eliminated (see Oppitz 1974).⁵ Originating from Sanskrit literature, the story of Shambhala was first introduced to Tibetans as a part of the Wheel of Time (Sanskrit: *Kalacakra*) tradition, which has now become well-known to Western audiences thanks to frequent public displays of the art of sand mandala making around the world. Mandalas can be seen as ‘maps’ of sacred realms (see for instance Buffetrille 1998), and certain mandalas, whether made in sand or other materials, are known as manifestations of the land of Shambhala.

The making of mandalas (Tibetan: *dbang'khor*; literally ‘power circle’) has a long history in the monasteries of Diqing, as in other parts of Tibet. This art has been revived since the 1990s in the larger monasteries. As of 2002, monks in these monasteries were making several different types of sand mandalas during special occasions, and according to them, the nine-level mandala (local Tibetan: *gyinkhor*) is a manifestation of Shambhala. However, outside the monasteries, most people were

⁵ The first European reference to Shambhala is generally believed to have been made by the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries Joao Cabral and Estevao Cacella, who referred to ‘Xembala’ in their letters of 1627, while Alexander Csoma de Körös made the first reference in English in 1833 (Lopez 1998: 267).

more familiar with contemporary song lyrics associating Shambhala with the mandala, especially a very popular song named ‘Shambhala dbang’khor’.

The idea that the name Shangrila was associated with Shambhala was a recurrent theme among Tibetan cadres and entrepreneurs, evident in the names they gave their enterprises as well as the promotional materials they produced. For instance, a reincarnate lama affiliated with the Tibetan Medicine Factory had plans to build a new theme park, which was to be named ‘Shambhala Cultural Garden’ (Chinese: *Shangbala Wenhua Yuan*). Other examples include the private housing complex ‘Shambhalingka’ (‘Shambhala Park’), the NGO ‘Shangba-La Folk Environment Protection Association’, and the ‘Shambhala Farm’ community nature reserve. An image of the ‘land of Shambhala’ was also at the center of a giant *thangka* painting, claimed to be the world’s largest, which was made by the Tibetan Medicine Factory and displayed during the 2002 name changing celebration. And out of three huge billboards put up by local authorities along the road approaching the airport, one of them, depicting beautiful scenery, carried the Tibetan inscription ‘Gyalthang County, Shambhala’.

Names and naming

While entrepreneurs were busily (re)inventing Shangrila for the sake of tourism, local Tibetans were slowly coming to grips with the new Tibetan name of their county, Semkyinyinda. Many reacted with seeming indifference, making remarks such as ‘we farmers don’t understand this name’. Others sought to revive the old Tibetan name of the county, Gyalthang (Tibetan: *rgyal thang*), meaning ‘victory plain’, marking the place as the site of an historical battle. Implicitly arguing against the name Zhongdian, the local government’s expert group on the name change interpreted its meaning as

‘loyalty’ (Chinese: *zhong*) ‘to Naxi feudal lords’. As stated in the expert group’s report, these feudal lords ruled the area during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD) and suppressed the local Tibetans.⁶ The Naxi ‘lords’ in question were the kings or chieftains (*tusi*) of the Mu family, rulers of the kingdom of Jiang under the auspices of the Ming Emperor. Their troops invaded Gyalthang in the late 15th century and challenged Tibetan forces to the north during the 16th century.⁷ As described to me by Wang Xiaosong (*Tshe ring dbang ’dus*), then head of the Tibetan Studies Office, the king of Mu once tried to build a temple on an island in the middle of Zhongdian’s Bitan Lake. The plan failed because the ship carrying the tiles sank, and this was considered a sign of bad luck. Even after the Mu family lost its formal power in the 18th century, Lijiang remained the administrative center of northwest Yunnan. During the Republican period, Lijiang Prefecture included Zhongdian and Weixi counties, and rule from Lijiang continued for several years after the 1950 ‘Peaceful Liberation’.

When the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture was founded in northwest Yunnan in 1957, it was given the name Diqing. This is a Chinese transliteration of the Tibetan *bde chen*, meaning ‘great bliss’. The same name was also given to the prefecture’s northernmost county, Deqin (though with a different Chinese spelling). The naming was done by Sangmu Lama (Chinese: *Samo huofu*), a prominent reincarnate lama of Songtseling Monastery. When the Preparatory Committee for the founding of the

⁶ Zhongdian xian gengming wei Xianggelila xian de zhuanjia zhulun yijian [Opinion of the group of experts on the name change from Zhongdian county to Shangrila county], Zhongdian county document, cited in Hillman (2003: 177).

⁷ By the early 17th century, the Mu family had become followers of the Kagyu Karmapas, and received the Tenth Karmapa as their guest when he had to flee from the Qoshot Mongol army of Gushri Khan, ally of the Fifth Dalai Lama. In 1667, Qoshot Mongol forces made their way into Gyalthang, conquering the area on behalf of the Fifth Dalai Lama and forcing adherents of the Karmapa and Nyingmapa schools to convert to the Gelugpa school (China Intercontinental Press 1997: 42). Following this, several Gelugpa monasteries were built, including Songtseling, Dechenling and Dondrupling. Challenging the Gelugpa, Mu troops moved northwards again, reaching as far as Barkham. Despite these clashes, a later Mu chieftain sponsored the building of an assembly hall for one of Songtseling’s eight monastic colleges, again playing the role of patron of religion.

Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture was established in 1954, Sangmu Lama was appointed as the chairman of the committee. As a skilled practitioner of Tibetan medicine, he received many patients seeking cures for diseases. When Tibetan interviewees described the name of the prefecture as auspicious, the importance of Sangmu Lama was a recurring theme. The founding of a new ‘Tibetan’ prefecture and the separation of Zhongdian from Lijiang also brought an end to Naxi domination. This was a popular move among Tibetan elites who gained new opportunities in the name of autonomy.

The power to name administrative units is held by the state. In China, state representatives have often imposed place names on locals without seeking their consent, as happened with the naming of Zhongdian, and later with the naming (and renaming) of townships and villages throughout the area (see Kolås 2004, 2007). At other times the state has ostensibly awarded the power of naming to the ‘people’, as it did with the original naming of Diqing and the renaming of Zhongdian as Shangrila. The naming of Shangrila was of course a matter of tourism development (see Cater 2001, Hillman 2003, Yeh and Coggins 2014). However, there was much more than tourism at stake for the local Tibetan elites involved in the renaming, there was also the important issue of legitimacy.

While the cadres involved in the renaming were confident about the economic benefits of tourism, they were also aware of their own role as political entrepreneurs, and as such they wanted the new name and their involvement in the renaming process to be accepted as legitimate by the general public. Therefore, it was not enough to negotiate the legitimacy of the new name with the higher authorities of the state, it was also necessary to debate and discuss it with the local constituency, the people of the county. In looking at this dual negotiation process, it is evident that different

techniques of truth-telling were brought into action, corresponding to different genres of truth, each with its own source of authority. As in the days of the founding of Diqing prefecture, the authority of reincarnate lamas was drawn upon to justify the name change to the general public. In this regard, the prophecy of Shambhala could not be ignored. Meanwhile, the application for the name change drew exclusively on scholarly authority (in the natural and social sciences as well as literary studies), as scientific findings were compiled to convince state agents of the legitimacy of the name change. There were thus multiple truth-claims within different genres of truth related to different authorities. Nevertheless, these were easily reconciled because different ontological realities or worlds were at stake (see Salmond 2014). This of course meant that the spiritual reality of Shambhala had no place in the application for the name change, which was based entirely on establishing the ‘true’ location of Shangrila in the material world.

Truth and genre

Anthropologists such as Clifford and Marcus (1986), Marcus and Fischer (1986) and Rosaldo (1987) were once at the forefront of a critical re-examination of the literary production of ethnographic texts, drawing on discourse analysis and genre theory. Despite that anthropology has since been replete with works on narrative, discourse and social construction (ethnographic as well as self-reflexive), genre theory has not been applied to emic constructions of truth-telling as a way to elucidate indigenous cosmopolitics. This gap will be addressed here by exploring multiple truths and pluriversal truth-telling about Shangrila through the lens of genre theory.

As sociologists of knowledge have made evident, a key issue in debates about the nature of truth is whether it is to be defined as singular, and solely dependent on

the relationship between language and the world, or as some theorists would have it, contingent on genres that are dynamic, historically and culturally contextual, and embedded in social action (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995, Gunthner and Knoblauch 1995, Miller 1984). Genre theory has moreover been applied to the analysis of differences in textual truths between, for instance, scientific works, journalism, works of fiction and poetry, and to the study of similar differences between (and within) audio-visual genres such as news broadcasts, documentaries, reality TV series and feature films, in which reality or truth is governed by different conventions or criteria (see for instance Ellis 1992, 2000, Ryan 2001).

The making or production of truth is a key issue in the science of knowledge, as illustrated by the debate between postmodern constructivism and the positivist tradition. The mid-1990s 'Sokal controversy' marked a peak in this debate, sparked by an essay written by the physicist Alan Sokal and published in the critical theory journal *Social Text*. The essay argued that physical reality no less than social reality is at bottom a social and linguistic construct, that scientific knowledge is not objective but reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it, and that the truth-claims of science are inherently self-referential (Sokal 1996: 217-218). Soon after the article was published, the author revealed that he was actually an adversary of postmodernism and had submitted the article as a hoax. In discussing the subsequent controversy, Ryan (1998: 813) perceptively points out that both the defenders of correspondence theory (including Sokal himself) and their postmodern critics share one basic assumption: 'both subject myth and science to a unique concept of truth and a unique mode of evaluation'. What Ryan (1998) proposes, and which will be applied in the present analysis, is to consider the application of different standards or criteria of truth and validity to different types of

text. Returning to the questions posed by Duranti (1993), I will here examine indigenous notions of what constitutes acceptable and true accounts, and who is entitled to tell them.

The expert group on the Shangri-la name change worked, as explicitly stated in their mandate, within the realm of science. Although the scientific account was by no means ‘restricted’ to those who were educated, in this case the scholarly credentials (including university degrees) of the members of the group, and their appointment by the government as ‘experts’ provided authority to the group. This not only entitled but even required them to give their views on the facts. To pass as acceptable accounts, their studies required the compilation of hard evidence. As the educated peers of the expert group were well aware, this meant that all data needed to be documented and verifiable, and that written sources should be properly referenced. Whether or not the expert group passed these criteria was an issue of debate, and those who disagreed were often very vocal about it. For instance, it did not go unnoticed that the crash of an American transport plane in Zhongdian took place only *after* the novel was published (see Chén Jùnming n.d.).

As for the fictional genre, local cadres were obviously engaged in a creative (re)interpretation of *Lost Horizon*, explicating and building on the story of Shangri-La in their speeches, statements to the press and written texts. In addition to *Lost Horizon*, another significant literary source in this endeavor was *Peach Blossom Spring* (*Taohua yuan ji*), which figures in the Chinese literary canon as one of the best-known works of classical literature, and is included in numerous anthologies as well as in school textbooks. Knowledge of the literature, which of course requires literacy in Chinese, was the key condition for joining the (re)interpretative venture, which many also did. During my fieldwork it was indeed clear that *Lost Horizon* had

become a popular book in Shangrila, and not only among government employees, but also among the general reading public or educated elites.

The credibility of prophecies about Shambhala would depend on the spiritual authority of the person receiving it, and primarily on the status of the narrator or visionary as a reincarnate lama. The spiritual travels that give insight into the realm of Shambhala rely primarily on spiritual (or karmic) accomplishment, which is also necessary for a reincarnate lama to control his own rebirth. Such a lama ‘prophet’ can know the future (and the past and present) in a very different way than the oracle who embodies and gives voice to a deity or spirit in a state of trance, and whose utterances have to be interpreted as a prediction. As different from the ‘visionary’ lama, an oracle (as well as a person who is spontaneously possessed by spirits) is unable to recount visions of otherworldly places (see also Bellezza 2005).⁸

In public, Diqing officials would typically relate to both Shambhala and Shiwai Taoyuan as fictional places, in line with the required scientific (or non-superstitious) view of the world. As such, the principle difference between Shambhala and Shiwai Taoyuan was that the former was described in a Tibetan Buddhist text, while the latter was depicted in a classical work of Chinese literature.⁹ The Diqing Tibetan general public took a much greater interest in Shambhala than in Shiwai Taoyuan, as expressed in vigorous debates on the relationship between Shangrila and Shambhala among my informants (see also Maconi 2007). Whereas some thought of Shambhala as an actual place (whether at present or in the future), others argued that Shambhala is an ideal or utopian place (‘a place you can try to make real’), and there

⁸ I have witnessed both a recognized oracle in trance (in 1999) and an individual entering a state of trance spontaneously (in 1992), both at public gatherings. My interpretation here is based on the explanations given to me by Tibetans who were present during the events.

⁹ Interestingly, *Peach Blossom Spring* is categorized in Chinese literary studies as a historical record (Chinese: *chi*) rather than a work of poetry or prose.

were also those who maintained that Shambhala exists in an otherworldly or spiritual realm; ‘not a place on earth, where humans live, but a place where the gods live’.

According to one line of argument, the Kalachakra text locates Shambhala geographically (i.e. in the material world) to the north of the Himalayas, corresponding to present-day Tibet, and since Shambhala includes all of Tibet, it would not have been right to give Gyalthang the name Shambhala. However, others were of the opinion that the county should have been named Shambhala in Tibetan. Several arguments were provided to support this view. Firstly, (where science meets fiction) the legend of Shambhala was allegedly known to James Hilton, and the name Shangri-La was chosen by Hilton specifically to allude to Shambhala. Secondly, (where science meets the visionary) the name Gyalthang (*rgyal thang*), or ‘victory plain’, is the battlefield referred to in the prophecy of Shambhala, and Shangri-La is therefore the true Shambhala. Interestingly, in this argument the future battlefield of the prophecy seems to coincide with the battlefield of the past, or else time has warped.

Ritual and reality

The cosmopolitics of Shangri-La can best be described as ‘the politics of forging a common world’ (Blok 2011) which encompasses both the material and spiritual reality. A prophetic vision such as that concerning Shambhala serves as a bridge between the material and the spiritual reality, where the reincarnate lama is a visionary traveler with a unique ability to bring spiritual knowledge across to the material world. The unique authority of the reincarnate lama as a truth-teller thus relies on his reputation (Tibetan: *gtam*), which is associated with his ability to know and navigate a spiritual or cosmic order that is otherwise difficult to access. He may

thereby serve as a mediator for others to interact with the spiritual realm. For an ordinary monk, knowledge or realization of the spiritual is a gradual process that requires years if not decades of study and practice. Reincarnate lamas, on the other hand, are born with such abilities, and this is also how they can obtain visions and prophecies, make divinations (Tibetan: *mo*), provide protection through amulets, and bestow auspicious names.

The bridging of cosmological divides is similarly sought in the performance of ritual offerings for the spirits. Whereas a prophecy can only be envisioned by a highly accomplished reincarnate lama, rituals can be performed by anyone. For lay Tibetans, interaction with the spiritual realm can be achieved through two main avenues, either through the monastery and the Buddha (local Tibetan: *trui*), or sacred sites (local Tibetan: *nai*, Tibetan: *gnas*). Likewise holy water, thought to be beneficial for the body and used as a cure for numerous ailments, can be found either at the monastery or at a sacred site, and is identified accordingly as *truicha* (literally ‘Buddha water’) and *naicha* (Kolås 2007). The *nai* (sacred site) often draws its power from association with an accomplished religious practitioner who once stayed at the site. For instance, near the hot springs at Tianshengqiao there is a cave called Pema Drogpo, where Guru Rinpoche himself is said to have practiced. The mountain Khawa Karpo (Tibetan: *Kha ba dkar po*) is a *naichen*, or ‘great sacred site’, as a site inhabited by a powerful mountain god and Buddhist protector deity.

As described by Handelman (2005: 2), there are three main modalities of anthropological thinking about ritual as a social phenomenon: firstly as model of and model for cultural worlds (in Geertzian terms) or storehouse of symbols and scripts; secondly as functional of and for social order; and thirdly as arena for the playing out of social, economic, and political competition and conflict (see also Seligman et.al.

2008). Following the alternate approach of Handelman (2005) in his exploration of ritual as a phenomenon *in its own right*, I draw especially on Kapferer's notion of ritual as self-contained imaginal space and site for the formation of 'virtual reality' (2005). As understood by Kapferer (2005: 47) the virtuality of ritual is 'really real', albeit in its own terms, and the virtual is not a parallel or alternate reality, or an attempt to reproduce the existential processes of 'real realities'. However, nor is virtual reality independent of 'external' (material) reality, and it is also encompassed by the reality of 'actuality', the chaotic dimension of ordinary lived processes (ibid.: 48). Here, Kapferer draws on Deleuze's distinction between the virtual and the actual in which the virtual is always present, yet is a source of potentiality for generating the actual. The virtual is thus not a memory or a past, but a 'presence' inhabiting each action. As suggested here, it is the power of ritual to open up an avenue between the actual and the virtual, allowing the subject to be integrated or to interact with the virtual, i.e. the spiritual realm or cosmic order, through ritual.

Across the wide variety of rituals practiced in Diqing, what most of them share is an appeal through some form of offering to some kind of spirit being. These spirit beings inhabit 'virtual' reality, but the rituals performed for them take place at 'actual' sites that are imbued with spiritual power. The main intent of the rituals is to bring those who take part in them into a beneficial relationship with these powers. This brings people into contact with the cosmic order so as to bring them good fortune and prosperity, cure them if they are ill, and protect them from danger or misfortune (see also da Col 2012).

In Diqing, rituals carried out for good luck, health and prosperity are seen as a meaningful way to engage with the spiritual, simply because these rituals are believed to have real consequences (see Seligman et.al. 2008). The importance of the

engagement with the spiritual world or reality is evident in the popularity of these rituals, which are known by many different names and practiced by locals of all ethnic denominations. While differing in their forms and expressions, the rituals in question have basic premises in common, concerning vital relationships between people, spirit beings and places. They are performed as a means to guard against danger and promote good luck or fortune (Tibetan: *gyang*) for individuals, households and communities, by maintaining harmonious relations between the people who live on the land and the deities and spirits who are its ‘owners’ (Kolås 2007).

In addition to *nai* (‘sacred sites’) there are also several other types of sites where rituals are performed, including the cairn of ritual arrows (Tibetan: *rtse phung*) where the men of several households get together to make offerings to the *ridag*, and similar sites for paying respect to the *klu*, the deity of the underworld.¹⁰ Whereas the village as a whole may keep an offering site for the local *klu*, a group of households cooperate in maintaining a *rtse phung* on the slopes of the mountain. This is where the men of each household get together annually to put up prayer flags (Tibetan: *rlung rta*) fastened to ritual arrows, and make offerings to the *tsän* (Tibetan: *btsan*) inhabiting each peak and the *ridag* of the mountain (Kolås 2007). The offerings for the *ridag* are meant to obtain good luck for everybody in the village, thus regulating vital flows of fortune by transcending cosmological divides (Da Col 2007, 2012). The *ridag*, *tsän* and *klu* are all powerful and potentially dangerous deities and spirits, and it is important to show them respect by observing certain rules of conduct in or near the places they inhabit. These places are therefore subject to restrictions on behavior,

¹⁰ Men may attend rituals for the *klu*, but the women of the household are most often in charge. The lighting of *sang* (juniper incense) below the tree is accompanied by incantations. It is essential to know the invocations by heart to perform the ritual well.

including digging into the sides of the mountain for construction materials, and cutting wood on its slopes.

Tibetans are not alone in practicing rituals for the mountain god. In 2002, I was invited to a similar ritual led by an elderly Bai woman, sponsored by a family of Tibetans living in the town. This took place on the lower slope of Wufengshan, below the temple. The woman in charge of the ceremony was one of four or five Bai women from Dali who had started conducting such rituals a few years earlier. Their practices were apparently based on rituals to mountain gods conducted in their native area, and the women had achieved a good reputation as specialists, conducting rituals nearly every day for a small fee. In this particular ritual, the offerings were made up of various kinds of food, as well as green tea and barley wine. Small red candles were lit, and burning incense sticks were distributed all over the site. The elderly woman who led the ritual then broke off a twig from a juniper tree, and picked up a bowl of barley wine. Holding one in each hand, she sang a song to ‘invite’ (Chinese: *yāoqǐng*) the mountain god while scattering drops of wine into the air in all four directions. The woman’s song (in Mandarin) invited the deity of the mountain to bring good luck (Chinese: *hǎo yùn*) to the family, to increase their wealth, bring money, a good harvest, and many children. When it was over, the participants made a fire out of paper ‘clothes’, ‘boats’ and ‘spirit money’ (Chinese: *huang jīn*, literally ‘yellow gold’), printed to resemble real notes. Plates of food were passed around for everybody to eat, and finally the rest of the food was thrown into the fire as an offering to the *ridag*.

Zhongdian also has a *yul lha* or ‘township god’, which has its abode on the mountain Wufengshan, overlooking the racecourse. At a small temple (Tibetan: *lha kang*) on the mountain slope, Tibetans make offerings to this *ridag* during the annual

May 5th horserace festival, burning juniper branches, planting *rtse sheng* (ritual arrows) in the cairn, and throwing barley wine and grain into the air. When the name of the county was officially changed to Shangrila, the May 5th festival was the event at which this was celebrated, with a massive media presence and well-rehearsed song and dance performances on the grounds of the race course. This was a celebration allegedly of the people, and for the people of Shangrila. The imaginary world had finally become real.

Truths and realities

After the announcement of the discovery of Shangrila in Diqing, questions concerning the ‘authenticity’ of this discovery were commonly raised by commentators in the Western media (Pomfret 2000, Woods 2001), and also by many of the Western tourists I talked with during my fieldwork two-three years after the name change.

What these tourists found most problematic was the attempt to locate a fictional place in the ‘real world’, as well as the use of dubious scientific evidence. By contrast, such issues were rarely brought up by Chinese tourists and commentators in the Chinese media, who seemed content to accept the name and story behind it at face value, and glorify the place for its natural splendors and tranquility, and the simple lifestyle and closeness to nature of its inhabitants. A different set of issues and perspectives were brought up in local debates on the name change. In these discussions, key questions were the contested relationship between Shangrila and Shambhala, and the authority to validate rather than verify the truth.

Drawing on Kapferer’s distinction between ‘virtual’ and ‘actual’ reality in ritual (Kapferer 2005), I suggest that visionary truth can be reconciled with scientific truth when science is applied only to the actual reality of the material world, whereas

the visionary is applied to the virtual reality of the spiritual world. This also makes it possible to understand the spiritual or ‘virtual’ reality as real in its own terms or ‘really real’ (Kapferer 2005: 47). I thus draw a parallel between the visionary as a truth-telling logic and the ‘virtual’ reality of ritual (Kapferer 2005).

The cosmopolitics of Shangrila is played out at the confluence between the virtual and the actual, but this is also a space where different truths threaten to collide. To avoid such collisions, the differences must in the end be maintained. While Shangrila can safely be located, the hidden land of Shambhala can only be seen by visionaries, and must forever remain uncharted. The ‘discovery’ of virtual Shambhala in an actual place would invite trouble into paradise.

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