China's Indigenous Peoples? How Global Environmentalism Unintentionally Smuggled the Notion of Indigeneity into China

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Abstract: This article explores how global environmental organizations unintentionally fostered the notion of indigenous people and rights in a country that officially opposed these concepts. In the 1990s, Beijing declared itself a supporter of indigenous rights elsewhere, but asserted that, unlike the Americas and Australia, China had no indigenous people. Instead, China described itself as a land of "ethnic minority" groups, not indigenous groups. In some sense, the state's declaration appeared effective, as none of these ethnic minority groups launched significant grassroots efforts to align themselves with the international indigenous rights movement. At the same time, as international environmental groups increased in number and strength in 1990s China, their policies were undergoing significant transformations to more explicitly support indigenous people. This article examines how this challenging situation arose, and discusses the unintended consequences after a major environmental organization, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), carried out a project using the language of indigeneity in China.

Keywords: China; indigenous peoples; international development; nature conservation

1. Introduction

This article explores several conundrums around the role of China in the global landscape of indigenous rights. How did it come to pass that environmental organizations, historically regarded as adversaries of indigenous peoples, tried to expand the indigenous possibilities for one group, especially in a country that officially and resolutely denies the existence of indigenous people? The article explores how environmental organizations began to incorporate indigenous concerns only after a long struggle, and shows how their efforts in China encountered unexpected challenges. In particular, it explores work by The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the world's wealthiest environmental organization, and how it negotiated a social landscape that would ultimately prove daunting. Chinese scientists expected that government officials would challenge TNC, but even their Chinese staff ended up questioning their employer's intentions.

China is an especially fruitful place for the study of indigenous rights for two reasons. First, there is little grassroots support and much official opposition to the category, which makes obvious that its emergence is often difficult and always political [1–4]. Second, although Tibetans in China are the one group that could most easily attain recognition as indigenous by international organizations, they are either largely unaware of the possibility or uninterested in this status [2,5]. Combined, such dynamics enhance our understandings of indigeneity because the vast bulk of studies are carried out in places, like Latin America, where the category has been largely naturalized. The case of Tibetans also brings into question common teleological assumptions about indigenous recognition, specifically that groups always want to be recognized and that this represents the most promising status toward which to aspire.

This article employs a notion of indigeneity that argues for its intrinsically political qualities and its international orientations [6,7]; thus, I do not take it as a natural category. In the course of my research over the last twenty years, I have been asked many times: are there indigenous people in China or not? My answer has always been that it depends. The term is almost always understood as a natural category and the expected answer is either affirmative or negative: do any groups in China meet the criteria commonly expected of indigenous peoples? I argue that indigenous status is a political category. Identifying with the category of indigenous is a political strategy as much as it is an identity.

Although authoritative organizations such as the United Nations (UN) often include Chinese groups in surveys of the world's indigenous peoples, few groups in China have attempted to position themselves as indigenous. Thus, while they may be included in this category by the UN, they do not necessarily self-identify in this way, nor even know that others view them as such.[1] Viewing indigenous people as a natural category does not account for all of the effort it takes to be recognized by national governments and international forums as indigenous, nor the complex identity-formation processes that happen (or do not) at the local level.[2] In many cases, nation-states refuse to recognize an indigenous status as it seems to imply that their sovereignty is superseded—or at least questioned.

A political approach explores the work of articulation of indigenous status with existing social and political ideas, laws, and institutions [7,10]. To become indigenous, as participants in a political category, groups must be "positioned" with solidarities, rights, and participation in a dynamic social movement [11]. As political scientist Courtney Jung argues, we must learn to rethink indigeneity in ways quite different than usual:

> Far from acting as a defensive retreat to the local and traditional in the face of external threat, indigenous identity constitutes an entitlement to participate in global political dialogue. Indigenous identity is a resource that allows millions of the world's poorest and most dispossessed to challenge the terms of their exclusion. Indigenous identity is a political achievement; it is not an accident of birth ([7], p. 11).

Thus to extend Jung's reference to Simone de Beauvoir ("a woman is made, not born"), Jung suggests that indigenous people, as political actors, are also made and not born. It takes conscious and consistent work to make such political achievements. Whereas a natural category approach treats indigeneity as timeless, a social approach tends to view such categorization as relatively recent. Looking at places other than where the concept of indigenous peoples was developed (such as the Americas) allows us to see the efforts of groups to articulate themselves within a global indigenous movement without assuming they were or were not indigenous in the first place.

The second main argument here is that the political notion of "indigenous people" is always transnational [12]. Jung's statement shows that instead, indigenous people have often been considered one of the world's *least* transnational actors. This is especially true when approached as a natural category, when it is assumed that part of what makes someone indigenous is their continued presence in their ancestral homeland. By taking a political approach, however, one can compare categories generated at national and global scales. National categories include the status of being "Indian" in places such as Peru or Canada, and "aboriginal" in Australia, which are shaped by a long history, sometimes centuries, of nationally specific laws, treaties, and negotiations. Such categories were often

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[1] The Global Environmental Fund indirectly acknowledges that the Chinese state does not recognize indigenous status but nonetheless affirms their status: "there are more than 370 million recognized indigenous people in 70 countries worldwide. Indigenous peoples are also recognized [as] ethnic minority in some countries. For example, the majority people in 60 per cent of land in China are ethnic minorities" [8].

[2] My approach should not be conflated with a social constructivist argument that sees the indigenous category as misrepresentative and dangerous, such as that argued by anthropologist Adam Kuper [9]. Rather, like the vast majority of anthropologists, I see the category of indigenous people as containing greater likelihood for generating social justice than for fostering social oppression, although I acknowledge instances where this is not the case (i.e., [8]).

used by settler governments to limit native peoples' rights and possibilities. Globally oriented political categories, such as "indigenous people", on the other hand, are quite recent, only gaining serious support in the 1970s and 1980s as native groups from around the world met under the banner of indigenous peoples. The notion of indigenous people is not pushed by governments but generated by native groups and their allies. They work to argue for a sense of shared history, and they craft shared political aspirations, mainly working in spaces that explicitly address global concerns, such as the United Nations and the International Labor Organization (ILO). "Indigenous peoples" as a political category is still being made through transnational connections, and people who work in its name continue to work at a global level. As a category it is potentially powerful, in part because it is connected to massive networks of people working creatively to enact social change.

Attaining political force is not automatic or easy: making indigenous people into a political category with social traction has required diverse and persistent efforts and continues to do so. The same could be argued for any political category.[3] In this particular case, it takes sustained effort to generate and cultivate the force of what I call an "indigenous space" a zone of re-thinking and re-making indigenous presence that is infused with questions of rights [13]. In China, Janet Sturgeon suggests that the term indigenous and its meanings are hotly debated, and are rarely used by rural groups themselves [1]. Making an indigenous space is often quite difficult; in many countries those arguing for indigenous status have often become impoverished and socially marginalized as the result of long histories of exclusion, dispossession, and ongoing violence [14].

The notion of indigenous space is used both literally and metaphorically. Literally, this concept is related to Renya Ramirez's notion of 'native hubs,' such as in California's Silicon Valley, where native peoples from across the country and even hemisphere meet at places like kitchen tables, political rallies, pow wows, and art shows to interact in convivial spaces and expand a sense of political possibility [15]. One can also apply her notion of hubs to understand how they are also created in places such as Geneva, where dozens of indigenous representatives meet and strategize plans for change internationally as well as in their home countries [16,17].

Metaphorically, enhancing an indigenous space refers to diverse efforts to improve the status of indigenous peoples at several levels: not just loud and highly visible forms such as protests and demonstrations, but also the quiet and often invisible work of rewriting legal regimes; programs to improve health, wealth (including but not only land claims), housing, and education; efforts to repatriate bones and burial objects from museums; and the expansion of a positive presence in public discourse, formal education, media, and other realms. This is challenging work, for in many cases, colonial legacies have been dire. Thus, enhancing an indigenous space is a massive and continually unfinished project with many setbacks and much opposition, but one that, especially in the last few decades, has seen continued and often surprising progress. On the other hand, whereas many scholars believed that all groups potentially able to articulate themselves as indigenous, such as the Maasai and Tibetans, would continue to strive towards this recognition, this might not always be the case [2,11]. This is not to say that such groups have "given up" on efforts to enhance their social position, but that they may not or no longer strive toward indigenous status. They have considered the ramifications of indigenous status and may conceive of the particular set of expectations around this indigeneity as constraints to what they prefer to work toward.

This article mainly draws on my long-term anthropological fieldwork in Southwest China's Yunnan Province, considered the center of China's ethnic and biological diversity, and the site of a dense concentration of foreign NGO projects. The rest of the article has three sections: first, a brief introduction to how indigenous rights entered the sphere of environmental NGOs, despite such groups' reluctance to embrace such issues. Second, it shows how, by the late 1970s, China had newly become

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3   I spent 18 months of continual fieldwork in two rural NGO project sites and combined this with archival study, and a raft of interviews with Chinese and expatriate scientists and NGO staff. This expanded my knowledge gained in teaching at a university in Kunming in 1995 and 1996, which was also supplemented by four research trips between 2005–2013.

open to international involvement and, combined with a panda bear crisis, began what has been one of the most rapid expansions of protected areas in the history of the world. Third it explores the challenges that arose as The Nature Conservancy attempted to carry out projects that dealt with ethnic Tibetans and their neighbors, and how the question of the indigenous inflected these struggles.

2. How Environmental Groups Began to Support Indigenous Rights

In the 1970s, the nascent movements for indigenous rights and for environmental protection were often regarded as conflicting, but by the late 1990s, many people saw these groups as sharing a "natural alliance." How did this new relationship come about? Although one could use the term "smuggle" to describe the ways conservationist activities brought the notion of indigenous politics into China, it does not necessarily imply they were the first to do so, nor does it imply they did so intentionally. Staff in conservation groups did not necessarily want to promote indigenous rights writ large or regard them as desirable. Indeed, many conservation organizations, just as national governments, consider indigenous politics to be "inconvenient" [18]. Whereas now most conservationists view indigeneity as an obligatory dimension to their work that raises additional difficulties, such an obligation only started recently, after a long and contentious history between environmental and indigenous groups [19]. These interactions continue to be strained; the contemporary inclusion of indigenous rights within a conservation agenda has not just been due to the moral self-reflection of conservation groups, but largely due to the widespread and continuous efforts of indigenous peoples, the product of hard work in many venues [2]. When the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), TNC, and other organizations work in China (or in any other country), they also gradually import their notions of indigeneity. It was not that they have become indigenous rights advocates; rather it had become part of their overall structure. In other words, rather than indigenous rights being a separate or parallel agenda, these were now "baked into the cake" of the organization.

When environmental organizations such as WWF were established in the early 1960s, the question of indigenous rights was far from the horizon: indeed, the term did not yet exist. Groups such as WWF first started to make nature conservation into a dynamic and truly global enterprise. They drew on an earlier imperial legacy, especially by the British and French, to protect large game species they were hunting with abandon in the late 1800s [20,21]. By 1900, delegates from Great Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, Germany, and Italy agreed on animal conservation measures for Africa. Around the same time, the creation of national parks in Africa and North America led to the eviction of native groups such as the Lakota and San [22,23]. At the time, there was little outcry against these removals. Such conditions prevailed into the 1970s, when thousands of Maasai were evicted from a conservation area, with little public reaction [24].

By the 1970s, however, two social changes were starting to have a reverberating effect: the rise of civil rights activism (especially the Native American "Red Power" movement but also the Australian "Black Power" movement) and the rapid growth of a new form of grassroots environmentalism. Some groups began to challenge their status as "minorities" within a nation-state to insist on their status as "indigenous peoples" at an international level.[4] Greenpeace, which combined anti-nuclear and peace activism with global conservation, used the image of indigenous people to critique the morals and practices of industrial society; at the same time, however, they showed little regard for indigenous

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[4]   The terminology is significant. The term "minorities" is an older, state-centered terminology, whereas indigenous peoples implies recognition beyond the state. Minorities are often trying to establish their own rights as equals within nations that grant them lower status. Indigenous peoples strive for different rights (often including special programs for education, health, land rights, and so forth) and forge alliances throughout the world. One can see the evolution, in creating the new category of indigenous as separate from "minorities." For example, the Minority Watch Group now issues a report "State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples." This group includes China in its report but describes people there (primarily Tibetans and Uyghurs) as minorities, not indigenous. At my university, one class uses the title "Comparative Studies of Minority Indigenous Peoples," a term assuming that indigenous groups are always numerical minorities, which is not true in places like Bolivia.

livelihoods [25,26]. Greenpeace drew on a well-established trope of the "noble savage" living in a state of natural harmony, which existed despite a long legacy of colonial dispossession by settlers and the Canadian and American governments. Even the US government drew on this image with its famous "crying Indian" anti-litter advertising campaign in the 1970s.

As these two issues arose in tandem in the 1980s, Latin America became an important global hotspot for both environmental issues and indigenous rights. Indigenous peoples, indigenous advocacy groups, and environmental organizations started to form the first strong, yet tenuous, alliances, often coming together to challenge projects funded by the World Bank [19,27,28]. Almost always indigenous peoples took the lead, and they received support and funding from many groups, especially as funds began to flow across national borders.

In turn, indigenous groups pressured the one organization, the International Labor Organization, which had created the only existing international guideline for indigenous rights: the Tribal and Indigenous Peoples Convention in 1957. This convention, which defined indigenous people as "a tribal population whose social and economic conditions are at a less advanced stage than other sections of the national community" aimed for social inclusion into the mainstream, but by the 1970s such aims were dismissed as assimilationist [29]. After more than a decade of hard work, the convention was revised in 1989 to include strong language about the rights of indigenous groups *vis-à-vis* state governments.

Soon after these victories, the World Bank created the Global Environmental Fund (GEF) in response to mounting NGO criticism that "the bank imposed vast dam and water projects on the Third World without regard to their effects on the environment or indigenous people" [30]. This accusation shows how "the environment and indigenous people" came to be seen as two critical global concerns that were connected, rather than separate. As indigenous and environmental groups began to perceive the state in more critical and adversarial ways and saw themselves as sharing some goals, they worked together in zones of "awkward engagement" [31].

In this changing context, indigenous groups were increasingly proactive and made greater demands for participation and rights, putting conservation organizations on the defensive. Unlike thirty years ago, when lower levels of funding meant that indigenous representatives could not afford to travel beyond national boundaries, they now frequently travel, organize, and participate in crafting major global conservation treaties or policies.

Such actions pushed the world's "big three" conservation organizations (WWF, TNC, and Conservation International [CI]) and major donors, such as the GEF and USAID, to take indigenous concerns seriously by the mid-1990s ([32], p. 599). In 1996, WWF and other major conservation NGOs adopted a set of resolutions on indigenous people and established units in each organization to oversee projects specifically for indigenous groups [32]. By this point, NGO activities were being more closely watched and in 2003, participants at a World Parks Congress were surprised by 120 indigenous delegates who challenged mainstream conservation and advocated for indigenous rights [33], including pushing TNC and CI to come up with a written plan addressing the rights of indigenous peoples. The following year, an article in the widely read *World Watch* magazine (published by a leading environmental organization) strongly critiqued the "big three" for "a disturbing neglect of the indigenous peoples whose land they are in the business [of protecting]" ([34], p. 17). The article, written by anthropologist Mac Chapin, was only one critique out of many launched by indigenous watchdog groups. After reacting defensively in print, WWF undertook a major review in 2007 to investigate its ongoing projects and craft policy that was more responsive to indigenous rights and livelihoods. TNC was not as active as WWF in evaluating its indigenous policies, but was increasingly under pressure to work with, rather than against, indigenous peoples in its environmental projects.

3. How China Became "Environmental" and a Place of Ethnic Diversity

By the time TNC began its work in China in 1998, China had already undergone a substantial shift in the previous two decades from a country opposed to international environmental legislation to becoming a world leader in conservation efforts. At an international conference in 1972, Chinese

representatives argued that because pollution resulted from fundamental contradictions in capitalist economies, socialist countries should not be concerned. They regarded such legislation as a way for First World countries to keep developing countries such as China undeveloped [35]. That year, China had finally succeeded, after decades of struggle, to be recognized as the UN representative of China, replacing the Republic of China (Taiwan) and increasing its international presence.

By 1976, however, the PRC's leader for 27 years, Mao Zedong, died and as a result major social changes were able to be enacted. The aspirations of socialist utopianism were quickly tempered, and the notion of "natural limits," previously tainted by association with Malthus and "bourgeois science" was becoming possible to discuss in public. Whereas Mao advocated increased population numbers ("more hands to build communism"), after his death leaders quickly began implementing birth restrictions eventually resulting in China's famous "one child policy." Problems with soil erosion, water and air pollution, and so on were more widely discussed. China moved away from a fairly strict notion of socialism to embrace more market-driven experiments. At the same time, the US dropped its trade embargo, creating new openings for China's international trade and relations.

In 1979, two events happened that opened possibilities for China's negotiations with international environmental organizations. Deng Xiaoping became leader and began a campaign for China to "open up" to the world. In this same year, panda bears faced a horrible famine after a massive area of their sole food source (bamboo) began to flower and die. Especially in the previous decade, panda bears had become a major part of China's international relations strategy, what some called "panda bear diplomacy" [36]. China had a monopoly on pandas: they were highly desirable, the original example of "charismatic megafauna" [37].

The World Wildlife Fund, which also used the panda as its mascot, moved quickly to take advantage of this new situation. WWF had been trying to get involved in panda conservation since the 1960s and was eager to develop projects in China, an "unknown frontier" for international environmental NGOs. Positive engagements between indigenous advocacy groups and environmental groups had barely started, so such concerns were not necessarily on the horizon for WWF's staff in China.

Although China denied it had indigenous people, it proclaimed itself a land of ethnic diversity. Thus, this was quite a different place than, for example, Bolivia (where leaders declared there were no Indians, only peasants) and Japan (where leaders proclaimed it was ethnically homogenous until the late 1990s, when they finally acknowledged groups like the Ainu and Okinawans). The Chinese government did not proclaim that all rural people were equally peasants or uniformly Chinese, but its form of "communist multiculturalism" declared that it was a land of 56 ethnic groups: about 90 percent ethnic Han and fifty-five "ethnic minority" (*shaoshu minzu*) groups make up the remainder [38].

Despite such ostensible diversity, WWF and other groups encountered a land of strong Han dominance. In the 1980s, almost all of the scientists that they worked with were Han. Conversations with these people and reading Han-generated texts steered the ways expatriates understood China. In China, almost no texts were available that described ethnic minorities in indigenous terms, documented indigenous knowledge, or argued that any of these groups deserved indigenous rights. Instead, ethnic minorities were distinguished from the Han majority, not in neutral terms, but as almost thoroughly negative or condescendingly, as poor, less educated, and superstitious and incapable of understanding science. Although many government programs aimed to improve minzu livelihoods, many Han saw the socially marginalized condition of minzu as the result of intrinsic qualities; poverty, for example, was often said to stem from their inability and refusal to participate in the market economy. These dynamics are quite familiar around the world in terms of majority understandings of minority populations, but China had several distinctions.

Chinese schools taught that the Han were the most advanced group, and described some ethnic minority groups as still in the "primitive stage" of living in communal groups and practicing "group marriage" [39]. These notions of social evolution drew on a mixture of Soviet models of social change as well as older Chinese ideas of social difference [40–42]. Unlike Rousseau's romanticization of

the noble savage, the Chinese public did not see any favorable qualities in earlier stages of human development but instead saw a linear model of improvement. Over time, such evolutionary rankings have tended to give way to a more general sense that some groups are more or less "backward" [43].

Expatriate conservationists, such as those working for WWF, TNC, or other groups were often confused by how China classified minzu groups, expecting to use the division, common in the Americas, between Indians and settlers. Thus, for them, they were surprised that "ethnic minority" meant non-Han, as it is a broad category ranging from groups that have lived in present-day China for many thousands of years to fairly recent immigrants (such as Koreans). They tended to be largely unaware of the level of ethnic diversity in China, knowing little about any group with the one exception of a general familiarity with Tibetans. Of any group in China, Tibetans met many globally circulating expectations of indigenous peoples: poor but also wise; unique in their clothing; and actively but nonviolently engaged in challenging state rule, particularly for the right to practice their own culture. Some knew about Tibetan history, how they were a powerful imperial polity with their own bureaucracy, diplomats, and army [44–46]. Yet, this was not a singular case in the history of the region: other groups now classified as "ethnic minorities", such as the Manchu and the Mongols, had been rulers of China, but few international organizations regard them as indigenous peoples, as they fit less with international expectations for indigeneity than Tibetans.[5]

To make matters even more complicated, these same NGO staff knew that Tibetan issues were politically charged, and for almost two decades environmental groups working in China largely avoided involvement with them. During the 1990s, however, the "big three" (WWF, TNC, and CI) began to work with Tibetans during a period called the "gold rush" of support for conservation efforts. They, and other groups, were pouring millions of dollars into the regional economy but were also humbled in several ways. Although international NGOs working in places such as the Congo could easily outspend and outstaff government offices, NGOs working in China realized that they were relatively insignificant in comparison to the massive government bureaucracy. Additionally, NGO staff were leery because China was known to eject foreigners, including entire organizations, with little warning or pretext, and in general the state was nervous about foreign NGOs [49]. It is also important to remember that the government itself was not passive during this "green wave" but busily investing vast sums of money and time to create one of the world's fastest and farthest reaching campaigns to create national parks and other nature conservation sites.

4. The Story of TNC and Indigeneity

TNC started its project in 1998, at the same time when its identity and purpose in China was undergoing a shift; for the first time TNC staff had to consider questions of "culture" in addition to their long-standing interest in protecting land and species. Unlike Greenpeace, TNC was not a radical organization challenging corporate responsibility but a group with substantial corporate funding that used private land ownership to protect habitats. Since its beginnings in 1951, TNC typically bought uninhabited land and managed it or arranged for others to keep it free from development. As TNC started working abroad in 1980, however, many parcels of land they wanted had been inhabited by communities for generations. In 2001, I met a staffer from the main office in Arlington, Virginia in TNC's Yunnan office. She was there to interview the staff about their perspectives on and experiences with working with "local communities". She reflected on her position, stating: "Oh yes, I was just in Latin America, where we started our first international programs. Some of the heads there have been

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[5]   The notion of "fit" is slippery, and deliberately so. One of the recent changes in the international arena (such as the UN's International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs), is that indigeneity is self-defined, rather than state-defined or defined based on a standardized set of criteria [47]. Important organizations such as the World Bank, where there are serious consequences for determining if a group is indigenous or not, have not come up with a single statement on which groups in China are indigenous. One recent example states this, without offering examples: "The term "minority" is not synonymous with the term "indigenous": in China some subgroups of the majority population meet international definitions of indigenous peoples, while some ethnic minority populations do not" ([48], p. 1).

working for decades. Real cowboy-like guys—older white men who think they can just do what they want, and I started telling them they can't anymore." As a young woman of color, who was also a committed environmentalist, she was hired by TNC headquarters to foster a shift. She enjoyed the challenge, and knew she had headquarters' blessings. In Latin America, she said, TNC staff mainly worked with non-indigenous government officials and the regional elite, but the project areas were often in places home to Indians. "We (TNC) started in the US, where we could buy empty land, you know, such as buy a ranch from a rancher. When we started going international, we started to find that people were living on these properties, the boundaries weren't always so clear." Thus, TNC was now having to confront the morals of dealing with local people living on land they were trying to protect, and faced greater challenges if these local people were also seen as indigenous.

Similar changes away from the "cowboy" model were also apparent at TNC-China. One big change was creating a bipartite leadership, one American and Chinese. The American leader was Edward Norton, a high profile Washington DC lawyer. The Chinese leader was an ethnic minority woman, Rose Niu, who was enticed back to Yunnan from New Zealand after having emigrated there with her family. Many Chinese staff and observers thought that Niu, an ethnic Naxi, would steer TNC projects almost exclusively toward the Naxi people. Indeed, TNC's first sub-office was opened in the center of the main Naxi city of Lijiang, and many of its first projects were steered toward Naxi concerns. For several years, TNC funded the expansion of a center to reinvigorate what had become one of the Naxi's main markers of cultural identity, the dongba, priest-like figures who were fluent in the Naxi pictographic language. During the Mao era, dongba were vilified, seen as superstitious, and often punished by groups such as the Red Guards and state officials, but in the 1990s they were "rectified," a term used in China, mainly to describe the restoration of status after the end of a political campaign [43]. With support from TNC, the Ford Foundation, and Chinese donors, a new Dongba Center was built, and great efforts were made to translate surviving dongba texts and train young Naxi in a body of knowledge and ritual.

None of TNC's dongba activities were framed within the broader category of indigeneity. TNC did not advocate for Naxi entitlement for expanded rights to land and resources. Rather, projects fit within the state framework of documenting a unique cultural heritage. Thus, these activities were not seen as antagonistic toward the state, but had the state's blessing. In the beginning, it seemed as if TNC was capitulating to Chinese demands. For instance, TNC not only shared leadership but also agreed that all contracts made by TNC would use the Chinese version as the legal one, not the English version. Also at this time, there was talk about a dam being built in the area, and Chinese scientists said that TNC would not oppose it, as they did not want to challenge government projects. They were correct: TNC staff said little on the public record.

By the early 2000s, however, TNC began a project that was politically contentious from the start and only got more so as it expanded involvement with Tibetans and began to employ a language of indigeneity—a surprising turn for a heretofore quiet ally of state-led conservation projects, a group that would not publicly challenge dams or other development projects. Some knew that other organizations, such as the World Bank's Global Environmental Fund, a powerful multilateral organization with far more leverage and funding than TNC, was quite apprehensive about working with Tibetans, in part because they were worried that such actions might bring public criticism from groups known as "Tibet watchers." These groups, such as Amnesty International, Tibetan Environmental News, Bridge Fund, Human Rights Watch, Free Tibet, and the International Campaign for Tibet not only study Tibetan relations with the state, but also with international organizations.[6] The watchers both encourage international support and yet are wary about the tendency for international NGOs to either collude

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[6]   In turn, such organizations are buoyed by a huge array of grassroots Tibetan support groups, and most contain few if any Tibetan peoples themselves. In the province of British Columbia, there are five Tibet support groups and fourteen in New York. In contrast, it is difficult to find any support group for other minzu in China. There are rights-based organizations run by Uyghurs in the US and Germany, but there is little evidence they attract outsider support. It is also difficult to find

with state interests or be ejected. The Global Environmental Fund's concern is, somewhat surprisingly, candidly revealed in an online report:

> Feedback from international NGOs, Bridge Fund, and KhamAid working in China thus far has indicated that the Bank/GEF should not avoid working in Tibetan areas. Local consultations undertaken as part of the Social Assessment confirmed interest and willingness on the part of Tibetan communities and their leaders to participate in the project. Further assessment of this issue will be undertaken as part of the disclosure of and consultations on the draft Environmental Assessment, as well as during Project Appraisal [50].

In all of the many dealings of international conservation groups in Yunnan, there is no record of this high level of delicacy and caution being exerted on behalf of any other ethnic group in Yunnan. Such reports evidence some of the ways in which Tibetans have far more international clout and support than any other ethnic group in China.

TNC's project was based on what they called "sacred landscapes", and the areas they selected were ones primarily occupied by Tibetans. TNC described the sacred landscapes as places where humans were excluded. This interpretation paralleled TNC's earlier pattern of land management tactics, which largely excluded humans, and selected the group that seemed most "indigenous" from a Westerner's perspective: Tibetans. TNC's efforts to map these lands engaged with an existing audience and a growing interest in indigenous peoples' "sacred lands" by researchers and activists around the world, including work carried out in China by a famous scholar, Pei Shengji. Outside of China, NGOs actively collaborated with indigenous groups to create maps of culturally important lands, often described as "sacred." These maps, sometimes described as "counter-maps" to state-created maps, had varying objectives but were often aimed at promoting more community control over lands. In this case, however, it was unclear if and how community control—a challenging goal in China—related to TNC's aims.

As this project unfolded, it generated a mixture of excitement and concern from a number of quarters, some of which were more or less expected, all inflected by the fact that the project was focused on Tibetan peoples. It should be noted that these Tibetans lived among a number of other minzu and that had TNC focused on one of these groups, such as the Lisu (numbering about 700,000 in China, more than twice the number of Navajo, one of the largest groups of Native Americans in the US), the outcomes would have been very different. The Lisu, virtually unknown in the West, and even in China for that matter, would have likely gained little attention and generated little tension as they do not have any organized domestic or international groups that support their cause. On the other hand, because Tibetans are well known and valorized, TNC was able to gain much Western support and media attention. Below, this article explores (1) established patterns of representing Tibetans in foreign and Chinese media; (2) how Tibet-watchers influenced these interactions; and (3) concern by some of TNC's Chinese staff.

Projects with Tibetans are bound to attract a lot of attention by people both inside and outside of China. Within China many officials are quite leery of foreign support: they know that their treatment of Tibet is a major issue of international contention. They argue strongly that Tibet is part of China, and that the Party had led to improved living conditions for Tibetans, such as increased income and education. Outside of China, the same upper middle class audiences that support TNC and WWF are also likely to support Tibetan causes, although few know much about their religion or history. TNC relied almost exclusively on Western funding and found an audience eager for stories about Tibetan sacred landscapes. TNC's particular approach, using GIS-based mapping, deeply appealed to the genre of combining "Western technology" with "sacred wisdom". Western audiences did not need

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support groups that connect different minzu, with one exception being a Tibetan and Uyghur Solidarity group that mainly consists of a handful of expatriate Tibetans and Uyghurs in Europe.

to be convinced that "sacred landscapes" existed for Tibetans, for they had long been regarded as a people with a deep spiritual connection to the land [51–53], what Emily Yeh calls the image of the "Green Tibetan" [54]. Westerners' great interest in and romance around Tibetan Buddhism is buttressed by a highly visible and charismatic spokesperson, the Dalai Lama. Although not a united front, there are many Tibetan advocacy groups, a powerful diasporic community with strong Western support, and an entire Tibetan government in exile in India. Nothing of the sort exists for other minzu in China.

As well, TNC's activities were quite well reported by the international media. This stands in dramatic contrast with the almost extreme lack of coverage for WWF's earlier environmental project in Yunnan, where there was no newspaper, radio, or television coverage, and only about six pages in the secondary literature (i.e., [55]). TNC's projects gained a substantial following, with coverage by National Public Radio, *New York Times*, and other venues. TNC was also able to attract the US Ambassador to Yunnan, the first time this happened in China's history, as Yunnan was often seen as relatively backward, poor, and unimportant. TNC's projects, using scientists and GIS software, seemed to promise a now familiar trope whereby foreign advocates help an indigenous group support their culture, often against outside forces such as the World Bank, globalization, or their national government.[7]

In these projects, TNC never took an overtly political position that Tibetans were indigenous people who should have more rights over decisions about their land, education, and so on. Evidently TNC staff did not want to make these claims, and their organization would have likely been kicked out. Although they did not use the language of indigenous rights, they did use what might be called a language of "environmental indigeneity", which represented a strong contrast with many of the Chinese-run development projects for Tibetans and other minzu groups, which used a language of "environmental peasanthood". TNC described Tibetans' understanding of their surroundings as a form of sophisticated indigenous knowledge. TNC staff documented the positive ramifications of Tibetan legacies of conservation (including the otherwise rare plant or animal species protected by monasteries). TNC staff created maps that showed Tibetans' "sacred landscapes" and tried to get these officially recognized by state agencies [58]. In this frame, indigenous knowledge is rich, largely undocumented, and threatened by cultural erosion. From this perspective, each indigenous group makes its own unique contribution to environmental sustainability—deep forms of knowledge cultivated through millennia of intimate engagement with plants, animals, and a particular landscape and embedded in language and practice.

Thus, by and large, TNC's project represented a substantial break from the language of environmental peasanthood, the standard frame for Chinese development since the 1980s. In this frame, peasants act irrationally in ways that are environmentally damaging, thereby requiring expert-led intervention and reform, often through science and technology. Thus, most other projects would castigate peasants' backward levels of sanitation and production, as well as encourage their greater participation in markets and use of pesticides, fertilizers, and hybrid vegetable varieties [59]. All of these techniques were part of the language and practice of "poverty alleviation," a virtually hegemonic model of development in China. As much as Ford staff tried to promote development models acknowledging villagers' own insights and understandings of the land, and much as they tried to increase their participation and access to natural resources (such as social forestry projects) [60,61], deeply rutted conceptual frames cast peasants as unscientific and unskilled, where their poverty was caused by a lack of initiative and ability (often seen as linked to their ethnic identity), which could be overcome by scientific assistance and outside support.

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[7] Similar kinds of projects are seen elsewhere. Stephen J. Lansing's work to document indigenous irrigation technologies in Bali (to demonstrate their sophistication and save them from being dismantled by a World Bank project) and Mark Plotkin's work with Conservation International in the Amazon, for example, to partner with "medicine men" to document and test their plants and train the next generation [56,57].

TNC's project also represented a break from its own past of understanding its projects as "science-based" and therefore as not political. In most previous projects, staff used a fixed framework (called "conservation by design") and carried out biological surveys, and created a system of prioritization. This project, however, was different: first based primarily on oral testimonies from Tibetan elders, not Chinese or expatriate scientists. Here, scientists were called in not 'before the fact' to assess different places and rank priorities, but 'after the fact' to document the effectiveness of sacred lands as a means of conservation.

This was not the first time such an approach was used in China; TNC's engagement with concepts related to indigeneity was one of the first times to directly advocate for particular changes in land use, but they borrowed from already circulating concepts. China's most famous ethnobotanist, Pei Shengji, began in the 1980s to describe minzu using an indigenous discourse [62,63]. Pei, then based in southern Yunnan's tropical region, began to publish in English just when the genre of "sacred lands" was beginning to gain traction around the world. Like TNC, he did not attempt to use this concept as a legal frame to argue for indigenous rights *per se*. Pei was, however, one of the earliest and most persistent agents in opening up an "indigenous space" in China, where ethnic minorities were seen as possessing valuable knowledge and effective techniques to address environmental problems, such as the maintenance of biodiversity or sustainable development [2,14]. Pei did not invent categories such as the "sacred forests" but his work on the "Holy Hills" of certain minzu resonated with these new openings. Pei's prolific Chinese publications helped stimulate a new generation of national scholars to investigate indigenous knowledge, especially in Yunnan. Pei's many English publications began to place China on the map of "conservation and indigenous people" and attracted many international researchers to China, particularly to Yunnan. The overall impact of Pei and his colleagues was to inject millions of dollars into Yunnan's economy of nature conservation. He and his students were critical networkers that fostered international connections with a region long regarded as on the margins of empire.

Although efforts by TNC and Pei represent actions that facilitated an indigenous space in China, neither he nor TNC tried to position any particular group as being recognized as indigenous peoples with rights. Neither TNC nor Pei acted like indigenous advocates in places like Latin America: advocating on behalf of indigenous peoples at international forums; sponsoring representatives to attend these forums; challenging the World Bank or other major funders, or testifying in human rights arenas about the poor treatment of indigenous peoples. Like almost all experts working in China they largely avoided a critique of state practices and instead worked to develop alternatives to seeing rural peoples as ignorant and environmentally destructive peasants, by instead to documenting indigenous knowledge and showing how their actions could produce favorable environmental outcomes.

4.1. Ironies of Legibility

TNC borrowed from the language of indigenous peoples and indigenous knowledge in its project on Tibetan's "sacred landscapes." The hope was that these places, which were often avoided by medicinal plant collectors and hunters, might preserve some of the plants and animals that TNC was trying to protect. As Robert Moseley, one of TNC's primary project managers, argued: "Traditional resource management in northwestern Yunnan appears to be more sustainable than previously thought. Managers need to document indigenous ecological knowledge and incorporate it into conservation programs as a complement to modern scientific knowledge" ([64], p. 219). As TNC began mapping these places, translating them into state-recognizable terms created new tensions and questions.

For example, even when TNC saw itself as supporting the recognition of Tibetan sacred sites, these efforts were not without ironies. After one meeting, TNC sought central government support for declaring Mt. Khawa Karpa (Chinese: *Meili Xueshan*) as an inviolate site. This request was approved, and subsequently a Tibetan mountain climbing team's trip on Khawa Karpa was canceled [65]. During the time that TNC advocated for this status TNC staff reported that Tibetans seemed to support this designation, but after approved by law, it became clear that there were different views.

The process of working toward state-legible laws and official conservation efforts also raised questions, even for those working closely with TNC such as Jan Salick, an ethnobotanist at the Missouri Botanical Garden. Salick stated:

> Tibetans keep reminding me that sacred sites are much greater than just conservation sites... For them, it's a connection with the ethereal, with eternity, with the universe. So we don't have to... set aside lands and disrupt traditional practices—we can use traditional practices for conservation purposes [66].

Thus, while TNC worked to create official conservation sites (such as a place often heralded as "China's first National Park"), some of their collaborators worried about the ramifications such acts would have, such as "disrupt[ing] traditional practices".

4.2. Growing Internal Tensions

Tensions also began to rise among some of TNC's Chinese staff. Typically, such tensions are kept under wraps, as NGOs work hard to manage the impression they made on the outside world. Some TNC staff joked that their organization was even more secretive about documents than the Chinese government, which formerly classified almost all texts as *neibu*, only for internal circulation. Yet, Chinese and expatriate staff have provided an almost unprecedented situation: they have reflected on these development projects in several public forums.

First, in 2002, TNC's biodiversity coordinator for the Great Rivers Project, Dr. Ou Xiaokun, wrote an English language article that described this tension. Ou wrote:

> Since the Yunnan Great River Project represents the first time for TNC to work in China, it is perhaps not surprising that the purpose and operation style of TNC is not very clear to some of TNC's Chinese counterparts. Many Chinese participants and observers would like to ask the same questions, namely, what is the purpose of TNC to invest in such a remote area of China and what is the benefit to TNC to undertake such a project? Northwest Yunnan is one of the most politically sensitive areas in China, for it is very close to the borders of Burma and Tibet. Moreover, most people living in this region are Tibetan or other minority peoples. Therefore, the Chinese government is very attentive and cautious regarding the affairs in this area. The political sensitivity in this area is one of the barriers for some of the Chinese officials, researchers, and community groups to understand fully TNC's motivation ([67], p. 74).

Although some critiques of TNC's actions were already published in Chinese by the provincial government, Dr. Ou's paper was the first in English to ask critical questions about TNC's China program.[8] Ou's statement reflects a number of Yunnanese social and natural scientists who expressed their growing suspicions about the intent of TNC and foreign NGOs in general. Even though a handful of more activist-minded Chinese researchers wanted TNC to advocate more aggressively for Tibetans and the Naxi, others — regardless of their own feelings about TNC's work —were fearful. If TNC ran afoul of the central government and was kicked out of China, as other NGOs had been in the past, TNC's Chinese staff could also be accused of wrongdoing.

4.3. Tibetans and Indigenous Status

One of the ironies of Tibetans is that, while they are the most likely candidate in all of China for inclusion within the global community of indigenous peoples, they have by and large eschewed this

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8   Somewhat surprisingly, Ou's article was published in *China Environmental News* by the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, DC. The center tends to be quite critical of the Chinese state and openly advocates for democratic reform, often promoting American NGOs in China with the assumption that they contribute toward expanding civil society.

aspiration. Such a refusal was not expressed by rural Tibetans in Yunnan, who with the exception of intellectuals, were mainly unaware of the importance of the frame of indigenous peoples, but by activists in the Tibetan diaspora, who have been actively engaged with international organizations for decades.[9] Their influence at these organizations is disproportionate to their actual numbers, and they have been quite successful in building and drawing support for their culture from a wide range of peoples and institutions. Although Tibetans around the world are not necessarily striving for indigenous recognition, neither do they actively oppose their inclusion in this category. They are almost always included within the purview of dozens of organizations that either focus on indigenous peoples or include them within a special category. Considered as indigenous, Tibetans' situation gains even more attention than they already generate on their own terms.

At the very least, such lack of interest should initiate questions about the kinds of potentials but also limitations of indigenous identity, how it is not necessarily a natural category but a political one. Tibetan activists suggest that they are striving for *more* than what indigeneity would achieve. Thus, rather than assume that gaining recognition of indigenous status by the state is their ultimate goal, these activists suggest that mainstream understandings of indigeneity may actually reduce their potential to negotiate more on their own terms within international settings, which may be more than that of an indigenous group within a nation-state. These may include new forms of governance, not just the succession model forming their own independent nation-state (such as what happened in the former Soviet Union), but something different that remains to be imagined and created. In the future, perhaps, some of the expectations around indigeneity will expand, so this may become a category of interest. As some scholars of indigeneity argue, just as notions of "nature" began to expand in the 1990s, the notion of "indigenous people" might also be opened up and pushed beyond its legacy of European understandings that hew to narrowly defined notions of authenticity [68,69].

5. Conclusions

Whereas in the 1980s and 1990s the question of whether China had indigenous peoples was mainly asked by a handful of international environmental NGOs, it is now coming from many different sources, including the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, International Fund for Agriculture, and elsewhere. Activities by TNC, WWF, and CI, building on existing efforts within China, inadvertently helped pave the way to discover and document an indigenous presence there, rather than assume it was, as Beijing says, irrelevant to China.

China's engagement with indigeneity is overall likely to increase over time, as more international projects and funds are earmarked for indigenous people, and as some Chinese institutions, both Chinese NGOs and state agencies, actively seek out international linkages on their own without necessarily going through the bottleneck of Beijing, which might discourage such connections. Yet, such international organizations have typically regarded indigenous status as a natural and not a political category. Very rarely do any of the international groups working in China have much understanding of the difficult politics of indigeneity there, in part because only a very select few scholars research this topic [2,5]. Outside organizations supporting indigenous rights often simply substitute the term "indigenous" for the Chinese term *shaoshu minzu*. In most cases, these statements are without teeth, mere semantic substitutions rather than fundamental challenges to the status quo. The actual work of creating an indigenous space, of trying to shift the dynamics of language and activities, is challenging.

Overall, what has occurred is a notable shift in which the category of indigenous people has now gained traction around the world, even in China, one of the few countries that actively protests its

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[9] There are three main possibilities to describe different relationships to the issue of indigenous status, including those who: (a) don't know that the category of "indigenous people" exist; (b) know it exists but don't think it's politically possible to attain; or (c) want to strive for a position with greater possibilities than that of indigenous people. In terms of Tibetans within China, the main sentiment among the rural inhabitants is likely a, and among some urban intellectuals is mainly b. In terms of the Tibetan diaspora, the main sentiment seems to be (c).

applicability in United Nations forums, even in the face of its repeated affirmation by many working there. Indeed, the notion of the global applicability of indigeneity was so widespread that many of the staff in these international organizations were not necessarily aware that the Chinese state denied an indigenous presence: state officials did not make this claim widely, but mainly within United Nations venues attended by relatively few. By the early 2000s, it was not a question of whether there were indigenous groups in China, but which groups were and were not indigenous.

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