Ladakh, INDIA

チベット文化「最後の秘境」を守る人びと

By Chieh Hwa
Photographer

In northeastern India lies the mountainous province of Ladakh. A sparsely populated, high-altitude desert, it is often called the “last Shangri-la” on account of its authentic Tibetan culture. Grand monasteries dot the barren landscapes. In the capital of Leh, narrow passageways snake through the Old Town. Here an old man spins a prayer wheel and a woman sits at a loom on the flat rooftop of her home. It’s 1968, but nothing has changed.

Once a thriving trading center, Ladakh was visited by people as far afield as Afghanistan. The impressive 17th-century Leh Palace attests to the wealth and importance of its former ruler.

These days Ladakh’s main trade routes are barren and numerous huts and lodges have sprung up in Leh, with names such as “Hotel Shangri-la” and, inevitably, “Hotel Shangri-lai.” Ladakh is also one of India’s most heavily militarized areas, having borders with Pakistan to the west and China to the north. The pressure of modernization means that much of Ladakh’s traditional architecture is under threat.

With the rapid degradation of Tibetan culture, the preservation of Ladakh’s traditional buildings has become something of an international mission. A number of organizations are involved in the effort, including the Tibetan Association, the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), the Archaeological Survey of India, and Tibet Heritage Fund (THF), a non-profit organization based in Hong Kong and Germany.

Yushu Hirako leads THF’s Indian project.

“Due to territorial disputes with China, India closed the border in the 1960s, and many of the former trading facilities, no longer border to Leh, moved out of the Old Town. Nowadays, the occupancy rate for Old Town buildings is about 90 percent. Hirako said. Many buildings have fallen to disrepair. Meanwhile, the local government’s “Leh Beautification” project has already turned the city into a tree-lined market street into a construction site. The government’s next proposal of a “ Slam development scheme” which would mean half of the Old Town will be rebuilt.

How this scheme will be implemented is understandably a concern for Hirako, who fears many of the original structures — which are hundreds, if not thousands, of years old — will be replaced with concrete ones. Consent is not simply the material of choice for developers however; often the building’s occupants prefer it. “People think cement is more aesthetic and therefore better,” said Hirako, a Ladakhi who oversees INTACH’s local conservation projects. “We tell them that’s not true. Mud is warmer.”

But what point should an old’s historic value take precedence over the benefits of modernisation? Hirako said there is no easy answer. Working alongside other organisations, THF hosts symposiums promoting the benefits of heritage conservation tourism being the obvious one. Yet a lack of transparency can be a barrier for Hirako and his fellow conservationists as the government have made little effort to consult with them. Hirako said he is working on future projects in the Old Town and that he is waiting for the next symposium on the city’s own development plans. Hirako’s third mission in Ladakh is to come to an end. He hopes to put up the houses and roads on the site of the museum buildings before returning to Hong Kong — where he lives — for the winter. While he enjoys the mountains and working with his team, he is looking forward to getting back.

“life is hard,” he said, “but we are happy in the spring, when the quest to save Ladakh’s heritage continues.”