



# The Sacred Landscape of the Yading Nature Reserve

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## ■ Abstract

*The Yading Nature Reserve has been declared a National Nature Reserve in China since 2001 and a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve since 2003. It is not only a wildlife sanctuary, but also a pilgrim site for believers of different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The glaciated landform of Yading is covered with a range of classic glacial features, such as U-shaped valleys, cirques peaks, horn peaks, and moraines. It is an area surrounding three awe-inspiring glacier-covered peaks which are believed to be the manifestations of Avalokitesvara, Manjusri, and Vajrapani, the three most important Bodhisattvas in Tibetan Buddhism. This article is a preliminary reflection and examination of the sacredness of Yading, its different aspects, and contemporary challenges.*

**KEY WORDS:** Yading Nature Reserve, Sacred Landscape, Sacred Mountains

## ■ 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Overview of The Yading Nature Reserve

In the *gnas yig*, the guidebook to the sacred land of Yading, the great Yogi Padmasambhava prophesied that “anyone who encounters the blessing of the sacred land (of Yading) will escape the three lower rebirths of Samsara, receive all four tantric empowerments, and attain all ordinary and extraordinary accomplishments (to Buddhahood)” (Lha Rams Pa, Unknown). Yading, or *gnas chen gangs dkar rigs gsum mgon po* in Tibetan, is a pure land (Tibetan: *zhing khams*, Sanskrit: *Kṣetra*), which is an abode of a Buddha or Bodhisattva. Additionally, a *gnas mchog*, which could be translated as sacred place, means a physical embodiment of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, or a place with great historical significance in Tibetan culture (Zhang, 1993). To the laymen’s eyes, it is a place with an awe-inspiring landscape, as well as great natural and cultural attractions.

Yading is located in Daocheng County of the

Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province, China. It shares a border with the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province in the northwest and the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan in the east. The total area of the Nature Reserve is 1,457 square kilometers (Qin, 2014). It has been declared a National Nature Reserve since 2001 and a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve since 2003. [Fig. 1]

### 1.2 Landscape and Biodiversity

Yading is an area of mountains and valleys surrounding three awe-inspiring glacier-covered peaks: the north peak Avalokitesvara (6,032m), the south peak Manjusri (5,958m), and the east peak, Vajrapani (5,958m). Cut by three U-shaped glacier valleys, the straight-line distances between the three peaks is less than 7km. Geographically, it is located in the Hengduan Mountains and has the distinctive features of high mountains and deep valleys. The altitude ranges from 2,800m to 6,032m, with 32 peaks above 4,500m, 10 peaks above 5,000m, and 1 above 6,000m (Qin, 2014). The glaciated landform

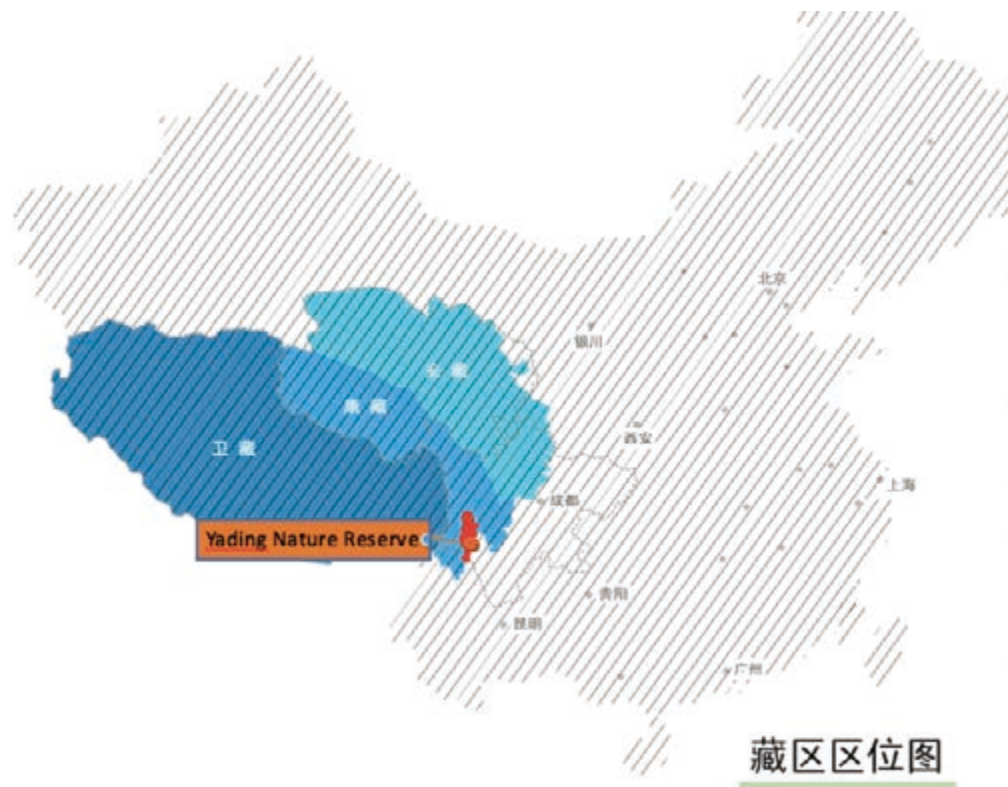


Figure 1: Location of Yading National Nature Reserve, a map from Overall Planning of Yading National Nature Reserve (2013~2025).



Figure 2: One of the three Peaks, Avalokitesvara, taken by Wang Lei from Yading National Nature Reserve Administration.



which literally means the land of snow mountains. Although it is a relatively small place, there are four tribes of people around the Nature Reserve: mtsho thog, gzir ba, 'bong dze, and stong nyen (Lha Rams Pa, Unknown). Each of them has distinct dialects and customs. Most of them believe in the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism while some believe in the Kagyu School. The most important monastic community is the Gangs Gling Monastery, its branch temple, mTsho 'Go Temple, is located within the nature reserve.

## 2. The Sacredness of Yading

We can get a glimpse of the Tibetan sense of landscape on the map of *srin mo*, or the supine demoness, which we can find in most Tibetan monasteries. *Srin* is one kind of pre-Buddhist animistic being which is associated with earth and later with an autochthonic aspect of Tibetan culture<sup>1</sup>. [Fig. 3] The story of the demoness map starts in the 7th century, the time of the legendary king Songtsen Gampo and supernatural events which happened frequently to stop Buddhism from propagating. The king's wives from China and Nepal saw that the



Figure 4: Padmasambhava, collection of Rubin Museum of Art.

whole landscape of Tibet was in the shape of a *srin mo* demoness, so they built 13 Buddhist Temples at focal points to nail down the demoness in a supine position. After the construction of the temples, Buddhism was able to spread across the land without hindrance. The whole natural landscape in this myth was seen as an autochthonic aspect of Tibetan culture<sup>1</sup>. This story can help us see some interesting and dynamic aspects of the sacred landscape of Yading.

### 2.1 The Great Snow Mountains of the Three Bodhisattvas

#### I. The Consecration and Opening of Yading as a Pure Land (*zhing khams*)

The first aspect of Yading is the Buddhist one. Yading is like a pantheon of over 40 sacred mountains with high and low status. Nearly every one of them is believed to be a Buddhist deity. In the two available traditional guidebooks (*gnas yig*) of Yading, (Karma, 2005) and (Lha Rams Pa, Unknown), it is claimed that both the consecration (*byin rlabs*) and the door opening (*sgo phye*) for spiritual practices are the action of the 8th century Yogi Padmasambhava, who is believed to have tamed a lot of Tibetan deities to serve the purpose of Buddhism. The consecration and door opening are similar to the action of the two princesses building the 13 temples; in this mythological way, the autochthonic culture and the natural wonder of Yading were brought into the Tibetan cultural world. [Fig. 4]

#### II. Tibetan Buddhists' List of Sacred Places

There are inventories, similar to the World Heritage List, that are put together by monks and scholars, in which different sacred places (*gnas chen* or *gnas mchog*), such as Bodh Gaya of India or Wutai Mountain of North China, are ranked as the best mountains to do a pilgrimage (*gnas skor*) in a certain year. In one pilgrim guidebook, Yading is listed as the 11th sacred place of Buddhism and it recommended the year of the Rooster as the most auspicious time to do a pilgrimage, while the Bodh Gaya is listed as the second sacred place and auspicious in the year of the Dog (Karma, 2005). In this way, Yading was evaluated and put within the spiritual order of Tibetan Buddhism.

#### III. The Three Bodhisattvas

<sup>1</sup>In one myth, the Tibetan people are said to be the offspring of a male monkey who is the incarnation of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara and a *srin mo* demoness.



In Tibetan, the full name of Yading is *gnas chen gangskar rigs gsum mgon po*, which means the Great Snow Mountains of the Three Bodhisattva. Three awe-inspiring glacier-covered peaks are believed to be the manifestation of Avalokitesvara, Manjusri, and Vajrapani - the three most important Bodhisattvas in Tibetan Buddhism who represent Lord Buddha's compassion, wisdom, and empowerment.

The combination of the three Bodhisattvas (Tibetan: *rigs gsum mgon po*, Sanskrit: *trikulanatha*) is a very important recurrent theme and idea in Tibetan culture, history, and religion. Some scholars find that this combination came from the Kriya Tantra in the esoteric tradition of Buddhism<sup>2</sup>. The cultural and spiritual significance of the three peaks and their surrounding areas brings reverence to the hearts of local people and pilgrims from other parts of Tibet. Because of this, all animals in the Yading Nature Reserve are guarded by Bodhisattvas, therefore hunting and killing them has serious spiritual consequences.

These examples show how sacredness has been expressed in the written words of monks and in the mythology of Tibetan Buddhism, when it was introduced as a religion and established as a culture. This is the monastic, or literary, aspect of the sacredness of Yading.

## 2.2 Sacred Mountains of Communities

The above textual narrative of the monasteries and Buddhist scholars shows the relationship with Tibetan Buddhism, or broader Tibetan culture, in the sacred landscape of Yading. However, the contribution of the sacredness to the conservation of the Yading Nature Reserve can also be found in the spiritual relationship between local communities, pilgrims, and sacred mountains. This relationship cannot only be interpreted in the canon and ideas of Buddhism. The worship of sacred mountains and pilgrimages predated the propagation of Buddhism on the Tibetan Plateau. A lot of sacred mountains in Tibet are regarded as abodes of guardian spirits for certain communities. Although these spirits or deities are said to be have been tamed by great

yogis and put in lower levels of the Tibetan Buddhist Pantheon, they are of the utmost importance to the prosperity and spiritual security of local communities. Within the Yading Nature Reserve, every village has its own sacred mountains, which are usually smaller mountains. On the first day of the Tibetan New Year, families and communities conduct offering rituals to these mountains. An example of how the communities care for their sacred mountains occurred in May of 2016, when a small forest fire broke out in a mountain near the nature reserve; villagers of the *dga dbyang* village rushed to put out the fire as if their own houses were on fire. According to a colleague from this village, the villagers believe that their village and family have a spiritual bond with this specific mountain. This is an underlying, unscripted, and indigenous aspect of the sacredness of Yading which needs further study.

## 3. Continuity and Challenges

"China has long survived its ancient cotemporary, the Land of Egypt; yet, even after all the centuries, it cannot be seen itself as a whole. True, its vast lands are known collectively as China; but with the barriers of confused tongues and difficult transportation, some of its areas differ from others, even as Formosa differs from Alaska," wrote Austrian-American explorer, linguist, and botanist Joseph Rock in his 1931 article "Konka Risumgongba, Holy Land of Outlaws" about his visit to Yading in June and August of 1928. Other than language barriers and inaccessibility as the reasons for China's cultural diversity, he also spoke about the chiefs in the Kham region at that time and thought that before long they would become things of the past. Now, in the time of globalization and modernization, they are really things of the past. However, different from language barriers, inaccessibility, and local chiefs or traditional political powers, the belief in the sacred mountains continues to live on with remarkable resilience, acquiring new meanings, and contributing to the conservation of Yading's natural and cultural diversity.

### 3.1 Sacred Mountains of Shangri-La

Since the 1990s, many places within the Sichuan, Yunnan, and the Tibetan Autonomous Region in

<sup>2</sup>"Three Lords of the World". Himalayan Art Resources Inc. July 2013. Web. 2 Aug. 2004., [www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=1146](http://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=1146)

China have been claiming to be Shangri-La, and Yading is no exception. Shangri-La was first described in James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*. Because of the similar landscapes described in the novel and the brand awareness of Shangri-La, Yading and other sites are competing to be the "real Shangri-La". In 2004, a neighboring county of Yading, named Zhongdian in the Yunnan Province, officially changed its name to Shangri-La County (now Shangri-La City). Reacting to this, the slogan "Daocheng Yading, the Soul of Shangri-La" was born. Now with modern and international connotations, the concept of Shangri-La participated in the new myth-making or re-enchantment of Yading for preservation and tourism.

### 3.2 Current Management Arrangements

The Nature Reserve is now managed by the Yading Nature Reserve Administration Bureau, a resident agency of the Government of Ganzi Prefecture, and protected by the "Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Nature Reserves: Decree of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (No. 167)". Stakeholder groups in Yading include: the villages of Shangri-La town, three other townships, and the monastic community of Gongga Ling Monastery. 62% of the staff of the bureau and over 95% of the rangers are from local communities.

As "the soul of Shangri-La" and because of her natural beauty and cultural distinction, the Yading Nature Reserve has become a popular tourist attraction in China. Tourism development generates the most revenue for nature conservation and the payment for the ecosystem services of local communities. Local communities' livelihoods have benefited greatly from this new tourism.

### 3.3 Risks and Challenges

In 2013, the world's highest in altitude civilian airport, Daocheng Yading Airport, was opened a 2-hour drive from the Nature Reserve. Cars can access from the Provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, and the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Highways and railways are being built in nearby counties. In 2017, over 750,000 people, including pilgrims, visited the Yading Nature Reserve, 55% more than in 2016. With all these changes, there are two main challenges for the conservation of the sacred landscape.

Firstly, with the improvement of the

infrastructure inside and outside the nature reserve and the influx of tourists, language barriers and transportation inaccessibility have really become a thing of the past. However, because of these changes, the cultural diversity and sacredness of the area are at risk. For example, local communities are getting more involved in the outside world and are subject to outside evaluation and the yearly pilgrim systems of different sacred places are now competing to be the one and only Shangri-La.

Secondly, the misinterpretation of local cultures, its value, and sacredness in tourism promotion results in ignorant tourists. Because most tourists are only taking short visits to the area, they do not know much about the sacred nature of Yading. This is evident in their insensitivity to customs such as playing in the water and even occasionally taking nude photos near sacred lakes. Moreover, not many people know nor appreciate the history, cultural diversity, and spiritual value of nature in Yading.

## 4. Summary

The primal natural beauty of Yading inspires the spiritual world of pilgrims and local residents, as a result, its sacredness and traditions have conserved this place for hundreds of years. The sacredness of Yading is not one dimensional and static, there are at least two aspects of broader Tibetan culture and local culture. In addition to this, historical changes are shown in the Buddhist mythology of the Srin mo Demones and Padmasambhava. From pre-Buddhism mountain worship to the modern notions of Shangri-La, the continuity and resilience of the sacredness of Yading should not be underestimated.

However, Yading still faces the greatest challenge: how to conserve the spiritual relationship between man and nature under the pressures of economic development. This article is only a preliminary reflection and examination of this challenge. A lot of hard works is waiting to be done.

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