

Searching for Sacred Mountain

20 minutes

Narrated by Fred de Sam Lazaro

This program includes close captions and subtitles and has an interactive transcript when viewed as part of the Global Environmental Justice Documentaries collection on Docuseek2

[00:00:06.70] In downtown Beijing on the 20th floor of a high-rise one of China's senior environmental reporters is becoming a Buddhist.

[00:00:15.43] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:22.25] [DOORBELL RINGS]

[00:00:23.22]

[00:00:27.61] Hi.

[00:00:28.09] Hi.

[00:00:29.08] Hi.

[00:00:31.34] Pleasure to meet you.

[00:00:32.82] Nice to see you.

[00:00:34.24] Likewise.

[00:00:34.42] Liu Jianqiang is an investigative journalist. His first story about the environment was an expose about illegal dam construction on the upper Yangtze River. It made national headlines. His hard hitting stories eventually got him fired. So he continued his work as the Beijing editor of China Dialogue, an online international journal.

[00:00:58.42] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:01:01.47] But after 10 years of reporting, he was feeling burned out.

[00:01:04.75]

[00:01:06.01] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:01:07.58]

[00:01:12.37] I think that our environmental activists, and those who work for public welfare, need more powerful, spiritual support. Why? Everyday what we do may be good deeds which

give us positive energy but meanwhile, what we are facing is the darkest side of the world. Everyday what we see is polluted air, polluted rivers, and the slaughter of wild animals. This kind of negative energy attacks us all the time. We've been working on environmental protection for a long time, but the situation in China is getting worse every day. Where do we draw our strength from?

[00:01:52.10] Liu Jianqiang is one of millions of Chinese who are returning to Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian temples that were once condemned by the government.

[00:02:01.79] A little more than four decades ago during China's cultural revolution, many Buddhist temples like this one in central Beijing were destroyed or defaced. Today, these temples are alive with worshippers. By some accounts, one out of every five Chinese, 240 million people, call themselves Buddhist.

[00:02:22.25] Some scholars say this search for faith is linked to China's massive environmental problems.

[00:02:31.03] In a world in which capitalism and socialism and consumerism have created a kind of industrial behemoth that is just thundering ahead. That is draining life out of the villages. That is polluting the soil and the air and the water. You have a heartless world. How on earth do you stop this juggernaut?

[00:02:54.59] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:02:59.33] Palmer has been working in China for nearly 20 years urging religious groups to respond to this crisis and to encourage conservation.

[00:03:07.82] Natural order is one of simplicity and it is also one of generosity and it is also one of knowing that you are part of something much bigger.

[00:03:19.07] In 2006, you realize this message was also being heard by the Communist Party.

[00:03:25.04] I was called in for a meeting with the minister for the environment and minister for religion. And these two Communist Party officials said, "We want the religions to help us bring compassion back, bring a sense of belonging to something bigger than just me back into our communities." It is putting a heart into a heartless world.

[00:03:47.26] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:03:48.70]

[00:03:51.22] The battle for the hearts and minds of more than a billion people can only take place one person at a time. But what is it that finally persuades an individual, like Liu Jianqiang to change; to cross the gap from atheism to belief or, in his case, to Tibetan Buddhism, one of the smaller branches of Buddhism with about five million adherents. Shi Lihong is a journalist and

filmmaker. She's known Jianqiang for more than 10 years, but she was still surprised by his decision.

[00:04:25.80] When I learned that Jianqiang was converted, I was really shocked. You know our generation, like we had been raised as atheist through childhood. We were taught that old religious belief are superstitious. So it's very hard for me to believe in any religion. I feel there is a huge gap. I want to know what has made him to cross that gap. So I want to kind of do a story about them.

[00:05:09.19] In order to find out what inspired her friends to become Tibetan Buddhists, Shi Lihong took a film crew and set out from Chengdu into the western mountains that were once part of an ancient Tibetan Empire.

[00:05:21.92]

[00:05:29.43] She and her husband, Xi Zhihong, are famous in China for their pioneering environmental films and photos. They made their first film about golden monkeys 15 years ago. That film helped raise awareness about endangered species in China. According to Conservation International, this whole region is one of 35 global hot spots for biodiversity.

[00:06:02.35] In the past this journey was much more difficult. Now it only takes a single day. Roads and railways are penetrating the Tibetan areas, connecting them more closely to the rest of China, bringing development and lots of tourists. Visitors from the big cities can still find clean water, fresh air, and green mountains. Prayer flags mark mountains and lakes that are considered sacred to Tibetan Buddhist. According to tradition, the monks and the local people have been taking care of these sacred sites for centuries.

[00:06:51.83] Much of the plateau is still pristine. This entire region is known as the Water Tower of Asia because it's the headwaters of the Yangtze, the Mekong, and the Yellow Rivers. So what happens here also affects millions of people downstream. Shi Lihong's destination is a small town clustered around a monastery at Baiyu. She's come to visit a monk named Tashi Sange who lives near the monastery. He's the kind of monk that Jianqiang wrote about when he spent a year with the Tibetans.

[00:07:27.50] [KNOCKING]

[00:07:29.93] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:07:31.30] The sign at the gate says this is an NGO, an environmental group that protects the land and the wildlife around Baiyu. The membership includes yak herders and monks.

[00:07:42.32] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:07:51.94] Tashi Sange is also an artist, a painter.

[00:07:55.01] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:08:02.54] The local people call him the monk who loves birds.

[00:08:05.98] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:08:11.16] Recently, he used one of the paintings to protect the Tibetan bunting, a very rare bird.

[00:08:16.76]

[00:08:19.28] This is the sacred bird of [INAUDIBLE].

[00:08:22.46] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:08:26.83] And these are the signature of living Buddhas. We have blessings from 22 living Buddhas from all temples around here. Here there are, signing their names. We give out 3,000 copies. People respect the living Buddhas so they put this up on the wall as a sign of respect.

[00:08:50.81] The Tibetan bunting is now protected by the local people's feelings that it is sacred. And its numbers are growing.

[00:08:58.61] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:09:01.07] Tashi is also making a documentary to tell the story about the Himalayan vulture. In recent years, many vultures have been starving. So Tashi went up the mountain to find out how many vultures have survived this year, and to see how many are laying eggs, and to bring a bit of food for the new chicks.

[00:09:21.25] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:09:43.80] The other monks say he must have had wings in an earlier life. His work combines old traditions and new technology in a way that presents nature and vultures in a new light.

[00:09:59.48]

[00:10:18.59] They are beautiful indeed. Before we can only see the animal from far away. We couldn't see their details. Now we can enlarge the image and see such beauty. And they are precious. We Tibetan already respect living things, now we can respect them even more.

[00:10:42.89] [CHILDREN LAUGHING]

[00:10:54.98] Our future belongs to the children. The environment belongs to them. So it is very important to put things into their heart and mind.

[00:11:03.95]

[00:11:08.32] [CHILDREN SHOUTING]

[00:11:19.99] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:11:34.19] When I was little, our family tent was over there. My sister and I played here. We took care of small yak over there. We were all yak herders. My grandmother taught me that I shouldn't wash my hands in the lake. Don't ever pee here. We would ask why. She said there was a dragon God in there. We would ask, what does the dragon God look like? And she said, "No, no. Don't say it. You will know when you grow up." Mama and papa told me in secret that this is a sacred lake. But they said don't ever talk about this openly. The Communist Party thinks God is not exist. Anyone who talks about superstitions would be beaten. But I always wanted to see the dragon God and I wondered will it come out one day.

[00:12:38.94] [TRADITIONAL SINGING]

[00:12:40.55]

[00:13:03.67] [BLOWING CONCH SHELL]

[00:13:05.12]

[00:13:10.47] Today this lake is the scene of annual gatherings of Buddhist monks. It's also the site of a special meeting between Buddhists and scientists.

[00:13:25.74] Dr. Lu Zhi is a conservation biologist at Peking University. She's been working with Tibetans in this area for many years.

[00:13:33.26]

[00:13:36.55] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:13:40.56] During the 1990s when I went to the Tibetan area for the first time, I saw something that really surprised me. There was a lot of logging going on, but in some areas, the wild animals were not afraid of people. And there were very old trees, six were 700 years old. The ancient forest was preserved. I asked the local people, "How is this possible." People said, "This is our sacred mountain." This was a big shock to me. Just the concept of sacred mountain was good enough to preserve the resources. It's more powerful than the law or the preaching of scientists.

[00:14:26.11] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:14:27.45]

[00:14:28.91] Today, the system is still functioning. In the core area nothing should be touched. Then in a broader area, killing is not allowed. No living beings should be harmed. We did a survey on birds. And we discovered that wherever the belief in sacred mountains is strong, there is greater biodiversity. So this shows, scientifically, the environmental value of sacred mountains.

[00:15:02.55] Then, for two years, Dr. Liu and her students used GPS to map the sacred mountains in the Ganzi District of western Sichuan province. They found an average of three sacred mountains near each monastery in the district. In the United States, the protected area would be about the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined. Nearly 1/3 of the land is in sacred areas.

[00:15:29.46] Who will protect the environment. In the West and in China, it is government responsibilities. But the Tibetans don't think that way. If you think that way, you are not Buddhist.

[00:15:45.65] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:15:46.88] You are the protector. No matter if you are a newborn or 80 years old, you are our protector. You have responsibilities. All life should be protected.

[00:16:01.57] [GONG]

[00:16:02.05] In some districts, local governments are recognizing the sacred mountains. And some are even hiring Tibetans to take care of the national nature reserves.

[00:16:14.34] The culture values of Buddhism are very comforting to the scholars of conservation. I felt at last we found a way. And I began to gain confidence in humanity.

[00:16:24.24] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:16:25.72]

[00:16:27.59] These Tibetan people are not wealthy yet they can still think of other creatures, not just other people, other creatures. This is altruistic behavior. If they can do it, there is hope that other people can do it as well.

[00:16:44.38] [CHATTER]

[00:16:53.57] Liu Jianqiang is one of millions of Chinese who are taking a fresh look at traditional culture. You're under the guidance of [INAUDIBLE] Tibetan Buddhism has changed the way he sees the world.

[00:17:08.85] Before, I only wrote from a legal point of view. It's wrong or this is a national park and how can you destroy it. Now when I write a story about fish that were killed by a dam, what I have in mind is there are millions of lives here. I strongly believe that I should write about it this way. I'm sure I should speak on their behalf. I shouldn't just think of what is good for us, what's good for humans. I can clearly see my change.

[00:17:40.77] [BUDDHIST CHANT]

[00:17:47.15] Observing this new interest in religion and conservation, China's Communist Party is now cautiously supporting it.

[00:17:54.40] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:17:57.05] Former State Councilor, [? Mr. Dai-Bing Guo, ?] spoke at the Annual Forum on Ecological Civilization and Buddhist culture.

[00:18:05.93] Traditional culture promotes harmony between man and nature, and encourages limited consumption and a simple way of life. We support this. We don't oppose taking from nature. We do oppose over exploitation. We want Gold Mountain but we also want clear water and green mountain.

[00:18:23.27] I think one of the things that I've seen over the last few years, and increasingly so, is a sense that if there is going to be some kind of Chinese solution to these issues, it is going to come out of Chinese traditional culture. So my sense is that this partnership between religion and the government around environment is only going to get stronger and stronger.

[00:18:49.98] There's hope these handshakes signal real support for ancient traditions of respect for nature in a society that has paid a heavy environmental price for progress in recent decades.

[00:19:01.34] [FLUTES]

[00:19:06.18] [TRIBAL DRUMS]