Brendan A. Galipeau
Rice University

A Tibetan Catholic Christmas in China

Ethnic Identity and Encounters with Ritual and Revitalization

This article explores the annual observance of Christmas, the largest festival of the year in a Tibetan Catholic village in Southwest China. I provide a short history of Catholicism in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands and explore the annual "performance" of Christmas by villagers. I frame the syncretism of the Tibetan Christmas festival itself, a mix of Catholic ritual with Tibetan influences, against other ethnographic observations of Christmas. A second topic addressed is the influx of both Chinese and foreign tourists and academics who visit the village to observe and take part in the festival. In exploring this issue, I examine the relationship between these visitors and local Tibetan villagers during the festival. I suggest this plays into a larger move by Catholic Tibetans in the region to utilize the state development and transformation of the region as "Shangri-La" to aid in promoting and developing their own unique identity as Tibetan Catholics.

Keywords: **T**ibetan people—China—Catholicism—identity—internal orientalism—Christmas festival

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This article explores the annual observance of Christmas, the largest and most important festival of the year in a Tibetan Catholic village in Southwest China.[1] In this work, I explore a variety of issues related to the annual "performance" of Christmas by villagers. I frame the syncretism of the Tibetan Christmas festival itself, a mix of Catholic ritual with Tibetan influences, against other ethnographic observations of Christmas. In doing so, I lay out the role that Christmas has come to fulfill among both Buddhist and Catholic households, and the niche it represents for the study community. I also seek to place the celebration of the festival within larger notions of ethnic revival and awareness in Tibetan southwest China's "Shangri-La" region, along with increasing touristic and academic interest (both domestic Chinese and foreign) in the festival as a reason for its expansion and growth in recent years. I assert an overall argument in conclusion that in the case of Tibetan Catholics, touristic and academic interest in the Christmas festival and other local religious and cultural activities in the study community have actually perpetuated and led to the expansion of local cultural traditions. In many ways, local Tibetan Catholic villagers have been aided in the revival and expansion of their traditions, including the Christmas festival, due to tourist interest and state inscription of the region as "Shangri-La." This runs counter to other critiques of Chinese encounters with Tibetans and other minorities, which suggest a process of "internal orientalism" (Schein 2000; Smyer Yü 2015), though this process still helps in understanding the reasoning among urban cosmopolitan Chinese behind their interest in Tibetan culture and traditions.

Nestled on the banks of the Upper Mekong River in Southwest China's Yunnan Province are several Tibetan villages of mixed religion, where Buddhist and Catholic families live together and often join in each other's festivals. While engaged in research on the history and budding economy of winemaking in this region, I was able to take part in the 2014 annual Christmas mass and festival in the village of Cizhong. Here, celebrations are a two-day event and the largest festival of the year for the area.

Yunnan's official renaming of neighboring Zhongdian County as Shangri-La, based on James Hilton's classic (1933) novel *Lost Horizon*, actually gains a small bit of credence as the real location of Hilton's story thanks to Cizhong and its nearby villages.[2] In the book, the fictional Shangri-La is a mixed monastic community where Tibetan Buddhists, Chinese, and Western Catholics all live peacefully

in meditation together. This is largely true in Cizhong today, though Catholicism historically faced a somewhat violent reception from some in the region, while other people openly welcomed it. French Catholic missionaries first arrived in northwest Yunnan in the nineteenth century, and viewed their work as a gateway to expanding their teachings across greater Tibet. Never being able to reach very far into this isolated and at times violent country, often due to resistance from local Buddhist lamas, the French would eventually manage to set up a slew of churches and convert many Tibetan communities in northwest Yunnan along the upper reaches of both the Mekong and Salween rivers. They were never quite able to pierce much further into Tibet. Even in these areas, religious crusaders at times faced violent repression from local religious leaders and in many cases death.

The first of these missionaries, Père Charles Renou, arrived in the region in 1852, and his followers subsequently worked toward establishing a church in the upper Mekong valley at the village of Cikou (today Cigu), just downstream of Cizhong. Though Renou himself would later move on to the neighboring Salween valley by 1854 and establish himself there, a missionary presence of priests was firmly made in the Mekong valley in a few years' time, with the first church being built directly upstream in Tibet at Yerkalo (today Yanjing) in 1865 by the fathers Biet

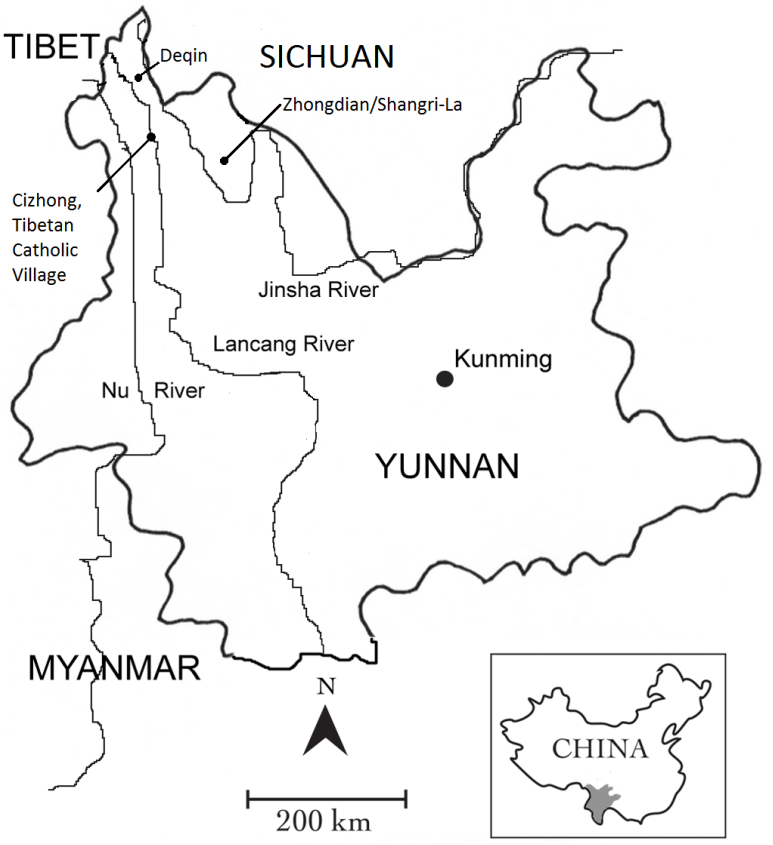


Figure 1. Map of Yunnan Province showing the location of Cizhong village.
Image by the author (baseline map courtesy of Bryan Tilt).

and Desgodins (Bray 1995; Loup 1956, 58; Moseley 2011, 124–29). While Renou and the other French priests who later followed him were able to befriend local Tibetan lamas in the Mekong region, this peaceful coexistence did not last. Eventually Tibetan lamas destroyed the churches and murdered priests during a major campaign in 1905, described by the British plant collector George Forrest who had been staying at Cikou with the two priests stationed there, Pére Bourdonnec and Pére Dubernard. The three of them along with one of Forrest's Tibetan assistants narrowly escaped being killed themselves and fled downstream, though both the French priests were still later killed (McLean 2009, 69–70; Moseley 2011, 124–29; Mueggler 2011, 23, 125–26). Four years later, however, in 1909, the Tibetan converts who had remained faithful began construction on a new church along the river, at Cizhong just upstream of Cikou, where the French Catholics would also reestablish themselves. This community still exists today, and has remained faithful to its Catholic beliefs, with about 80 percent of village households remaining actively Catholic (Goodman 2001, 183–85; Goodman 2010, 171–79; Lim 2009; Moseley 2011, 124–29). As the French persisted in their missions, a group of Swiss hailing from the Grand Saint Bernard Hospice high in the Alps joined them during the 1930s, after a request for assistance from Paris. These fathers had already become quite famous for providing mountain rescues and services to Catholic pilgrims crossing the Alps en route to Rome. Their expertise in mountain travel and high-altitude living were crucial in helping to continue and eventually take over the work first begun by the French in Yunnan (Loup 1956, 69–70).

Today in Cizhong, where the original church built in 1909 still stands, the village households who remain Catholic have persisted in their beliefs and are led in their prayers by a Han Chinese priest from Inner Mongolia who arrived in 2008, sent by the Catholic Association of China. Prior to this the village had no priest, and so no formal masses took place after 1952 when the Chinese government expelled the remaining French and Swiss Christians. Villagers nonetheless maintained their religion and began to pray in the 1980s. Christmas today in Cizhong is a major event, and both Catholics and Buddhists alike celebrate the non-religious portions of the festival. Major preparations and community events for the festival began on the morning of Christmas Eve, when many villagers gathered at the church to clean the building and decorate it for the festival. Some

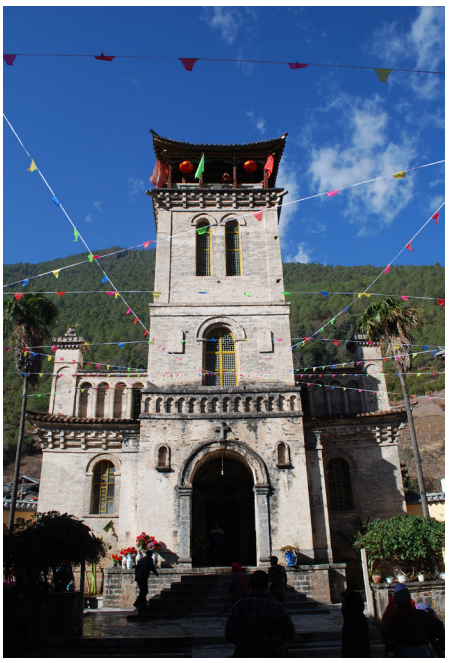


Figure 2. Decorations on the original Cizhong church, built in 1909. Photo by the author.

Figure 3 (left). Decoration of *shengdan shu* or "Christmas tree" branches. Photo by the author.

Figure 4. Crèche decoration. Photo by the author.

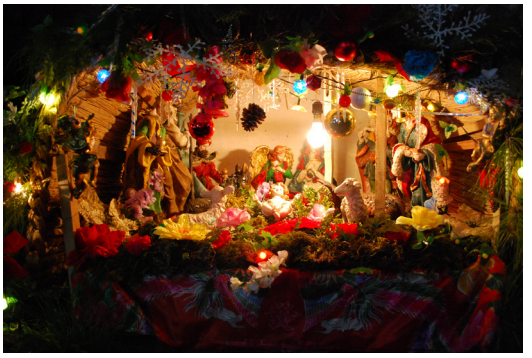


Figure 5. Virgin Mary with Tibetan-style lotus lamps. Photo by the author.

prepared lunch for those working through the afternoon, and then everyone returned home before dusk.

The decorations set up in the church were predominantly what one might equate with a Western Christmas celebration: strings of lights surrounded statues of Mary and Joseph in shrines on each side of the altar, with a similar statue of Christ placed high up on the wall behind the altar for all to see. Several plastic Christmas trees that grace the inside of the church year round were also cleaned and redecorated with Christmas lights. A very elaborate nativity scene was set up to one side of the altar, decorated with pine boughs, with lights on its roof. In addition to the boughs, the front of the church was adorned with branches from a local broadleaf evergreen tree with red berries, from the genus *Photinia*. Local elders say they have called this plant *shengdan shu* or "Christmas tree" since the time of the French and Swiss fathers.

Around 7pm, villagers slowly began to arrive and file into the church for the evening mass, which began this year around 8:30pm. As with all normal Sunday masses, as villagers began to enter the church, Catholic chanting in Tibetan commenced and continued until the father began the service. Christmas seems to have become quite a publicized event in Cizhong, perhaps due to the attention it receives in tourism materials. The mass not only included Cizhong

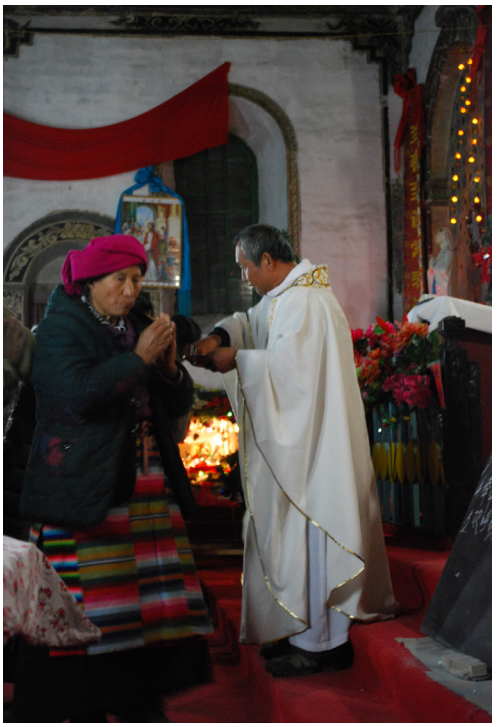


Figure 6. Priest distributing sacraments during Christmas Eve mass. Photo by the author.

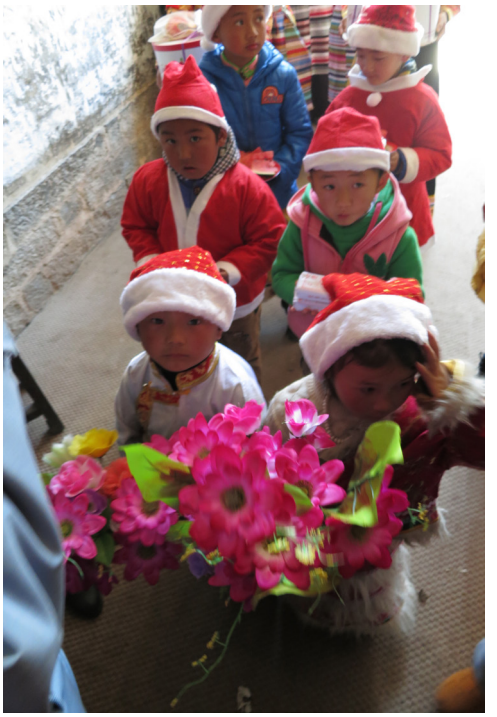


Figure 8. Children in Tibetan clothing and Santa hats during Christmas morning procession. Photo by the author.

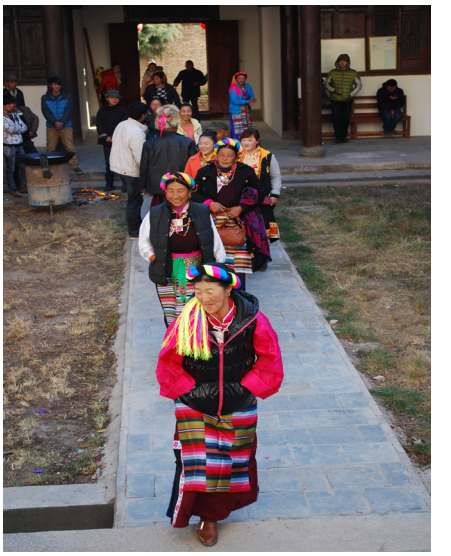


Figure 7. Villagers arriving for Christmas morning mass. Photo by the author.

villagers but many foreigners, particularly French and Chinese tourists, photographers, and academics including myself. Christmas Eve mass continued for just under two hours, after which everyone returned home until the next morning. Both Christmas masses, and particularly the morning mass the next day, were much more extravagant than a typical Sunday service. Large numbers of villagers showed up from all over, dressed in their full traditional Tibetan regalia. As many of the other villages surrounding Cizhong also practice Catholicism yet have no permanent priest, many villagers make the trek into this village for this large annual festival to celebrate and observe their faith together.

The next day's Christmas morning mass, which actually didn't begin until almost noon despite villagers arriving around 9am, also included a full processional composed of the priest and his assistants walking into the church in their robes, with

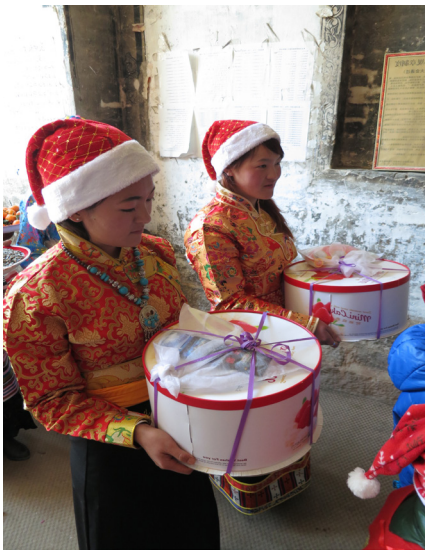
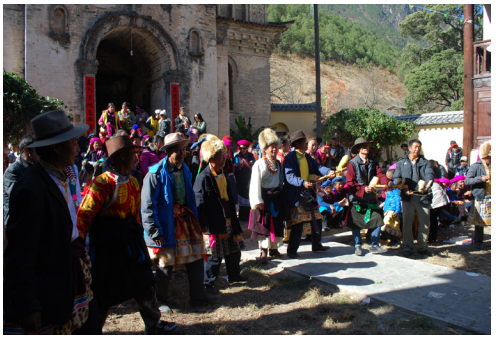


Figure 9. Village women with cake offerings for Christ during Christmas morning mass. Photo by Sun Fei.

Figure 10. Village men dancing after the Christmas morning mass. Photo by the author.



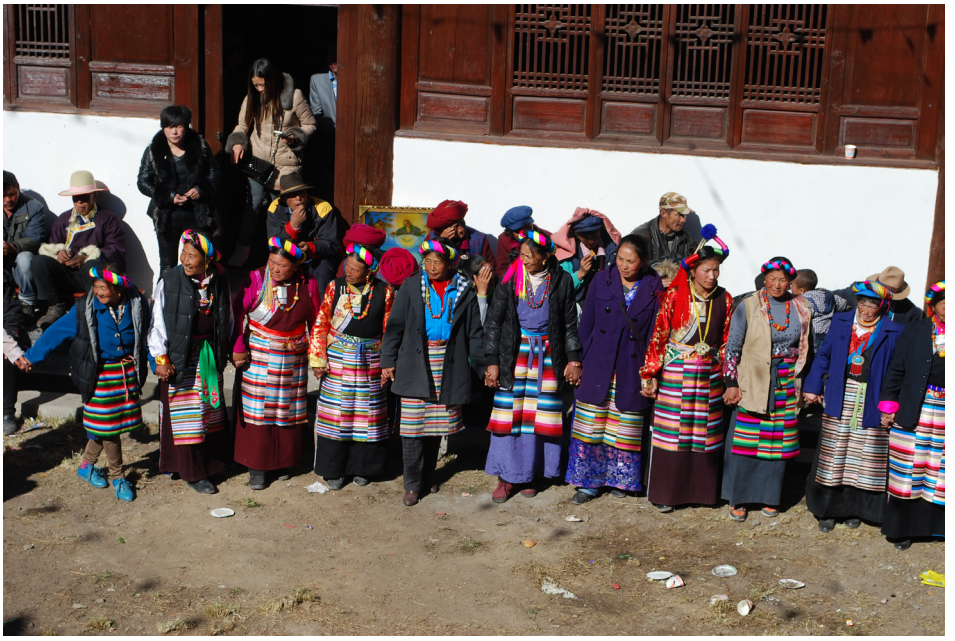


Figure 11. Village women dancing after the Christmas morning mass. Photo by the author.

candles, a cross, and an incense censer. These activities and materials are not normally practiced and used during weekly services. The language of the mass in Cizhong is peculiar. Villagers sing many familiar Catholic songs in Tibetan using the translations originally created by the French and Swiss, using hymnals preserved by village elders and then reproduced in recent years. Conversely, the priest conducts the mass and bible readings in Mandarin Chinese, so the service is quite syncretic and eclectic, being Chinese with Tibetan chanting. Later an engaged couple walked down the aisle to receive a special Christmas blessing from the father. A procession of children in traditional Tibetan clothing and Santa hats and

traditionally dressed women bearing gifts for Christ followed them. The priest and his village assistants accepted the gifts and then placed them in front of the nativity scene that had been set up below and to the side of the altar.

Following the Christmas morning mass, everyone including villagers, tourists, and anyone else in attendance gathered in the courtyard in front of the church and began the afternoon festivities of drinking and performing traditional Tibetan dances and singing. During this portion of the day, Buddhist locals also arrived to join in the festivities. To begin, everyone first simply found a spot in the courtyard to enjoy the sun, the company of others, and cake donated by all the village families. It was served followed by a choice of barley liquor known as *qingkejiu* mixed with meat, or a locally made rice wine called *mijiu* mixed with egg. After a short time, traditional circle dancing began, accompanied by singing and several men playing traditional string instruments called *piwang*. Men and women exchanged singing back and forth while dancing on opposite sides of the circle, which rotated around as more people joined.

While the merriment ensued, villagers also served lunch of several Chinese-style dishes in a small museum room next to the church. Here, several tables were set up and groups of locals and visitors rotated through and ate. After they finished, villagers cleared the tables and a new group was welcomed in to eat. For lunch, I shared a table with a Taiwanese-French family who had traveled to spend the holiday with their children observing the unique history related to French culture in Cizhong; more on my observations and reflections on this follows below. Dancing then continued, and by this time many of the villagers and tourists had joined in. The men in particular all seemed to be sporting a bottle or can of beer. By around 5pm things began to wind down with most people returning home, while the tourists and other visitors headed back to their guesthouses.

Framing a tibetan christmas and catholicism: a means of creating local tibetan ethnic identity and niche distinction in "shangri-la"

In many ways, Christmas in Cizhong is unique as a highly syncretic festival, blending Catholic worship with local Tibetan practices and language, particularly with traditional dancing and festival clothing worn by villagers. However, under the surface and more generally, the Christmas celebration in Cizhong is quite similar to celebrations in other former missionary bases among non-Westerners in post-colonial situations, as a predominantly public or community and less family-oriented festival (Bodenhorn 1995). Similar to an Inupiak community in Alaska, Cizhong's Christmas involves the practice of multiple masses or church services over two days followed by community events integrating "local traditional" practices, in particular dancing and singing, in which community members from all religions also join—in this case Buddhists, and in Bodenhorn's case animists (ibid). As Miller (1995) suggests, this in some ways runs counter to Christmas in European, American, and other more urban Asian contexts, where it is centered within either or both of two phenomena—the family and consumerism—though in all of these cases it certainly still takes on unique, localized forms. For the Tibetan

Catholics in Cizhong, however, as in the case of the Inupiak described by Bodenhorn (1995), Christmas is in many ways a festival and ritual that integrates sociality and cosmology into one, as Miller (1995) also describes—in this case community sociality rather than family, as individual household activities are non-existent within the celebration. As I lived with a host family in Cizhong for several months, the patriarch of which is the director of the church management association and former lay spiritual leader before the priest's arrival in 2008, I was able to gain a very close insight into all the Christmas activities in the community. These all took place at the church, with none at all in individual family homes. This of course fits in well with Bodenhorn's (1995) description of the Inupiak Christmas as well as more general anthropological treatments of the holiday.

In his introduction to his 1995 anthropological volume on Christmas, Miller outlines quite well a framework for this holiday, which has reached across the globe in highly syncretic fashion. He suggests that accounts of Christmas are so diverse that Christmas perhaps provides a possible example of the first global holiday, with both secular and religious accounts of the festival giving a prime example of "spectacular heterogeneity" (1995, 4). To quote Miller directly on this ideal in viewing the holiday:

> The emphasis on the Anglo-American Christmas looks increasingly parochial when we appreciate the nature of contemporary Christmas as a complex amalgam of heterogeneous customs often specific to nations, regions, *or even villages*, and deriving from both Christian and non-Christian traditions in many parts of the world, together with tendencies towards the formation of "global" Christmas symbol and customs. (1995, 5; emphasis added)

Certainly, despite the very familiar elements observed in Cizhong's two Christmas masses described above, and other "global" contributions like the Santa hats worn by children during the processional, the after-mass celebration with much local Tibetan flare including clothing, food, drink, and dancing is not found much further beyond Cizhong and its nearby Tibetan Catholic communities. Christmas in Cizhong is familiar yet also unique, which is a major reason for the draw it creates among foreign and domestic Chinese tourists and academics alike, which I discuss in the next section. This fascination with the "localization of Christmas in Cizhong" (many Chinese academics who show up in Cizhong for the festival will indicate they are there to study the "localization of Catholicism") also ties well into what Miller (1995) indicates has allowed Christmas to flourish around the globe as both a Christian and secular holiday. Christianity itself has also maintained a strong level of syncretism as it adapts to different locales, which Miller suggests has allowed Christmas to reach far beyond its original religious base, enabling the holiday to extend and gain local significance, making it the "quintessential local occasion" (22–23).

Also important in the case of Cizhong's Christmas festival is Miller's (1995) observation that depending upon the situation, Christmas is often locally used to fulfill the needs of a society in terms of festival and sociality. For the Inupiak, where events and customs involving the family are readily present, Christmas has taken on the form of a community event blending Christian and "traditional" practices

(Bodenhorn 1995; Miller 1995). In the case of Japan, where Christmas has become a widespread secular, consumer-based holiday, the purpose has become to provide an avenue and event for romantic love and togetherness in the context of gift giving. Interestingly this takes place with or is immediately followed by three indigenous festivals connected to Taoism, Buddhism, and Shinto, all celebrating the New Year, winter solstice, family, and respect for one's colleagues (Miller 1995; Moeran and Skov 1995).

In Cizhong, Christmas has also taken up its place to fulfill particular needs or missing pieces within Catholic Tibetan society and community. As Lim (2009) points out, Catholic Tibetans in Cizhong find themselves caught between several notions of identity. They are ethnically Tibetan but at the same time are often viewed by non-Catholic predominantly Buddhist Tibetans as believing in a "foreign" religion and go through a regular process of "negotiating foreignness," as Lim refers to it. Simultaneously though, Lim suggests that being Catholic plays a significant role in the formation of unique local ethnic Tibetan identities in Cizhong and other Catholic Tibetan villages. Lim (2013; 2009) plays off a number of scholars' work on ethnic minorities in Southwest China, in particular Harrell (2001), to suggest that Catholicism in Cizhong and other villages has created a new "way of being ethnic" (borrowing Harrell's terminology). As to what exactly this new "way of being ethnic" has developed in response, Lim is a bit vague, though my own longer-term work in Cizhong, particularly on the historically based landscape and household economic changes surrounding vineyards and wine, suggests it is a combination of Catholic identity and tourism pressures. This ties into ethnic expression in response to tourism development as indeed a major "way of being ethnic" described by Harrell (2001) and others in the context of the Shangri-La region where Cizhong is located (Hillman 2003; Kolas 2011; Smyer Yü 2015). Lim suggests a new terminology to refer to Cizhong's Tibetans and their way of being ethnic as "religio-ethnicity" (2013, 108). This also goes along with other work on tourism and religion in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, where it is suggested that in the context of contemporary China religion and ethnicity are so often pieced together as one as to be inseparable; so much so that in some cases communities become identified as ethnic only because of the religion that they practice (Sutton and Kang 2009).

I am apt to go along with Lim's terminology but my own observations of Christmas combined with daily household economic life in Cizhong throughout the year also show that in some sense, village regionalism and economic development schemes—in the case of Cizhong as part of Shangri-La tourism in what Coggins and Yeh (2014) call the "shangrilalization" of the local landscape and local "indigenizing of modernity" (Sahlins 1999; Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015)—also play a significant role in the ethnoreligious ideals of villagers. As Oakes (1998) also suggests, while there appear to be contradictions in developing and preserving culture and ethnic identity for the sake of commodifying it, for many rural ethnic villagers in China, this has simply become their own way of thinking about modernity (also see Hillman 2003 in specific reference to Shangri-La on this point). I have therefore begun to use the term "regionally ethnic" or "regional

ethnic identity" in reference to Tibetan Catholicism in my own work on this community, which I explore more here in the case of the Christmas festival.

In 2001, neighboring Zhongdian County next to Deqin where Cizhong is located was renamed Shangri-La as part of a much larger state-based scheme to incorporate this region of Yunnan and the larger Sino-Tibetan borderlands into the folds of the state in order to promote scenic and ethnic Tibetan tourism. One major reason for this pursuit was that in 1998, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture's (where Zhongdian and Deqin Counties are located, along with Weixi County) primary source of economic activity was unilaterally ended, with a national logging ban in western China's mountain areas. This was in direct response to major flooding in downstream areas in central China the year before. In order to stimulate the economy, the local government chose to pursue tourism drawing on the region's ethnic diversity and scenic beauty. This opened up a new "way of being ethnic" and allowed for new modes of ethnic expression across a variety of modes and methods for local Tibetans and minorities (Hillman 2003; Kolas 2011). Cizhong villagers were apt to join into these new practices of ethnic expression and were not only allowed but in most cases encouraged to by the local state. Villagers reported that as early as 1998 tourists were beginning to show up in Cizhong to view the church and observe the informal Sunday masses that took place.[3] Along with these arrivals, a renewed sense of Lim's (2013) "religio-ethnic" pride began to take shape. Church attendance and the number of active practicing Catholic villagers began to rise according to many local accounts and interviews. Simultaneously, the community began to recognize their potential unique ethnic niche within Shangri-La as Tibetan Catholics. This has taken on many forms, primarily through household guesthouses, where tourists in Cizhong can stay and drink wine produced by the household and promoted using the history of the French and Swiss who first introduced grapes and viticulture, albeit in very small amounts and scale.

For one villager named Wu Gongdi,[4] my host while staying in Cizhong, the idea of taking cuttings from the old grape vines in the churchyard to plant his own vineyards and make his own wine came from the thought that, before, wherever there was a missionary there was a vineyard. In addition, to have a proper Catholic mass you also need to have wine. For him, especially as director of the church association and lay spiritual leader at that time (ten years before a permanent priest arrived in the village), not having wine anymore meant that religiously and culturally, life in Cizhong was in a way incomplete. Additionally, with the burgeoning tourist interest at that time in Cizhong coupled with the early years of tourism promotion across Shangri-La in Northwest Yunnan, making wine to serve to tourists as a way of sharing local history seemed like a novel idea. In order to ensure his wine was produced in the traditional method employed by the missionaries, in 1997 Gongdi first traveled to Yanjing upstream in Tibet, where the French and Swiss also established Catholicism, to learn about wine making from his grandmother's sister who was a Catholic nun there. After learning the methods, which he insists are unique to his family (though other villagers in Cizhong say he boasts too much and everyone now uses this method of wine making), he first began

producing wine using grapes from the churchyard and eventually from his own vineyards planted with cuttings taken from the church. Following Gongdi's lead, by around 2002–04 most families in Cizhong had also begun planting grapes and making wine, with each family seeing the potential market and success that selling wine as a historical product from Cizhong's landscape could provide.

I wish to suggest here that while this may seem like pure commercialism at the surface, and though in some ways it is new in Cizhong, wine is in fact very entwined with local village culture and Cizhong identity through landscape and production. For many in Cizhong being Catholic and being Tibetan are the same and inextricably entwined with each other in much of the way that Lim potentially points to; village elders are especially keen to point this out. However, this ideal of non-contradiction between being Catholic and being Tibetan has come to be expressed to a much larger degree in recent years, more so than in the 1980s and 1990s, through things like wine making because of incorporation into Shangri-La and tourism. As Wu Gongdi says:

> After the Chinese government kicked out the Catholic fathers there was no more wine, but there were still grapes here. In 1997, I traveled to Yanjing to visit a relative of mine who is a nun to learn about making wine. She learned from the Catholic fathers. I think Catholic culture is part of Tibetan culture, so wine is also part of Tibetan culture. However, you also cannot talk about wine without talking about Catholic mass. The fathers who lived here even learned to speak Tibetan and I think this also makes wine part of Tibetan identity here.

I address this topic in much more detail with specific respect to wine and viticulture elsewhere (see Galipeau 2017). What I seek to point to here though in the context of the Christmas festival is that like Christmas and other facets of Cizhong's Catholicism mixed with Tibetan identities, wine has been revived and become a larger and larger part of life from year to year in the context of the development of Shangri-La. Indeed, both government and private interests actively promote Cizhong because of its unique Tibetan Catholic identity as a regular stopping point within the larger Shangri-La tourism circuit. This leads me to the development of my final point of analysis on the uniqueness that has come to surround Christmas in Cizhong, drawing in larger numbers of both Chinese and foreign visitors each year and leading to the expansion of the festival by the local villagers in scale and scope. The festival draws unusually and seasonally large numbers of tourists and academics who in many ways seek to "consume" and capture a unique experience in this community, as a unique place within larger Shangri-La.

Christmas fieldwork encounters and visitor engagements with ritual

Having lived in Cizhong for several months before Christmas and witnessed normal tourism traffic, the number of visitors I observed, not just Chinese but European as well, who showed up for this festival was significantly larger than normal. Tourism indeed provides the community with its primary source of economic output, with the primary means of household income for most in Cizhong coming

either directly or indirectly from tourism (i.e., if not through managing a guesthouse then through selling souvenirs, especially household produced).

In my opinion it seems that the Christmas celebration and masses in particular were treated either as something unique to be documented by filmmakers and photographers or as something fun and special by more touristic visitors, both foreign and domestic. When I arrived with Wu Gongdi and his son Hongxing at the church early on Christmas Eve morning to take part in and observe the festival preparations, the scene was quite interesting from a research standpoint. A Taiwanese filmmaker/photographer, who explained he was from a prominent travel and culture magazine, was moving about the courtyard photographing everything he could with large camera equipment. Another Chinese academic professor also spent the morning with an elder 86-year-old villager, famous as a local historian who knew the French and Swiss fathers before 1952. The time was spent audio recording this man singing hymns in Tibetan and instructing him which hymns to sing.

Later that day I was speaking with a Chinese master's student in anthropology who was there for her thesis research. When I asked what her thesis was about, she said she was studying the "localization of Catholicism" in Yunnan and Tibet and how interested she was in Cizhong and this topic because the Catholic Tibetans in Yunnan were so unusual, unique, and special to study. She also made an association with the Catholic Tibetans being a unique part of Shangri-La.

Part of what I argue and assert here about the increasing interest and growth of the Christmas festival in Yunnan is that its revitalization is in many ways very much driven and encouraged by both the aforementioned tourist interest in addition to academic interest among ethnographers. While many ethnographers might perhaps be trying to capture something like the Christmas festival before aspects of it disappear, such as the researcher recording hymns, mentioned above, in fact, the presence of these researchers has simultaneously led to more revitalization of the festival among villagers.

In research on a local new year's festival among the Ersu, a Tibetan group living in western Sichuan also facing increasing ethnic tourism promotion at the hands of the state, Schmitt (n.d.) has noted similar observations among Chinese ethnographers. One suggestion of Schmitt's is that as ethnic groups face increasing tourism pressures and commodification of their ethnic identities, they will become the subject of more and more study and interest among ethnographers and academics. This is not to say that such an increasing interest should be viewed as negative, with increasing tourist and academic interest in fact leading to mutual revival and practice of festival and ritual activities among local populations.

Additionally, Schmitt also explains that there is plenty of room for cooperation and working together among academics and locals in the manner of applied anthropology and applied folklore studies, which is quite similar to the collection of oral histories and songs that takes place with elders in Cizhong. By working together with villagers to document festival practices, particularly among elders, songs and other traits of the festival can then be perpetuated and kept alive for future festivals and future generations. It is worth noting in this respect that as both academic and tourist interest in Cizhong's Christmas has grown, villagers

have further expanded the scale and scope of the festival in a sort of revival in response to this interest.

Festivals and religious life have grown substantially with the development of Shangri-La and the renewed "religio-ethnic" (Lim 2013) consciousness this has brought. In fact, religion itself has expanded, with the same village elder/historian mentioned above indicating that the number of practicing Catholics has expanded from 100 in 1952 to over 400 today (Dickinson 2012). Also, though I must base this on observations from documentaries filmed in the early 2000s, the Christmas festival itself has become much larger and grander, most certainly also due to the arrival of a resident priest in 2008 (Liu 2002; *The Way to Tibet* 2004). Along with this growth has come a greater fascination with Tibetan Catholicism among Chinese academics and tourists. This is also not unlike what Smyer Yü (2015) has referred to as an "internal orientalism" and "orientalism without the orient" in the recent Chinese engagement and fascination with Tibetan culture and religion, though in this case in fact occurring over a Western religion in the context of Tibet. As urban, upwardly mobile, middle-class Chinese have become disenfranchised from "traditional" cultural values by their wealth and urban lifestyles, they have begun to seek out Tibet for its more nature-oriented and mystic culture in recent years. Though applied explicitly to the case of Tibetans in China more recently by Smyer Yü, the suggestion of an "internal orientalism" in the treatment of and fascination with ethnic minorities in China as "exotic" by more cosmopolitan middle-class Chinese was first proposed by Schein (2000, 101). For Schein, such "internal orientalism" is defined as a practice and method of "othering" of minorities by Chinese, and I do suggest that such an othering as a practice is occurring in a way in Cizhong, with a growing interest and fascination with Tibetan culture and religion.

When I compare the Christmases observed in the two films cited above, they were miniscule compared to 2014's event, which was magnitudes larger with many more villagers attending from all over the region coupled with all the outsiders and tourists. Some tourists in attendance, both foreign and Chinese, showed a great interest (perhaps even more so than the academics who seemed more interested in the festival alone) in the community, its history, development, and the role of religion in daily life. In one particular instance, I carried out a conversation with the French husband of the Taiwanese-French family mentioned earlier, who was very interested in knowing more about the community and its history. Others I spoke to also explained about their interest in the history of French Catholicism in the region and its ties and connection with Tibetan life and culture. It seemed that the idea of having a western religion combined with the culture and religion of Tibet, which is often viewed as especially spiritual, was particularly captivating to people and that this was part of what drew them to attend Cizhong Christmas festival.

There is a two-way set of communications occurring with festivals such as Christmas in ethnic areas of China. The festival further promotes cultural and ethnic revitalization and expression in a way, coupled with state tourism promotion. However, at what level do these revitalizations remain local and to what extent do they become or lead to state commodification of ethnicity? These are questions

that deserve further research and observation, though in Shangri-La Coggins and Yeh (2014) suggest that results are mixed. The expansions in the scope and scale of events like the Christmas festival are both driven by and lead to further interest among both tourists and academics, who then come to attend and learn more about such events, aiding in their perpetuation and expansion. However, this interest in attending such festivals and ethnic events comes from a sense of fascination and "internal orientalism" in China toward Tibetans today, which, according to many scholars, carries with it a possible sense of negative reification of "the other." In Cizhong though, most villagers are very eager to welcome these larger numbers of guests as a means of further developing their local economy and their unique identity as Tibetan Catholics. Though the outsider interest in their identities and culture is based upon an orientalist ideal, this does not appear to be of major concern to locals themselves or creating any sense of disenfranchisement. I wish to stress though that this likely remains something specific to Cizhong villagers due to their dual identity as both Catholics and Tibetans and also to the experiences of Tibetans in Yunnan in their relationship with the Chinese state, which have both historically and contemporarily differed from those of Tibetans elsewhere in China, where both marginalization and reification run stronger (Hillman 2003; Hillman 2010).

Conclusion

Commodification of ethnicity for state-led tourism development is not always a negative phenomenon, but in fact strengthens ethnic identity and village unity among Tibetan communities in Shangri-La for both the Tibetan Catholics and Buddhists of Cizhong and neighboring communities. As Hillman (2003) suggests, while some of the new notions of identity among ethnic groups in Shangri-La may be entirely new in response to "shangrilalization" (Coggins and Yeh 2014), this is not necessarily a negative development because ethnic awareness among local communities has definitely risen. In the case of Cizhong and the Christmas festival, this is certainly true with the growing importance and size of the festival, the expansion of Catholicism, and the relatively recent arrival of a permanent priest, etc. Similarly, because of their Catholicism and history villagers view themselves with distinction among the other cultures and ethnic groups, including other Tibetan communities in the larger Shangri-La landscape. As one Buddhist villager actually mentioned to me during a conversation, close to Christmas time: "Cizhong is a big name in local Tibetan culture and lore, everyone around Deqin and Shangri-La know about this place and the unique church here." As suggested early on, Buddhist and Catholic families do take part in one another's festivals and cultural activities, and all benefit economically from the unique history of the church and its place within the tourism landscape.

For Buddhist families in Cizhong, religious life is also limited by the fact that there is no local temple or monastery and therefore no monks or lama to lead people in regular prayer, other than daily devotional recitations. In many ways, Christmas has provided the community and those around it with their largest and most community-oriented event and festival of the year, which all can take part in

through the traditional dancing, singing, and dining portions. In addition, nobody is excluded from the Catholic masses based on religion, and unlike regular Sundays, a few Buddhist attendees could be seen in the church at Christmas as well. The syncretism of traditions and religion and the role of Christmas as the true annual community festival tie in quite well with Bodenhorn's (1995) work on the Inupiak Christmas, where community is the primary thrust of the event; likewise in Cizhong, everyone attends all non-religious portions of the festival, regardless of their religion. For the Catholics of Cizhong, Christmas is the one large annual festival by which they can truly belong, not being Chinese for the celebration of Chinese New Year, and not being Buddhist. For the Buddhists, the festival provides more of a secular gathering space for people to join as neighbors regardless of religion, with no such space otherwise provided due to no strong religious leadership in the community. Overall Christmas is about many things for the people of Cizhong, including being part of a regionally unique and distinct ethnic identity within Shangri-La, as well as providing an inclusive opportunity for the entire community to celebrate an annual festival together, which they can truly call their own.

Alongside these positive developments of the festival on a community level over the past 30-plus years, and particularly the last decade, there could also perhaps be some perceptible downsides with respect to the outside interest in Cizhong's Christmas festival and the phenomenon of Tibetan Catholicism in general. As the size of the festival has grown and interest in attending it has spread with the development of Shangri-La, there has also been an increased academic gaze and romanticizing among Chinese toward Cizhong as an exotic other, or what Smyer Yü (2015) and Schein (2000) have called an "internal orientalism." There is a two-sided coin here though. This increased gaze furthers interest in Cizhong's Tibetan Catholic identity and unique festivals such as Christmas, which then further encourages local villagers to develop, promote, and perpetuate their festival and religious practices and identities. Certainly ethnic commodification for the sake of profits and regional economic development without local voices are a problem, but the "internal orientalism" that has developed around the Tibetan Catholics of Cizhong and their Christmas festival has actually led to further awareness among both Chinese academics and foreign and domestic tourists and engagement directly with villagers. As interest in the festival has grown, so has a desire to capture it and perpetuate it along with the associated traditions beyond the community, to keep the unique culture and identity of Tibetan Catholics alive. Simultaneously, as the festival itself has grown in response to this outside interest, its expansion has led to more religious activity, revitalization, and participation among local villagers in religious and local ethnic life.

Notes

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2. For a detailed review of the renaming process of Zhongdian as "Shangri-La" see Hillman 2003; Kolas 2011; and Smyer Yü 2015.

3. Until 2008 when the Catholic Association of China sent a permanent priest to Cizhong, no formal masses were regularly held except on special occasions when a priest visited. Masses at this time consisted of singing and praying with no formal Eucharist.

4. In the case of Wu Gongdi I use his real name rather than a pseudonym by his own request. Gongdi is a bit of a public figure in Cizhong as the director of the church management association and was also the main protagonist in a documentary produced about Cizhong and Catholicism in Tibet by the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong (*The Way to Tibet* 2004). Gongdi and his son Hongxing are both especially proud of their family's wine making and viticulture and their participation in church life, something people know them for, and have asked me to use their family members' real names when writing about them because they do indeed want people to know about their wine and their family's story.

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