



Searching for Sacred Mountain

Presented by Face to Face Media and the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting



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2014 • Running time 20 minutes • Directed by Gary Marcuse and Shi Lihong • Distributed by Face to Face Media

Journalist Liu Jianqiang and conservation biologist Lü Zhi discover a new way of looking at environmental conservation on the Tibetan Plateau, where Buddhist monks and villagers have preserved vast tracts of land for centuries. “Everyone has a responsibility to protect life,” Buddhist lama Tashi Sange says, “no matter if you are just born, or 80 years old.”



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Searching for Sacred Mountain



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As environmental justice studies multidimensional intersections of ecological and social issues, this film features Buddhist ethics and practices as a meaningful and scientifically documented successful way to promote environmental protection in China.

WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

I have used this film in a comparative religion and ecology class and found it fruitful to raise students' global and religious studies awareness about the inextricable interrelationship of ecological and social issues from Buddhist perspectives.

SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

Anthropology	History
Bioregions and Habitat	Media Studies
Conservation Biology	Political Science
Environmental Science	Sustainability
Geography	Tibetan Buddhism

SYNOPSIS

The Tibetan monastery at Baiyu rests in the brilliant Nianbaoyuze mountain range, a sacred and nationally protected park. The Nianbaoyuze range is the epitome of intersections between religion and environment and China—and a key element in *Searching for Sacred Mountain*. The documentary tells the story of Liu Jianqiang, an investigative environmental journalist and Beijing editor of *Chinadialogue* who has recently converted to Buddhism. The documentary includes footage of senior Chinese government officials declaring their commitment to an “ecological civilization” that draws on Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and other Chinese cultural traditions as a means of addressing the country’s growing environmental challenges. It also shows that leading Chinese academics are making the connection between these traditions and the protection of vulnerable lands and habitats.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

As environmental justice studies multidimensional intersections of ecological and social issues, this film features Buddhist ethics and practices as a meaningful and scientifically documented successful way to promote environmental protection in China, especially in Tibetan regions. Issues such as climate change, extractive industries, infrastructure plans/construction, industrial pollution, and waste disposal all threaten land, air, water, forests, and wildlife habitats. Buddhist ethics could provide an important means to redress these impacts in China.

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“Buddhism’s approach to the concept of protection is through an act of self-discipline. We’ve often wondered which would work best: laws that are based on punishment or economic incentives that are based on financial rewards? The Buddhist system is different. It comes from the heart of the people.”

*—Conservation biologist
Dr. Lü Zhi, Peking
University*



REVIEWS

“Filmmakers Gary Marcuse and Shi Lihong capture a surprising trend in China in their new film, *Searching for Sacred Mountain*. China is beginning to draw on its religious heritage—including Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and other traditions—to address the country’s growing environmental challenges.” —KCET Los Angeles

KEY LOCATIONS AND PEOPLE

Beijing, China

Chengdu, Sichuan province, China

Baiyu, northern Sichuan province, China

Liu Jianqiang – environmental journalist

Qiamei Rinpoche – Jianqiang’s Buddhist teacher and guide

Martin Palmer – Secretary General of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation

Shi Lihong – filmmaker

Tashi Sange – Buddhist lama

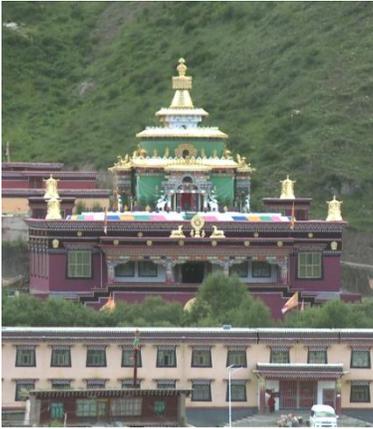
Dr. Lü Zhi – conservation biologist

FILM CHAPTERS OR SEQUENCES

The film’s **opening segment** portrays downtown Beijing, alternating between scenes of temples, traffic, and skyscrapers while chronicling the conversion of Liu Jianqiang, an investigative environmental journalist and Beijing editor of *Chinadialogue*, to Tibetan Buddhism in order to find spiritual support for his ongoing environmental protection work in China. Liu Jianqiang’s story illustrates a broader trend of increased membership at Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian temples in China; scenes of temple prayer and worship are interspersed with statistics about China’s Buddhist population, which numbers around 240 million.

Martin Palmer of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation claims that China’s environmental problems are a result of a capitalist, socialist, and consumerist-fed urban lifestyle that causes air, water, and soil pollution and that these ills disproportionately affect villages. Scenes of Palmer’s presence at faith-based ecological conferences and at meetings with the Chinese minister for the environment and minister for religion emphasize that both Chinese government officials and community leaders highlight the role of religion in responding to these environmental problems.

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“When I first visited the Tibetan region in the 1990s, I was surprised by what I found. At that time there was a lot of logging going on, but in some areas the original forest was preserved. There were huge trees, 600 and 700 years old. In some of these areas, the animals were not afraid of people. I thought this was very strange; why were these areas preserved? I asked the local people how this happened and they said, ‘Oh, this is our sacred mountain.’ But what did that mean? How could this be possible?”

*—Conservation biologist
Dr. Lü Zhi, Peking University*

The **second segment** foregrounds journalist and filmmaker Shi Lihong’s pioneering work on China’s endangered species, particularly golden monkeys. She journeys to Chengdu in eastern Sichuan province, a global hot spot for biodiversity and source of China’s major rivers, to further document Tibetan Buddhism and its ecological beliefs and practices, and as a means to understand her friend Jianqiang’s conversion. At the Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Baiyu, monks like Buddhist lama Tashi Sange, together with local residents and yak herders, work together to help care for Tibetan ecosystems connected with sacred mountains and lakes.

Scenes in the monastery and the surrounding mountains and lakes highlight the role of Tashi Sange’s art (especially painting and filmmaking) in promoting environmental protection for birds that local living Buddhas deem sacred, especially the Tibetan bunting and the Himalayan vulture. The monastery also hosts an environmental NGO that offers educational programs for local youth; scenes from these programs teach Buddhist ethics of environmental sacrality, respect, and protection in the hopes of long-term impacts on wildlife conservation.

The **third segment** highlights annual conferences between Tibetan Buddhists and Chinese scientists. Dr. Lü Zhi, a conservation biologist, is featured for the studies she carried out in the Ganzi district in western Sichuan province. Her work strongly correlates Tibetan Buddhist beliefs in sacred mountains with the nearby presence of monasteries, increased environmental protection, and biodiversity. Some local governments have since recognized sacred mountains and have hired local people to care for these nature preserves. Tibetan Buddhist devotional practices, such as prayer and meditation, are portrayed, with an emphasis on the Buddhist ethic of altruism.

The **final segment** returns to Jianqiang’s conversion, emphasizing that his environmental protection work is now informed by a balance of legal policy and religious ethics. Likewise, Chinese government leaders state their support for Chinese traditional cultures and beliefs in harmonious human-nature relations, limited consumption, and simplicity. The film concludes with images of Tibetan Buddhist temple ceilings and Tibetan mountaintops, as a possible “sacred canopy” for this new religion-government-environment movement.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Ask students to take notes relating to the following questions, which will serve as the basis for subsequent class discussion, while viewing this 20-minute film. These questions are inspired by and adapted from <http://www.pulitzercenter.org/builder/lesson/religion-and-environment-china-19129>.

1. Describe some of China's environmental challenges, especially in Tibetan areas.
2. How are China's leading environmental journalists/activists and government officials making connections between these environmental challenges and religion, particularly Buddhism?
3. What is the purpose and significance of environmental filmmaker Shi Lihong's visit to Chengdu (i.e., a global hot spot for biodiversity, the "water tower of Asia")?
4. How does the Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Baiyu promote environmental protection of the land and wildlife (e.g., birds) in the region, especially since it supports an environmental NGO? Pay attention to such aspects as Buddhist beliefs and practices and to collaboration between Buddhists and conservation biologists like Lü Zhi.
5. Explain the sacrality of mountains in Tibetan Buddhism, and summarize the environmental value and impact of such mountain ecosystems. Draw your support/evidence from Lü Zhi's study in the film and from the reading you chose in *Mapping Shangrila* (see Supplemental Material below).

SHORTENED VERSION

An abridged version of the film (about 8 minutes) aired on *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* and was featured in a panel discussion at the University of Chicago that was sponsored by the Pulitzer Center. See www.pbs.org/video/religion-and-ethics-newsweekly-china-buddhism-and-environment/ and <http://pulitzercenter.org/event/meeting-chinas-environmental-crisis-through-lens-religion>.



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ACTIVITIES

Additional lesson plans are provided by the [Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting](#), especially regarding:

- Religion and the environment in China: www.pulitzercenter.org/builder/lesson/religion-and-environment-china-19129/ This lesson plan includes activities such as conducting interviews with local religious leaders about faith-based support for local environmental sustainability, and creating art projects to raise awareness about local environmental issues.
- Similarities and differences between Pope Francis's activism and Buddhist traditions: www.pulitzercenter.org/saving-eden-pope-francis-exerts-his-moral-authority This lesson plan is easily integrated into comparative classes in religion and ecology.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

An introductory class on Buddhism and ecology would help students prepare to view the film. Illustrative readings for such an introductory class include:

Gottlieb, Roger, ed. 2006. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press (especially Part I, chapter 7 on the greening of Buddhism).

Jenkins, Willis, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, eds. 2017. *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*. New York: Routledge (especially Part II, chapter 5 on Buddhism).

Also, before students view the film, ask them to read about the rising religious environmental movements in China in general, and Tibetan Buddhist beliefs in the sacrality of mountains and their impact on green Tibetan movements in particular. Illustrative readings include:

Yale Center Beijing. 2015. *Ecological Civilization: Proceedings of the International Conference on Ecological Civilization and Environmental Reporting*. Sponsored by Communication University of China, Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, and Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. [Available online](#) in PDF format. See especially chapters 2–3 and 5.

Yeh, Emily T., and Christopher R. Coggins, eds. 2014. *Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press. See especially chapters 8–10.