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6

Spirituality Matters: The Role of Religion in Development Project Evaluation in the Tibetan Communities in China

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Abstract

The Chinese Indigenous/ethnic minority people have rich cultural traditions. Spirituality, including religion, is central to their worldviews and is manifested in their daily lives. Many development projects in China are conducted in ethnic minority areas. This paper discusses the authors' experiences and reflections on evaluations of development interventions in the Tibetan communities. The authors propose: (1) project participants' values, including religion and spirituality, be fully integrated into project design, implementation, and evaluation and (2) evaluators be humble to gain insight and wisdom from ethnic cultures, and conduct evaluations in a culturally responsive way. © 2018 Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.

Introduction

In many parts of the world, development projects are conducted in poor, remote areas where Indigenous/ethnic minority people live. The ethnic minority people's spirituality, including religion, is central to their worldviews and is manifested in their daily life. Spirituality and religion play an important role in poverty alleviation. In 1998, Jim Wolfensohn, then-president of the World Bank, and then-Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, founded a "World Faiths Development Dialogue" to promote

dialogue and exchange among the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and religious groups on faith and development. Wolfensohn pointed out that “the engagement of faith communities in the fight against poverty is vital to success in achieving the Millennium Development Goals” (Wolfensohn in Marshall & Leough, 2004, p. xii). Additionally, in *Voices of the Poor: Crying Out for Change* (Nayaran, Chambers, Shah, & Petesch, 2000), a World Bank study, hundreds of poor people were interviewed, and religion was found to be a vital part in people’s sense of well-being. Whether in Bangladesh or in Jamaica, many people interviewed repeatedly expressed that a good life included attending religious activities or finding a quiet place to read the Scripture.

Similar to other countries, many development projects in China have been implemented in the remote ethnic areas. In China, there are fifty-six major ethnic minorities. The Chinese government has made a great deal of effort to alleviate poverty in the ethnic minority inhabited areas. For example, since 2011, the Tibet autonomous region and the Tibetan prefectures in Yunnan, Sichuan, and Gansu provinces have been included in the fourteen national poverty destitute areas; these Tibetan ethnicity communities have received extra financial support in poverty alleviation and infrastructure programs (Liu & Liu, 2012). Living in the Qinghai–Tibet Plateau, people in the Tibetan communities live in a pastoral or semipastoral yak herding style; they believe in the Tibetan Buddhism and maintain their unique cultural identities and customs.

This paper discusses the design and evaluation of development projects in the Tibetan communities in China. The authors are faculty members in the College of Humanities and Development Studies in the China Agriculture University. Two authors have been engaged in development interventions and evaluations in the Tibetan communities for over 20 years. All the three authors have conducted evaluation trainings for officials from the poverty alleviation office in the Tibet autonomous region. We appreciate the Tibetan culture and wish to see that the poverty alleviation effort in the Tibetan communities and other ethnic minority inhabited areas yield fruitful results. We hope that this paper will provide some food for thought for future development work in the Tibetan communities and beyond.

The Qinghai–Tibet Plateau Shaped the Tibetan Culture and Religion

According to the *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, culture is “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon on man’s capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations” (Culture, 2001, p. 282). In his book *Lebensweisheit*, Dr. Wilhelm noted that culture is formed by a particular group of people and is “an organic constitute highly dependent on geographic space and climate environment” (Wilhelm, 2010, p. 57).

In *The Essence of the Chinese Culture*, Mr. Liang Shuming, an eminent Chinese philosopher of the early twentieth century, eloquently stated that the “human culture starts with religion; the mass order and politics originate in religion; man’s ideas, knowledge and scholarships all arise from religion. And until now such cultures in which religion encompasses all exist—Tibet is a case in point” (Liang, 2005, p. 86). For Tibetans, their religion, the Tibetan Buddhism, is essential in life, and it emerged from a unique humanistic and geographical environment—the Qinghai–Tibetan Plateau. Such an environment formed and shaped the Tibetan culture.

Tibetan communities are mainly located in the Qinghai–Tibetan Plateau with an average altitude between 4,000 and 5,000 m above sea level. The Tibet autonomous region is located in the southwest of the Qinghai–Tibet Plateau with more than 90% mountainous area. Agriculture products such as plateau barley and wheat are produced in the valleys. Most farmers and herders live in valleys and plateau areas where they face the frequent challenges of snow, drought, flood, landslide, mudslide, avalanche, wind hail, pest diseases, and earthquakes due to the fragile plateau ecological system and the damage to the surface soil and plants (Yang, 2015).

Although the Tibetan communities face serious survival challenges, they keep passing on their lives, traditions, and cultural heritages. Such miracles, to a large extent, can be attributed to their unique faith—the Tibetan Buddhism, which has shaped the Tibetan people’s values and worldviews. In every herder’s and farmer’s home in the Tibetan communities that we visited, a place is set up and dedicated to praying. The Buddha protects and guides the lives of the Tibetan people. The Tibetan Buddhism regards the snow plateau as the embodiment of the Buddha’s nature. Revering and worshipping holy mountains and holy lakes are omnipresent in the Tibetan communities (Yang, 2011). As a never ending, always flowing fountain of life, the Tibetan Buddhism connects the past, present, and future, and has become a spiritual pillar to the Tibetan people (Yang, 2015).

The Tibetan Buddhism teaches that a complete next life can only be attained by sowing the good and kind seeds and thus harvesting the good and kind fruits. The spiritual life far outweighs the material life in this world for the Tibetans. They keep a serene attitude regardless of what life brings to them. In addition, the Tibetan Buddhism teaches people to love one another, and this helps them to overcome difficulties. They always feel hopeful, respectful, and grateful.

An Evaluation Story

We heard the following evaluation story which offers a glimpse of religion’s position in the Tibetans’ heart. In 2009, snow struck Naqu county in the Tibet autonomous region. The poverty alleviation office in Naqu county provided assistance yaks for herders who lived in extreme poverty. Two years later an evaluation was conducted to assess how yaks had assisted herders’

lives. The evaluation found that one herder, who had received three assistance yaks, gave all of them to a local temple, and this caught the evaluators by surprise. The herder explained that on three previous occasions—when his mother was sick, when his youngest son was born, and when his son was sick—he went to the temple to seek medical assistance; the Tibetan doctor in the temple helped his family. On each of those occasions, the herder had made a wish promising that he would contribute a yak to the temple. After he had received the three yaks, he contributed all of them to the temple and was able to fulfill his three promises. Since then, his heart was filled with happiness and peace, and his family lived in greater harmony.

In this case, the evaluation sought to find out whether the yaks had given birth to baby yaks and whether the herder's income had increased. Although the yaks did not bring the herder any economic benefits that evaluators had expected, the happiness and peace that the contribution of yaks bought to the family was invaluable. The local government officials, however, regarded the herder's act unwise, because the herder did not use the yaks to increase his income. This evaluation story, along with others that we have heard about, prompted us to think about how we should conduct evaluations when working with ethnic minority people whose spirituality and/or religion guide their lives, what criteria we should use, and whose perspectives should be taken into account when evaluation conclusions are drawn.

Yaks in the Tibetan Culture

In the Tibetan language, yaks are pronounced as *Nor*, meaning “treasure.” Tibetans depend on yaks for their livelihood. In the Qinghai–Tibet Plateau, the weather is cold and the oxygen is low. The harsh condition requires that animals have good health and good adaptability. Only yaks can provide the various needs of herders. Yaks plow the field to help plant Tibetan barley, potato, and rapeseeds. Yak milk, yak butter, and yak milk dregs are consumed every day. Yaks' manure is dried in the sun and stored as burning fuel. Cloaks made of yak skins and hairs protect herders from rain and snow in the harsh weather. Tibetans hand knit yarn with yak hairs and make scarfs, carpets, and tents. Yak skin can also be made into Tibetan boots or shoes. Ornaments made of yak bones are popular in many cities in China (Xiao, 2012).

The Tibetan communities also depend on yaks for transportation. When houses are built, villagers use yak carts to carry bricks, soil, and wood from afar. Moreover, the mountainous plateau condition makes it difficult for vehicles to travel. Yaks are able to carry goods in such difficult conditions. Yaks have a great deal of strength, endurance, patience, and are adaptable to high mountain grassland conditions. Moreover, older yaks can tell the way. Yaks are regarded as the “Boat of Plateau.”

Additionally, the Tibetan herders are emotionally attached to yaks. The Tibetan herders spend almost two thirds of their time with yaks daily. The first thing they do when they get up in the morning is to feed, milk, and herd the yaks. They respect yaks and treat them as members of the family. When asked about their feelings to yaks, the herders say that they “should care for yaks like caring for mothers, because yaks bred and nurtured us like our mothers.”

Furthermore, Tibetans regard yaks as symbols of deity. Yaks are believed to be related to Tibetans’ ancestors in legends, and yaks protect people from harms’ way. Some Tibetans place yaks’ heads on top of door frames as decorations and symbol of protection. Yak motifs are painted in rocks, and yak images etched in colored potteries. In a county-wide ceremony for spring plowing in Duilongdeqing county in Lhasa city in the Tibet autonomous region, two yaks were selected—one yak’s hairs have a tinge of blue while the other a tinge of brown. The local villagers explained that the colors of these two yaks’ hairs carry special meanings: Their hair colors represent blue sky or water and earth, respectively; when plowing, villagers are connected to the blue sky, water source, and earth. (Xiao, 2012). Even though modern technologies (tractors) are gradually replacing yaks, the spirit of yaks and what it represents stays with the Tibetans.

As such, Tibetans regard yaks as emotional, spiritual, and livelihood treasures. The herder in the aforementioned story contributed his yaks to the temple in order to fulfill his promises to the temple and receive Buddha’s blessings. This demonstrates that the devotion to the Buddha permeates the mind and soul of the herder. Receiving Buddha’s blessing is his ultimate goal in life.

Religion and Spirituality Matter in Interventions and Evaluation

According to the *Merriam-Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, spiritual is defined as “of the spirit or the soul as distinguished from the body or material matters,” “of or consisting of spirit, not corporeal,” “characterized by the ascendancy of the spirit; showing much refinement of thought and feelings,” and “of religion or the church, sacred, devotional, or ecclesiastical” (Spiritual, 2001, p. 1382). Religion is “(1) a belief in a divine or superhuman power or powers to be obeyed and worshipped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe 2) expression of such a belief in conduct and ritual” (Religion, 2001, p. 1210).

The Tibetan communities face challenges of the harsh climate and periodic disasters which are beyond one’s ability to control. Their faith, namely the Tibetan Buddhism, helps maintain hope and keep their spirits up. When we visited the Tibetan communities, we noticed that people were always smiling—from men and women who were threshing the wheat and constructing the road to poorly dressed children who were playing dirt. Although they had little in the material sense, they kept smiling and one sees

the happiness and contentment emanating from their hearts. Writing about this reminds us of the lyrics of a popular Tibetan song entitled *My Hometown*:

My hometown is in Rikaze, there is a beautiful river there. My mother says that the hill is filled with cows and sheep because of Buddha's blessings. White clouds fill the blue sky, clear waves dance in the beautiful river. Eagles with their mighty wings fly by and have left a moving song. Om mani mani padme hum, om mani mani padme hum (encore).

The encore of the song is the Tibetan chanting/prayer to the Buddha of Compassion. When one says the prayer, it invokes a strong feeling of benevolence and compassion—the Buddha of Compassion will bring blessings to the person reciting the mantra. As part of their traditional religious practice, Tibetans recite this mantra frequently throughout the day.

The Tibetans respect and care for all sentient beings. Treasuring and respecting life undermines the basic tenets of the Tibetan Buddhism. For example, not killing is a basic doctrine in the Tibetan Buddhism; the Tibetan people demonstrate an extraordinary reverence and respect for all lives, be it humans or animals. The Tibetan Buddhism teaches that all sentient beings possess Buddha's nature, and therefore are equal. In the traditional Tibetan society, the Buddhist principle of avoidance of causing harm to animals was a value that people acquired from the cultural environment. From a young age, children are taught to avoid killing even insects, so this avoidance became internalized and automatic.

Yaks, which are considered sacred animals and possess Buddha's nature, should be treated with kindness and love (Xiao, 2012; Yang, 2015). The Tibetan herders sometimes release old yaks in the grassland so that they pass away naturally. Releasing yaks help remove one's karmic obstacle. In the Tibetan communities, one often sees that some yaks' or sheep's horns are tied with yellow and red ribbons. This indicates that their owners have promised to offer these animals as tributes to Buddha and will take care of them until the end of their life. These religious practices, somehow, stand in contrast to the development concepts endorsed by development and government agencies, because these animals consume fodder and can no longer bring economic benefits (Xiao, 2012).

Different from the herders' value system, the local government often perceives yaks from the economic dimension alone. The government endeavors to increase the number of yaks for sale and therefore, increase the commodity rate and income. Many poverty alleviation projects aim at maximizing economic benefits whereas the cultural value of yaks is not considered. The culture of yaks has developed for generations. The design and implementation of development interventions must stay in line with traditional cultures and ethics should they become effective. When the government is designing and implementing programs or policies, it should

consider whether the programs or policies are fitting to the traditional culture and Indigenous knowledge.

In January 2016, the authors attended a seminar on conducting development projects in ethnic minority areas in China. Mr. Tashi, a Tibetan participant, opined that a unique ecological system ethos has passed on from generations in the Tibetan Plateau; the relationship among all sentient beings includes mutual communication and nurturing, sincerity, warmth, and altruism. He noted that the philosophy of the Tibetan Buddhism relies on a mutual reliance of circulation of cause and effect. The Tibetans trust in an animal husbandry economy in harmony with nature. The biggest challenge faced by development projects is the conflict between the interventions and the Tibetan herders' traditional ethics. As a solution, a natural holy sphere and spiritual home must be built.

When religion is taken into account in project design in the Tibetan communities, good results follow. As mentioned earlier, to avoid killing has been followed by Tibetan herders for generations. To control the grassland degradation caused by rodents (which damage the surface vegetation of grassland), the local government recommended using raticide as part of a vegetable pest management project implemented in a traditional Tibetan community in Shannan Prefecture of the Tibet autonomous region. At the beginning the herders refused to use raticide for fear of killing. To both protect the grassland and to alleviate guilty feelings of herders, in one community, the local government officials invited a Living Buddha and lamas to perform a religious ritual to help release the souls of rats from purgatory. This religious ritual greatly helped decrease the villagers' feelings of committing sins and they could use raticide as a result (Xiao, 2012).

Reflections

A meaningful evaluation approach reflects project participants' core values; culture should be embedded throughout project conceptualization, design, implementation, and evaluation (Frierson, Hood, Hughes, & Thomas, 2010; Tuagalu, Phillips, Sauni, & Cram, 2014). The development projects mainly aim to achieve maximum economic benefits. The Tibetans, however, give their best to the temples. In development programs, one must acknowledge and identify with the culture of the local people, and remove linear development concepts. Imposing outsiders' own value to the local people will only result in failure. A project which pursues only economic benefits cannot sustain in the Tibetan communities.

It is time that we reflect on and be critical of the existing evaluation system, particularly the conventional logical framework based on a linear-thinking cause and effect as this does not fit to the evaluation in ethnic areas. It is time that we explore "new and expansive paradigms . . . that include cultural identity, relationships, sense of place, and impact in terms

of immediate and long-term contributions and service to the community” (Kawakami, Aton, Cram, Lai, & Porima, 2007, p. 229).

Outside evaluators should not assume that economic objectives alone are appropriate. One of the goals of evaluations is to find out the effect of interventions to project participants. Evaluation should be designed and conducted in ways that are fitting to the culture of project participants.

Indigenous evaluators have asserted that evaluation must be contextualized within culturally appropriate frameworks (Tuagalu et al., 2014). An evaluation approach needs to be created and constructed for each Indigenous people. We need to learn about their needs in development and understand their culture, traditions, and values, which are often constrained and suppressed by the mainstream culture.

It is important that evaluators learn to understand the spirituality/religions and acquire an understanding of the ethnicity’s languages and their thinking systems (Yang, 2011). Additionally, engaging the local project officers or village leaders who speak both Chinese and Tibetan in the evaluation is a must, for they are the experts in the cultural nuances and customs. Evaluators can learn a great deal from them.

Only when evaluation is conducted in a culturally responsive manner will the evaluation results be relevant and meaningful. From our experiences, we have come to realize that evaluations which ignore culture of project participants will only result in invalid data, erroneous findings, and ineffective recommendations. When we conduct evaluation in ethnic minority inhabited areas, we must take their spirituality and religion into full account, for cultural responsiveness is the heart and soul of evaluation.

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