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Those Who Sell the Sacred Sites

The Economic Development of
Contemporary Tibet and Popular Religious Spaces

This article considers the popular spaces of religious practice that have formed at the sacred sites of Buddhism in contemporary Tibet during the rapid modernization that has taken place under Communist Party rule and will pay special attention to the commercialization of those religious sites. Traditionally, research on sacred sites, undertaken mostly by Western scholars, has been based in an understanding of cosmology as rooted in the Buddhist scriptures and has been most concerned with the kind of ritual correspondence built between the natural environment at sacred sites and pilgrims. The diversification of the religious environment of the sacred site is rarely taken into account. I argue that the religiosity of sacred sites established through the replacement of “natural space” with “pure land space” has been influenced by the diversification of monastic economies and the penetration of outside commercial actors. I will demonstrate that this religiosity is, in fact, the target for those seeking to acquire economic profits on the level of individual sacred sites, which are the actual locations of religious practice. As a result, within the sacred sites of contemporary Tibet, which are exposed to the intense pressures of development, a commercial space based on the relationship of economic supply and demand operates in parallel to a value system based on pure land cosmology. I conclude that it is time to revise the traditional understanding of the preceding literature.

KEYWORDS: contemporary Tibet, commercialization, pilgrims, sacred site business, supply and demand

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In contemporary Chinese-controlled Tibet, beginning with the closing years of Jiang Zemin's regime (1989–2002) and continuing for over fifteen years (beginning in the year 2000 and currently in the second phase), the Chinese government has undertaken an economic development initiative for the marginal regions called "The Great Western Development Strategy." In China, the "frontier" refers to an area of 9,600,000 square kilometers that accounts for roughly three fourths of the country's land—a place where Mongols, Tibetans, Uighurs, and other minority groups live along the 22,000 kilometers of China's most extensive inland borders. Under the Great Western Development Strategy, in addition to efforts made to mine the natural resources that exist in abundance in the scarcely populated areas where these minorities reside, and to send those resources along a massive shipping lane to the coastal areas, there have been attempts to transform the frontier regions such that labor surplus can be put toward the construction of infrastructure. This is an effort to accommodate the colossal demands of the Chinese market, which have formed with the coastal metropolises at its center, by reinforcing domestic demand for construction materials. Accordingly, one can witness the establishment of basic infrastructure such as an electrical grid powered by various dams and hydroelectric stations on the high plateaus of Tibet, roads, airports, and a pipeline to facilitate the smooth transfer of resources to the eastern areas of the country. In 2006, the Qinghai-Tibet Railway system (from Xining to Lhasa) with a total length of 1,956 kilometers was completed. Moreover, in recent years, along with the construction of infrastructure, the state of information and social media technology has improved rapidly and a communication network powered by 3G broadband now provides coverage to a broad number of Tibetan communities.

This modern network that spread along with state-led development initiatives has totally enveloped the sacred sites of traditional Tibetan Buddhism that had heretofore existed apart from society amid the hostility of nature, and

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introduced seismic changes to the very core of the religious character of these locations. In terms of their general state of development, sacred places have evolved through a complex interaction between the religiosity that formed within the unique natural environment of the highlands and the wave of economic development that has arrived from the outside. If one sets aside certain topics such as tourism and damage to the environment, which stand out and have received attention in recent years, this general state of affairs has not received sufficient attention. As I will mention later, until now research on sacred places—conducted predominantly by scholars from Europe and the United States—has typically revolved around an understanding of cosmology as can be devised from Buddhist texts. This research has expressed its greatest interest in the manner in which natural spaces and pilgrims preserved this ritualistic correspondence. This same research has consistently neglected the issue of the transformation of the religious space of the sacred sites themselves. The fact of the matter is that the religiosity of sacred spaces that formed as a result of “natural spaces” being rendered as “pure land spaces” has been influenced by the diversification of the economies of monasteries and the introduction of outside commercial actors. In this article, by revealing the complicated character of the actual spaces of religious practice, which also serve as sites for the acquisition of economic profit, I reveal the problems inherent in the current approach used in research into sacred spaces. In particular, I will demonstrate the limitations of the position held in this body of research that takes the one-dimensional formation of a “pure land cosmology” at sacred locations as self-evident.

Before beginning my own investigation, below I will briefly discuss the findings of the preceding research into the religiosity of Tibetan sacred sites and modernity while highlighting the trends in this research, which has been conducted predominately by Western scholars.

The Theory and Practice of Sacred Sites

SACRED SPACES AS “PLACES OF PURITY”—THE DEBATE OVER CENTRALITY AND PERIPHERY

The territory of Tibet is a comparatively new research field as conducting onsite studies was prohibited for an extended period following the forced annexation of Tibet by China in 1951. Upon entering the mid-1980s, when the reform and opening policies (Ch. *gaige kaifang* 改革開放) began to have a more concerted influence on the regions of Tibet, approval was gradually granted for surveys to be carried out in Tibet by foreign researchers—albeit with limitations on theme. Given this, Western scholars of Tibet who had traditionally conducted fieldwork in Nepal and other neighboring regions began to conduct onsite surveys in

Tibet on certain topics that were approved by the Chinese government such as “nature worship” and “folk religion,” and publishing their research findings on folk-level religious revival.¹

Through these research findings, the revival of “pilgrimage to sacred sites” as multiregional, popular religious practice attracted attention for the opportunity it afforded to observe at once a worldview articulated in certain Buddhist scriptures and familiar to scholars working with texts, and the concrete manifestation of that world represented in actual society. As a philosophical system introduced from India, it is essential to explain how Buddhism first transcended the boundaries of the monastic institutions of the professional groups who specialize in its handling and spread among the general population. In other words, it is essential to discuss the process by which the world as it appears in the Buddhist scriptures was transposed onto the actual objects that make up the real world. As is well known, within the context of the Buddhism of Asia, as Buddhism became localized in a particular society, the act of placing the structures of the natural environment of those regions into a Buddhist cosmology and reinterpreting them was an important medium for this transition. For example, as Suzuki Masataka as demonstrated, within the context of Japan’s mountain cults, the view that mountains were otherworldly locations that had existed since ancient times served as a foundation for the transposition of esoteric Buddhist cosmology of the Matrix and Diamond Mandalas wherein certain mountains came to be viewed as central axis of the world, such as “Mt. Sumeru.” Climbing these mountains (“entering the peaks”) fulfilled a certain set of norms that became steps in the spiritual development of the climbers (that is, entering a state of non-self) and this connection came to organize the places and practices of Japan’s unique mountain faith.²

In this way, the imported religion was localized through the systematic reinterpretation of the native view of the natural setting of the target society through the lens of imported religion. This process of the localization of imported religion generally traces the same path in the context of Tibet’s direct reception of esoteric Buddhism from India. Beginning in the eleventh century, during the height of later esoteric Buddhism, the mountain ranges that bordered the Indian world—with the Himalayas playing a leading role—began to be discussed in numerous religious scriptures as places where tantric Buddhist worldviews characterized by the geometric structure of the mandala had been transposed into this world (HUBER 1990).

1. For more on this topic see BLONDEAU and STEINKELLNER (1996), MACDONALD (1997), GOLDSTEIN and KAPSTEIN (1998), and BLONDEAU (1998).

2. Suzuki Masataka has an extensive body of work relating to mountain cults but for his most recent work see SUZUKI (2015).

Existing among the various mountain ranges of Tibet were originally local territorial gods called *yul lha* (*yul* means territory in Tibetan) who were worshipped by tribal groups who ruled each of these various locales. It was believed that these local divinities promised continued fortune in war for men and the prosperity of the tribe in exchange for offerings and rites from the tribe. However, as the era of later esoteric Buddhism progressed, these designated mountains, which had until that point served as the sites for worship of these local divinities, went on to serve as sites where through a projection of pure land cosmology the symbolic systems supported by esoteric Buddhist rites were written on top of preexisting indigenous mountain cults. The first important opportunity to undertake such a process can be found in the rewriting of legends that concern the nature of local divinities. The French scholar of Tibet, Alexander MACDONALD (1990), points out that in Tibet one can see broadly the motif whereby connections between “pure land cosmology” and “actual natural space” served as an opportunity for the conquest of the divinities of other religions by the divinities of later esoteric Buddhism. MacDonald, as one instance of such a motif, introduces the legend known as the “myth of Rudra.” Rudra is a non-Buddhist divinity and considered to be the equivalent of the god Shiva. However, in the scriptures of later esoteric Buddhism, there is a shared creation myth that states that after Samvara (*bde mchog*) descends from the heavens and subjugates Rudra, who had been installed on a mountain by non-Buddhist devotees, Samvara himself goes to reside at the mountaintop and transforms the surrounding area into a mandala. Samvara here is the main deity of the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*, a representative scripture of later esoteric Buddhism. By eliminating the non-Buddhist forces from the local environment, this esoteric deity changed the mountaintop from the residence of a local god. In that process, the natural environment from the mountaintop all the way to the foot of the mountain was given new symbolic meaning as it was paired to the structure of the sanctified sacred space of the “mandala.” Kailash (Gangs Rinpoche), a famous sacred mountain site in the western Himalayas, is one well-known example of a location where this kind of “mandalization” process was applied to an actual physical space. This mountain possesses an ancient history and was worshipped by practitioners of Bon as the residence of the highest god. However, from the middle ages onward, along with the spread of the itinerant pilgrimage practice called *pitha*, a practice engaged in heavily by Tibetan tantrists, one can confirm from records in the surviving literature the view that Kailash’s entire form resembled the mandala of *Cakrasamvara* had increasingly gained the upper hand. The mountain’s meaning within the context of the Bon religion began to fade. In this process the indigenous, local territorial god who was originally in the position of the highest divinity of Kailash was swapped out for an esoteric Buddhist deity, and the practitioners of the Bon religion were ultimately defeated by charismatic

tantric practitioners such as Milarepa (1040–1123) and Gotsangpa (1189–1258) who excelled in the incantations of esoteric Buddhism. As a result of dramatic transformation, today's Kailash is itself considered to be a natural mandala that encapsulates that stratified symbolic system, and it is home to three hierarchal pilgrimage courses with the main peak serving as Samvara, four temples, and four other places of worship. Pilgrims traverse this circuit within the mountain region and, by climbing along the higher-level, interior pilgrimage route approaching Samvara, it is believed that one achieves the same spiritual merit as if one had visualized and meditated upon the actual mandala (BUFFETRILLE 1997).

The French scholar Katia Buffetrille first established the theoretical framework for the “Buddhicization” of mountain cults by utilizing “mandalization” as an index for the series of changes such as the one described above. Buffetrille argues that where the mandalization of a region's interior takes place can be expressed quantifiably as a process where the secular nature of the indigenous culture supported by ties of blood and local relations associated with the land serving as the source of subsistence food production decreases in value (BUFFETRILLE 1998).

Here, that which is specifically assumed to be “Buddhicization” is the phenomenon where the penetration of a religious outlook turns a specific natural space into a “pure land” where the layperson's behavior such as drinking, smoking, and animal sacrifice is declined within its borders. Along with a transformation in behavior that is in accordance with Buddhist virtue, self-serving and exclusive tendencies rooted in tribal cohesion diminish.

Buffetrille sees this process by which the belief system of a particular mountain gradually shifts from the indigenous content that enshrines the tribal guardian deity, or *yul lha*, to a Buddhist one that takes the entire mountain as a naturally existing mandala and Buddhicization as one and the same. As change visible to the eye and in response to the intensity of Buddhicization, the main divinity at the mountain's peak, which began as an indigenous territorial god (a tribal level guardian deity), will be replaced by an esoteric deity. Accordingly, the rites of the mountain god wherein animal sacrifice was performed face-to-face gave way to an Indian-style practice of clockwise circumambulation (Sk. *parikrama*) and, in the end, those who visited the mountain were bound by the same behavioral norms that would be followed while visiting a temple (BUFFETRILLE 1998, 21–29).

In addition, given that as Buddhicization progressed there would be regional differences based on societal conditions such as sectarian distribution and tribal influence, there would be cases of hybridity where the name of the indigenous territorial god might remain associated with the mandalized mountain (semi-mandalization) or there would be individual mountains where both the

indigenous and the esoteric systems overlapped. However, the ultimate goal of Buddhization remained the expatiation of the indigenous system of faith from the mountain region under question and, therefore, it would be possible to point out the causal relationship being the intensification of Buddhization and the proximity with which the structure of the sacred place approached a mandalized pure land space.

The above is a theoretical explanation of how the natural environment of the Tibetan Plateau became a stage for the historical development of sacred Buddhist mountains (*gnas ri*). In this process, the pure land cosmology derived from literature acquired a concrete form as specific mountains and the surrounding regions of the natural environment were given over to this cosmology that gave shape to a centralized sacred area with a new main tantric divine forming the axis of that region. On the other hand, the general believers who paid visits to this kind of instantiated sacred space would reference the information revealed in the sacred literature and understand the religious significance of the rocks, trees, and mountain ranges that would appear before their eyes. To these the visitors would make offerings and through physical contact with location they would receive its sacred power. This entire series of activities—from creating these sorts of representations of the natural space to coming into physical contact with natural space—is the religious practice of “sacred site pilgrimage.” The popular religious activity observed today is taken to be a movement to reconstruct such historical undertakings as they have continued since premodern times amid the modern social environment of a territory under Chinese rule.

Development and Sacred Places: Erosion at the Hands of Modernity

As described above, the initial research on sacred space that opened up the regions of Tibet to the outside was concerned with the issue of the centrality or peripheral character of sacred places as expressed in terms of the “loss of the secular character of a space.” Studies have developed in various locations to examine the ritual conduct of pilgrims in order understand the extent to which the cosmology expressed in Buddhist scriptures remains compatible with the actual natural environment.³

On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, after the reform and opening of the 1980s, in the year 2000, the Chinese government began the Great Western Development. The effects of economic growth of the coastal areas quickly began to expand into frontier areas giving rise to a frontier-style market economy driven by state-led infrastructure development. This was to have an intense

3. Representative works in this area of research include HUBER (1999); HUBER ed. (1999); MCKAY (1998).

direct or indirect impact on the religious meaning that had accumulated in Tibet's land and natural environment.

Amid this intensifying impact, and within the framework of tourism research as the “garnish” of cultural industry, a series of discussions have emerged. These consider the redefinition or recreation of the sacred spaces of traditional Tibetan Buddhism within the context of “ethnic tourism” where these sites of pure land cosmology take on a new form as tourist locations.⁴

One scholar representative of this trend is Jiangbian Jiacao of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences who explored how the oral tradition of the epic poem entitled “The Epic of Gesar of Ling” (*gling gesar gyi sgrung*) was nurtured in a delicate ecosystem centered on the region at the headwaters of the Yellow River. This epic integrates the animistic traditions of Tibetan pastoralists who are made to symbolize in spiritual form the vitality of nature. This assertion makes the spiritual heritage of the location congruent with the water resource conservation objectives urged by the central government. Moreover, by connecting the existing mountains and lakes depicted in the epic as “places where spirits reside” to the “tourism content of environmental education” and promoting eco-tourism that targets ethnic Han Chinese from the inner regions, it reinforces the belief that it is possible to build a mutually beneficial relationship between center and frontier (JIANGBIAN 2003, 317–28).

The viewpoint that invigoration of the frontier economy is due to the development of a tourism that makes the folk culture of Tibetans into a product for consumption is also shared by Western scholars who began researching the transformation of Tibetan tourism in the late 1990s. However, while Chinese scholars tend to speak affirmatively about the recreation and redefinition of the indigenous culture of Tibet, these Western scholars tend to pay more attention to the processes replete with competitive contradictions inherent in the focused attention from the outside and increased tourism. For example, Åshild KOLÅS (2007) illustrates the ulterior motives of government attempts to integrally reorganize the main portion of Tibetan settlements in Yunnan under Western utopian concepts such as “Shangri-La,” and shines a light on the symbolic politics of interventions into this region. In addition, foreign organizations such as China Dialogue and Tibet Watch that are interested in the negative impact of tourism development on local communities publish articles that trace the escalation of the confrontation between tourist capitalism and residents over the development of Yamdrok, the sacred lake west of Lhasa (LIU 2012). These organizations also publish reports that comprehensively cover the cultural friction caused by ethnic Han Chinese pouring into traditional Tibetan communities in

4. For more on this issue see JIANGBIAN (2002), XIE (2005), and WANG (2012).

vast numbers (TIBET WATCH 2014). These reports depict the unbalanced power relationship that exists between those outside of the communities, and Tibetan monastic communities and sacred pilgrimage sites, which are made out to be “sacred, hidden seclusions” through mass tourism. These same reports also show that if the balance between the “culture” and “consumption” of “culture of consumption” cannot be reached, unilateral efforts to make locations into tourist destinations will not necessarily lead to the steady economic development hoped for by local governments. Rather than unifying these regions, such an unbalance could become a factor in the unexpected fragmentation of and conflicts with the communities of these regions.

Direction of this Paper

The various issues discussed above have emerged from the debate over the relationship between sacred sites and economic development, and they serve to disrupt the framework of preceding research that asserts that the infiltration of a pure land cosmology into specific natural environments led to the autonomous formation of centralized sacred spaces based on Buddhist values. In the literature on traditional sacred space as depicted by Buffetrille, the religious understanding of sacred spaces was something that was firmly grounded in the society of a specific region and the physical space of sacred sites existed in a natural environment that was not easily accessible. However, within the context of the whirlwind of massive economic development that has remade people of the frontier and the structure of nature in accordance with the demands of the coastal regions, and with the development of the tourism sector and the media industry, the religiosity that has accumulated in sacred spaces is broadcast outward as a cultural resource and diffuses in a fluid manner. Moreover, at the same time, there are a wide range of situations in which the opening of the physical land that accompanies the development of infrastructure has greatly affected the way sacred sites continue to exist. These movements might be considered a process and aspect of “de-Buddhicization,” wherein the centrality of the sacred site—seemingly the product of an era of religious revival—is engulfed by the dynamism of a modernization that came from outside the region and that has eroded the centrality of the site as it becomes the target of “consumption” by third parties without faith-related objectives. With this situation in mind, from the late 1990s to the present, case studies related to sacred sites and tourism, with Chinese and Western researchers at the helm, have differed in terms of approach or level of interest. However, as I have mentioned, these case studies have mainly discussed the creation of an ethnic tourism with the ability to attract tourists from the coastal areas and the accompanying conflicts and contradictions that take place among the people of the regional communities.

On the other hand, research from the latter half of the 1990s onward deals mainly with highly visible, sensational examples of large-scale tourism and ethnic tension, and considers it a necessity to pay a certain amount of attention to the fact that the spotlight has been given exclusively to the active movement of people. In the inland regions of the Tibetan Plateau where GDP is consistently the lowest domestically, the number of places with the potential for market growth to reach the level where industrial capital will begin to take notice is limited to regions that meet the requirements for becoming tourist hotspots, such as Lhasa after the opening of the Tibetan Railway (YEH 2013), the aforementioned Shangri-La (Yunnan), and the World Heritage Site Jiuzhaigou and its neighboring area (Sichuan) (PENG 1998; SCHREMPF and HAYES 2009), and Lurol (Qinghai), which is home to a traditional festival that is recognized as an official intangible cultural property (EPSTEIN and PENG 1998). The three-way clash between the tourism industry, local government, and local residents at these large-scale and well-known tourist locations is being researched extensively. Moreover, from this seemingly economic process one must also take into account the role of the state's political intentions, which at the highest level of state policy make a distinction between those aspects of ethnic culture that facilitate the speedy integration of the population and those that do not (MURAKAMI 2011).⁵

It is possible to look at modern sacred sites as caught in a grand national integration project that is a tug of war with “Buddhicization” at one end and “de-Buddhicization” at the other. However, given poor accessibility, outside of the local Tibetan population little is known about what is happening at local sacred places where tourism is still in its infancy. More minor Buddhist sacred spaces, such as will be explored in this paper, that exist in remote locations have finally been affected by the wave of economic development. These minor sacred spaces have been passed over by mainstream Tibetan tourism because of their small capital and market value, and they are unlikely to receive attention in the literature on tourism.

However, it is too early to conclude that there is absolutely no commercial activity popping up at these small-scale, more minor sacred sites. At these kinds of local sacred places, given their size and anonymity, one can see the development of unique commercial activities that utilize the religiosity of the sacred

5. MURAKAMI Daisuke (2011) considers the mass tourism of Lhasa in the early part of the first decade of the twentieth century and argues that the tourist industry under the auspices of state leadership is not limited simply to stimulating the consumption of ethnic symbols through tourism, but is none other than an attempt to force the acceptance of state-promoted values such as “progress” and “harmony” on the Tibetans and encourage the internalization of such values through political power.

place itself to target local pilgrims. In addition, in contrast to the preceding research—which treats the relationship between the infiltration of a pure land cosmology into sacred space and changes in the normative behavior of believers as a self-evidently causal relationship—by focusing on economic behavior that targets the “faith” that forms autonomously at these sacred places, there is an opportunity to propose an analytical framework that takes into account the new dynamism of diversification of the actual popular religious space. In this sense, this paper will examine the existing business model of local sacred places through an extreme close-up that will have the potential to serve as a guideline in exploring the relationship between modernity and the religiosity found at a great number of general sacred spaces in the Tibetan interior.

In the following, after presenting an overview of the sacred places that will serve as my case studies, I will explore the official symbolism—derived as it is from Buddhist scriptures—of sacred sites, the process of ritual performance undertaken by pilgrims, and commercial activities that stem from locals who develop a means for going out to make money in tandem with religious practices. On that basis, from an examination of how these commercial actors at sites of religious practice appropriate the religiosity of sacred places to improve their profits, I will demonstrate the merit of analyzing the relationship between the religiosity of local sacred places and the indigenous economic fundamentals that naturally arise in those locations.

The Object of Examination: The Drakar Dredzong Pilgrimage

A GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The location that I will address in this paper is a sacred site centered on an independent rock peak called Drakar Dredzong (Monkey Fortress) (see FIGURE 1). As an administrative division it belongs to Xinghai 興海 County in Hainan 海南 of the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province and is located in a mountainous region about thirty kilometers southwest of the county’s administrative municipality. The Dredzong pilgrimage route, which consists of climbing a single rock peak, stretches for a length of nine kilometers, and the circuit can be completed in roughly five hours on foot. Given that the indigenous god that serves as the main deity of this sacred site has the face of a monkey, it is believed that pilgrimages undertaken in the year of the monkey bring about twice as much merit as is typical. In 2016 (the third year of the monkey after the opening and reform following 1992 and 2004), at New Years (8 February), a huge number of pilgrims are quick to visit this location and, with summer as the peak (July through August), the waves of people are continuous until after October.

The earliest record concerning this sacred site is a guidebook (*gnas yig*) written in the early seventeenth century by esoteric practitioner Drigung Chokyi

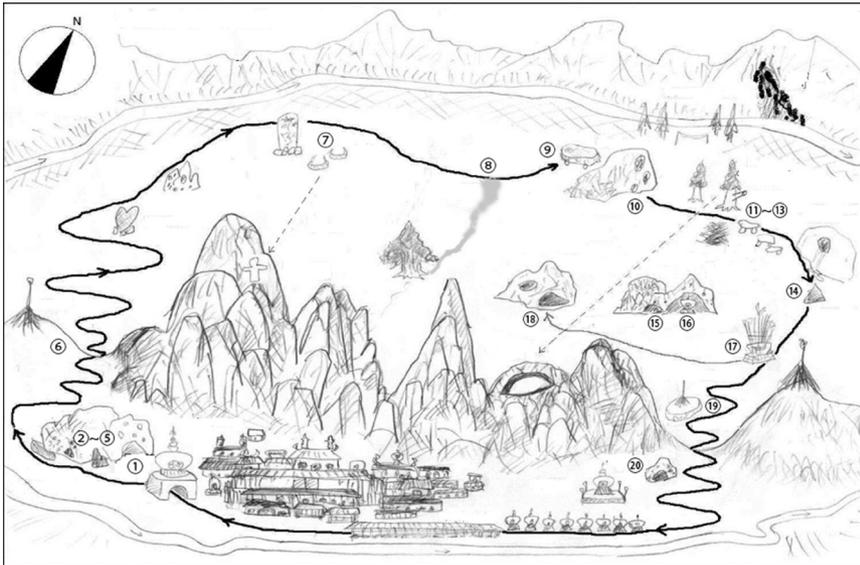


FIGURE 1. Drakar Dredzong pilgrimage route and major religious sites. Created by author.

Trakpa (1595–1656) entitled, “Pilgrimage Guide to Drakar Dredzong” (*Brag dkar sprel rdzong gi dkar chag*). In this text the events concerning the tantric practitioner Padmasambhava,⁶ who had visited from India and had entered a meditative state inside of a cave, are recorded. After expatiating the local spirit that had attempted to bury him alive, Padmasambhava sanctified the land through various esoteric rituals such as burying the *gter bum* (an enchanted urn filled with grains and wish-granting jewels used to sanctify the land) in the earth and prayed for the flourishing of the Buddhist Dharma. Among the records in this text, there are some that point to the beginnings of the Buddhist sacred place Dredzong which correspond to the abovementioned “creation myth” motif involved in “Buddhization” which remains the central theme of pilgrimage activities today.

There is no definitive record for when exactly this sacred site came to be visited by pilgrims but, in a biography for the itinerant monk Shabkar (1781–1851), who resided in this area around 1810, there is a record that states, “*bod sog kun ’ong phyag skor byed*” ([To Dredzong,] people from Tibet and other regions visit to do prostrations and complete the pilgrimage circuit) (SKAL BZANG LHA MO 2002, 383) and, at the very least, one can see that by the early nineteenth century Dred-

6. Padmasambhava was a historical figure who was invited to the court of the Tibetan empire in order to establish Buddhism in Tibet and succeeded in subjugating various indigenous gods one after another through powerful esoteric incantations. Commonly known as Guru Rinpoche.

zong was widely known as a famous sacred place. In 1923, the first full-fledged monastery, Drelzong Temple, was constructed at the foot of the mountain. This temple was constructed by Arol Rinpoche (*A rol blo bzang lung rtogs bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan*, 1888–1959), who was a reincarnation of a high-ranking lama of the famous Rongwo Monastery (in Tongren 同仁 County in Huangnan 黄南 of the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture), in response to the dying wishes of his previous incarnation. The monastery completely ceased activity from 1958 until the end of the Cultural Revolution, but in 1981 the government allowed activities to resume, and reconstruction of the monastery continues to this day. Currently, the temple has a head abbot, Arol Rinpoche (1977–), who is the first of thirteen incarnate lamas, and five hundred and thirty registered monks who reside at the temple.

*Written Tradition and the Actual Location of
Connection: The Representative Behaviors of Pilgrims*

TABLE 1 summarizes the twenty major sacred sites one can observe while undertaking a pilgrimage to Drelzong. The spatial location of each sacred place is given on FIGURE 1 where they are numbered from ① to ⑳. In general, in addition to those locations that serve as objects of ritual activity related to the events of the Padmasambhava myth mentioned above (⑭, ⑯ through ⑱), there are certain trees, waterfalls, and two mountain passes with monuments for ritual use. Also, to the northeast of the site, there is a concentration of sacred sites related to the auxiliary theme traversing hell (⑪ through ⑬). The natural landscape and composition of natural objects in this area are marked by a series of representations that hint at the world after death. Pilgrims in the process of walking clockwise along the pilgrimage circuit make physical contact with the miraculous traces that appear at these locations, they perform prostrations and, by presenting offerings, attempt to draw spiritual power (*byin brlabs*) of these locations into their bodies. In addition, they collect rocks, soil, pieces of wood, or spring water from these sacred places and attempt to take them back to the space of their daily lives. Given the restrictions here, in the following I will limit myself to an outline of the ritual activity of pilgrims as it is performed at the sacred sites associated with the “creation myth” discussed above.

⑭ DEMON’S GRAVE

This is the place where the remains of the demon lie, who was himself killed during his attempt to trap Padmasambhava inside a cave. Pilgrims face a mound of earth made to be the “gravestone” that is on the left-hand side of the pilgrimage route, spit at it quickly three times, and throw a handful of dirt taken from

TABLE 1. List of the main religious sites of Drakar Dredzong pilgrimage.

	NAME OF RELIGIOUS SITE	OBJECT OF WORSHIP	FORM OF THE RITUAL ACTIVITY OF THE PILGRIM
1	Cave of Gratitude for Parents	The crack in a boulder	Enter the interior and touch one's head to the boulder and make a wish
2	Hidden Door of the God of Wealth	A rock wall running along a river	Throw a Terma bag into the river
3	Yama's Pliers	A narrow pass in a triangular rock formation	Pass through the gap in the rock
4	Hidden Door to the Treasury	A white rock wall along a river	Offer a Terma bag in front of the hidden door
5	Holes of the Sound of the Recitation of the India Sutras	Two holes in the rock face	Place one's head into the hole and listen to the recitation of sutras
6	Tori-La	The western mountain pass (3,860m)	Conduct offerings at Labtse Shrine
7	Prostration Place of the Old Man from Arik	The figure of the Avalokitesvara that manifested naturally at the rock peak	Conduct prostrations while facing the figure of the Avalokitesvara in intimation of the old man who received the prophecy from Avalokitesvara after devoted practice.
8	The Waterfall of Annihilation and Completion	A waterfall pouring over the cliff wall	Bathe and collect water from the waterfall
9	Gravestone believed to have come flying from India	A rock with a flat, board-shaped surface	Lay down facing upward, bending to see the emanation of symbols of a monkey on the back.
10	Yama Tharkhong	A rock formation where wind comes out of three tunnels	Climb to the top of the rock formation and descend to the bottom by passing through a wind tunnel
11	Yama's Great Pot	A river pool below at the base of a cliff	Throw a big rock into the pool to break the bottom of the pot
12	Yama's Bellows	A thin embankment between mountains	Build a small stove using rocks and supply with firewood
13	Yama's Scale and Mirror	An old pine tree facing a huge rock mountain	Hang from the branch of the tree to measure the weight of one's sins and look at the rock mountain upside down
14	Demon's Grave	A pile of fallen rubble	Face the grave and spit on it
15	Crystal Palace	Long, narrow limestone cave	Enter the cave and touch the sacred relic
16	Yangdzong Cave	Rock dome	Touch the sacred relic that manifested on the surface of the rock
17	Labtse of the Monkey God	Labtse Shrine	Make offerings to the monkey god
18	Vajra Meditation Cave	Meditation hall inside a limestone cave	Make prostrations to each of the sacred relics of Padmasambhava
19	Tashi-La	The eastern mountain pass (3,820m)	Conduct offerings at Labtse Shrine
20	Cave of the Wish-Granting Cow	Dome-shaped rock cave	Enter the cave and collect some earth

the ground before passing on. It is said that this is to dispel the evil presence of the demon.

⑩ YANGDZONG CAVE

There is a large rock dome with a Buddhist stupa built on the inside at this site. In various places on the rock surface are the footprints of Padmasambhava and characters in the Tibetan language that are thought to have manifested on their own. While circumambulating the stupa, pilgrims touch their head to these sacred relics and, in imitation of the acts of purification undertaken by Padmasambhava to purify the sacred space, the pilgrims themselves also deposit *gter bum* inside the cave.

⑪ LABTSE OF THE MONKEY GOD

The sheer triangular rocky mountain soaring across from the Yangdzong Cave is considered to be the palace of Nyendrel Dawachenpo-dawa chenpo (literally, “Monkey God of the Moon”) who pledged himself to Padmasambhava and serves as his protector. Pilgrims perform rites at the *labtse* at the base of this mountain. *Labtse* is a shrine of bundled wooden poles shaped like a bow and arrow and is believed to house the deity. Here the pilgrims tie strips of cloth with various verses from sutras printed upon them called “darchok” to the *labtse*, place scented wood or wheat flour into the censer placed before the *labtse*, and pour sacred alcohol as an offering. Subsequently, pilgrims scatter scraps of paper with pictures of horses printed on them called “lunta” while circumambulating the *labtse* and intoning sutras.

⑫ VAJRA MEDITATION CAVE

This location is commensurate with the interior pilgrimage route of the sacred site. Here the pilgrims momentarily leave the main route of the pilgrimage and, taking the mountain pass toward the interior pilgrimage route, arrive at the cave where Padmasambhava entered meditation. Inside the cave there are rock formations that are presented as Padmasambhava’s seat and a beggar’s bowl. There is an opening in the ceiling that is said to have been made by a vajra after the demon had locked Padmasambhava in the cave. Pilgrims pray, make prostrations touching their head to the ground, and gather pieces of stalactites or underground water at these sites. In addition, they offer *gter bum* inside the cave.

The above description of the sacred places and ritual activities of pilgrims is based exclusively on the portrayal of the pure land landscape of the sacred site as recorded in the Drigung Chokyi Trakpa guidebook for the location. This same

guidebook explains how these sacred spaces came into being through Padma-sambhava's sanctifying acts, the origins of its relations to the hells, and how the sacred site possesses the same virtue as *Tsa ri*, the sacred mountain of central Tibet, also known as the "Crystal Palace"—which is one of the famed sacred sites of the Cakra Samvara Mandala.⁷ In this sense, this pilgrimage centered around the rocky peak of (15) standing in for the "Crystal Palace," on the one hand, is said to be identical in essence to the sacred sites of the Cakra Samvara Mandala. Given that this pilgrimage is also composed of the coexistence of an indigenous system with the local territorial god Nyendrel Dawachenpo from the Padma-sambhava origin tales, one could examine the pilgrimage within the context of "Buddhization" described earlier. Within this framework, the site could be understood as the "semi-mandalization of a sacred Buddhist site" wherein the two systems of the indigenous gods and esoteric gods overlap at a single mountain. Pilgrims who visit this sacred site experience the same motifs of multiple legends, such as "sacred creation," that are firmly rooted in the place. Simultaneously, these pilgrims offer prayers and offerings in accordance with the context of each sacred site and through their bodies receive spiritual power. Through the repeated performance of such acts, the sacred site continues to exist as a bounded space that is in possession of a specific religious theme. As seen earlier in the conventional research on sacred places, creating a connection between the "written information" that discusses the religious value of this sacred site and the actual natural space is taken to be something that happens automatically at the site mainly through the judgment of the pilgrims who perform the rituals. However, with the penetration of widespread economic development into the frontier areas of today, it is unrealistic to assume that pilgrims can act in such a way as to provide the main interpretation of the natural space at the actual site of religious faith. To put it simply, in the years of the pilgrimage, when a massive number of people—between several thousand and ten thousand each day—enter the mountain for the purpose of faith, a small market forms within the sacred site to handle the demands of religious supplies such as offerings, food, drink, and lodging. These years are also a period of economic revitalization for migrant commercial actors who enter from the outside at this time. By bringing incense, sanctified alcohol, *gter bum*, and *darchok* that were purchased at wholesale stores in urban areas in order to sell them and setting up stores onsite that supply butter lamps, mani stones, and so on, these commercial actors enter into religious activity at the various sacred locations along the pilgrimage route in order to profit economically. In the following, I will examine the changes in the religious environment that accompany the intervention of such commercial

7. For more details on this document see BESSHO (2007).

actors from a perspective that takes into account the local economic principles involved in the religiosity of the sacred site.

*From People of Faith to People of Income:
Migrant Commercial Actors and Monastic Institutions*

In February, May, and September of 2016, the author made three trips to the sacred site under question and joined in pilgrimage activities in order to conduct research.⁸ In February, the influx of commercial actors had just begun and they were still at the stage of setting up their stores. However, when I revisited in May, all of the main religious sites were filled with the tents and temporary shacks of these commercial actors and I witnessed the same situation in September as well. In considering the formation of a local market such as this one, one must first account for the problem of land management at the sacred site as a whole. The jurisdiction over the land surrounding Drakar Drel dzong belongs to the Drel dzong Monastery. All of the commercial actors who do business inside the territory of the sacred site are required to get approval from and pay a fee for land use to the “Monastery Administration Committee” (MAC) (a congressional administrative body consisting of monks from the same monastery and headed by Arol Rinpoche IV) who oversees administration of the temple affairs. The site rental fee is typically paid in one lump sum for the year, calculated according to the “faith value” and “convenience” of the location in question, and ranges greatly in price from 5,000 yuan at the lowest to a maximum of 380,000 yuan (1 yuan = 17 yen).

I will explain these locations by tracing the path in FIGURE 1. Sections ① to ⑤ consist of 25 square meter blocks costing 40,000 yuan. Up until the pass in section ⑥ tents cost 5,000 yuan each, 15,000 yuan at the top of the pass in ⑥, and beginning in the descent in ⑥ and continuing from ⑦ through ⑬ tents are 5,000 yuan each. Sections ⑭ through ⑰, which are located on both sides of the pilgrimage route, are 250,000 yuan, and ⑱ and ⑲ are together 350,000 yuan. The monastery has prohibited the use of area ⑱, but the pass top at ⑲ is 380,000 yuan, and the descent from ⑲ through ⑳ in front of the monastery is 120,000 yuan per tent. At a single glance one can see that places that relate to the creation of the sacred place have a higher price tag but, in order “to maintain a tranquil environment,” commercial activities have been prohibited at the highly religious site at ⑱. Also, even within the same mountain, the reason that a different price is given for ⑥ and ⑬ is that when compared to “Tori-La” (High Mountain Pass),

8. The author was onsite for one week during each visit and, along with performing the actual pilgrimage on foot multiple times (one of those times was conducted in the manner of prostrations), collected research resources through participant observation and interviews.

“Tashi-La” (Auspicious Pass) relates to the good luck of “the completion of all things” and is, therefore, religiously superior. In addition, given that poor access to water and transportation results in higher costs, prices on the northern side of the sacred site are set to be more reasonable than those on the southern side. Here on the northern side, fees are “retail” and the cost of renting the space is carried out on a one-tenth basis with fees paid to the MAC. On the other hand, as in sections ⑭ through ⑰, a single investor pays the annual fee for using the space in one lump sum and, after securing the right to use this space, acts as a “broker” who makes a profit by leasing lots to tenants. This section, also called “Gate to the Holy Land,” is an area of fierce competition that borders the most important religious sites, and there are more than thirty tents on each side of the pilgrimage route expending energy jockeying with one another for customers. Moreover, according to interviews with the members of the MAC, the income received by the temple in terms of leases on land plots amounted to 1,730,000 yuan as of September. However, after making deductions for the various expenses associated with the public monastery, the remaining funds were all distributed equally to each monk as an allowance regardless of class or age.⁹

Next, I would like to highlight some of the representative narratives expressed by commercial actors from my September survey field notes.

1. Section ⑥ Tori-La Pass (small retailer, Han woman from Gangtsa County, forty years old), moved to the mountaintop with her family to open a shop immediately following the start of the new year and began to conduct sales. She was selling *darchok* for 10 yuan, one bag of incense for 15 yuan, one jar of sanctified alcohol for 10 yuan, a large butter lamp for 10 yuan, and a small butter lamp for 5 yuan. There were costs involved with hiring someone to carry goods to the base of the mountain so an investment of one million yuan was made to build a simple ropeway for that purpose. The goods are purchased directly from a wholesaler located in town (the administrative municipality of Xinghai County) and carried to the foot of the mountain in the family truck. She also took orders for hauling goods for other vendors and received 2 yuan per kilometer. Starting two years ago, this vendor began conducting business at other pilgrimage sites, thereby acquiring experience and, because she knew that location was the most important thing, she selected this location even though the cost of leasing was much higher than other locations. The profits are decent. At the best times, she makes 10,000 to 12,000 yuan in sales in a single day. The frigid temperatures at

9. The right to receive these funds is given to any currently registered member of the clergy who participates in the extended dharma assembly of the summer retreat. During the year of this survey, about four hundred such monks participated and were given roughly 2,500 yuan each.

the ridge and the difficulty involved in disposing of garbage are the biggest challenges.

2. Middle of the northern side of Tori-La (managing a dining hall and lodging, pastoralist man from Golok, thirty-three years old), run by a couple. Tukpa (Tibet-style meat and noodle dish) for 15 yuan, meat buns for 20 yuan, and cup noodles for 5 yuan. One night at the lodging is 20 yuan per bed. Daily earnings during the busy period amount to between 5,000 and 6,000 yuan with a net income of about half that amount. Lucky to sell one hundred Tukpa meals a day. From September onward pilgrims begin to decline in number and their earnings decrease by half. Based on an agreement with the MAC, aside from the cost of lodging, all prices for commercial goods and foods are set at the same price for all shops. The same is true for both the northern and southern sides of the sacred site. The main expenditures are the cost of fuel for boiling water and the cost of gasoline for the motorcycle used to fetch water. It was decided that tea would be given to pilgrims without charge, but as the water comes from a distant mountain stream, is acquired by hand, and requires the use of a motorcycle for transportation, when costs are calculated, the water for one cup of tea results in a loss of more than one yuan.

3. Section (16), Yangdzong Cave (lamp shop, pastoralist woman from Xinghai County, thirty years old), in addition to butter lamps and *gter bum*, sells incense and sanctified wine as a family of four. Received a hint from the MAC and believing that, if their location was good, they would definitely make a profit, they therefore decided to raise the funds to rent this space. Having an excellent location before the Buddhist stupa, and free from competitors, they got a return on their investment. Each day they made a net profit of between 5,000 and 6,000 yuan, over half of which came from butter lamps. They experienced difficulty in acquiring a building permit for their structure from the MAC and, although they originally built a small brick shop for dedicating lamps, they were told that they could not erect a permanent building at that location and were ordered to tear it down. They rebuilt using a prefab structure but, in addition to the fees for leasing the space, their costs were upwards of 250,000 yuan. Because sales went smoothly, despite these losses they were still able to make a profit.

4. Section (17), nearby the *labtse* of the Monkey God (managing a dining hall, a pastoralist woman from Xinghai County, twenty-seven years old) operating the shop with her two daughters. This woman typically runs a small restaurant in the county's administrative municipality. With the hope of success, she set up a tent in the valley but, at the moment, there are twenty such tents in close proximity and competition is intense. The cost of one tent in this area is 10,000 yuan. The neighboring merchants have come up with strategies to attract customers and to increase the sales of offerings by newly assembling incense platforms and surrogate *labtse*. During the period of peak activity, they were left with 2,000

yuan in profit for the month. At the moment, when sales are good, profits are about 500 to 600 yuan. Because butter lamps make more money, they would like to try selling them but the location where they are set up is not close to the religious sites, making it difficult to increase profits from those kinds of sales.

To summarize, the various trades of the interviewees can be roughly divided into four categories: (1) dining halls, (2) simple lodging, (3) retail shops (carrying Buddhist implements, offerings, and daily use items), and (4) retail shops that sell butter lamps. Most commercial actors engage in several of these trades simultaneously. Within the market that forms alongside the religious activities that take place within the sacred site, the primary factor in acquiring regular profits is the “religiosity” of the location, that is, the value of the location in terms of faith, and this is also linked to the establishment of the market price of the fees for renting plots. When one considers that the average monthly income of a local civil servant is around 5,000 yuan, one can clearly see that those commercial actors who monopolized speculatively good locations before their competitors made extremely high profits. Conversely, one can also see that those who ran shops in locations where competition was stiff or the location unfavorable were in a situation where they were lucky to break even. In the next section, I would like to explore the formation of economic activities around the religiosity of sacred locations such as this one from the perspective of “supply” and “demand.” In so doing, I will present the characteristic features one can see in the relationship between the religious and the commercial at the sacred sites of contemporary Tibet.

Considerations: The Relationship Between Supply and Demand at “Sacred Places”

In order to efficiently turn a profit in the business of sacred sites, it is important to quickly physically monopolize the religious sites that directly connect to the religious value of the sacred site as a whole and, based on the religious context that the site possesses, continuously supply the products that meet the needs of pilgrims. The entrepreneurs in cases 1 and 3 understood the defining features of supply and demand at their locations—supplying *labtse* offerings at 1, and offerings related to the creation myth at 3—and aimed to maximize profits by restricting the capital used to procure specific products. In particular, commercial actor 1 prioritized the speedy procurement of products by installing a simple ropeway, and was able to make earnings that justified such an investment. On the other hand, commercial actors, such as 2 and 4, who were in areas of intense competition, or who were selling on the relatively inaccessible northern side of the sacred site, were required to devise creative techniques for getting a leg up on the competition and to raise profits. One such example comes from the installation of a new religious monument discussed in case study 4. In actuality, when I began the study of this sacred site in February, merchants had yet to arrive in

this section of the mountain and there was only one vendor for the *labtse* and one vendor for incense. However, when I was there again in May there was an army of tents to be seen in a situation that had totally changed. I witnessed on the roadside iron rods that would serve as the axis for pillars and cement being carried to assemble an incense platform. In September, when I visited for the third time, the commercial actors had finished constructing the new shrine and incense platform, which was functioning and receiving a large number of offerings. In this way, commercial actors promoted sales by adding new monuments that were consistent with the context of the space and increasing demand from pilgrims. For these reasons, the response of this commercial activity to the religiosity of the sacred site is not limited simply to following the religious meaning of the site but involves using that image and, in building new locations, creating a related context that connects to the generation of personal profit.

The autonomously progressing commercialization at sacred sites like those described above are uniformly influenced by policies such as the establishment of high-priced plot leases by the MAC of Dreltzong Temple and the uniform pricing established to control the cost of items at the sacred site. Establishing a uniform price reduces over-competition and, by relieving issues of supply and demand, benefits pilgrims. However, as remarks made by merchants who set up stores in locations with unfavorable conditions suggest, the pressure of operating costs and competition produces “market losers” who are basically unable to increase their profits. On the other hand, the MAC did not include area ⑩, which lies at the heart of the sacred site’s creation myth, among those for rent. Furthermore, in May, there was a notice released in the name of the MAC outlining a policy forbidding the construction of new permanent edifices in order to maintain the tranquility of the religious environment. The “dismantling and removal” that resulted in case study 3 in the previous section is the result of a crackdown on new structures as a part of this policy. These decisions can be seen to be part of a larger policy designed to avoid a situation where in the most religious location at the site one would also find the most commercial site—a dilemma unique to the business of sacred sites. In this way, the monastic institution sets the relative prices for plot leases inviting commercialism into the areas of the sacred site, but does not allow commercialism to surpass this pricing and overtake the site. This demonstrates a two-fronted set of standards for managing the sacred site.¹⁰

10. These policies issued by the MAC also reflect the administrative leadership of government-related departments such as the Xinghai County Religious Affairs Bureau, which is the top political unit supplying oversight jurisdiction of the monastery. One cannot ignore the intervention of such political entities in the management and control of this sacred site, but I will discuss this issue at another time.

In Conclusion: Toward a Future of Sacred Site Research

In this article, I have considered the natural process by which religiosity develops at sacred sites and, in contrast to the theories of Buddhicization, I have demonstrated that the commercialism that self-propagates at sacred sites is actually intervening in the onsite religious practice. At the sacred sites of contemporary Tibet, which are exposed to the high-pressure development that accompanies rapid modernization, natural space and pure land cosmology are linked to one another without mediation. However, it is impossible to conduct a proper analysis if one ignores the mediating role of the commercial space that is generated by the economic relationship of supply and demand that runs parallel to that value system. Based on the preceding results, it will be necessary to revise the analytical framework of preceding research on sacred spaces so as to account for the economic reality of the actual site.

On the other hand, the problem of how to situate the parallel development of the local religiosity we find at a site such as this one discussed here and commerciality in reference to the movements of “Buddhicization/de-Buddhicization” in mass tourism remains. As we saw earlier, tourism is a process where representations that are the result of views from the outside are consumed. The government of Xinghai County, which is in the position of having jurisdiction over Drelzong Monastery, has begun to promote this sacred place as the centerpiece of local tourism. However, that effort has only just begun and, in terms of preparing the entire site for tourists, the government is not yet at a phase where they are prepared to start sending out information systematically to the other areas.¹¹ Similarly, at the majority of sacred places which reside within the inland area of the Tibetan Plateau, there has not yet been a systematized movement to turn representations of these locations into a resource. As described earlier in this article, major sacred sites experience a kind of tourism that is only possible once public, private, and religious organizations come together. However, at minor sacred sites that reside in the shadows of these major sites is a different kind of minor economic phenomenon that has begun to spread, where what one might call self-consumption is carried out by local residents at the sacred sites. The situation described in this article where religiosity is utilized for commercial activity gives broad support to the implication that the general occurrence of such things takes place at a great many minor sacred sites. In future research on sacred sites, I believe it will be necessary to include both sacred sites that have

11. The Tourism Bureau of Xinghai's local government is making special attempts to modernize the environment by constructing promenades and billboards, but at present, these investments have not been made in a direct effort to attract tourists.

become tourist destinations and those sacred sites where those developments are still in their infancy.

(Translated by Jesse LeFebvre)

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