

香格里拉 百年回望

REVISITING SHANGRI-LA

PHOTOGRAPHING A CENTURY OF
ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE
IN THE MOUNTAINS OF SOUTHWEST CHINA

Robert K. Moseley

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THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

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FOR RENÉE BENZINGER MULLEN

My wife and the best mountain companion a man could ever have.

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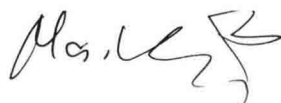
FOREWORD

The causes of landscape and environmental change in China during the past century are enduring questions. There is much speculation, but little direct evidence. So when I discovered Bob Moseley's repeat photography work in the mountains of northwest Yunnan, I took keen interest in the graphic evidence of change that it presented. Repeat photography has been used elsewhere in the world for ecological research, but it was new to China at the time. I invited Bob to present this new technique and his results to conservation scientists at the Sixth National Symposium on Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use in 2004. At my request, he later submitted an article with Professor Tang Ya to the *Chinese Journal of Plant Ecology* to further spread the word about this elegantly simple technique that looks at the past, yet yields surprising insight on how China can sustainably manage its natural resources in the future.

But repeat photography does more than just document changes on the land. It also documents change in people during the past century and how cultural changes can influence the patterns of environmental change. This is especially important in the mountains of Yunnan and elsewhere in western China, which today experience unprecedented development pressures. Many people are aware of the great changes that have taken place in eastern China during the past several decades. Western China is poised to see a similar transformation. Understanding the human-nature interrelationships of the past can help ensure that we manage these resources to maintain the biological integrity of the land and provide benefits to all people of China.

Finally, the repeat photos of northwest Yunnan presented in this book provide a rich visual tour of one of the most dramatic mountain landscapes in China—the Three Parallel Rivers World Heritage Site—that is also a land of great cultural diversity. So please enjoy this remarkable view of nature and people through time in this remote corner of China.

Ma Keping
Beijing, June 2011



Dr. Ma Keping has been a leader in biodiversity science and conservation in China for 20 years. He is a Professor of Plant Ecology at the Institute of Botany, Chinese Academy of Sciences, a Councilor to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, and Secretary General of the Chinese National Committee for DIVERSITAS. Dr. Ma established the Chinese Forest Biodiversity Monitoring Network and continues to lead development of biodiversity informatics and associated information facilities in China.

PROLOGUE: WHENCE SHANGRI-LA

In early 2001 I moved to Deqin, a county seat in far northern Yunnan Province of China on the Tibetan border. I was tasked with starting a conservation project and opening a field office for The Nature Conservancy. Before moving, I'd been hearing rumblings that the real Shangri-La was recently determined to be located in this ethnically Tibetan region. So I picked up a copy of *Lost Horizon*, James Hilton's 1933 novel that introduced the world to the Shangri-La Monastery and its fictional Tibetan utopia. Amazingly, when I got to Deqin, there it was! The place had all the critical elements of *Lost Horizon*. It was remote, mountainous, and required an arduous journey to reach the isolated community. There was a Buddhist monastery on a high ridge (in ruins, but being rebuilt). Far below in the Lancang River valley were green fields surrounding quaint villages tended by cheerful Tibetans, a dead ringer for Hilton's valley of the Blue Moon. There was even a narrow canyon called Moon Gorge in the local dialect. But the final ingredient sealed the deal for me. Towering over this idyllic scene was the giant snow peak of Khawa Karpo, which also happens to be one of the most sacred mountains in the Tibetan world. It was a dead ringer for the "dazzling pyramid" and "icy splendor" of Karakal peak, the luminous backdrop to many scenes in the novel. It appeared, then, that the rumors were true. There was a real-world Yunnan counterpart to the fictional paradise of Shangri-La.

As a scientist, I was curious as to how close my discovery came to Hilton's fictional geography. James Hilton was British and the novel's main character, Hugh Conway, is the British consul in the fictitious city of Baskul. Due to a revolution, he and others were being evacuated to Peshawar, then in British India, now in Pakistan. Baskul is likely fashioned after Kabul, Afghanistan. Their plane becomes hijacked, is flown in the opposite direction over the Himalayas, runs out of fuel, and lands near the Shangri-La Monastery. The geographic reality is that they could only have ended up in the Kunlun Mountains on the western edge of the Tibetan Plateau, the opposite side from where I was in Deqin.

So the geography didn't match, but did the physical and spiritual inspirations for Shangri-La come from Yunnan? Hilton had never visited China, and his inspiration for the physical setting was probably the Hunza Valley in far northern Pakistan, where he had visited a few years before writing the novel. It is an isolated valley deep in the Karakoram Range, with green, irrigated crop fields surrounded by lofty, snow-capped peaks. Hunza lacks Tibetan Buddhism, however, which forms the all-important spiritual context for the story. In a 1936 *New York Times* interview, Hilton singles out the 1850 travelogue of two French missionaries for much of the Tibetan material in his book. Evariste-Regis Huc and Joseph Gabet traveled roundtrip

between Beijing and Lhasa in 1844 to 1846 and recounted the prophecy they had heard of a sacred hidden land called Shambala, the mythical Tibetan kingdom of peace, tranquility, and happiness. It seems an easy stretch to assume that Hilton's Shangri-La is a rendering of the widely known Buddhist Shambala. Huc and Gabet's book was famous and had gone through many editions over the years, including a popular "condensed translation" that had just been published in England in 1928.

It was looking less likely that my Shangri-La was the real one. Then in late 2001, the Yunnan Shangri-La rumors became official. The Chinese State Council approved the name change of Zhongdian County, which neighbors Deqin, to Shangri-La County. With this proclamation, Zhongdian officials had eclipsed a large number of competitors from across the Himalayas and China who were vying for the real-world title of Shangri-La. It was a brilliant piece of tourism marketing, which would have been fine if that is all it was. To the contrary, they had engaged experts to "prove" that Zhongdian was the true Shangri-La. Their report was based largely on wild speculation. Among other things, they claimed that Hilton's inspiration for Shangri-La came from Joseph Rock, an American who spent many years in nearby Lijiang. Rock's writing and photography on Yunnan appeared during the 1920s and early 1930s in the U.S.-based *National Geographic Magazine*. The problem is that Joseph Rock never visited Zhongdian and, as we shall see later in the book,

neither did most Western explorers. It was not on the main caravan routes of the day. Most important, there is no direct evidence to support the Rock Shangri-La hypothesis to which Zhongdian and many others allude. Direct evidence points to the missionaries Huc and Gabet, who traveled a route some 250 kilometers (150 miles) north of Zhongdian. Nevertheless, it was a major marketing coup for Zhongdian's young tourism industry and it has proved to be wildly successful in drawing tourists from around the world.

Despite my initial impression, I found, of course, that Deqin was not Shangri-La either. It was not Shambala, the mythical, earthly paradise of Tibetan Buddhism and James Hilton's imagination where people do not age or get sick. Deqin residents face the same life problems and stresses of people everywhere. Despite this disappointing reality, however, the mountains and valleys of Deqin are dear to me as a place of great beauty and sacredness, filled with wonderful people and awe-inspiring landscapes. Even six years after leaving, it still seems like heaven on Earth to me. I miss it and aspire to return.

Robert Moseley
Congerville, Illinois
April 2011

PART 1 INTRODUCTION

Yunnan Province is in far southwest China and is the country's gateway to Southeast Asia, with Viet Nam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar forming its southern border. A part of China for centuries, Yunnan has always been its hinterland owing to the great distance from government power, difficult transportation due to rugged terrain, relatively unproductive land, and habitation by diverse ethnic groups. The name Yunnan means "south of the clouds," apparently referring to perpetually cloudy Sichuan to the north. While not always sunny, Yunnan does have an equitable climate resulting from that knockout combination of low latitude and high altitude, as all travel guidebooks attest. In addition to a wonderful climate, the travel guides also expound upon the near universal appeal that Yunnan has for tourists due to breathtaking scenery that supports extraordinary levels of biological and cultural diversity.

The northwestern part of Yunnan covers a reasonably coherent geographical region. It is made up of 15 counties and one county-level municipal district that lie in the mountainous transition between the alpine Tibetan Plateau and subtropical Yunnan Plateau. Occurring here are the first Himalayan-sized peaks when approached from the east.

Beginning in 2001, northwest Yunnan became the venue for my five-year project to document change through repeat photography. In this section, I begin by describing the art and (mostly) adventure of repeat photography and how I applied it to the environment and culture of northwest Yunnan. Next, I introduce this enchanted land and its people as context for the repeat photography and stories that follow. As you will see, each photo sequence references the dominant ethnic group of the scene for cultural context and elevation of the photo point to give a sense of the physical geography. Following place and people, I explain my work in northwest Yunnan, the conservation of nature, and how these repeat photos informed that mission. Finally, I examine the Western explorers on whose photographs and writings I rely. This is a very brief treatment of a complex and interesting history, which could be the subject of an entire book by itself. But I do pay special attention to the 12 Western photographers whose old photographs I use in this book. These short biographies give a glimpse of the Westerners trotting around Yunnan between the 1840s and 1950.