

Liu Jianqiang, *Tibetan Environmentalists in China.
The King of Dzi*

Translated by Ian Rowen, Cyrus K. Hui & Emily Yeh, London, Lexington
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- 1 As the title may not indicate it clearly, this book concerns the work of Tibetan environmentalists in the Tibetan regions under Chinese rule, not in China proper. The author, Liu Jianqiang, was the Beijing editor of Chinadialogue, a website in Chinese and English dedicated to environmental issues.
- 2 It is not really surprising that somebody like Liu Jianqiang, already fighting the destruction of natural resources in his own country, becomes interested in the environmental situation of Tibet, a place where the major rivers of Asia – Indus, Ganges, Sutlej, Brahmaputra, Salween (Gyelmo Ngulchu), Mekong (Dzachu), Yangtze (Drichu), Yellow River (Machu) – have their source. Through several years of experience in Tibet, and many discussions with Tibetan environmentalists, the author became not only concerned by the ecological problems but influenced by Tibetan culture and religion, even more since he adheres to the “Green Tibetan discourse” which says that “China’s entire ecological system is protected by Tibetans and their traditional culture (IX)”.
- 3 This book actually relates two stories. One tells of the author’s personal discovery of Tibet, of his new awareness of the importance of the Tibetan Plateau in the Chinese

ecological system, and of his encounters with Tibetan environmentalists who introduced him to their culture and religion.

- 4 The second and main story focuses on six major figures of the Tibetan ecological world: Karma Samdrup, a successful Khampa businessman, environmentalist and devotee of Tibetan culture; his brother Rinchen Samdrup¹, who was active in Kham also; Tashi Dorje (Tador), a well-known figure in the Tibetan ecological world; Gendun, a painter, historian, and researcher from Amdo; Musuo, a Tibetan from Dechen in Kham (in present Yunnan province) and one of the founders of a Tibetan NGO, the Kawakarpo Culture Society; and Sonam Dargye, whose fame went beyond Tibet after a film was made on his life and dramatic death at the hands of poachers. The book describes their fight to preserve the landscape amidst the uncontrolled development of the Chinese economy, sometimes putting their own lives and security at risk – Rinchen Samdrup and Karma Samdrup both ended up in jail.
- 5 This book, written in Chinese under the title 天珠--藏人传奇 (*Dzi--Legend of Tibetans*) was first published in 2009 (and then again in 2011 and 2013), in Hong Kong by Zhung Hwa. It appeared that same year in China (Tibet People's Publishing House), but that edition was rapidly banned due to the trial of Karma that started six months later.
- 6 We are indebted to Ian Rowen, Cyrus K. Hui and Emily Yeh for the English version published in 2015.
- 7 A short biography of each of the main protagonists is given at the beginning. All of them are from the eastern regions of Tibet (Kham and Amdo), as one might expect given the harsh control the Chinese authorities have imposed on Central Tibet for decades and in particular since 2008.
- 8 The book itself is divided in seven chapters. Each of them deals with past and present events in the six environmentalists' lives, to which Liu adds historical information on Tibet, a choice that leads the author to jump from past to present in his narration and can cause some chronological confusion for the reader.
- 9 The first chapter (pp. 1-32), "Seeking the Buddha", introduces two of the actors of the book, Karma Samdrup (or Karma) and Tashi Dorje (or Tador). Most pages are dedicated to Karma, his endeavors to preserve Tibetan culture and his successful creation of a Tibetan museum in Lhasa to display over 8000 artefacts he "acquired [...] with the profits he made from his business" (p. 9). Liu describes Karma's happy childhood in Gonjo, a county in Chamdo Prefecture, in the present Tibet Autonomous Region and his first encounter with a local religious figure at a time of severe restrictions on religion (Karma was born in 1968). Ada Lhamo was the daughter of Changchub Dorje, a famous *dzogchen* practitioner, founder of the Nyingma monastery of Nyala and one of Namkhai Norbu's masters.
- 10 Tador was also raised in Kham, in Suojia village (present Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture) – Chinese nomenclature is used for Tibetan territories – where his mother had moved after his father's death. She herself died at an early age following the abuses she suffered during the Cultural Revolution. While Karma had an early contact with Buddhism, Tador grew up ignorant of Buddhism until he was 20 years old (p. 24). He was only able to "attend the local tent school" but the admiration he developed for Sonam Dargye, his teacher's son, changed his life. In 1979, Sonam Dargye, then a teacher at the county middle school, recruited students, among them Tador. He completed his training in Yushu (Tib. Jyekundo), then Xining, where he was joined by Bolei, a girl from his village, who later became his wife.

- 11 The second chapter, “Leaving Home” (pp. 32-77), offers an insight in the religious world of Gonjo during the 1980s: the death of Ada Lhamo, whose body “was transformed into a rainbow” (p. 35), the despair of a Tibetan party vice-secretary at the death of this high practitioner (p. 33) and the ongoing tradition of giving one son to the monastery. In Karma’s family, it is his brother Rinchen who took his vows from Lama Gawang, Ada Lhamo’s son, and grandson of Changchub Dorje. The lives of Rinchen and Karma were deeply marked by this important figure, the most revered Buddhist teacher in the valley, whose life is recounted by Liu, using Namkhai Norbu’s memories (pp. 52-53). As for Karma, he chose to stay three years in a cave engraving mani stones. His deep faith was not an obstacle to fulfill his dream to become rich, what he will eventually become thanks to his tenacity and great talent for business enterprises. This is the occasion for the author to raise one of the major problems affecting China: the widespread corruption of local authorities, which “collect levies and confiscate caterpillar fungus, acting almost as if they were robbers” (p. 59).
- 12 The third chapter, “Wasteland” (pp. 79-116), focuses on Tador and Sonam Dargye and their life in the Kekexili reserve (Tib. Achen Gangyel), a place which has become famous beyond Tibet thanks to Chuan Lu’s 2004 film *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol*. Sonam Dargye became the general manager of the Drido County Kekexili Economic Development Group Company in 1992 and Tador started to work with him in this ‘haven for wild animals’ But quickly, the reserve became the target of poachers, illegal prospectors, hunters and gangsters (p. 96). Not only was life very difficult there, but environmental protection turned into highly dangerous work which ended with Sonam Dargye’s murder by poachers.
- 13 The fourth chapter, rightly called, “Love”, (pp. 117-165) narrates the love story between Karma and Drolkar, a member of the famous Lhagyari family, said to descend from the Yarlung kings. At that time Karma was the best trader in *zi* (Tib. *gzi*) stones while, insists the author, always paying a fair price for the stones. He then began to be known as “the king of *dzi* (sic)”. The *zi* stones, an agate etched using a long-forgotten technique, is said to protect against all sorts of misfortune, illness and evil spirits. For Tibetans, they are a creation of the gods whereas many researchers think that they are related to the ancient Zhang Zhung civilization (p. 133). Helped by Tsewang Gendun Denba, an ex-monk, historian and thangka painter, Karma started to look for the origin of these stones. Meanwhile, Rinchen who had renounced his vow, has married the grand daughter of Nyala Changchub Dorje, and has received rewards for his work for the preservation of the environment.
- 14 The chapter 5 (pp. 167-210) takes the reader to Dechen (in Kham, present Yunnan province), a small city close to Kawakarpo, the main sacred mountain of the Khampas. Here too, some Tibetans are fighting to preserve their culture and environment. Musuo, and the other founders of the Kawakarpo Cultural Society, are the main characters of the chapter. Their efforts to rescue from oblivion the *piwang*, a musical instrument, as the local songs and dances, are still going on in spite of all the administrative difficulties they encounter. I could see myself the result of their work in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2014 and 2015. Nevertheless and contrary to Liu’s assertion about pilgrims playing *piwang* along the mountain paths (p. 194), I have never heard the sound of this instrument during the four circumambulations I did.
- 15 The sixth chapter, “Running away” (pp. 211-237), addresses the consequences of Sonam Dargye’s murder. Because the poachers were not found, Tador was suspected and

although all charges were later lifted, people continued to regard him with suspicion. He refused to participate in the “Wild Yak Brigade” set up by Sonam Dargye’s brother in law to arrest the murderers and instead wrote a book on him with friends and took part in the making of a film on him.

- 16 Among the many difficulties Tibetan environmentalists are confronted with is the corrupt and inefficient administration, not to mention the risk of being accused of being “politically incorrect” (p. 237). In 1998, Tador and friends founded the first environmental NGO on the Tibetan Plateau (p. 220) but quickly discovered that “he couldn’t possibly do what he had hoped to do by working inside the system.” Indeed, as Tador explained: “the government’s method of protection is to establish bureaux and send police to relocate the people. Our wish is to establish nature reserve inside Tibetan areas, to let Tibetans and not police protect the environment” (p. 228).
- 17 The last chapter, “Homecoming” (pp. 239-299), brings most of the characters of the book together. The initial problems Karma encounters with the police in 1998 illustrate the danger that Tibetan environmentalists can meet working in China. That year, Karma was arrested in Xinjiang charged with plundering graves. Although he was cleared and released, jail and torture changed him and he lost all interest in doing business (p. 268). Shifting to environmental work, he founded an environmental NGO. Following their meeting in Xining in 2001, Karma and Tador decided to cooperate. Later, Tador was given the “Earth Award” for his work in environmental protection (p. 274).
- 18 In 2006, the changes that hit Lhasa lead Liu to realize that “Lhasa has disappeared. It seemed we had arrived in Zhengzhou, Kunming, Lanzhou, or some other city in China” (p. 275). A long passage in this chapter is dedicated to Yachen Gar and its founder Lama Achuk Rinpoche, and to Larung Gar, two important monastic camps established in Kham in the 1980s (pp. 284-290)². The story of a long “tribal conflict” over pastureland between two villages in Karma’s homeland (p. 283) and that of the opening of a mine in a sacred mountain are a reminder of the many problems Tibetans have to face.
- 19 The epilogue (pp. 301-314) deals with the five surviving characters of the book, Karma, Rinchen, Gendun, Tador, Musuo, who have introduced Liu, a Han Chinese, to the rich culture of the Tibetan Plateau. Throughout the book, the author expresses a strong admiration for these Tibetans, who make him feel ignorant, “like a marmot on the Tibetan Plateau, appearing to live on top of the world, but with vision limited to a dark burrow and a few bushes of grass” (p. 313). He is obviously impressed by these men, but if sometimes veering into romanticism, he still keeps a distance. Unlike Jiang Rong, the author of *Wolf Totem*, who is obsessed with the virility of the Mongols that Han males seem to be lacking and looks at them as “authentic and pure Others”, Liu clearly disapproves of the macho attitude of his Tibetan friends, for instance when he defends the “virtuous” Tibetan women who have to “accept the husband’s abuses in silence » (p. 181, 234). Neither does he go along with the image of the “harmonious society” promoted by the central government, which can be found in Fan’s book³.
- 20 A postscript written in 2014 reminds the reader of the fate of Karma. Despite being nominated “philanthropist of the year” by CCTV in 2006, he was arrested again in 2010. He was seeking in vain the release of his two brothers, Rinchen Samdrup and Chime Namgyal, imprisoned in 2009 after accusing local officials of poaching threatened species. Karma was thereupon charged again with stealing from ancient tombs, an offense of which he had been cleared years ago. He was sentenced to 15 years jail in Xinjiang, where

he is still being held. Rinchen Samdrup sentenced to 5 years is now released and Chime Namgyal (the other brother) was released after serving two years in jail.

- 21 One can regret the use, all along the book, of Tubo, qualified as “the ancient name of Tibet” (p. 12), instead of Bö (Bod), the Tibetan name for Tibet. However, as early as 1915, P. Pelliot has shown that the transformation of the name Tufan in Tubo derives from the work of Western Orientalists at the beginning of the 19th century and should be abandoned⁴. It is also regrettable that the translators have kept the original indications of date referring to Chinese dynastic eras without giving always the corresponding year in the Gregorian calendar. (p. 129).
- 22 But these are very small critics. This book is a must read not only for scholars and experts interested in contemporary Tibet but for anyone concerned with environmental issues. The author addresses one of the most fundamental problems, which concerns the whole world: the ecological protection of Tibet, a country that became a colony of China in the 1950s and is currently facing the looting of its natural resources. He highlights the many difficulties met by environmentalists in China and especially Tibetans, and the risks they face, including long prison terms and even murder.
- 23 This book also demonstrates that ecology is a field where Tibetans and Chinese can meet on an equal footing and work together in mutual respect. Nevertheless, their fight is far from over and recurring events show that Chinese authorities continue to trample their own laws and to destroy the Tibetan environment, without respect for its holy sites, its rivers, its pastures, or its land.

NOTES

1. On Rinchen Samdrup, see Emily T. Yeh 2014 “The Rise and Fall of the Green Tibetan”, in E. T. Yeh & C. Coggins, *Mapping Shangrila* (University of Washington Press), pp. 255-278.

2. If no news reached us about a possible destruction of Yachen, that of Larung gar, in Sertha, which began at the end of July 2016, is well documented. The Chinese authorities have decided to destroy many of the monastic cells in order to reduce the number of nuns and monks to 5000 [see online, URLs : <http://www.tchrd.org/china-issues-demolition-order-on-worlds-largest-religious-town-in-tibet/>, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/28/world/asia/china-tibet-larung-gar-sertar.html?ref=world> and <http://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/chinese-authorities-plan-major-reduction-of-monastic-population-at-larung-gar>, all consulted 28 November 2016].

3. Fan Wen 2004 *Une terre de lait et de miel* (Arles, Éditions P. Picquier).

4. Paul Pelliot 1915 “Quelques transcriptions chinoises de noms tibétains”, *T'oung Pao* 通報 16(1), pp. 18-20. See also Sperling 2011 “Tubote, Tibet, and the power of naming” [online, URL : <http://www.rangzen.net/2011/04/16/tubote-tibet-and-the-power-of-naming/>, consulted 28 November 2016]