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Chapter 5

THE MOLUO TOURISM ASSOCIATION

How Far to Go?



The Moluo Tourism Association is registered with the Civil Affairs Bureau and the Culture and Tourism Bureau of Danba County as a state-certified “popular association” (*minjian shetuan*). Although defined thus, it is not a purely voluntary or self-generating organization, since its founding was based on the “organizational will” (*zuzhi yitu*) of the local state in Danba, which expresses the intentions of the county bureaucracy. Its members are appointed or approved by the Party secretary of Suopo Township with the advice of his subordinate, Uncle Pema, the famous “King of the Eastern Queendom,” and its activities are to be performed under the jurisdiction of the village committee. Despite the state’s strong presence in the Moluo Tourism Association as well as the association’s semiofficial nature, it is also a popular association because of the voluntary participation of eight villagers and the villagers’ recognition of its role in coordinating efforts to develop tourism in Moluo. More than that, its members and some villagers use the tourism association as a legal mechanism for engaging in the queendom struggle and pressing other political claims. However, tourism association members have disparate positions on the association’s relationship with local government and divergent development agendas. These differences are a continuation of everyday village tensions and negotiations.

Scholars point out that the concept of “civil society,” which originated in European traditions and practices, doesn’t translate easily into the sociopolitical, historical, and cultural contexts of China.¹ In China, hierarchy and *guanxi*, or communal kinship ties and networks of personal connections, often characterize various organizations and social groups. Simultaneously, due to the omnipresent influence of the state, most officially certified civil associations or nongovernmental organizations have adopted a conciliatory or cooperative attitude toward the powerful state and are not concerned primarily with seeking autonomy (see, e.g., Sujian Guo 2000; Weller 2005). Therefore, these organizations seem incompatible with the standard understanding of a civil society, which is thought to “(1) be voluntary, . . . based on the free choice of autonomous individuals; (2) act with civility, . . . accept the rights of others to disagree. . . . and (3) respect the legitimacy of the state while in turn enjoying a free space for action guaranteed by the state” (Weller 1999, 15). Thus, with the penetration of state power into social sectors, these social organizations and associations are not always “civil” in the Western sense. Nevertheless, they not only play a role similar to that of a civil society in connecting the family, community, and private spheres with the state but also can facilitate political change and generate space for civil dissent.²

The notion of the “state-led civil society” (Frolic 1997) has been suggested as a way of categorizing the “alternative” civil society in China, in which the Party-state exerts firm control over its societal sectors and the state takes advantage of its created civil society to “help it govern, co-opt and socialize potentially politically active elements in the population” (Saich 2004, 228). However, as evidenced by the Moluo Tourism Association, despite the imprint of state will, various associations in China may be able to secure a degree of free space and develop their own agendas, which consequently may pose a challenge to state agendas. In this way, the state and society display more nuanced interactions than mere opposition.

POSITIONS OF TOURISM ASSOCIATION MEMBERS

The Moluo Tourism Association is the second and, at present, only officially recognized tourism association in Danba County. The Jiaju Tourism Association in Niega Township was disbanded—though not officially—after the 2006 Gelindeya incident, in which increasing tourism led to social and

bureaucratic chaos. The founding of the Moluo Tourism Association in 2008 was built upon the lesson the county authorities learned from the failed experiment of engaging elites and villagers in tourism development projects. They feared that if the Party and the government allowed such a quasi-civil association to grow and define its own agenda freely, the situation would spin out of their control. With this legacy in mind, Mr. Chen, the Party secretary of Suopo Township, was cautious about the membership and guidelines for the Moluo Tourism Association. In reality, however, the association seems to be more than the county's or township's puppet. The eight members include Teacher Thubten, a well-respected retired teacher, who serves as the head; two vice-heads, Yeshe, a retired county cadre and successful businessman, and Tsering, a former accountant for the village committee who is known for his sophistication; Teacher Dorje, a retired schoolteacher and local cultural specialist; Lobsang, a retired cadre; and two young men and one middle-aged woman who are known for their singing and dancing talents.³ Although these members are officially designated, they use the association as a legal framework that enables them to fight for their queendom cause, express their concerns about Moluo's tourism prospects, and explore the possibilities of promoting Moluo and Suopo to the outside world by going beyond the restrictions of local authorities.

These members take three different positions—which may be described as cooperative, radical, and passive—on the association's relationship with the township, publicizing their queendom discourse, and advertising Moluo's and Suopo's tourism resources.

The cooperative position stresses the essential importance of keeping the township government and village committee (the administrative body at the village) informed about the association's plans and activities while engaging villagers in the development of tourism in Moluo. Teacher Thubten stressed that the association must follow the guidelines set by the township and the village committee and also highlighted the importance of villager participation as well as the association's central tenet, which is to serve the villagers' interests.

The radical position is based on the incapability of and/or indifference of local authorities when it comes to promoting Suopo and thus advocates self-promotion in order to enlist support from and cooperate with the media, scholars, and other interested groups and individuals. Yeshe and several other members advocated such a stance with varying degrees of intensity. They

blamed local authorities for doing little to help Suopo and Moluo and even obstructing their advancement; instead of cooperating with the authorities, they sought help from external sources. The radicals asserted that if Moluo did become famous due to their persistent promotion, the county and township governments should not involve themselves or share the benefits.

Finally, the passive position is characterized by a “nothing can be done about it” or “let it be” attitude, which is often accompanied by a sense of helplessness and a pessimistic view of the association’s limited role. Teacher Dorje became so frustrated with shortsighted villagers whose desire for quick money took precedence over their concern for the queendom cultural heritage that he began to think that challenging their mentality was a nearly impossible task.

Nevertheless, some members shift their positions as the situation changes or react differently in various contexts. For instance, Teacher Dorje sometimes held a cooperative position and at other times became radical, claiming that the county and township governments should “leave Moluo alone” and that Moluowa would do whatever was best for themselves. From time to time, Teacher Thubten expressed his desire to quit the post and have nothing further to do with the association because of its powerless and awkward state. Despite their differences, all of the members agreed that external support was essential for publicizing their queendom cause and establishing their village and township as a worthy tourist attraction.

This association is also divided into two notable camps built on different interests and agendas. Yeshe, one of the retired cadres, makes up one camp all by himself; he has won the support from one other association member, a small number of villagers, and his relatives, including his nephew—a former village head who plans to run for the position again. The other camp consists of all the other members and is concerned about whether Yeshe will take over the association and turn it into a profit-making instrument for himself. Nonetheless, it is not a homogeneous collective. Everyone in this camp has his or her own ideas and plans for how the association should work. The opposition between the two camps is not derived wholly from the members’ differences of opinion; it is rooted in daily village lives and histories. Therefore, the tourism association is just another field for the continuation or escalation of village conflicts.

Who is Yeshe and why has he taken such a position? How can he be a camp largely by himself? Yeshe is also not on good terms with the township

cadres, who are accused of being irresponsible and incapable, while some cadres believe that he is too sly and complicated to deal with. If this is so, why did the township Party secretary make him the vice-head of the tourism association in the first place?

The majority of Moluo villagers have a negative view of Yeshe. The most frequent comment is that he is too selfish, yet all agree that he is smart enough to know how to make money. He used to work at the county's "science commission" (*kewei*). After retirement, he turned the barren land beside his house into an apple orchard. He sells the young trees to other peasants or to other counties in Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and also sells apples to fruit merchants. His other dealings include the sale of cattle, and some villagers claim that he might earn ¥100,000–200,000 (about \$15,625–31,250) every year—a sum equal to the yearly income of at least ten average households. In many villagers' eyes, Yeshe cares only about money and not about the well-being of other villagers, nor does he seem interested in helping to lift his fellow villagers out of poverty. His selfish image was reinforced when he evaded responsibility for damage to twelve houses located below his fruit orchard caused by his nonstop irrigation since 2003. Four households had to build new houses at other locations, and two rebuilt them on the original site because of the lack of alternatives. Yeshe argued that the damage had nothing to do with him and that, on the contrary, without his fruit orchards, the situation could have been even worse because his hundreds of fruit trees solidify the soil and protect the environment. This claim has estranged him from other villagers, but his unshakable status as the wealthiest man in the village and township, his wide connections with county cadres, and his forceful eloquence, literacy, and knowledge of Party policies and the outside world make him a strong and even intimidating presence in Moluo and Suopo. Few can take him for granted. That is also the reason he was "elected" vice-head of the tourism association.

MAKING THE MOLUO TOURISM ASSOCIATION

Most tourism association members say that they were elected by villagers. As a matter of fact, their nominations were approved by the township Party secretary, Mr. Chen, at the suggestion of Uncle Pema and Teacher Dorje after negotiations with fourteen seniors (over fifty years old), the village

head, and the Party secretary.⁴ By “elected,” they meant that their membership was legitimate and supported by the masses and that they have the authority to speak for the villagers, whose interests they represent.

As mentioned, the county and township governments wanted to make sure that the tourism association, like other village associations, would be securely under their control because of the Gelindeya incident in Jiaju in 2006. The incident was caused by many problems that grew out of the increasing popularity of Jiaju, called “the most beautiful village in China,” in the Chinese tourist market and the skyrocketing number of tourists who have traveled there since the early 2000s. Conflicts included local guides and tourist reception households (family hostels) fighting over tourists, overcharging for accommodations and guide fees, improperly discharging excrement and polluting drinking water, children begging tourists for money, a growing income gap between tourist reception households and non-tourist-reception households, and intensified disagreement between villagers, the township, and the county government over ticket income distribution. In 2006, CCTV (China Central Television Station), the most influential TV station in China, produced two episodes on the chaotic situation in Jiaju titled “Gelindeya.”⁵ As a result, the county heads were censured by prefectural officials for the disorder in Jiaju and their inability to keep the situation in check. The Ganzi prefecture government took the matter so seriously that it ordered all counties to conduct sessions of self-critique or self-examination so that they could learn from Danba’s failure at managing tourism and governing its people, and the Danba County government had to launch an intensive self-criticism campaign. The county government put the blame on the Jiaju Tourism Association, whose three major leaders, trustworthy retired cadres from county agencies, had been appointed by the county’s former Party secretary but were now accused of inciting villagers to defy the county government’s authority. After this incident, the county and township governments marginalized the Jiaju Tourism Association by ceasing to involve it in Jiaju’s tourism projects, although they have not yet officially disbanded the organization.

Construction of the tourism association in Moluo Village is part of the New Socialist Countryside Construction (Shehuizhuyi Xinnongcun Jianshe) project, a nationwide initiative launched by the central government that aims to transform China’s rural areas mentally and materially.⁶ Moluo’s designation as one of the first two experimental sites for this project in

Danba in 2008 was inseparable from its status as Danba's only Famous Historical and Cultural Village of China. A claimed agenda of this rural development project is to promote democratic political construction at the grass roots—that is, within the legal framework of the Chinese state and under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, peasants are granted the rights of democratic elections (*minzhu xuanju*), democratic decision making (*minzhu juece*), democratic administration (*minzhu guanli*), and democratic superintendence (*minzhu jiandu*) as a way of involving them in the construction of the new countryside. The founding of the tourism association in Moluo was intended to make Moluo villagers take charge of their own tourism development. The Gelindeya incident cast a shadow over the newly founded tourism association, and the last thing the county and township governments wanted was for the association to turn against them by developing its own agendas and inciting villagers to protest.

Uncle Pema was entrusted by Mr. Chen, his superior and the township's Party secretary, with the task of nominating candidates for the tourism association, since it was assumed that Uncle Pema, a Suopo local, knew the people and local situation quite well. At first, Mr. Chen and Uncle Pema wanted to appoint Teacher Dorje as the head. He was well connected with the county and had experience in tourism and knowledge of the queendom heritage, but Teacher Dorje declined the position because he thought it would be difficult to work with the "practical" Moluo villagers. Then Mr. Chen and Uncle Pema turned to Teacher Thubten, who enjoyed prestige in the village thanks to his uprightness and easygoing character and would be able to help the township manage tourism and "difficult" villagers in Moluo. He had the same concerns as Teacher Dorje, but Uncle Pema assured him that the position was temporary and someone else could take his place when everything was on the right track. Two village heads, the head of the village committee and the Party secretary of Moluo, and also the majority of seniors wanted him to take this post because they believed he was the only one who would be able to counteract Yeshe, who had expressed a strong desire for the position.

Yeshe ran for the post of village Party secretary in 2004 but did not win due to his negative image in the village. Although the head of the tourism association was not an official post, he was eager to take it, since it carried symbolic prestige and would give him a public stage for showcasing his talents and skills as a leader in front of "incompetent" village heads and

suspicious villagers. Few wanted to give him such a chance, including the township Party secretary, Mr. Chen, as it was generally believed that Yeshe wanted to benefit only himself, not the whole village. His knowledge of Party policies, formidable eloquence, and confrontational style alienated him from Mr. Chen and other cadres who didn't want to have the Jiaju Gelindeya incident repeat itself in Moluo. But the township was aware that Yeshe's business acumen and creativity would contribute to tourism development in Moluo, so after negotiations among the seniors whom Uncle Pema had gathered, Yeshe was appointed vice-head. His role, however, was limited by the veto power of his superior, Teacher Thubten, and the presence of the other vice-head as well as the watchfulness of other members.

The rest of the association members were selected based on age, kinship ties, *guanxi*, literacy, and knowledge of local history and talents. Of the eight members, six were older than fifty because, according to Uncle Pema and others, in local tradition, old age itself demands respect and elderly people are considered more altruistic and devoted. Uncle Pema also attached great importance to kinship and *guanxi*. As China scholars point out, kinship ties were and are often a natural cause or source of political alliance or dissension in rural China,⁷ and various forms of *guanxi* have also played an important part in reconfiguring social relations and power structures as well as remolding political goals and the interests of the actors concerned in socialist China (Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang 1994; Yan 1996). This is evident in Suopo, too: kinship ties and *guanxi* were a significant variable in deciding the tourism association's membership and shaping the power structure within it, since candidates with wider and stronger kinship ties and *guanxi* were expected to receive more support. As a result, all members except Yeshe share kin or *guanxi*, or both.

In Uncle Pema's view, since local culture and queendom traditions are major tourism resources in Moluo, the association must reserve seats for those with local knowledge. His son, a former monk, who is proficient in written Tibetan language and queendom legends and also good at singing folk songs and performing traditional dances, was recruited into the association. Uncle Pema argued that since entertainment was of essential importance in tourism, people with musical, artistic, and performing talents should be admitted, too. As a result, the association took in several who had such gifts. Besides Uncle Pema's son, who was in his early thirties, another man of similar age was also nominated due to his musical and

performing skills. Of the eight members, only one is a woman, in her early fifties, who is very keen on singing and dancing.

In all, most of the candidates were nominated by Uncle Pema with the assistance of Teacher Dorje. They first reached consensus on the appropriate candidates and then persuaded some other seniors to nominate and vote for these candidates at the election meeting, which was attended by fourteen seniors and the two village heads. Next, the township gathered the Moluo villagers for a meeting, where a township cadre announced the names of the candidates and asked people to put up their hands if they approved of the slate of candidates. All attendees put up their hands as expected, so the nominations passed unanimously. Even if some villagers hadn't wanted to vote for certain candidates, they would have hesitated to vote against the group. Voting by raising hands instead of with secret ballots also discouraged villagers from expressing disagreement in public. Villagers were used to this kind of "democratic election" process from village elections,⁸ so this procedure did not seem odd to them, and Uncle Pema's careful consideration of age, kinship, literacy, talents, and so on, seemed fair enough to most. In addition, many villagers didn't care much. The tourism association was a new concept for them, and they didn't fully understand what it was all about, nor did they expect much to change with its founding.

THE ROLE AND AGENDAS OF THE TOURISM ASSOCIATION

The assumed purpose of establishing the tourism association was to let villagers manage their own tourism resources as a way of cultivating their sense of being responsible and qualified hosts for tourists, that is, hosts with "personal quality" (*suzhi*). The cadres like to say that the Suopowa "have very low personal quality" (*suzhi taidi*). This remark reflects countrywide anxiety over the issue of personal quality in Chinese national discourse, in which China's "low-quality" population, especially the peasants, are viewed by the Party-state and urban intellectuals as impediments to China's modernity and ascension to world power (Anagnost 2004). Many scholars point out that the Chinese state looks at tourism as a modern force that will transform its "backward" and "uncivilized" populations, especially minorities in remote regions with less access to "modern ideas."⁹ Therefore, the Moluo

Tourism Association is expected to implement the state agenda of improving the personal quality of villagers in their interactions with tourists.

For Danba and Suopo cadres, “low personal quality” involves lack of both literacy and civility, concepts that overlap and usually are indistinguishable from each other. It is normally assumed that literate people possess civility, and vice versa. “Literacy” is a delicate concept in Suopo as in many other Tibetan regions, while the term “civility” (*wenming*) is widely applied throughout China, referring to proper manners and speech as well as attention to sanitary conditions. People with a traditional Tibetan education are often not counted by the state or by villagers themselves as literate or literate enough. Uncle Pema’s son, a member of the tourism association, often referred to himself as “illiterate,” although, as a former monk, he studied Tibetan scripture for some ten years. The idea of “literacy” thus centers upon proficiency in Chinese and the cultivation of proper manners inculcated through the Chinese education system. It also demonstrates that, to some extent, some local Tibetans have internalized the dominant state-imposed structure and discourse that has marginalized traditional means of education or non-Chinese education.

Villagers are supposed to learn to use such polite words as “thank you” and “please” and avoid rough and dirty words. Many locals don’t bathe or change their clothes often, and some do not clean their houses regularly and are often accused by cadres of having a poor sense of sanitation. Because excrement from pigs, oxen, sheep, goats, and other livestock is visible in Moluo, the county and township governments often feel embarrassed in front of visitors and tourists. An important task of the tourism association is therefore to prod villagers into positive change through propaganda and education.

The tourism association is also expected to suggest to village heads and the township concrete means of developing tourism and disciplining villagers in their interactions with tourists. The township government underscored the importance attached to the tourism association by allocating a room to the association in the newly completed office building for Moluo’s village committee. Most members, however, didn’t really have any idea of how to proceed. Toward the end of 2008, the township heads, the Party secretary, and the newly appointed township head took the tourism association members to Jiaju to learn from the latter’s tourism experiences. The Moluo visitors were impressed with Jiaju’s cleanliness, the local guides’ standard Chinese and eloquence, the villagers’ “professional” manners, and

the hospitality of tourist reception households. They also had the chance to listen to the former heads of the Jiaju Tourism Association, Bao and Zheng, talk about their experiences. Perhaps because of the presence of the Suopo cadres, Bao and Zheng talked as if the tourism association at Jiaju were still functioning, and they admonished the Suopo visitors that preserving cultural heritage and exhibiting “authentic” local culture to tourists were crucial to the success of tourism development, since tourists came to see the essence of traditional local Tibetan culture, not “modern” stuff. Both expressed admiration for Suopo’s distinctive queendom cultural heritage. Bao, who held the post of the Party secretary of Suopo Township in the 1980s, even asserted that Suopo, with its queendom heritage, had much greater potential in the tourist market in China and even in the world.

The members of the Moluo Tourism Association read Mr. Bao’s remarks as a reaffirmation of their cultural traditions. Like Bao and Zeng, most of these members were aware of the importance of cultural heritage as a tourist attraction. As Uncle Pema pointed out, both cultural learning and entertainment are important in tourism, so a healthy way of developing tourism in Suopo and Moluo is to combine the two by entertaining tourists with “real” culture. The tourism association shared this concern and decided to set up a *kordro* (a circle dance popular among Tibetans and other ethnic groups) troupe, a *bashe* (another kind of circle dance popular in the Kham region) troupe, and a folk-music band. The association encouraged villager participation, promising that they would eventually benefit economically when tourists came and paid for performances. This way of presenting or commercializing local culture had much to do with Yeshe. Every time the tourism association members met, he pushed his agenda of turning local resources into capital, indicating his disappointment with the incapacity, lack of imagination, and indifference of the local authorities. He insisted that the market was the only solution. He suggested inviting interested individuals and corporations from elsewhere in China to invest in Moluo, with the tourism association coordinating interactions with local authorities and villagers. The local authorities would play a smaller role in this ambitious project, and their interference with Moluo’s tourism agendas would be undesirable. Not everyone agreed with him. Proponents of the cooperative position expected direction and financial as well as policy endorsements from the local authorities and preferred a safe and conventional development mode. No one could say that Yeshe was wrong, however, because of

his success in business. Yeshe was frustrated with his “conservative” colleagues who were unable to understand his “modern” marketing plan and sometimes expressed the desire to quit.

As mentioned, it was Uncle Pema who charted the membership of the Moluo Tourism Association on behalf of the township government, and the Party secretary also made him assist the township head in overseeing the association’s activities. Therefore, Uncle Pema’s role in this association is significant. As the “King of the Eastern Queendom,” he spares no effort in promoting the queendom cause and expects that the major task of the tourism association is to thoroughly investigate and revive the culture of the ancient queendom. He has been collecting legends on the queens for years and has made every effort to integrate the local oral history of the queendom with related Chinese and Tibetan historical records and literary writings in order to reconstruct the history of the Eastern Queendom. Due to his illiteracy in Tibetan, the evidence he cited for the existence of the queendom and its connection to Suopo was based almost exclusively on his reading of Chinese literature. He is fully aware of this shortcoming, and, to compensate, he often consulted his son, a former monk, and others who knew written Tibetan on the meanings of place-names and expressions that he assumed were associated with the queendom.

In 2008, a new graduate, originally from Suopo, who had studied Tibetan at college, got a position in Suopo Township. Uncle Pema took the opportunity to educate this young man about the importance of preserving queendom traditions and converted him to the queendom cause. One cadre in the township joked about their relationship, referring to the new employee as Uncle Pema’s “disciple,” who, like Uncle Pema, was not interested in administrative affairs and was concerned only with studying and promoting the queendom. Uncle Pema began learning “standard” Tibetan from this man, and I was impressed with his creative use of his limited Tibetan-language skills in the service of his goals. For instance, he argued that the Tibetan name of the Dadu River, which literally means “sweat of the queen,” actually means “the river in front of the queen[’s palace in Suopo].” In his view, since this river starts right in Suopo after its two major streams converge, the name itself is informative and symbolic: it tells the exact location of the queendom palace. Both his son and his Tibetan-language teacher commented that he would interpret many place-names or historical accounts imaginatively despite their corrections and protests.

The township Party secretary asked Uncle Pema to write a tour guide's speech for the tourism association that local guides could use as a standard introduction to local conditions and culture. He consulted me on how to write a vivid speech that would attract the attention of tourists as I had been a part-time tour guide. As one might expect, the speech was exclusively about queendom legends and claimed that only Suopo could be the site of the queens' palace. With the Party secretary's instructions, he and the young cadre who taught him written Tibetan also worked on packaging the ancient trees in Moluo for tourists. The Party secretary suggested that trees with unusual shapes should be packaged as tourist attractions by giving them exotic names related to the queendom. For instance, a certain tree could be dubbed "Queen's Horse-Tethering Tree" or "Queen's Reposing Tree." Since Uncle Pema is the authority on queendom issues, he was entrusted with embellishing the trees in Moluo with queendom cultural decorations.

Both the tour guide's speech and the tree-packaging project were authorized by the Party secretary and the township head in an attempt to orient and engage the Moluo Tourism Association in the mission of making concrete plans for developing tourism in Moluo. Some tourism association members admitted that they haven't done many "real" things yet. The association's ambiguous role often left its members puzzled about what they were supposed to accomplish. The principal task of the tourism association is to assist the township government and the village committee as well as the Culture and Tourism Bureau in coordinating the villagers' efforts to participate in and contribute to tourism development in Moluo. However, the actual responsibilities and functions of the tourism association were not clearly defined. This created a paradoxical impression of the position and role of the tourism association: on the one hand, it seemed that the association could do anything to promote tourism in Moluo as long as it didn't challenge the hegemonic role of the township government and the village committee; on the other hand, the association seemed powerless to implement plans since its activities were overseen and checked by the authorities.

From 2004 to 2007, the tension between Moluo villagers and the township on the distribution of tourist entrance fees was heating up, and in May 2007, a few tourists complained to the prefecture about the poor attitude of township cadres who were collecting entrance fees at the Suopo Bridge. Realizing how difficult it was to manage the villagers and deal with the tourists directly, the township government hoped that the tourism associa-

tion would help ease this difficult situation. The tourism association members and some villagers believed that this was a “trick” and the township just wanted to shift its responsibilities and burdens to the association. Some, however, saw it as a signal from the township that the tourism association should resolve the trouble on its own. Since the township had also designated the membership, it seemed that the association could be fully entrusted with resolving these issues for the township. However, tourism association members complained that they were not given power or money to carry out their duties and that their real job was to “offend people,” since disciplining the villagers and educating them about the proper behavior for soliciting tourism would provoke resentment.

The tension between the two camps paralyzed the tourism association. Although every member recognized Yeshe’s creativity and business talent, most didn’t trust him. They would not allow him to restructure the agenda in Moluo as he wished. His idea of corporatizing tourism by bringing in interested partners from all over China to manage tourism was simply too unconventional for most of the other members of the association and the villagers, and they had serious doubts about his “real” motives. Opposition from the association, villagers, and the township meant that there was little chance he would be able to realize his ambitious plans. Only one of the eight members supported him. According to this person, the other members’ main agenda was to stop Yeshe from succeeding rather than to make concerted efforts so that the association would work. He sighed, “If the situation continues in this way, the tourism association will soon close down.” This member had a personal connection with Yeshe, but he argued that it was not important at all in his judgment of Yeshe’s character. He truly appreciated Yeshe’s business gifts and believed that Yeshe was the only one who could lead Moluo in the right direction. In his opinion, what made Yeshe stand out from the “conservative” members and common villagers were his modern and innovative ideas, which they found unacceptable. According to this member, the villagers just wanted to make “small money” in the conventional way and had no idea of how the market worked. So, hindered by this strong conservative force, Yeshe could not apply his “advanced” ideas. This member blamed his fellow villagers for being “stupid” and not realizing that by preventing Yeshe from taking a more active role in the tourism association, they were harming only themselves, because without tourism development, he would still be the wealthiest man in the village. If

they followed his advice instead, everyone would benefit eventually from the reinvigoration of tourism in Moluo.

This inaction on the part of the tourism association coincided with a slowdown in tourism in Danba during 2008 and 2009. Tourism had been seriously affected by the Tibetan riots in March 2008 and the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008. Although no uprising took place in Danba, and most of the locals, like their Han compatriots, condemned the Tibetan rebels for demanding independence, many potential tourists still imagined that Danba was a dangerous place to visit, since most of them were unable to distinguish between “rebellious” and “peaceful” Tibetans as a result of widespread Tibetophobia in China. At the same time, even though Danba was not severely affected by the earthquake, potential tourists from other parts of China still hesitated to explore it because of safety concerns. In the so-called Golden Week of October in 2008—the countrywide seven-day break for National Day—Moluo received only about a hundred tourists, and the tourism association collected just ¥1,088 (\$159) in entrance fees. One villager commented:

During the Golden Weeks in 2004, 2005, and 2006, we received so many tourists every day—as many as the ants. It was just like at the county seat. The path from the bridge to Moluo got so congested that it was almost impossible to get through. Last year, it was not bad. One or two thousand people came. This year, it was really horrible. The tourism association said it would distribute the money to each household. We have more than fifty households, so each one can get . . . how much? . . . A little over ¥10. I feel ashamed of accepting this money. What can such a small amount be used for? Buy a bag of salt? Haha.

The slowdown in Suopo continues through the writing of this book in 2012. It is a complicated matter involving many factors—the construction of a viewpoint platform on the highway from which tourists may look at the Suopo landscape and watchtowers for free, the non-operation of the newly completed Suopo Bridge, the county’s tourism development agenda, which favors Jiaju and Zhonglu, and poor highway conditions from Chengdu to Danba. The lack of tourists contributed to the less active role of the tourism association. The association was expected to deal with problems in the locals’ interactions with tourists, but since not many tourists came, there

was little conflict, and the association did not seem to be doing anything real in the eyes of some villagers.

Several tourism association members reminded me that the association was “just a temporary phenomenon” and would complete its mission when tourism in Moluo and Suopo developed to the level of Jiaju. They argued that when tourism in Moluo and Suopo was standardized and the personal quality of locals improved, the association’s original role of mediating and coordinating between tourists and villagers and between villagers and the township and county would diminish to the extent that it would become unnecessary. This idea originated with the newly elected township head, who used to be the vice-head of Niega Township (to which Jiaju belongs) in charge of tourism development in Jiaju. He took the post in Niega right after the Gelindeya incident, when Jiaju’s tourism association was unofficially disbanded. His view of the destiny of the tourism association represents the official voice of the local state. When the county transferred him to the new post in Suopo, he began to publicize this ideology. Surprisingly (or maybe not), most of the Moluo Tourism Association members accepted this assertion, an indication of their lack of interest in engaging with the villagers in tourism development. They felt they didn’t have enough resources to publicize Moluo and motivate villagers to participate, and they were aware that the villagers were difficult to deal with when conflicts arose. Their acceptance of the township head’s opinion thus reflected their own uncertain and pessimistic attitude toward the future of the tourism association.

Jiaju’s success in the tourism market is often used as an inspiring model for Suopo by both its township cadres and its tourism association members. It generated a belief that Jiaju’s today is Suopo’s tomorrow, and that Suopo, with its unique queendom heritage and cultural features, can catch up with and even outdo Jiaju. However, whether the experiences of the Jiaju Tourism Association could also serve as a model was unclear. The heads of Suopo Township took the Moluo Tourism Association members to Jiaju to learn “advanced” techniques from the former heads of its tourism association, even though the Jiaju Tourism Association had been unofficially dissolved. It was as if the Gelindeya incident had never happened. As the new head of Suopo Township and former vice-head of Niega claimed, since tourism at Jiaju had reached the mature stage and villagers were experienced and civilized enough to do the right things, the tourism association was no longer necessary. However, most members of the Moluo Tourism Association

knew what had really happened to the Jiaju Tourism Association. Its demise reminded them of the limits of their role and subsequent counterstrategy: a safe role is the one that highlights their subordinate status vis-à-vis the village committee and the township.

BEYOND STATE AGENDAS

In spite of the fact that Yeshe is a headache to the village and township, most members of the tourism association, especially Teacher Dorje and Teacher Namkha, are on good terms with the village heads and township cadres. The tourism association's allegiance to the authorities seems unchallenged, but this doesn't mean that the association is a mouthpiece of the local state. All members, including Yeshe, know exactly the importance of official support for their work. If they don't cooperate with the local authorities, their actions could be restrained, checked, or even invalidated, as was the case in Jiaju. They classify the tourism association as a grassroots association under the direct leadership of the village committee and township government. However, rather than always acting as the local authorities expected, the association became a public arena for the expression of different, even oppositional opinions as well as concerns about the queendom cause and vanishing cultural traditions.

A common topic of discussion among tourism association members was the county's unfair treatment and the status quo of the queendom cause. They unanimously attacked county officials for neglecting Suopo and declared that they would find their own way of rejuvenating and promoting their township. Several members expressed the following opinions:

Zhonglu said that the queendom was in their place. What evidence have they got so far? They are lying. Several Zhonglu officials at the county seat even want to take away our queendom label? No way!

If the tourism bureau doesn't promote tourism for us, we will do it by ourselves without their involvement. . . . There used to be so much publicity about Suopo, especially during the period when the Tibetan stone watchtowers were competing for World Cultural Heritage designation, but now what happened? . . . We must make use of our own excellent local

personnel to promote ourselves. . . . We have such rich cultural resources to excavate—Eastern Queendom culture, farm-plowing culture. . . . They are all our intangible cultural heritage [*feiwuzhi wenhua yichan*].

This year [2008] the county is not advertising our stone watchtowers. . . . The officials have almost forgotten our place. . . . Not many tourists are attracted here, but if you can help us invite some experienced experts to package Moluo, it will be a great boost to our work.

Some [village heads] lack a sense of responsibility. At first they seemed to be eager to see the results [of developing tourism]. But tourism couldn't bring about immediate benefits [as they expected]. Then in the end, they didn't show much interest.

The county always criticizes us for being filthy, disorderly, and indecent [*zang, luan, cha*]. This is a typical example of subjectivism [*zhuguan zhuyi*]. . . . The farmers have to raise livestock [and the animals excrete]. If they want cleanliness, too, how can they survive? They have to rely on the brown fields for a living.

We are renowned for the label “One-Thousand-Watchtower Kingdom” [Qiandiao Zhiguo], but we [Suopo] have become the largest garbage dumping site in Danba. The county built a garbage disposal site opposite our temple. From time to time, they would burn the garbage. It was so foul smelling that some women even fainted.

These remarks express dissatisfaction toward local officials for what are deemed to be nepotism, subjectivism, irresponsibility, dereliction of duty, and shortsightedness, but at the same time, tourism association members sought opportunities to change the status quo based on their sincere conviction that their queendom heritage and other cultural entities in Moluo and Suopo are truly exceptional and unrivaled. As mentioned, Yeshe would like to sell his idea of corporatizing Moluo. One proposal is that management be left to investors and each household would become a shareholder; the other scheme suggests welcoming other kinds of partnerships with interested individuals and groups. Although Yeshe's plans were too radical for most people, his insightful ideas on stimulating tourism in Moluo had an impact on the tourism association and the villagers. For instance, his suggestion that they rediscover queendom traditions, folk songs, and customs

and establish a museum to exhibit traditional farming tools was well received by other members of the tourism association and some villagers. Although other association members take pride in the queendom heritage and attach importance to preserving vanishing cultural traditions, Yeshe is one of the few who knows how to turn queendom traditions and other cultural resources into commodities. For reasons already specified, it is difficult or nearly impossible for all of Yeshe's plans, especially the unconventional one of corporatizing Moluo, to be carried out in reality, but his strong presence as the most successful businessman and resourceful individual in the village and township solidifies his position at the tourism association.

Tourism association members often make use of *guanxi* in implementing their agendas.¹⁰ One member made his brother-in-law's friend, the vice-head of the Culture and Tourism Bureau, promise at a new year's party where both got drunk to give the association ¥15,000 in "activities fees" (*huodongfei*) to fund its folk music and dance development project. Although this funding was from an official source, the association didn't obtain it through the regular process of requests and petitions. A former student of Teacher Dorje's, a department chair at a university who initiated several cultural preservation programs in Danba County, entrusted Teacher Dorje and Teacher Thubten with collecting disappearing folk songs and legends and donated ¥30,000 to build an activity center for the elderly and children in Moluo Village, which was in the charge of Teacher Dorje. Unlike other villages, where grassroots "seniors associations" (*laonian xiehui*) operate under the supervision of the county and township governments,¹¹ Moluo doesn't have such an association yet; however, the tourism association fulfills this role, as most of its members are respected village seniors.

As a result, the tourism association was given the activity center project with the approval of the township government and the village committee. After discussions among the members, the association selected a site right in front of the Berotsana pagoda, based on both practical and symbolic considerations.¹² With the increase in population, land has become more valuable and hard to obtain, but this small plot in the pagoda compound wasn't privately owned and thus could be used for the center. And since the pagoda compound is the ritual, religious, and social center of Moluo Village, Teacher Dorje and other members expected that the activities center would also serve as an educational center, which would pass on traditional culture and religious values to the younger generation, and a cultural

museum, where tourists could catch a glimpse of the richness and uniqueness of local culture and the queendom traditions.

The Moluo Tourism Association may be seen as a “state-led civil society” (Frolic 1997), as its membership and agendas exhibit the strong organizational will of Suopo Township.¹³ The association is expected to assist the township in managing difficult villagers and is allowed to come up with its own tourism development agenda consistent with that of the township. The township does not want to see villagers incited to take action against the township and county, as occurred in Jiaju. The township Party secretary therefore appointed eight tourism association members at the suggestion of his subordinate, Uncle Pema. He also admitted Yeshe into the association due to Yeshe’s business talents and connections. The wide acceptance among tourism association members of the new township head’s claim that the association is just a temporary phenomenon best exemplifies the imprint of the state’s will. Although most members take a cooperative position vis-à-vis the township, the association managed to carve out a space for expressing negative opinions toward local authorities, pursuing the queendom cause, and implementing its own agendas.

The relationship between the tourism association and the township shows that it would be simplistic to dichotomize the state-society relationship or stress the hegemonic role of the Chinese state and the resistance/passivity of societal sectors.¹⁴ The Moluo Tourism Association is both a quasi-state agency and a quasi-civil society. It is authorized and regulated by the local state but plays a role in connecting the local society and the state and in creating free space in which marginalized townspeople can voice grievances and press various political claims. State-society relations in Danba, as in China, should be seen as dynamic and multivalent. The differing positions of the eight tourism association members regarding the association’s relationship with the local state, the existence of two camps representing divergent interests and mutual grudges, and the contrast between “conventional” and “modern” development models demonstrate that society itself is internally differentiated and is composed of sectors or individuals with different goals and concerns.