Traditions of Appearance: Adaptation and Change in Eastern Tibetan Dwellings

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Tibet has been described as “a heterotopia . . . a plurality of often contradictory, competing and mutually exclusive places simultaneously positioned in a single geographical location.” The question of how the combining (or not) of such difference takes place is particularly interesting to consider within the context of domestic life, since the dwelling is a key location of assimilation, appropriation or resistance to external change and influence. For many years the cultural space of Tibet has also been contested. Today, it is apart from, yet fundamentally connected with a developing global diaspora, with a displaced leadership; and it is marked by varying definitions and perceptions of its history and borders. This article explores how these competing forces have caused differences in the image of the dwelling and in the dialogue between this image and actual built and modified form to become more pronounced.

Dwelling form carries significance both as the framework for and embodiment of specific social and ritual cultures, and the working out of particular vernacular building traditions dependent on local processes and materials. It is part of a larger social and spatial system which relates family, way of life, settlement and community, landscape and ecology. In Tibet, as in other parts of the Himalayas, the dwelling and its cycles of construction, inhabitation and renewal are also intricately bound to the particular phases and aspects of its inhabitants’ lives as understood from an underlying Buddhist framework. In the Kham region of Tibet, the area of this study, these are also linked to the Bon religion and local folk beliefs. Traditional image-making in relation to dwellings in Tibet thus situates the house in relation to mountain and cosmos, enclosure and boundary, and a distinctive color and squareness of form (Fig. 1).

Generally speaking, both the form of tradition and the tradition of dwelling, as a collection of encounters and processes of inhabitation, are understood to implicitly assimilate change. However, the speed and confluence of external influences in Tibet in recent years has accelerated and sometimes distorted traditional paradigms. The result has been an increased focus on form, resulting in hybridities where differences often blatantly coexist (Fig. 2).
Today emerging shifts in the making of buildings in Tibet demonstrate changes both to the form of tradition and the tradition of dwelling. These have been informed to differing degrees by a number of factors: changes in the availability and supply of materials and labor, political agendas for improvement, demographic change, the assimilation of new (global) media, local aspirations, and attitudes toward modernity. This article looks at how these various factors are being resisted or accepted in dwelling forms, and how the image of the dwelling may be changing.

The research consisted of an examination of specific houses and groups of houses in three areas in Ganze County in the northwest of China’s Sichuan Province, between 1998 and 2000. It included case-study observations, surveys, and interviews regarding local building processes and buildings under construction, to establish knowledge and understanding of current practices and evaluate issues that may influence future development and house adaptation.

In particular, the research focused on three sites located at various distances between Kanding (a mid-sized town at the eastern edge of ethnic Tibetan settlement) and the buffer zone of the nationally designated Luoxu Nature Reserve (an area of outstanding natural beauty in the very northwest of Sichuan Province) (Fig. 3). The areas were defined as follows: area one — grasslands around the temple town of Thlagong (Tagong Na Wa Xe settlement); area two — a historic town northwest of Yushu/Serxu (Dengke); and area three — a rural mountain village at the edge of the current Tibetan Autonomous Region (Bengda).

**CHANGE IN EASTERN TIBET**

The Kham are one of four main ethnic Tibetan groups. Their area of residence combines the eastern portions of the current Tibetan Autonomous Region with the western area of Sichuan. The TAR was created as a political region of the People’s Republic of China in 1965, following the absorption of Xikang (eastern Tibet) into Sichuan in 1955 (Fig. 4). However, the geographical area populated by ethnic Tibetans is much larger, extending from Qinghai Province in the north, to Sichuan in the east, to areas of northern India and Nepal in the south.
Since the late 1990s, the influence and pressures of social and urban modernization have grown in eastern Tibet, as increasing numbers of Han Chinese migrants have arrived as part of the PRC’s “Great Leap West.”

Launched in June 1999 by President Jiang Zemin, the central ambition of this initiative was to relate the rapid urbanization of China’s east to the development of its perceived “backward” west. Among other things, it has meant encouraging a change in rural production from a pattern of largely domestic consumption to a more market-oriented system — with the goal of better harnessing and controlling the resources of the Tibetan plateau. Within the Chinese government, the perceived need for such a modernization project had its roots in the 1950s, as evident in discussions following the Khampa uprising in eastern Tibet. From the 1980s, the west of China has been the site of major road-building projects, as well as one of the most ambitious development projects in Asia, the 190-km. Qinghai-Tibet railway (due to be completed in 2007). Running south from Golmud in Amdo to Lhasa in central Tibet, this railway traverses high altitudes, cold terrain, and a fragile ecological setting. It illustrates why many of the projects of the Great Leap have been likened to the development of the Wild West.

Although the movement of Tibetans is still restricted for economic and political reasons, the rural areas of western China are today being opened to visitors from eastern China and abroad. Implicit in this policy is an expectation that the region will remain attractive to the global tourist market as a site of cultural consumption, based on its image as a “Shangri-la,” or spiritual antidote to the material West. The danger does exist, however, that improvements to the region’s infrastructure in support of increased levels of visitation may jeopardize the environmental and cultural values tourists wish to experience. Indeed, this larger discussion of ecological sustainability now encompasses development projects and debates in many Himalayan regions, including Bhutan, Nepal, Ladakh, and the area of central Tibet around the city of Lhasa.

According to the *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (EVAW): “Since 1950, new developments and hastily constructed roads have introduced new materials (such as cement and aluminium) and new needs, causing a rapid degradation of the architectural heritage of the...
Himalayas. . . . Most of these changes have produced maximum disruption to the environment.12 Individual localities have taken various strategies with regard to such outside forces. In the region, for example, it is possible to contrast the effects of Bhutan’s tightly controlled attitude toward modernization with the experience of Nepal, which was widely opened to visitors in the 1970s and 1980s and has since suffered significant cultural and environmental damage. Another important site of study has been Ladakh, a rural region of northwest India. Following a number of appropriate-technology initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s, it was recently cited as a potential model for the “ecological” development of the region as a whole.13

More specifically, in the Kham region of China a number of factors are converging to create changes in the form and traditions of dwelling. Among these are government campaigns of nomadic resettlement, a new availability of consumable items, infrastructure development in terms of new roads and electrification, and the spread of global communications technology, including satellite television, radio, and the Internet. However, as the studies presented below indicate, spatial practices implicit to traditions of dwelling are relatively slow to change, despite increased awareness of alternative forms.

On the other hand, the image of the “traditional” can be appropriated in a number of ways. As Dodin and Räther have pointed out, the “inherent ambiguity” of this image allows it to be “. . . proposed with one meaning while it is used politically in another, allowing a government to present a model of Tibet intended to be read by its domestic audience as concern for the threat to traditional culture, and by Chinese diplomats as sympathy for the difficulties of bringing a backward society into the modern world.”14 Conversely, what that image represents can also be appropriated in the context of the domestic as a continuity of tradition, while outwardly appearing to be at odds with it.

Such a “hybrid typology” has been noted in other Himalayan areas. For example, according to Dujardin (in relation to Bhutan):

. . . one may feel uneasy about the way urban architecture adopts architectural features from the country’s unique traditional architecture. Major efforts have been made to give each (imported) urban building type a traditional appearance. “Tradition” is seemingly brought down to the level of wall-paper decorations by providing each “westernized” urban building with a Bhutanese character. . . .

This phenomenon of new buildings donning an external “coat” or dress suitable to a particular locality, which mimics its recognized local idiom, is certainly evident in developing areas of eastern Tibetan. In an institutional context it has often involved efforts to localize urban buildings such as government offices or new power or supply stations (fig. 5).

FIGURE 5. Urban hybridity: new building type (government office) with applied image in the local idiom, Kanding. (Photo by author, 1999.)

EASTERN TIBETAN DWELLING TYPES: A NEW HYBRIDITY

Everyone knows the magnificent, daring stone buildings typical of Tibet — palaces, castles, temples and even private houses. Such technology is not the work of nomads. The prototypes of this architecture are reported in the land of Fu and the Country of Women, in eastern Tibet in the sixth century; nine-storied houses and defence towers some 75 to 90 feet in height. These towers, which are often octagonal, are still characteristic of the Ch‘iang and other districts in Kham, in the modern period.16

Historically, the buildings of Tibet have often been striking, combining almost monumental simplicity of form and construction with intense decorative moments. They often occupy settings of topographic complexity, in a harsh yet “fragile” environment.

EVAW has categorized eastern Tibetan dwellings according to three types of Himalayan dwelling and four shapes of Tibetan houses in Sichuan.17 Dwellings observed in this study included a range of typically noted arrangements — sun genka (U-shaped), lov benka (L-shaped), and gongoag (rectangular). In terms of the three case-study areas, gongoag dwellings predominated in the grassland settlements of the Thlagong (Tagong) valley, north of Kanding (fig. 6). Sun genka and lov benka dwellings were more common in the town of Dengke, situated on the banks of the Yangtse in the northwest of the province. The same was true of the more rural, mountain-valley settlements of Bengda further northwest.

All types of dwelling in this area are traditionally massive-walled, flat-roofed structures. They must shelter an extended family through the extremes of a harsh, snowy winter and a hot summer, and they must withstand occasional earthquakes. Walls are constructed of dry stone or rammed
earth, with an internal timber post-and-beam structure which supports timber/earth floors. Other typical features include timber stairs and paneling and carved hardwood window frames and shutters. Although variations occur from settlement to settlement, individual family dwellings are generally rectangular and either two or three stories tall. Settlements vary in size, but it is rare to see isolated houses. Generally, the study found that traditional differences between houses in the Thlagong valley and the historic town of Dengke, two to three days travel to the northwest, included overall shape, amount and use of timber, and detailed aspects of decoration. Depending on wealth, dwellings in Dengke ranged from a single story to three stories tall. However, all usually featured some form of entrance courtyard, which separates family spaces of encounter from the street or adjacent path.

In terms of recent changes to dwelling form, in area one the study found that significant expansion and building had taken place in the town of Thlagong over the past five years, including extensive renovation of the existing temple. New materials, roof forms, and extended infrastructure (such as electric cables to houses) were evident. The increased accessibility of the area had generated demand for a tourist hostel in Thlagong (fig. 7). More shop trade had appeared along the main street to the temple, primarily to serve the needs of recent Chinese settlers, who inhabit many of the new houses.

In the second area, the historic town of Dengke, the study found a considerable number of recently constructed buildings, generally for wealthy households. Despite the continued poor access infrastructure, concrete and other new materials and processes were being used alongside traditional forms and processes (figs. 8–10). The town’s bureaucratic compound, school, and hospital buildings, built by the Chinese government, stood in stark contrast to more traditional rammed-earth and timber structures. Electricity was available, and the glass and plastic litter along the main street was evidence of the availability of consumer products. It emerged from interviews that an increase in the price of timber, due to a government-imposed afforestation ban on logging in the area, was a significant factor in present building choices.

In the third study area, the rural mountainous settlements of Bengda consisted primarily of single-story buildings with stepped courtyards and roofs. Traditional materials were similar to those in Dengke — rammed-earth walls with internal timber post-and-beam frames. However, the influence of a nearby Sakya monastery (Bengda gompa), with its strong pattern of striations, was evident in building decoration. Satellite dishes had been installed in the concrete, Chinese-built bureaucratic compound, as well as in one traditional walled private house. Since the area is only accessible by jeep, the use of outside materials is still limited. The tradition of building with rammed-earth walls is being maintained, although an inventive use of waste glass signaled the emergence of an ad-hoc hybridity (figs. 11, 12). A number of houses in the settlements of Bengda had been improved recently. One, in particular, near the foot of the village, had new glazing and a very colorful new painted timber facade for its upper story. The Bengda Xiang secretary commented in a meeting that families with more income now wanted more “styles” to differentiate their houses. Other desired changes included “letting in more light” and the use of pitched tiled roofs.

In terms of trends, the investigation revealed that the form of tradition is being maintained to differing degrees in the three study areas. In Dengke and Bengda the image of the dwelling has remained generally close to earlier versions, with local adaptations/assimilations and adjustments. At the other extreme, however, the blatantly hybrid new forms in the more rapidly urbanizing areas of Thlagong clearly illus-
tate the impact of demographic and market changes. In this case, the marked distinctions between buildings reinforced cultural boundaries and issues of identity — in particular declaring the presence of Han Chinese migrants and their political and economic power.

The study found that the use of imported, rather than local, labor and skills was perhaps the most significant shift in building practices in the region. As a result, the construction process itself is developing a new hybrid character, in which known materials and associated methods of construction are used to create a form-related “identity.” Concrete, for instance, is being introduced in a variety of ways, as are different grades of imported sawn lumber. In addition, glass windows are replacing wooden screens/shutters, and a cladding of glazed brick and tile, ubiquitous along roads throughout Sichuan, is becoming a new “face” for the region, jostling with “Tibetan-style” facades.

Meanwhile, architectural elements that have long been understood as “traditional” are being extracted and fused to differing degrees with that which is perceived as new and desirable. Thus, traditional external decoration and signification may be joined with completely “other” building processes and types. This change has been facilitated by the increased presence of specialist construction workers and product sellers. Such outsiders are taking over the job of building maintenance and adaptation, a responsibility which traditionally fell to each family which occupied a structure. As a result, regional variation in, for example, timber window decoration is tending toward greater homogeneity, as standard building products are replacing locally made building features.

**Figure 8.** Old methods and forms are maintained in this lov benka house under construction. Such buildings using traditional construction materials and methods are becoming increasingly costly, however, due to a lack of local timber since the institution of a logging ban by Chinese authorities. (Photo by author, 1999.)

**Figure 10.** Recently completed lov benka house that conforms to the image of a local tradition accepting of new materials and products. Thus, the concrete steps take the place of timber or earth steps, and Chinese clay tiles appear at the edge of the roof. In addition, the square timber ends running under the eaves are probably of imported, bought softwood, unlike the round-ended locally available timber that supports the floor of the upper level. (Photo by author, 1999.)

**Figure 9.** Hybrid construction on a new house in Dengke. Rammed-earth walls enclosing new poured concrete, brick, and timber wall structures. (Photo by author, 1999.)
Generally, the study also found that the most visibly hybrid buildings were those in proximity to areas undergoing rapid urbanization.

SPATIAL PRACTICES: TRADITION OF DWELLING

The building of houses in Tibet has historically enabled a continuity of relationships between family and community through time, and between the realms of interior and exterior in space. In broader terms, it has also signified the interdependency of earth and gods. Indeed, the internal spatial arrangements of the Tibetan home evidence deeply rooted symbolic structures and spatial relationships also evident in the single, overarching spaces of nomadic tents.22

At the time of the thirteenth century Mongol censuses, a family was defined as a house, four pillars in size, containing six persons: the married couple (their children, no doubt), manservant and maidservant. The household included domestic animals and fields.23

Within a typical Tibetan house, the central living area is usually located on a floor raised above ground level. This is the heart and primary place of encounter within the dwelling, both for the family and in relation to outsiders and other members of the community. Family relationships are most pronounced in this space. It is where eating, celebrating, and decision-making take place — both as ordinary, everyday activities and as related to more significant events. Occasionally, this space is also used for sleeping.

In spatial terms, the central living area is usually at least partly enclosed by internal walls or screens, which denote separation from other areas of the house. It is entered after passing by an adjacent area containing a stove and used for cooking. In one of the poorer case-study houses, this cooking area was part of the same room; however, it was differentiated by a lower floor.

Within the main living space a low table and bench seats are provided. Guests or important members of the family sit furthest from the door, while the host sits with his back to the door. Relationships are thus ordered while tea or food is being served and received (figs. 13–14). Generally, the area defined around this table also allows the host to see out through a window, either directly to the house’s entrance courtyard or to an intermediate balcony.

Specific arrangements vary between settlements depending on the overall setting of each house. But a structural timber column is generally used to define areas within the room. The column can mark a place for a small shrine, and has been interpreted as “the fixing peg of the earth,” related to the household deity and hearth.24 The wealthiest living-area interiors are intensely decorated with timber paneling and flooring, brightly painted cabinets or wall details, and simple wooden furniture. Window frames and shutters or screens are also made out of carved and painted wood.

In terms of the relation between interior and exterior, Stein has commented on the defensive appearance of Tibetan houses: “even the dwelling houses are fortress-like,” he has written.25 In this regard, the perimeter walls are physically and symbolically significant, not only for climatic reasons but also as a means of marking, defining and ordering the balance of social, spiritual and physical relationships — the phyi-nang relationship (fig. 15).26 How this boundary is made can depend on the local settlement situation: for example, a house may be isolated, freestanding, or built as part of a tight-knit neighborhood in a village or town. Whatever the case, its single entrance door on ground level denotes a primary orientation, which both locates the house in its settlement and sets up its interior ordering.
In terms of materials, the solid base of a house is deliberately contrasted to the more lightweight timber construction of window openings, cladding, and decoration on its upper levels. The distinction signifies how the human act of dwelling is situated between earth and sky. To further accentuate this relationship, prayer flags and offerings may be located at the outer corners of the roof.

In this tradition of dwelling, the articulation of window openings in the perimeter wall may be particularly significant, as can be seen in an example from a Thlagong house (fig. 16). Here, the hierarchy from earth to sky underlies all choices of materials and architectural details. In particular, the color white, painted on the stone surrounding the window, denotes the protector deity framing the opening to the btSan world of dwelling. Meanwhile, the wood of the windows is often painted red, and relates to red horizontal bands, or defined courses, on the surrounding walls.

The symbolism of particular carved window forms relates to more detailed representations of Buddhist dharma texts/teaching. Traditionally these may also vary between settlements according to their relationship with specific monas-

**Figure 13.** Interior of Fong Ying's house, Dengke, northwest Sichuan, showing living area. The central column is visible on the very left-hand side. (Photo by author, 1999.)

**Figure 14.** Interior plan and section of living area of Fong Ying's house. (Drawing by author.)

**Figure 15.** Schematic drawings of a Tibetan house, showing the clear boundary between outside (phyi) and inside (tang). Internally, spatial arrangements are defined by the relationship between klLu, lha, and intermediate btSan, the realm of humans. Offerings to house protector gods (pho.lha.mkhar) are located on the four corners of the roof (1). The hearth is, significantly, the home of thlab-lha, the household deity (3). A shrine to an interior or mother god (phug.lha/mo.lha) may also be associated with a column near the hearth (2). (Drawing by author.)
For example, the Sakya gompa near Bengda is distinctive in its use of three colored stripes on its external walls, and this pattern carries over to the local settlements. In the temple compound, however, there is also a differentiation between the striped exteriors that face out toward the valley, and the wall surfaces facing the inner courtyard, which are painted a deep, plain red. This can be interpreted as another signification of the differentiation of the world of the earth and human interaction in terms of spatial location. The treatment of individual windows and the exterior of individual dwellings can also be traced back to painted images of dwellings in their collectively understood framework (refer to fig. 1).

The tradition of “tripartite” spatial ordering within the clearly bounded, four-walled enclosure of the Tibetan dwelling also establishes important symbolic divisions between the world of earth and the gods. Thus, the living area — and, significantly, the hearth — exists between the lower (kLu) and upper (lha) realms, a pattern synonymous with the organization of the Tibetan cosmos (fig. 17). In typical arrangements, the entrance level is used for storage and shelter for animals. The main living floor above has separate cooking, living, sleeping and storage areas varying in size and division depending on the wealth of the family. The top floor, or roof, typically houses a “god” room or shrine, which is sometimes associated with a room reserved for visits by significant guests, such as a lama. The flat-roof area, snow-covered for most of the winter is also used for storage and drying of crops in the summer. However, such flat roofs are also prone to leaks during heavy rains and due to seasonal loading of snow, and traditionally require significant maintenance. It is therefore not surprising that adjustments to the form of the roof are being experimented with as new materials, products and processes become available.

It is significant today that the above spatial arrangements, indicative of a tradition of dwelling, are being maintained in contemporary houses. In all three study areas established relational definitions (family-community, interior-exterior, earth-

![figure 16](image1.jpg)

**Figure 16.** Analysis of a traditional window. (Drawing by author.)

![figure 17](image2.jpg)

**Figure 17.** Tripartite ordering of traditional family house in the grasslands of Tshagong. Special areas are outlined in gray and numbered: 1) SBas-ka (“Pillar of the sky, fixing peg of the earth”) establishes a basis for all vertical relationships in the house; 2) a sky door, the opening in the roof, links btSan with the realm of lha by means of a ladder, a connection that may sometimes be manifest as rising smoke; 3) an earth door associated with the family hearth and/or opening from the ground level links the lower world of spirits, kLu, with btSan. (Drawing by author.)
god) continue to structure the spatial organization and circulation of recently constructed dwellings. This is particularly true of the relationship between a lower-level entrance and an upper-level reception and living area containing a hearth and table. Where electricity is available, this main living area may also be the area of the house that is lit. Even the spatial order of a small, one-room apartment in a new housing block in Kanding, inhabited seasonally by a trading family from the Tlagaong grasslands, was found to be structured according to the general qualities described above. In addition to “living area,” this space needed to provide places to sleep and store the butter of the family’s trade. Yet despite the cramped scale and the setting in a ready-made housing block, the essential interrelationships were maintained.

The continued importance of the ordering of the main living space as a key to family dwelling practices is also indicated today in the relative placement of such new high-status products as televisions, stereos, and built-in furniture. On the other hand, the incorporation of products giving access to global media inside this ordered space has had important impacts on the lives of the occupants and the way they inhabit it. According to Morley and Robins,

... time, distance, and culture are almost interchangeable concepts, in explaining and justifying the differences between the colony and the metropole... the colony is seen as primitive, backward and underdeveloped. The flow of time, in this context, is the product of colonial agents... who collectively represent themselves as agents of “progress” — a term opposed to “tradition,” that also merges time, distance and culture. Progress implies movement in time, from unchanging past to the dynamic future; in space, from the isolated hinterland to the bustling city; and in culture, from static tradition to fashionable modernity.

The separation of the spatial-symbolic aspects of tradition from their material embodiment may ultimately be one factor that will lead to the fragmentation of the tradition of dwelling (as embodied in the form of tradition). In particular, it may allow a new consciousness to arise of a discrete vernacular, “ordinary” building in opposition to a deliberately “modern-style” house, according to the status and aspirations of the owners, developers or authorities. At the same time, concepts of style, choice and individuality may diverge from the more synchronized understanding of detail and situation that currently allows different activities and meanings to interrelate. No longer seen in a relational context, building process and inhabitation may then lose their sense of situated place and meaning, and become discontinuous from older processes of making and remaking the dwelling.

Given the influential and unique political and cultural exposure of Tibet in the West and within China, this separation may potentially have wider implications — in particular, as it relates to differentiating, delimiting and maintaining particular interpretations of national and cultural identity. Thus, an accelerated developmental model, involving a Chinese national view of minority groups like Kham Tibetans as historically backward and in need of modernization and national appropriation, can be perceived as exploitative. However, beyond lies contact with a global market and documented associations of “no-choice” modernity that may prove equally dominating in economic and cultural terms. Dodin and Räther have written, “The spectrum of foreign renderings of modernization is wide... a developmental consequence of globalisation that exists irrespective of ‘the Chinese’ and their policies.”

RHETORICS OF IMPROVEMENT

According to Bishop: “Since the 1979 reforms, and especially since Deng Xiaoping called for a commitment to rapid marketization of the economy in 1992, the principal Chinese rhetoric about Tibet has also become a rhetoric about modernity.” One result has been that the implicitly evolving process of tradition in Tibet has shifted to accommodate the replaceable products of global markets, with their implicit associations of the new, the modern, and the progressive. In terms of building practices, then, a local impact of globalization has been the perception that local building techniques and forms are inferior to “new” construction methods and materials.

Today specialists argue that experimentation with new techniques is superior to common knowledge and local ability to build using such techniques as rammed earth. Yet such a transfer of construction, repair and maintenance techniques may not be appropriate. The main problems with traditional Tibetan buildings today are that their roofs may leak, they lack adequate light and ventilation, and they need to provide improved levels of sanitation. And in this regard, the perception of “modern” (usually Western or Chinese) technology as being superior to local methods may ultimately lead to superficial decisions that not only inadequately address these issues, but affect judgements embedded in a larger understanding of how materials behave in the local environment.

Ironically, the tendency to shift from a collective understanding of building forms and practices to individual “style” in single-family dwelling has been countered by the repetitious quality of government resettlement housing, both in form and methods of construction. The horizontal banding courses evident in the stone construction of these new structures may also be less related to the local dry-stone technology and the layouts of existing houses in the region, than to the brick and block/mortar technology more typical of the skills of Han Chinese migrants to the area.

Early in the twentieth century Tibet’s exposure to the “other” came largely as a result of its Indo-British relations. Today, such exposure comes primarily from China. However, as a result of such outside contacts, the image and identity of
Tibetan buildings are coming to reflect a number of outside agendas. Among these have been the “nationalization” and “modernization” projects of the People’s Republic of China and the “conservation” agenda of concerned global agencies and networks with their alternative-technology models. Meanwhile, traditions of adaptive local building practice and processes continue, appropriating new products and methods. However, such slower processes of traditional building adaptation orthodoxy are being confronted and challenged by local people already appropriating and accommodating global media and ideas, with resulting shifting aspirations. And in this context the perceived superiority of new products and the more “advanced” infrastructure of the “global” inevitably reinforces the conclusion that what is local is inherently inferior.

**SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE POLARIZATION OF CULTURE**

The characterization of Tibet as a heterotopia is evident in recent shifts in dwelling traditions and practices. As observed and documented in recent changes in the more urban and accessible centers of Kanding and Lhasa, the identity and substance of Tibetan architecture is at a critical juncture. Here, fast-track concrete buildings often define themselves as regionally distinct using little more than “Tibetan-style” cladding. This appropriation of style may be seen as serving the wider political aims of The Great Leap West; it may also be seen as deriving from exposure to the pressures and politics of the globalization of space and place.

“Modernity” in this context may be understood as involving a marked shift from local process to the importation of global products. A number of overriding agents have been influential in this shift: the developmental/modernizing agenda of the central Chinese government; the opening of the region to global economic and tourist markets, bringing new pressure for infrastructure development and cultural conservation; and the equating of a specific culture/ascension with particular building decoration, which raises questions concerning social, cultural and national identity. In the architecture of the traditional rural dwelling, an increasing awareness of individual style difference seems to be accompanying these general shifts. As a result, the form of tradition is becoming more self-conscious. It may also be gradually separating from the implicit process (or tradition) of dwelling.

This article has identified some aspects of the tradition of dwelling in a rural area of Eastern Tibet. It has found that the tradition of dwelling and processes of inhabitation here are generally adaptive to change, but often involve an additive rather than a synchronized appropriation of new building features. A new hybridity of dwelling form in the region also exemplifies a polarization of material and socio-spatial reality.

**REFERENCE NOTES**

4. The author acknowledges the support of the Centre for Architectural Research and Development Overseas (CARDO), the School of Architecture Planning & Landscape at the University of Newcastle, and the University of Newcastle Small Grants Fund awarded in 1999 to enable fieldwork under the auspices of a multidisciplinary ecotourism project led by the Care & Share Foundation. Material is based on fieldwork studies in Sichuan, PRC, in 1998–1999, as well as ensuing literature reviews and documentation, including exploration of the sustainable adaptation of existing traditional dwellings. A subsequent linked research project was undertaken by Nic Crawley, with fieldwork in 2000. Some of the ideas developed in this paper were presented at the Seventh IASTE Conference in Trani, Italy, October 2000, as S. Ewing, “Authentic Dwelling? Contemporary Aspects of Traditional Building Aspiration and Process in Eastern Tibet.”
7. Shakya, *Dragon in the Land of Snows*, discusses reactions to the Khampa uprising in the 1950s. Among other things, the Chinese believed these areas had “special problems” because they were “less developed and socially backward” (p.136), and also included a large nomadic population. The uprising resulted in Tibetan refugees from the east (old Xikang) moving to central Tibet, where support for their reaction to Chinese control was ambivalent. Newly completed roads, and efforts to settle nomads are also noted (pp.117,184). An encounter between Khampas and the Communists of the Long March in April 1935 was hostile.
8. *China’s Great Leap West*, pp.20,27,141.
9. Various Western agencies, such as
Brathay Exploration Trust, have investigated possible attractions for tourists on the route from Chengdu toward the TAR. They note that the remoteness of the region could be a draw for Western ecotourists, as well as Chinese tourists from the richer east.


14. Dodin and Räther, eds., Imagining Tibet, p.297. These issues are presented in more detail in China’s Great Leap West.


18. Evidence of new building skills and urban influence, usually concrete construction with pitched tiled roofs, has been noted in the town of Dengke since the early 1990s (Andrew Sneller, CSF report, 1992). Also see Semple in Oliver, Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World, p.579: “Increasingly with the scarcity of wood in Tibet and the Himalayas, detailing around windows is being reproduced using concrete. With this change, though the aesthetic qualities of the Tibetan building are being maintained, the carpentry skills to build in the traditional way are rapidly disappearing.”

19. It was noted that there had been major deterioration in the state of the street since the last CSF visit in 1995.

20. Logging trucks used to travel through this area to serve areas of Sichuan, facilitating locally affordable timber supplies. It emerged from interviews that the timber in new constructions had been bought and stored prior to the logging ban in September 1998. There is an increasing impact on the forestry and building trade due to this, and, of course, the lessened possibility of building solely in the local materials of timber and mud or stone. The Tibet Foundation Newsletter (no.31, February 2001) reported on a visit to Kandze by editor Jon Aldridge: “The villages . . . displayed a strongly regional Tibetan identity, each village having a different design and style. There was a visible affluence among sections of this population — many houses were recent, and new religious buildings became increasingly common as we went further west. Large monasteries had been expensively and extravagantly rebuilt with government money, smaller monasteries were being invigorated with private money. Recent afforestation legislation across the whole of China will doubtless slow any future building work — already the local market price of timber has doubled.”


23. According to Stein, Tibetan Civilisation, p.119–122: “It is significant that the inhabitants are described by a figure of speech derived from the architecture of a house, not a tent. We have seen how the phrase ‘beam and rafters’ typifies a particular kinship structure. The word ‘beam’ (gšung) also denotes a pedigree. These metaphors were applied to spiritual descent in a religious school (also expressed, as we know, by the father-son relationship). The principal disciples of Marpa are the ‘Four Pillars’, the disciples of Mila Repa the ‘Eight brothers’. Those of the Nyenma-pa Lama Gyano-pa are labelled ‘Four pillars, Eight beams, Sixteen rafters and Thirty-two planks’. A similar classification was applied to the noble house of Shalu and its estates: four pillars, eight beams, or rather nine counting the northern one with a ‘maned lion’, (probably the pillar capital) and seventy rafters.”

24. B. Hillier and J. Hanson, The Social Logic of Space (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) explore spatial significance when the interior is thus defined as synchronized, allowing different activities and meanings to interrelate. The altar furthest away from the entrance can be seen as a “deepest sacred space” within this spatial and transpatial environment.

25. Stein, Tibetan Civilisation.

26. A. Gansach, in an unpublished thesis, has drawn attention to this and other aspects of the interior ordering of dwellings.


