

Summer Happiness: Performing the Good Life in a Tibetan Town

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Look! The male voice is sonorous as a long golden horn,
Look! The female voice is melodious as a golden Tibetan trumpet.
Hearing the lyrics, please look!
The Maitreya Dharma Wheel Monastery [Lithang Monastery] sits on the elephant's
trunk with auspicious streams running by.
May the lama with health,
May the homeland with happiness,
May the earth without disasters.

This song, accompanied with the white-mask dance, opens *Alce Lhamo (Sister Goddess)*,¹ a theatrical performance at Lithang's annual summer festival.² The festival includes mountain sacrifice, *Sister Goddess*, horse racing, camping, and feasting. It starts in the town seat of Lithang and spreads to all of

its villages over several months. Like Carnival, it interrupts the tedious daily routine and forms a space of ritual, theater, and amusement.

This article studies the monthslong performance of happiness and the local vision of the good life in Lithang. As ethnic Tibetans, the people of Lithang are easily labeled “peripheral,” “minority,” or “subaltern,” in contrast to the Han, the majority and default participants in Chinese modernity. Ethnic studies of China tend to highlight the violence of the Chinese state and the sufferings of ethnic subjects in the modernizing process (Liu 2011; Mueggler 2001; Yeh and Coggins 2014). Thus, they often take the performance of happiness by the ethnic groups such as the Miao and the Tibetans as epiphenomena of the suffering reality, concealing a structure of inequality and differences that is produced and reproduced translocally and transnationally by a whole set of multicultural and transnational mechanisms (Adams 1996; Schein 2000).

Nonetheless, as Michael Herzfeld (2016) argues, performances shape social relations rather than just being epiphenomena of the real world. By studying the poetics of the Greeks’ performances, Herzfeld illustrates the cultural intimacy between state ideologies and the rhetoric of everyday life, and a social poetics of essentializing differences through performance. The concept of cultural intimacy reveals the common ground between the individual and the state, as well as the cultural engagement of the common people and the elites in the formation of state ideology. Taking my cues from Herzfeld, I see performance as real as any other action rather than as symbolizing an idealized vision or concealing a power structure. I focus on the poetics and politics of performance as ritual, heritage, and tactics to illustrate the ways in which the government, the monastery, and the global media are included in the local vision of the good life and the local system of heroism, underscoring a dynamic of intimacy between the individual and the state as well as between the local and the global.

Lithang has been labeled “the highest town in the world” and “the county of poverty” by the Chinese government, due to its high altitude, hostile climate, poor road conditions, and underdeveloped industry. It seems the least likely place to talk about happiness and the good life. However, locals are often heard rejoicing at their *norbu sacha* (treasure land). This reveals a different vision of a good life, as expressed in their performance: life’s treasure

rests not only in wealth but also in good karma and merit (May the lama be with health), fertile land (May the homeland be with happiness), and cosmological balance (May the earth be without disasters). It clearly extends beyond the position of individuals in the state (beyond power and politics), to that of human beings in the world (to virtue and poetics). Such a vision not only demonstrates the autonomous spaces of action within the confines of social positions but also enriches the value frameworks of the good life in postsocialist political economies, as explored in this issue. In Lihang, *Sister Goddess* performances are on the one hand a way of negotiating for autonomy and profit with the local government and the global market, and on the other hand, a way of communicating with the deities, bringing fertility to the land, pacifying demons, and accumulating merit.

As the Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang (2004) proposes, visions of the good life arise more from possible lives than from life possibilities. Possible lives rest on the very ontologies of being-in-the-world, while life possibilities are realized through social and political processes. Similarly, Michael Jackson (2011: xi) defines the idea of well-being as grounded “in the mystery of existential discontent,” which leads to the sense that “one may become other or more than one presently is or was fated to be.” In line with their emphasis on the ontological frame, I raise the concept of *cosmological poetics* to articulate the local understanding of well-being that encompasses both the political-economic and the ontological dimension. Cosmological poetics refers to the connectedness of being and well-being with natural and supernatural beings (see also Elliott’s article in this issue for a similar conception of well-being in Laos). This approach sees ritual performance as not only engaging with social processes but also regenerating the social at the ontological and existential levels.

In the following, I first outline in section 1 the origin and development of the two *Sister Goddess* troupes in Lihang, one of laymen and the other of monks, and the tension between them. I don’t simply attribute their tension to political violence or the modernizing process; instead, I argue that the tension also arises from their pursuit of heroism. In Lihang, heroism means the capacity of navigating through various power centers such as the state and the market, and becoming a hero is a goal of life. It is the basis of cultural intimacy and the key to understanding the local vision of the good

life. It also illuminates a different perspective from a top-down one that easily treats the state as a violent hand transforming ritual into heritage. As I further demonstrate in section 1, both the laymen and the monks engage actively with this process and strive to become an officially recognized heritage so as to “eat the government.” Further, different from the perspective of globalization, as I discuss in section 2, though Lihang is definitely at the margins of the world system, by connecting with the cosmopolitan centers on the screen, the local people incorporate the globe into their system of heroism. Despite being officialized and commercialized as cultural heritage, the ritual aspects of the performances are maintained, and local people see them as the foundation of their well-being. Therefore, in section 3, rather than highlighting the rupture between modernity and tradition, I describe how the performance dissolves it. In section 4, I discuss how cosmological poetics is mediated through the performance to demonstrate the local vision of well-being: the interconnectedness of humans, land, mountains, cosmic power, and supernatural beings that is crucial to local people’s sense of happiness and heroism.

My contribution goes beyond articulating the local vision of a good life. I further argue that the local view of well-being provides a broader value framework for our conceptualization of the good life that breaks the illusive scales of top-down and local-global and the dichotomies of modernity against tradition, politics against poetics. We tend to scale up from the individual to the state to the global, or from the individual to society to nature, as if these concepts are concrete and discrete entities external to one another. However, the cultural intimacy and cosmological poetics I illustrate in the article challenge these scales and highlight how individuals incorporate and coordinate all the agents and networks to craft a better space of being in the world.

1. Eating the Government: Hero, History, and Heritage

The local people in Lihang believe that the Living Buddha of Lihang Monastery, the Second Kyagon (1909–49), first introduced *Sister Goddess* to Lihang. They consider the Living Buddha an exemplary hero: he was versatile at negotiating with various economic and political powers in Nanjing,

Lhasa, and India, and his collaboration with the government of Republic China greatly influenced the regional politics of Kham and the formation of the modern Chinese state in the early twentieth century (He 1989: 13; Litang xianzhi bianzhuan weiyuanhui 1996: 510–13). He is a hero to whom the locals attribute the introduction of *Sister Goddess*. It is said that he led a team to Lhasa in 1941 to learn the performance. After five years the team returned and started to perform regularly at his birthday celebrations, which soon merged with the summer festival. This undocumented narrative has been reiterated by the monks and introduced to me by local officials.

Similar to the life history of the Living Buddha, the local monastic and governmental histories also feature Lithang's connections with political centers and its role in regional history. As the local government's documented history goes, Lithang was established as a garrison by the Yuan court in the thirteenth century and continued to function as an important garrison between Chengdu and Lhasa during the Qing Dynasty (Litang xianzhi bianzhuan weiyuanhui 1996). As the local monastic history goes, Lithang Monastery was founded by the Third Dalai Lama at the end of the sixteenth century, which officially made Lithang a parish of the Gelug School of Tibetan Buddhism (N. L. Gyatso 2005: 241–42). The Gelug School was patronized by the Qing court, and Lithang Monastery was the biggest monastery in Kham until the early twentieth century. Lithang was thus governed both by local rulers who were recognized by the Qing court and by high monks who were entitled by Lhasa, the two ruling agents often being from the same family (Litang xianzhi bianzhuan weiyuanhui 1996: 511). During the Republic era Lithang interacted with Lhasa and Nanjing through its monastic and bureaucratic system. Since the 1960s, however, the monastic influence in Lithang has declined when the central government tightened its policies in the Tibetan region. Although the current reincarnation of the Living Buddha still holds a position in the central government, he is not as influential as the previous incarnation was. At the same time the influence of the local government has been rising and it dominates the local life. A large proportion of the local population earn their living from local governmental infrastructure and cultural projects. The locals describe such a way of earning bread from working in or for the government as "*Jago sama*" (eating the government). It has become an ideal way of life locally.

Regardless of the changing relationship between religion and politics, the state in various forms remains the foundation of local life. Far from the assumption of “naive natives,” Lithang’s people understand the role of politics well and actively manipulate state policies; rather than visualizing the state as hostile and invasive, distant and unreachable as the top-down perspective assumes, they draw it into a relationship of cultural intimacy.

Contrary to Lithang’s own highlight on its centrality, being part of Kham, a region characterized by its “tribal” situation, linguistic variation, segmentary loyalties and feuds, and lack of institutionalized religion and systematized philosophy, Lithang actually is a geographical and cultural margin to both Central Tibet and the hinterland of China. It is popularly seen as the birthplace of merchants, warriors, and bandits, part of the autonomous social and political spaces referred to by James Scott (2009) as Zomia. However, the local people did not escape from the state as Scott has assumed, but passionately embrace the state. To understand the reason, it is necessary to introduce the concept of heroism in Lithang. Similar to the Greek and Yi understandings of manhood (Herzfeld 1985; Liu 2011), Lithang’s people cherish heroism and easily turn daily life into social gestures of exaggeration and bombast, battle and feud. However, the Kham heroism does not simply refer to a Robin Hood–like spirit or any outlaw action, but implies flexibility, mobility, and an ability to manipulate and mobilize multiple forces and agents such as the state or the market. As Tenzin Jinba (2017) points out, far from being a space of Zomia, Kham has been intensively involved with the dominant political and cultural powers of the Indian-Hindu, Han-Confucian, and Theravada-Tibetan Buddhist states and civilizations.

The people of Lithang respect heroes because heroes embody connections and mediate power. Lithang’s heroic figures are continuously commemorated and their birthplaces, residences, life stories, and personal items are carefully preserved as sources of empowerment. Today the house in which the Living Buddha was born is still carefully maintained by Happiness Village. Through this connection, Happiness Village claims to be the exclusive donor of *Sister Goddess* performances. Although inviting performers, purchasing material for costumes and masks, setting up tents, and providing food for the performers involve great expense and intensive labor, the villagers see such donations as a good way of accumulating merit and prestige.

Moreover, the monk performers are mostly originated from Happiness Village, thus their performances are seen as being imbued with the power of the Living Buddha.

Lithang people's desire to become heroes leads them to engage actively with the state. In collaboration with the local government, the layman performers have become new heroes and challenged the prestige of Happiness Village as donor and its monk performers. In the 1980s, Rainbow Village invited some former monk performers to help them organize a troupe of laymen to perform occasionally on holidays and at festivals, because the monk troupe had been dismissed during the Cultural Revolution. In the 1990s, with the central government's more liberal religious policies, Happiness Village's monk performers revived their performance at the summer festival. Meanwhile Rainbow Village's layman troupe was thriving under the patronage of the local government. At first the laymen performed only in their own village, while the monks performed across the entire region. Gradually, with the development of tourism, the local government invited the laymen to perform in the town's central square during the tourist season, and as a result they established a good reputation among the tourists and the locals. In 2008, the *Sister Goddess* troupes in the neighboring towns of Bathang, Serda, and Derge were officially recognized as national Intangible Cultural Heritage. This triggered Lithang's sense of heroism and a desire to be nominated as cultural heritage themselves. Endorsed by the local government, the layman troupe was officially recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage at the prefecture level in 2018.

Although only recognized by the prefecture government, having their performance officially recognized as cultural heritage brings the troupe repute, income, and opportunities. Their employment by the local government secures them a stable salary, and they are able to take on a mobile and cosmopolitan life. They perform representing Lithang in megacities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, and Kunming. With local government recommendation, they appear in movies, shows, and newspapers. The local government also sponsors Tibetan- and Chinese-language classes for them as most of them are illiterate, and their new language skills enable them to communicate with broad audiences. As pious Tibetan Buddhists, the layman performers show great respect to the monk performers, and never felt

equal to them, but official recognition has greatly increased their reputation and confidence.

The troupe leader, Lobsang Tamba, became a completely different person once their performance was recognized as cultural heritage. A former artisan monk with moderate art and literary training, he had renounced his monastic life in his thirties to marry. He and his wife ran a not very profitable craft studio and were thrown into poverty after bearing three children. The couple sent two sons to the monastery to improve their life. Compared to his previous quiet and sullen demeanor, Lobsang Tamba is now a successful “eater of the government” and a confident and eloquent local hero, frequently shaking the hands of high officials, appearing in the popular media, and touring big cities with the troupe.

This section has shown how the state, in the form of officials, policies, subsidies, and certificates, represents not only authority from afar but also a resource that can be mobilized. An outsider might expect the intimacy between the local government and the layman performers to lead to injustice and inequality, but the locals respect it, as it embodies a capacity for contracting relations with powerful agents and benefiting from mobilizing them.

2. Screening Differences: The Local and the Global

Janet Gyatso (2005: 3) has cautioned the field of Tibetan studies to be aware of “Tibet’s Hollywoodization,” the tendency to romanticize or demonize Tibet through scholarly production to feed the popular imagination, because such a tendency imprisons Tibet in Shangri-La, rendering the real life-worlds of the Tibetans irrelevant (see also Lopez 1998; Sakya 1994). This perspective somewhat underestimates the subjectivity of the local people in appropriating the “Orientalist images.” This section demonstrates how the people of Lihang practice self-Orientalizing strategies to plug themselves into the global world.

As mentioned, more and more people in Lihang are becoming “eaters of the government.” This accompanies the central government’s overall switch from building a modern society to building *xiaokang* 小康 (a moderately prosperous society) (Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi 2016).³

Such an ideological turn is followed by policies of redistributing wealth and power nationwide. Instead of investing in already-developed economic zones, the central government introduced poverty-alleviating policies and relief for underdeveloped regions including Lithang. In this way Lithang's local government began to invest in infrastructure and tourism that absorb local labor. The nomination of *Sister Goddess* as cultural heritage in 2018 and the construction of the *Sister Goddess* Museum in 2019 are part of this process.

Realizing that the exotic *Sister Goddess* masks and costumes attract domestic and international tourists, the local people have taken advantage of this Orientalist image to brand Lithang as a town of mystery and romance. The museum's walls are decorated with masks and costumes, and the museum employs the layman troupe to perform during the tourist season. Adjusting to the museum's schedule and available space, the troupe has cut the three-day performance to two hours and reduced the cast of more than twenty performers to four or five. The local government has installed lighting facilities in the old town and arranged performances in the town square at night. The museum, the decorations, the lights, the dance, and the music strongly shape the local visual and acoustic landscape. Increasing numbers of Lithang inhabitants have opened restaurants, hotels, and bars, and run other tourist businesses. The embellished old town has become the new center of the local world.

The mysterious and romantic image of Lithang attracts a wide range of visitors, including investors. In 2018, parts of the movie *Looking for Rohmer* were shot in Lithang. The layman troupe joined the international cast side of Chinese movie stars and foreign actors. The movie is a life and death romance, and ultimately, a story of salvation in Tibet. The layman troupe's *Sister Goddess* performance in the movie represents a path to salvation. Through encountering, watching, and joining the performance, the main character recovers from the trauma of his lover's death.

Chris Berry (2019) points out that this movie follows the trend of othering Tibet, in which salvation is featured through exotic symbols rather than actual human interaction. Indeed, the layman troupe appears on the screen as a circus and their performance is reduced to a thin story and an exhibition of exotic masks and dances. However, behind the scenes the layman

performers also participated in the fabrication of the story and the exhibition of their mysterious symbols. Lobsang Tamba, the troupe leader, wrote the script for the *Sister Goddess* performance in the movie, demonstrating his adaptation to the popular exoticization and romanticization of Tibet. He drew the plots from one of the most popular *Sister Goddess* scripts, transformed the religious story into a love story, and added more mask dances in the choreography. The troupe even made new costumes in brighter colors, and more exaggerated masks for the movie performances.

The layman performers enjoy showing off their photos with the stars and foreigners, regardless of the open promotion of the film as a “gay movie.” For them the othering process means connection, mobility, and cosmopolitanism. At its basic level, the economic profit derived from such media engagement alleviates these nomads’ dependence on their scant production of potatoes and yak meat and the unpredictable market for highland herbs and mushrooms that they used to rely on for their livelihoods. More than just a way of gaining profit, the experience of working as part of an international team has given them a way into a bigger world and made them heroes in the eyes of other locals, who consider them brave in their venture out into the world, connecting with the cosmopolitan actors, and benefiting from their courage and connections. Lobsang Tamba showed me a photograph of himself with the entire cast of the movie with the same pride as when he showed me his certificate of cultural heritage. The framed photograph hangs on the wall in the main entrance to his house as a badge of honor and a symbol of his cosmopolitanism.

By repositioning the local in the global, this section has illustrated how the local people are capable of essentializing differences as a way of creating intimacy with the global world, not simply out of economic rationality but also from their desire to embrace difference and their ability to imagine life against a bigger picture than their own.

3. Modernity on the Surface: Ritual and Theater

The story above seems to be one of a rupture in which the secular regime overruns the religious regime and secular actors overshadow monastic actors. As Arjun Appadurai (2005) suggests, modernity is often featured as rup-

ture, and through electronic and virtual media the expressive space of art, myth, and ritual in the transcendent realm has descended to the quotidian life. However, this section illustrates how in Lithang ruptures appear only on the surface, while in their deeper lives people experience the continuous entanglement of the secular and the transcendent, with the *Sister Goddess* performance seen as a simultaneously ritualistic and theatrical mechanism that amalgamates this-worldly fortune and other-worldly merit.

During performance, on the one hand, the performers welcome and even invite their audiences to take photographs and videos, because the resulting exposure in the local and global media is a way of establishing connections and harvesting respect. On the other hand, the performers are concerned when their masks are exposed to cameras. They usually keep their own masks, unlike those specially made for museum exhibition and media display, under a white cloth. For the local people, these items possess sacred and dangerous transformative power. Wearing them entails a transformation from ordinary human performers into demons, animals, heroes, and gods, in which normally the heroes and gods, assisted by the good animals, prevail and kill the demons. Lithang people see this transformation as actual rather than symbolic. They believe that the masks and costumes possess supernatural power, and thus the mask dances influence their karma and their bodies. To avoid waking the demons, they cover the demon masks with cloth, avoid touching them, and only uncover them for performances. A monk performer who plays the role of a demon attributes his rheumatism to the health-damaging action of touching the contagious demon mask. In the same vein, the layman troupe has to invite a monk to play the role of monk due to the profane karma-damaging action of laymen wearing monk costumes.

In this sense, being recognized as cultural heritage never really causes rupture for the troupe. The ritualistic aspect remains the core value of the performance. Although performing for different audiences in different spaces, both troupes start with ritualistic mask dances to enact the power of the masks. They take this step as a guarantee of the authenticity and authority of their performances. Meanwhile, the enactment of the transformative power is also and always associated with secular profits. Especially, it is critical in the two troupes' competing claims to heritage and museum.

For the monks, the authenticity of their performance is guaranteed by their connection with the Buddhist teachings, the Living Buddha, and the institutional transmission of the standardized scripts and techniques of the performance. The head lama of the monk troupe, Lama Phurba, who received the highest Buddhist degree after twelve years of study in India and is thus well respected by the locals as a cosmopolitan figure, told me that the monk performers summon the power of Buddha through mask dance. He highlighted that *Sister Goddess* is not entertainment but an entertaining way of spreading the Buddhist teachings, and thus accuracy is important, because wrong words bring bad karma to both performers and audience. He expressed his concern that due to their illiteracy, the layman troupe frequently improvises new lyrics and deviates from the Buddhist classics. Lama Phintso, the leading monk performer, highlighted descentance and techniques. He pointed out the differences between their three-dimensional blue masks and the flat masks of the laymen, and emphasized that the monks' much more complicated technique was introduced by the Living Buddha from Lhasa. He also reiterated his experience as the disciple of a prestigious monk who trained in Lhasa with the Living Buddha, the strict training in vocal and body techniques that he received, and his teacher's close relationship with the Living Buddha. He believes that the layman group's performance techniques do not meet the standards required to qualify as cultural heritage.

In contrast, the laymen's shamanistic capacity to navigate freely among the cosmic forces, government power, and local and global media illustrates their performative authenticity. They believe their mask dance provokes the power of the three realms of the universe, which clearly corresponds to the pre-Buddhist shamanic tradition (Xie 1988). This releases them from the Buddhist duty of maintaining accuracy in performance, so they frequently improvise lyrics and steps and incorporate new trends, bringing them popularity among the tourists, employment at the museum, and exposure to global audiences. When touring local festivals and rituals from village to village, they disseminate new government policies as well as local and global news. Such flexibility and cosmopolitanism lead them to wider popularity.

The competing claims of the two troupes have shaped the cultural heritage narrative and the materialization of the museum. In China, individ-

ual and collective heritage is often appropriated by the local government to represent its administrative achievements and local prestige in order to secure economic and political resources from the central government (Chen 2015). Lithang also witnessed fierce debates on which troupe was qualified as inheritor of *Sister Goddess* representing Lithang. With their sense of heroism, officials from Happiness Village and Rainbow Village value safeguarding the prestige and resources of their own people more highly than their official task of preserving cultural heritage. As a compromise to the differing interests of the officials involved, the layman troupe received a certificate as inheritor while the monk troupe was recognized as orthodoxy in the museum. The laymen are paid to perform in the museum, pose for photographs, and produce masks for display, while the monks ensure that the museum displays their standard narrative, scripts, and techniques and officially supports their orthodoxy. Such an appropriation of the laymen's performance as representing Lithang and the redistribution of profits to both troupes illustrate the cultural intimacy rather than tension between the government and the local people.

This raises criticism of studies contending that the surge in heritage is a consequence of modernity (Foster and Gilman 2015; Hafstein 2018), and studies concluding that authenticity and agency are part of the modernist project (Bauman and Briggs 2003; Bendix 1997), out of which actors transform their folkloric past into a possession (Herzfeld 2016). In Lithang, the different groups' competing claims are not simply made with reference to the modernizing process: the sense of heroism, pursuit of prestige, concern about bad karma, and desire to accumulate merit are all present.

4. Cosmological Poetics: The Landscape of Well-being

The above analysis has explored how the local people incorporate the state and the market into their vision of a good life, and how a sense of heroism shapes their ways of achieving it. This section applies the concept of cosmological poetics to highlight the local vision of the connectedness between social well-being and cosmological balance, which broadens the value framework of political economy in the conceptualization of well-being.

As mentioned, Lithang people see their hometown as "treasure land,"

and understand the treasure in life as resting not only in wealth, but also in good karma and merit, fertile land, and cosmological balance. They often attribute their treasure in life to Lhang's blessed geography that was mapped out by the Third Dalai Lama who founded Lhang Monastery as the center of the local world. As expressed in the performance, "the Maitreya Dharma Wheel Monastery [Lhang Monastery] sits on the elephant's trunk." The locals believe that Lhang manifests as a crouching elephant with the monastery on its trunk, leading the way. Surrounding the monastery, the eight villages of the old town are visualized as being carried on the elephant's back arranged in the shape of a lotus flower. Further, the monastery, villages, and mountains are imagined as integral parts of a mandala, with four sacred mountains embracing the flower from the four directions. Elephants, lotus flowers, and mandalas symbolize empowerment, luck, and safety in Buddhism.

The locals thus perform sacrifices at the sacred mountains every year to assure continuing blessings and protection, order and good fortune, and land fertility. *Sister Goddess* performance constitutes a significant part of the sacrifice. As the monks explained, burning pine branches and chanting sutras at a mountain sacrifice before the performance can drive away unhappy land spirits, and the *Sister Goddess* performance can satisfy the water dragon residing under the mountains that is in charge of water, rivers, floods, and rain. In this sense, the land and the mountains are not seen as an inert world of material supporting the production of yaks, potatoes, and caterpillar fungus, but as agents with emotions, desires, and reason, which demand respect, amusement, and awe. Once their emotions and desires are tended to, they regulate the water by bringing the necessary rainfall and preventing floods. Such a vision of well-being embeds nature in the human world through the landscape, the mountain sacrifice, rainfall, and the cultivation of yaks and caterpillar fungus.

In recent years the government's infrastructure projects have reshaped the old town with new roads and buildings, and the shape of the lotus flower is no longer recognizable. The local people make even more luxurious and majestic mountain sacrifices to counterbalance the destruction. They attribute the increased mobility, connection, job opportunities, and wealth brought by the new infrastructure to their auspicious land and pious sacrifices.

Local livelihoods depend heavily on the land: the grasslands feed the yaks, and the mountains produce various flora and fauna, including caterpillar fungus, matsutake, and other expensive herbs and mushrooms that cannot be mass-produced. With rapidly increasing demand in recent years, the caterpillar-fungus season brings in a handsome income. The local people thus perform more enthusiastic mountain sacrifices in hope of securing stable production and weather conditions.

To increase local well-being, the local government also participates in the mountain sacrifice. Each year before the *Sister Goddess* performance, when the monks travel clockwise on horseback to each of the four sacred mountains to make their sacrifices, government cars lead the way. During the performance, local officials and commoners mingle in the crowd, burning juniper branches, offering wind-horse flyers, replacing old prayer flags with new ones, and reciting the scriptures of each individual mountain deity. In this spectacle the assumed boundaries between the state and the social, the secular and the sacred, the human world and the natural world dissolve, giving way to an imagination of the good life in which cosmological balance takes center stage.

It is believed that the sacrifice increases overall well-being, while each person's individual portion is ultimately decided by their karma and merit. According to Buddhist teaching, karma is written at one's birth according to one's previous life cycle, while merit is accumulated by conducting good deeds throughout the current life. Thus local people respect those who are capable of finding valuable highland herbs and make good sales, whose yaks are strong and fertile, who have fast horses and win the race, who profit from government projects and the development of tourism, who can afford a modern home, and who get opportunities to be sponsored by the government or exposed in the outside world. They see fortune as the product of karma and merit rather than part of the structure of inequality.

As such, the natural and social realms are connected with individual lives through karmic operation and the cosmic movement. We have long assumed a clear division between nature and culture, and between the secular and the sacred. However, in the vision of the Lithang people, political power, economic gain, individual achievement, ritual performance, and the ecological order are seen as closely related through the system of karma and merits.

Conclusion

We tend to reach for concepts such as power and politics, inequality and injustice when discussing the necessary conditions for a good life. They are significant because they open up possibilities in the lives of local people. However, by focusing on these alone we miss the local visions of possible lives from which we can learn to expand our own vision of well-being. People in Lithang have a much broader scale of well-being, which, as expressed in the *Sister Goddess* performance, encompasses supernatural (May the Lama with health), human (May the homeland with happiness), and natural (May the earth without disasters) dimensions, illuminating how we can expand and reframe the limited scope of our discussion.

I therefore propose the concept of cosmological poetics to include natural and supernatural beings in the discussion. When framing a discussion, politics is usually seen as more real than poetics. Yet the case of Lithang shows that poetics acts to coordinate the cosmic order, supernatural power, and natural beings, which are perceived by the local people as the basis of well-being (see also Elliott, this issue; Kleinod-Freudenberg and Chanthavong, this issue).

Far from being just a zone of Zomia, the state has long been embedded in the local imagination and realization of the good life as potential resources and relationships that can be mobilized for a better life. Contrary to the Appadurain idea that the global mediascape pushes the local into the global, I have repositioned the global in the local, showing how local people incorporate cosmopolitanism into their system of heroism and prestige. Such intimacy between the individual and the state, and between the margins and the cosmopolis, breaks the illusive scales of top and bottom, local and global.

In short, the local landscape of connectedness, in which history and myth, ritual and theater, merit and karma, money and market, as well as the local, the state, the cosmopolitan, and the cosmological, are folded into the local life-world and its people's vision of the good life. This landscape of connectiveness defies the reified dichotomies between ritual and theater, poetics and politics, and tradition and modernity.

Notes

- 1 I recorded it during Lithang's 2019 summer festival. While translating it into English, I try to keep the original Tibetan way of expression. *Sister Goddess*, sometimes translated as Tibetan Opera, is a traditional performance that may derive from sources such as the ceremonial spectacles of the Tibetan imperial period (seventh–ninth century), local songs and dances, and Indian Buddhist dramas (Henrion-Dourcy 2015; Fitzgerald 2018). In Lithang, the performance follows a prescribed three-stage procedure: prelude, main story, and coda. The prelude includes a white-mask dance and a blue-mask dance; the main stories are based on the popular *Eight Classics of Sister Goddess*, and the coda incorporates local songs and dances.
- 2 Literally, the festival is called Dbyar Skyid (Summer Happiness). It celebrates the end of *dbyar gnas* (summer retreat; in Sanscript *varṣā*), a three-month retreat in the monastery during the monsoon season to avoid stepping on insects (Buswell and Lopez 2014: 960).
- 3 Xiaokang was previously raised as a goal to be achieved through the modernizing process. It was reset by the current regime as a new political ideology, adopting the Confucian view of well-being that encompasses both economic growth and the broad distribution of wealth, cultural diversity, and ethical pursuits among the various ethnic populations.

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