TOURISM PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT IN TIBET

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China experiences four major tourist flows, each of which has significantly different characteristics that planning must take into account. The needs and expectations of Chinese domestic tourists (by far the largest market) are quite different from those of ‘Overseas Chinese’, which in turn are different from international Asian visitors (Japan, Korea, Thailand, etc), which are again quite different from those of international western country travellers.

My focus as part of the team was to contribute to proposals for the international western countries’ segment of the market, particularly ecotourism and cultural tourism. A major characteristic of this market is that Tibet has an almost mystical fascination for westerners, and tours need to be undertaken with interpretation that covers history, religion, biology, geology and culture. Given the relative isolation of Tibet, its underdeveloped tourism services sector and the reliance of access to many parts by four-wheel drive vehicles on precipitous roads over passes more than 5000 metres high, the type of tourism might be appropriately described as cultural/natural heritage adventure tourism.

The following vignettes are included to indicate the potential attractions for this type of tourism.
Road to Jiuzhaotse
1. In Dege, there is a very famous Buddhist printery and monastery that for more than 300 years has been producing hand-printed Buddhist texts on scrolls which are also of handmade paper (from mulberry tree pulp and bark) in an annexe. A visit to that monastery today will reveal an absolute hive of activity as perhaps 100 monks continue to hand-print 3 million copies of such texts each year that are distributed all over Tibet. They have a ‘library’ of 60,000 woodcut blocks, which were secreted safely away during the Cultural Revolution. Dege has recently been opened for tourism and thousands of Chinese and foreign Buddhists, including from Taiwan, Japan, India and elsewhere, purchase texts from the printery each year.
2. The wood-cuts used by the monastery in Dege come from a tiny village called Sejiong about 200 miles away high up in the mountains which we approached through the long narrow Jirong Gorge foaming with white water under precipitous cliffs. Boys are apprenticed at the age of six to begin learning how to read and write Tibetan sanskrit and to carve the wood blocks, using ancient templates that were also hidden during the destruction of the Cultural Revolution years (1966-1976). After the cultural revolution the art of template carving was resuscitated and is a thriving cottage industry. On request you may be taken into the Sejiong monastery – largely rebuilt by funds from India, under the supervision of a Tibetan monk who had returned only recently from Dharmsala - and shown the ancient woodblock templates, and some of the ‘books’ of Buddhist mantras that are 300-400 years old and black with age. The monastery is also filled with religious paintings, carvings, accoutrements and artefacts of significant antiquity, as well as new monastic decorations. Two artefacts did not exactly follow conservation or the Buddhist tenet against taking all life: the skins of two magnificent snow leopards. When I queried this, I was told they were there to teach the people NOT to kill them: but one looked very new and was being used as a 'robe' over a drum. But the point about these activities is that they refute allegations of suppression of religious freedom, destruction of material culture or cultural genocide. There is not even one Chinese policeman in this remote community. Its isolation is however likely to be changed if a new road proposed for the area runs through Jirong Gorge.
Snow leopard skin inside Sejong monastery

Sejong Monastery

Novitiate with woodcuts,

Jirong Gorge

Ancient Buddhist texts

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3. Qiang-ba-ling monastery in Chamdo, perhaps the most famous Buddhist Yellow Hat (Gelu) sect teaching institute – swarming with more than 2000 resident monks. Pilgrims coming and going all day, every day of the week. Some prostrating themselves across the huge courtyard to the inner temples, others lighting incense in front of statues of Buddha and his guardians, throngs of Tibetans burning dwarf cypress twigs for its purifying scent. Teaching and debating all day, with the monks shouting and gesticulating and stomping in a walled courtyard lined with river pebbles raising a huge clatter as they emphasize a point - incredibly dynamic and participatory. If only my students displayed the enthusiasm of these novitiates! The temple complex was inscribed on China’s list of protected heritage and cultural sites in 1962, suffered significant damage during the Cultural Revolution, but has been rebuilt and expanded in the past three years, following my first visit in 2005.
Monks sneaking out of evening meditation

Main temple of Qiang-ba-ling Monastery

Novitiates at class in the “Lamaist Scripture-Discussing-Courtyard” of Qiang-ba-ling Monastery

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4. Similarly, **Wa La monastery**, 1500 years old, now rebuilt with Taiwanese and Dharmsala (India) funds after major destruction during the cultural revolution, all its main statues, icons and artefacts hidden away in caves for more than a decade, the monastery now enjoying rebirth with more than 500 young novitiates, also clattering on their courtyard of pebbles as they debate esoteric topics. One group while I was there was debating “How high is the sky?” with one of the elderly professor monks, using Buddhist texts to substantiate their arguments. I visited temple after temple, monastery after monastery, around central eastern and southern Tibet, some so isolated they completely escaped the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, all of them alive with complex ceremonies, elders teaching younger artists the highly skilled art of *thanka* painting, pilgrims with prayer wheels, monks chanting mantras, where their daily rituals were being practised without hindrance as far as I could ascertain.
A living religion, a living culture

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5. Wami village on the road to Garma temple and monastery five hours drive up into the mountains from Chamdo where blacksmiths make their traditional Buddhist metal masks and carvings, all handcrafted, not a single Chinese-made percussion drill, welder or metal grinder in sight, smoke rising from charcoal kilns where the iron is smelted, tap-tapping and ringing tones reverberating around the valley as they shape the metal into temple artefacts. And near Garma Temple itself a whole village of thanka artists producing traditional paintings and decorations for Buddhist monasteries. Here we were invited into a sunlit courtyard and enjoyed lunch of fresh barley bread, yak yoghurt and stewed yak washed down with copious volumes of yak butter tea, joined by many of the villagers. All local authorities were Tibetan, the only Chinese present being members of our planning team.
Artists at work for Buddhist temples and monasteries

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6. The cave temple of a Buddhist healer in the mountains above the Nujiang Valley, halfway between Chamdo and Bo-mi. So famous have his healings become in the last 20 years that Tibetans and non-Tibetans, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, seek his services in their hundreds. The entire mountainside where the cave is located is draped in prayer flags and there are numerous shrines beside the trail that leads from the gravel road for a kilometre up to the cave. As new healings are made, more and more offerings are made and prayers and incense offered at the shrines - active, dynamic, a living culture in open view. The cave has become a Buddhist shrine, its caverns lined with offerings of all kinds, one cavern piled high with the skulls of yaks, horses, oxen, sheep and goats on which are inscribed Buddhist mantras. On descending from the cave I noticed a pile of abandoned crutches left behind by those who had been cured, and now a shrine in its own right as pilgrims have placed mani stones and incense next to the crutches, where they stop and pray.
The flag-festooned trail up the mountainside to the cave

Entrance to the healing cave temple

The healer monk

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7. Glaciers are common in the Tibetan ranges, and we visited six along the road from Nying-chi to Dzayul. Zeju Glacier in the Tibet Yigong National Geo-park near Bo-mi involved a four hour 4WD trip through the Baiyu Valley, past six or seven villages, numerous shrines of *mani* stones and steles, little monasteries and temples, and flocks of yaks, sheep, goats and horses. Our planning team voted this one of the most interesting valleys/day trips we experienced, and the following photographs attest to its scenic qualities. Community based tourism with home-stays and guided treks to the glaciers and montane forests is the obvious recommendation to take advantage of the nature-based experiences on offer.

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Perhaps most poignant of all, a visit to a sacred Buddhist valley high up in the mountains above the Tibetan town of Po-mi, in a forest called Zha-Longou. I first visited the site in 2005 and again in July 2008.

It is believed by some Tibetan Buddhist sects that a child under the age of one has not been able to amass any merit for the next life and be reincarnated, and so they are condemned to be ‘lost souls’ wandering in the void. Some 27 years ago – that is, 1981 and 30 years after the Chinese moved into Tibet – a Buddhist monk through various divinations determined that this valley had special properties that would allow young babies to be reincarnated as humans again. Babies who have died are brought to this sacred place by their parents, many of them coming from hundreds of miles away. The bodies are wrapped in silk scarves and placed in tiny boxes or baskets or blankets, their ‘coffins’ hung from the branches of ancient cypress trees that grow in this high alpine valley. The monk from his simple temple offers prayers that never stop, day after day, week after week, his prayers guiding the babies’ souls on their journey to reincarnation.
This site is not ‘secret’, it is known to the authorities and as such represents evidence of both religious freedom and tolerance of Tibetan culture. I was taken there to offer my views on whether it was an appropriate place for cultural tourism.

This site raises critical issues related to the emic and etic perspectives and thanatourism. As a westerner my initial judgement based on my imported (‘outsider’, etic) value system rejected visitation as an invasion of privacy and personal grief. The anthropologist in me allowed me take 6 photos before the (western) human emotions took over and put the camera away. My initial recommendation against this place as unacceptable dark tourism was very firm.
However, in talking with two sets of parents who were leaving after having brought their babies there two days previously I was exposed to the emic (‘insider’ Tibetan) perspective, and was jolted by their response to my questions about strangers visiting the valley. It was obvious that this place gave them enormous peace of mind; their child was not condemned to eternal void: his/her soul had been saved. While not quite a celebration, it was certainly closure. They went to some lengths to assure me that they did not to mind that as a complete stranger I could visit this very special place, with hundreds of tiny moss-covered boxes and baskets and blanket bundles swaying gently in the breeze under the gnarled trees. Part of their response may have been common Tibetan courtesy to a foreigner but their underlying value system suggested parents at ease with this form of thana-tourism.

As a westerner I remain of the view that this site should not be ‘developed’ for tourism and that it should be respected as a sacred Buddhist site. Despite the apparent acquiescence of the parents I spoke to, I would want to see the results of a survey with a much larger sample than 2 before moving to any reconsideration of this position.

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