Shangri-la: rebuilding a myth

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Old Town Burning

On 11 January 2014, I received a call from a foreign correspondent in Beijing.

'Did you hear the news,' he asked?

'What news?'

'Shangri-la's old town is burning.'

I hadn’t heard, but I told I’d get back to him as soon as I found out more. I called a Tibetan friend in the town.

'Is it true?' I asked, 'Is the old town on fire?'

'Yes, it’s been burning all night ... the town’s water tanks were empty so we had to wait for fire fighters to come from Lijiang. They didn’t get here until the morning.'

'Was anyone hurt?'

'No, I don’t think so, but half the town is gone.'

'My God, how did this happen?'

'We don’t know, but people are very angry. The army blockaded the old town and wouldn’t let anyone in to rescue their belongings. I have to go now ... call back later.'

I hung up and searched for more information. Reports and images were already trickling in from the wires. Photos showed that the old town was still burning. Headlines told the story: '1300 year-old Tibetan Town Destroyed by Fire'. I spoke again with the foreign correspondent.

'How bad is it?'

'It looks pretty bad,' I said, 'The fire burned for ten hours. Hundreds of buildings have been destroyed. Miraculously, though, it seems no one was hurt.'

'Right, but all those old Tibetan buildings ... what a tragedy!'

Remembering Shangri-la’s Old Town

I first visited Shangri-la in 1999. Back then the unremarkable county town was more humbly known as Zhongdian 中甸, or rGyal-thang rDzong ཐང་ངོ་རྫོང་
in Tibetan. Zhongdian was a dusty place at the edge of the Tibet Plateau in Yunnan province with one paved road, which provided access to various tile-clad government offices, a bank, a post office and a musty state-run hotel which hosted local official banquets. At the back of the official buildings that lined the main street were drab housing complexes where the workers lived.

As a modern town Zhongdian was unimpressive, although it had once been an important trading post. Until the 1950s, when the Communist Party administrators began building new roads from the provinces of Sichuan and Qinghai into Tibet, Zhongdian had sat for more than a thousand years on the only overland route between what is now the city of Beijing and Lhasa. It was a place through which grand caravans and imperial envoys passed on yearlong journeys. It was also a place where Tibetans had once traded their highland products — meat, dairy products, furs, horses — for lower altitude commodities, especially tea and rice, produced by the Naxi, Bai, Lisu and Han residents of Lijiang 丽江, Dali 大理 and other rich agricultural lowlands to the south. The Austro-American biologist-adventurer Joseph Rock wrote about the place in the 1920s, and his writings for National Geographic are said to have been the inspiration for James Hilton’s Lost Horizon — the 1933 novel that invented ‘Shangri-la’.

Historical evidence suggests that a settlement of sorts has existed in Zhongdian since the late-seventh century when a local Tibetan king established a fortress at the base of Turtle Hill 龟山 at the southern end of the Zhongdian Plateau. In 1999, I stumbled across the area known as the ‘Old Town’ of Zhongdian by accident during a meandering walk up to Turtle Hill from where I hoped to get a better view of the surrounding countryside. Entering the original settlement, I only found crumbling farmhouses made of rammed earth and organised in a geomantic pattern around the base of the hill. The place was largely deserted. The houses were abandoned and decrepit beyond habitability. At the foot of the hill was an empty dirt-covered quadrangle that, I later learned, was once the site of the main market place. The market, like the town itself, was gradually abandoned as the locals relocated to modern housing blocks in the new town (the original town had no running water, electricity or sewerage) from the 1970s. A few people who worked the nearby fields still lived in two-storey farmhouses on the edge of the old town, keeping yaks on the ground floor as was common in Tibetan houses, but apart from the toil of these tough stalwarts, the place had otherwise been left to rack and ruin.

The locals had readily abandoned the old houses because they were not worth much. Although the buildings represented a distinctive form of architecture and ingenious design (the internal timber frames and roofs were constructed to move separately from the adobe walls to protect the buildings against earthquakes), these Tibetan-style houses were relatively cheap to construct — building materials were freely available, and labor was typically provided pro bono by members of the extended family and neighbours. As family needs changed, houses would be knocked down or, if a better building site was available, simply abandoned. So,
even though a town had existed in this place for more than a thousand years, when I visited in 1999 not many of the extant buildings were more than a few decades old.

**The Revival Begins**

When I returned to Zhongdian in early 2002, the old town was still a ghost town, but with one important difference: an intrepid Swedish entrepreneur and his Sichuanese partner had turned a dilapidated farmhouse into a bar. The proprietors were faithful to the property’s heritage and their renovations were creatively discreet — they kept the house largely as it was, adding a cozy bar, some bench seating, a pool table and an open-pit fire. The bar was located on the ground floor where the stables had been. Fittingly, the owners named their bucolic saloon ‘The Cowshed’ 牛棚酒吧.

The Cowshed was a portent of change — an embryonic model for what the old town would become. Despite being at the end of a dark and slippery path and lacking running water and electricity, The Cowshed received scores of visitors — mostly local youths who found something raw, different and exciting in the venue. It was like a secret hideaway in the middle of the deserted town. The uninformed would walk past the high adobe walls without knowing that there was a bar inside. There was no sign on the heavy gate. Someone in-the-know had to introduce you to The Cowshed, something which added to its allure, especially among Zhongdian’s young people.

The next establishment to stake its claim along the dusty paths of the old town was also a bar. The Raven 乌鸦酒吧 was opened in 2003 by an Englishman and his American partner, both of whom had relocated from Lijiang in search of new adventures. They rented a small two-storey house that was in a dangerous state of disrepair for 2000 yuan per year (about AUD$300 in those days). Jason, the Englishman, set about building his dream pub. An old barfly and armchair philosopher with the artfully dishevelled look of a washed-out rock star, Jason had a clear idea of what he wanted: an English-style tavern where the bar was the main attraction — a British Isles concept freighted around the world, including to my homeland Australia, but one was still relatively uncommon in China. Jason’s pub was designed as an extension of his persona and his unkempt living room. The name, The Raven, was inspired by the research of American scholar Eric Mortensen who was a close friend and regular visitor to Zhongdian. After many years studying raven divination across Tibet and Central Asia, Eric had discovered something truly remarkable — raven divinations were very often accurate.

The Raven was a hit. When the watering hole first opened its doors the clientele mostly consisted of friends and acquaintances — an ‘in crowd’, much like that of The Cowshed, which was still operating on the other side of Turtle Hill. But, perhaps because it was warmer and cosier than the open-air Cowshed, The Raven
was soon attracting more custom. A ragtag bunch of local boozers began congregating there in the evenings. Patrons included local gangsters (one of whom kept a pet black bear), artists, tour guides, writers, researchers and a few foreign stoners who’d managed to make it to Zhongdian, but weren’t too sure where to go next. The Raven was at once colourful and seedy, an earthly version of Planet Tatooine’s Mos Eisley Cantina.

Like the freight pilots and bounty hunters who passed through the fictional Star Wars cantina, the patrons of The Raven drank heavily and liked to fight. In the 1980s and 1990s, Zhongdian bar fights (back then they were in the new town) often featured knives and guns, but by the 2000s the police had mostly cleaned up the streets, and brawls at The Raven were generally characterised by old-fashioned wrestling and punching with the occasional bit of bottle throwing. A large timber-framed mirror near the front door had to be replaced every couple of months. Sometimes, and only when things really got out of hand, Jason had to call the police. The cops would do their best to sort things out and, out of respect for the pioneering establishment, would overlook the fact that The Raven was not licensed — either to serve alcohol or to operate as a business. In the early 2000s, Zhongdian’s old town was still a mini Chinese version of the Wild West — a place with few rules — and one where fortunes could be made and lost.

The Party Takes Notice

Undeterred by the lack of running water and electricity, new businesses soon followed in the footsteps of the creators of The Cowshed and The Raven. Farmhouse owners, already comfortably settled in the new town, eagerly rented their unused old-town properties to a wave of entrepreneurs from other parts of China and overseas. Many of those among the first group of small business people were creative types who were interested in preserving the heritage of the old town. A few well-known designers and architects rented properties and developed them into luxurious and exotic private getaways catering to China’s inward travelling Yuppies, as well to as foreigners. Others opened galleries displaying and selling folk arts and handicrafts. A handful of cozy-looking guesthouses appeared in renovated houses, where a new breed of Chinese solo adventure could swap travel tips and be regaled by stories and legends proudly proffered by the town’s colourful local Tibetans.

The creative dynamism and commercial potential of what was now properly thought of as the ‘Old Town’ came to the attention of astute local officials, notably the then prefectural governor and current Communist Party Secretary of Lhasa, Qi Zala. Qi saw the Old Town as a rough diamond, one that one day would become another jewel in the crown of Zhongdian’s ethnic tourism industry. The Old Town received official endorsement as a tourist attraction in 2004 when Governor Qi escorted a member of the Communist Party’s ruling Politburo through its cobblestone streets and boldly stopping by The Raven for a chat with its English proprietor. In their wake, an entourage of national, provincial and
local officials in dark suits descended on The Raven. Jason, startled by the attention like a deer in the headlights, mumbled some broken Chinese answers to the Communist Party boss’s friendly questions about The Raven and the Old Town. There were smiles all round, and it provided a good photo op that led to glowing press coverage. The Old Town was [re]born! And The Raven, at least for a fleeting moment, was its poster child.

An Old Town committee was formed to manage development. Roads were paved with aged-looking cobblestones and street lanterns designed to look like something from the 1930s and 1940s were installed. Studies were commissioned about the Old Town’s glorious past and coffee table books full of fact and fiction were quickly churned out by China’s fast-moving commercial presses. Producing and inventing stories about the Old Town became a small industry in its own right, with the local authorities eager to commission studies and projects that could unearth exotic and marketable details about the place’s history and its former occupants — the warlords, bandits, holy men and snake oil salesmen who once called it home.

One such study, the main focus of which was to prove that Zhongdian was the inspiration for Shangri-la in Hilton’s 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, uncovered the fact that the old town was once known as ‘Dukezong’ 独克宗 — a Chinese transliteration of the Tibetan name *rDo-dkar rDzong* (pronounced Dorkhar Dzong), literally ‘Stone Fortress’ — a reference to the military outpost that guarded the Zhongdian Plain in centuries past. Although the name had long since fallen into disuse, officials and travel agencies actively promoted the exotic expression. ‘Dukezong’ was soon emblazoned on shiny new street signs. However, the county’s sign writers did not appear to appreciate the fact that ‘Dukezong’ was a Chinese transliteration (and not a translation) of Dorkhar Dzong and, as such, the Chinese characters had no meaning. Nonetheless, they translated the Chinese name for the Old Town into nonsensical English: ‘Alone, Pope City’. A humorous mistake perhaps, but it does reflect the more serious and widespread phenomenon of ideas and meanings becoming ‘lost in translation’ between Tibetan and Chinese. A more significant example is the term ‘living Buddha’, a direct translation of the Chinese term ‘huofo’ 活佛. This itself is an inaccurate translation of the Tibetan *sprul sku* སྤྲུལ་པོ (pronounced ‘tulku’), the reincarnate custodians of a specific lineage of Buddhist teachings, many of whom are considered to be Bodhisattvas. The fact that many English-language texts refer to ‘living Buddhas’ highlights the extent to which Tibet’s cultural heritage is interpreted and misinterpreted through the lens of the dominant Chinese Han culture.

**The Invention of Dukezong**

Academic debates are rarely allowed to interfere with narratives produced for the delectation of tourists, especially if the narratives are commercially viable. Dukezong was being cast as one of the best-preserved ancient towns in the Tibetan world, and to prove it old houses were being knocked down so that more ancient-looking structures could replace them. By 2005, the ‘new old town’ was starting to take shape. Nonetheless, local officials thought something more
emblematic was required — something really big and shiny — to draw in the tourists. It was decided that next to the recently renovated temple on Turtle Hill they would construct the world’s largest Tibetan prayer wheel, *mani-chos-* \( \text{'khor} \) or ‘khor for short.

The golden prayer wheel marked a turning point for the Old Town. From the mid 2000s, a new wave of small businesspeople and traders moved in from different parts of China; they peddled trinkets, hiking gear and snacks, and in the process they turning the Old Town into a shopping arcade for mass tourism. Nearly all of the items for sale, including the handicrafts, were mass-produced in the factories of Guangdong and other industrial centres of China. Fake pashmina scarves from India and Nepal were put on display alongside cow-horn combs, yak-tail feather dusters and comic high-volume cowboy hats. Shop space soon became scarce and rents skyrocketed: an annual 2000 yuan once paid for The Raven’s humble premises; soon it was 20,000 then 50,000 and 100,000 yuan. As rents skyrocketed a few savvy investors who had taken out long-term leases on multiple properties at bargain prices began to cash in.

Despite efforts by many among participants in the first wave of entrepreneurs to preserve the Old Town’s architectural heritage, the new tranche of merchants found it cheaper and easier to knock down the old farmhouses and rebuild. Between 2005 and the end of the decade, most of the houses in the Old Town had been demolished and new old-looking edifices erected in their place. Unsuspecting tourists may have thought they were visiting an ancient town, and I suppose they were, in a spatial sense, but nearly all of the old town they experienced was new, fake or shipped in from other parts of China. The tourists didn’t know or seem to care, and business boomed. In the Old Town Square, now repaved with old-looking stones to allow for daytime food stalls and nighttime traditional dancing, a woman sold Tibetan barley pancakes, 青稞饼, to hungry tourists for double the price you paid for them elsewhere. She handed me a pre-cooked pancake and invited me to choose form a variety of condiments arrayed on top of her cart. I added some fermented tofu and chilli and took a bite.

’Hey, older sister,’ I teased, ‘this is tasty but I can tell it’s made from wheat and not barley ... and I’m guessing from your accent that you’re not Tibetan either!’

Ethnic Naxi speak Chinese with a distinctive accent (and the Naxi accent was the subject of a good-humoured joke originally aimed at Cantonese speakers of Standard Chinese: ‘Fear neither heaven nor earth, only Naxi speaking Mandarin’ 天不怕，地不怕，只怕纳西说普通话). The woman laughed, told me she was indeed Naxi from Heqing 河清 (south of Lijiang), and admitted that the pancakes were made in the Naxi style using wheat instead of barley.

*The tourists don’t know the difference!’ she jovially confided.*

I laughed with her, but pointed out that she shouldn’t be shy to sell Naxi pancakes in the Old Town as Naxi people had long been a part of the multiethnic local
community. Naxi architecture has influenced the style of local Tibetan houses; and the Naxi influence on local Tibetan language has been profound, so much so that the local Tibetan dialect is all but unintelligible to other Tibetans. Conversely, Tibetan culture and religion has long been a major influence on Naxi society. Many Naxi from the Zhongdian region practice Tibetan Buddhism, and even those who follow the traditional Naxi Dongba beliefs typically display great reverence for Tibetan lamas and their teachings.

“That may be true,’ said the pancake hawker from Heqing, ’but tourists will eat Naxi pancakes in Lijiang; in Shangri-la they want Tibetan pancakes!’

Within the space of a few years, Dukezong had been transformed from a dusty ghost town into a bustling new-old town filled with noise, colour and promise. It had rediscovered and reinvented its identity as a mini-urban melting pot of cultures, languages and ideas. It also became a new hub for Tibetan entrepreneurialism. After the extensive uprising in Tibetan China in 2008 scores of Tibetans flocked to Dukezong from Lhasa, and the major Tibetan-populated regions of Kham (Sichuan and Yunnan) and Amdo (Qinghai) to work as tour guides and to set up bars, cafes, shops and other businesses. For many Tibetans, Dukezong offered a safe haven, freedom and economic opportunity. And, in turn, the Tibetan arrivals helped to inject new cultural richness into the old town, even if it meant frequent arguments with local Tibetans about what was and what was not properly Tibetan.

The Fire and the Fallout

Just as outsiders had breathed new life and dynamism into Dukezong, it was also an outsider that brought about the town’s destruction. On that fateful night in January 2014, Shanghai-born Tang Ying 唐英 invited a friend to join her for dinner at her guesthouse — the Ruyi Inn 如意客栈, 200m to the east of the old market square. As many people did on winter nights, Ms Tang and her friend enjoyed a few cups of warming liquor. Another friend called: ‘Come over for a drink?’ Ms Tang and her companion finished their dinner and staggered off for another round, or two. When they returned home in the early hours of Saturday morning they were horrified to discover that curtains in her bedroom had caught on fire (a five-sided element-based space heater had been left too close to the windows). Panicked, Ms Tang ran for help, but by the time she returned the fire was a conflagration. The roofs of neighbouring buildings soon caught fire and, ten hours later, fanned by steady, dry winds, half of the Old Town’s commercial centre had burned to the ground.

I wasn’t able to visit Shangri-la again until the summer of 2014. I immediately went to the Old Town to see the damage for myself. The centre was mostly rubble and I walked through the midden trying to locate where the Raven and some of my other favourite haunts had once stood. A group of Tibetan men from Ganzi prefecture in Sichuan had set up a makeshift camp where their businesses were once located to protest against the insufficient compensation being offered for their losses. Talking to them and other locals, I learned that over two hundred
buildings had been destroyed. Nearly all of houses and shops that burned were new buildings, under ten years old. The heritage loss was limited to two or three unique properties, but even then they were mostly only several decades old. One of these was the House of Abu, which was dated as having been built some 100 years ago and was thought to be the oldest house in the Old Town. It had been re-furbished as a guesthouse and was known for a colourful fresco on the inside of its courtyard wall. Another loss was the ‘courthouse’ — a Naxi-style complex with rooms arranged around an internal courtyard that served as a site for dispute resolution among traders before 1949. Ironically, one of the features of the courthouse was a fire watchtower, once used to ensure sure that fires were quickly spotted and arrested.

In earlier times, whenever a fire broke out locals would rush to dismantle their timber roofs and cast the wooden shingles (held in place by the weight of stones) into the middle of the house’s interior where any flammable materials would be protected by the earthen walls. This is exactly what many locals had wanted to do when the fire broke out in January 2014, but the army prevented access to the fire zone in the interests of public safety. The safety-first policy ensured that 2600 people were successfully evacuated and that there were no casualties, but to this day locals remain critical of the decision, believing that the fire could have been quickly contained had they been allowed to respond to it with traditional fire prevention methods. Tellingly, the official who gave the order to blockade the old town has never been publicly identified.

In mid 2014, reconstruction of the Old Town was on hold while a master plan was drawn up, and as a result of disputation over responsibility and compensation claims. From the local government’s perspective responsibility for the disaster was clear: Tang Ying, the Shanghainese guesthouse owner was to blame. She was arrested immediately after the fire and, following an extended period in the county lockup, was sentenced to five years in prison by the district court. In court, Tang’s lawyers argued that she should only be held responsible for the loss of the two buildings immediately adjacent to her property. All other properties, they reasoned, should have been saved by the town’s firefighters, and that the non-performance of the fire-fighting unit was the government’s responsibility. Although this line of reasoning failed to save Ms Tang from gaol time, the authorities did, by their actions, appear to accept some responsibility for the failure of the firefighters (and an earlier decision to empty the water tanks to prevent freezing and damage to underground pipes). This was an embarrassment given that a new fire station had been built and all local fire fighting facilities upgraded only a year earlier. One official was sacked and several officials, including the county magistrate, were subjected to disciplinary action.

After months of negotiations the Shangri-la County government agreed to pay compensation to property rights holders and tenants as a proportion of estimated losses. Property rights holders received compensation and interest-free loans to rebuild their houses in return for a commitment to follow the new master plan.
Tenants received cash compensation for their losses (ranging from 200,000-1,000,000 yuan). A number of business operators remained disgruntled about the settlement, but most eventually agreed that it was as good a deal as they were likely to get. It was time to rebuild and start again.

**Dukezong Reborn**

And rebuild they did. A team of architects and planners from Tsinghua University was recruited by the city government (Shangri-la County proudly became Shangri-la City in 2014) to draw up a Masterplan for reconstruction — an impressive document that established technical as well as aesthetic style parameters for reconstruction. Once underground works were complete, housing reconstruction began in earnest. By the summer of 2015, eighteen months after the fire, the vast majority of the properties destroyed in the conflagration were either finished or nearing completion. Builders had largely followed the Masterplan guidelines, creatively using new materials and building techniques to construct the Tibetan-style houses in the style of yesteryear. Instead of building labour-intensive rammed-earth walls, for example, the new properties used concrete coated with a rough mustard-colour paint that gave the outward appearance of rammed earth. Sidewalks and entries were paved with stone tiles, giving the streetscape a cleaner and more upmarket look. Overall the reconstructed houses looked like an upgraded version of their former selves. The only disappointing architectural adaptation was the loss of the courtyards that had previously featured in the front and back of many of the former farmhouses. Eager to cash in on high rents, property owners sought to maximise floor space, which meant outdoor areas, once used for washing, chopping wood, and butchering meat, were sacrificed.

The new Old Town planners also took the opportunity to give the place an even more venerable appearance than before the fire. Wandering through the northeast quadrant of the town, for example, I came upon a new laneway named ‘Old Street’. It was already half filled with shops and restaurants and tourists visiting in the summer of 2015 could have been forgiven for imagining that Old Street had been the hub of old-town life for centuries rather than just a few weeks. After all, the new Old Town of Dukezong was itself a place of the imagination — a place where entrepreneurs, artists, traders, writers, missionaries, dilettantes and pettifoggers congregated to pursue their dreams or to flee their troubles. Dukezong offered tourists the opportunity to participate in this imaginary world, and the local guides and shopkeepers ensured that tourists paid handsomely for the privilege.

The damage of the great fire of 2014 has now mostly been undone. Many lost money — indeed some unfortunate businesspeople lost small fortunes when their wares went up in smoke. But nearly all of what was lost has been replaced by a bigger, better and newer Old Town. Dukezong may not be the ancient town it sometimes pretends to be, but, in its latest incarnation, it seems set to continue to
serve as a local engine of economic dynamism and multicultural reinvention. Some aspects of the reinvention will be tacky and fake, but some will be inspiring and enjoyable. Dukezong reborn is a perfect expression of the Shangri-la Dream.

End
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