

INTRODUCTION

Benedict Copps

Once again, I'm nodding my head, and playing along, while silently disagreeing. Not much for confrontation, I'm smiling while Kevin tamps his corn cob pipe, preparing to hedge my agreement. This is, however, an uncomfortably familiar impasse, and he seems a little too comfortable for my liking as he chomps down on the stem of his pipe, strokes his beard, and then begins twiddling his thumbs. We have been here before, and it's never ended with me hanging on to my assumptions, has always ended with me learning, usually unwillingly, something new. Nothing with Kevin was ever simple. It was possible to get Kevin wrong. A lot of people did.

The first time I walked into Kevin Stuart's apartment, there was a wild party going on. It might have been easy to dismiss Kevin after that night of friendly chaos, had it not been for the cogent clarity of thought with which he had commented on his surroundings, and the encyclopedic knowledge with which he had answered all the Tibet-related questions I had brought with me. There was something more to this character than met the eye.

By the end of that first meeting I had begun to learn more about local drinking culture than I would have ever suspected there would be to learn. First, there was that business with the three cups at the door. Then there was the generous style of hosting that infused the entire event. I was surrounded by genuinely warm people: Monguor, Tibetan, and a young man who identified as Mongolian, but who spoke Tibetan. I couldn't have articulated what was so different about that party, but I felt like the most important person in the world for those few hours. This was no cocktail party. At one point, we took turns singing. Singing! And hooting and clapping for each other in humorous and vociferous appreciation! There was something more to this than my first dismissive assessment of it as quaint. There seemed, for instance, to be a great deal of meaningful gesturing going on by the singers – one hand set to an ear, the other slowly sweeping through space during a long held note... a well-practiced way of offering drinks during breaks in

the song. Something was... outside of my expectations and frames of reference. And whatever it was, it was local. I seemed to have stumbled into an authentic gathering of local people in a foreign man's apartment. Yet it was more than that too, because the young Tibetan I sat next to had published an English-Tibetan dictionary and spoke perfect English. And another, also with perfect English, was on holiday from his MA program in the US, where his dissertation was on 'Why NGO Projects Fail'. The intelligence quotient in the room was through the roof. And everyone there referred to Kevin as 'Teacher'.

The next morning, I received a horribly early phone call from Kevin, inviting me to visit his friend's village. Brutally hung-over though I was, I eagerly agreed. The friend, it turned out, was an elder gentleman who had been at the party the night before, and we now greeted each other with the warm familiarity that only comes to new acquaintances after a night of real celebration.

To my horror, I learned in the car that my role that day would be to play the part of a foreign donor in a village where a development project had been completed. The real donor had not been able to make the trip to see first-hand that running water now reached each home in the village and that each home now had a solar cooker in the courtyard. The donor would not personally receive the gratitude of local women who had always spent about four hours per day carrying water, and countless hours contributing to the area's desertification by pulling up grass roots to burn in their cook-fires. Kevin had facilitated the project, helping his friends write the English language proposal, so he had a legitimate place in the celebration. I had no place at all, but there I was. I wanted to get out of the car and walk back to Xining, but we had already covered so much ground that on foot it would have been beyond heroic to even attempt it. And anyway, I was hung over.

As our vehicles sped their way infinitesimally across what looked to me like the face of the moon, Kevin explained to me that it was actually good that the real donor wasn't visiting, but that the villagers still needed someone to thank. Local people, Kevin said, felt the need to display their gratitude, to fete their donors lavishly, even in the midst of extreme poverty. Then he told me a story about

an NGO that had visited a village site dozens of times in the name of 'relationship building' and repeatedly hosted by the local people at considerable expense before mysteriously pulling out, never to be heard of again. Kevin was not hiding his values. He was teaching them. Local lives were both fragile and important. I was along to help manage a delicate balance of dignity and poverty.

In the car that day, I listened. I heard story after story of misspent funds and good intentions that brought only disappointment. Of landrovers gliding through villages without running water. Of dogs being fed on IV drips while sick people were turned away. I heard about NGO workers so overwhelmed by the 'stench' of rural life they couldn't bring themselves to sleep in the village they were supposed to be 'developing'. I heard about shoddy school buildings that collapsed within weeks of their unveiling. I heard stories of poverty alleviation experts who earn 200,000 US dollars a year, and about hugely expensive personal toilets built to western standards in adobe-walled villages, and then locked to keep out the locals who received, in the end, little benefit from the foreign presence.

Although Kevin told those stories in a deadpan voice, the details he selected articulated a sense of moral outrage at the underlying cosmopolitan mindset that always managed to preserve its own presuppositions and, in doing so, maintained its own superiority. Story after story featured international visitors circularly rationalizing the pointlessness of listening to local people and the impossibility of learning anything new. A refugee of this mindset myself, I listened quietly without comment, not wanting to let him know that I had stumbled into the wrong car and had no right to any of this.

At that point, I may not have known enough to fully believe everything I was hearing. Further impeding my understanding of these stories was the fact that Kevin's old friend was getting very excited as he returned to his native place, so I was hearing these absurd and tragic stories between bouts of song and spontaneous car jostling. What's more, our car was no SUV, and the road hardly existed in more than theory, so we were bouncing and fishtailing. When we stopped to urinate, I listened to the intense quiet and

distant sounds of the wind as my eyes adjusted to the sheer size of the sparse geographic features and the vast distances between them. Kevin was at home here, as was his friend of course, but I was humbled in the face of something entirely unexpected, a feeling that has seemed to follow Kevin around for all the years that I have known him.

As we arrived, guns were fired in the air and windhorses thrown to the wind. The entire village had come out to greet us in their finest and most colorful clothing. A wind swept over us, threatening to lift the village children, yet seeming to have little oxygen in it. After being draped with white scarves, given three shots of local moonshine, and having made three circles around the village stupa, we were brought to see the solar cookers, the well and the pipes that now brought water to the homes. The older women cried as they thanked us and shoved forward their shy granddaughters, who they said were now freed from their most burdensome domestic task, and would thus be able to attend school. I shrank inside from actually receiving their misplaced gratitude, but tried to play the role by giving them someone to thank. I could see Kevin's rural upbringing in the courtesy with which he greeted the elder women, and I saw his large frame and long beard through their eyes: Everything about Kevin that made no sense in the city suddenly snapped into place. The meaning of his life was here. He could not fit in less, and yet the eyes of these old women brimmed and glistened with a gratitude and protective tenderness that could only be described as familial. I thought back over the past twenty-four hours and all the points where I had attempted to rely on a shared worldview in my utterances to Kevin, but had been rebuffed or misunderstood – here I was, standing in Kevin's worldview. These old women had him pegged. And he had their backs.

Then we were settled in for a feast. The village had literally killed the fatted calf. As we received hospitality of a warmth far surpassing anything I had ever experienced in any of the dozens of cities I had called home in my lifetime, we progressively abandoned our own hesitations regarding the local moonshine that was being repeatedly offered by our hosts with song and ceremonial scarves. As my consciousness gradually widened, dimmed, and softened, the

dancing and singing made perfect sense and I joined in, spending my turn when it came around by belting out Vagabond by Little Feat. Then the young girls of the village came out to take their turn, putting the sweet singing of the angels in my song to shame. After Kevin rocked us with "I know a girl from New Orleans," I started to wonder if his consciousness hadn't widened too far, but then he turned and said, with sober coherence, that it was time for us to leave. I looked around and saw that he was right – the villagers were entertained, and had seen with their own eyes that their hospitality had been well received and their debt paid, and thus our role was played, our time up. Kevin had been right after all.

But that was the problem with Kevin – he was always right about something. Here is a short list of some of the things he has been right about: Tibetans aren't the only people who live on the Tibetan Plateau. Tibetan villages sometimes have wars with each other. Muslims and Tibetans have cooperated to fight neighboring villages. Most Tibetans don't ride horses. Some of them sing dirty songs. You can't teach hygiene to people with no water. There's no reason to print flyers for people who can't read. You can't learn English by speaking in another language. Without education, development work creates beggars. And at times, Kevin even makes Socratic use of local knowledge structures: Dragons live inside tornadoes, and under the earth. Cigarettes cure toothaches. Prayers for school success are as important as studying.

And – the goat is a god.

Even when I was sure Kevin was wrong about something, it generally turned out to be a horizon of meaning he was intentionally shading from view, to focus on the path under his feet. A conscious choice. Kevin is determined to let local people speak, and to do so he must suspend non-local modes of perception and listen while people make their own sense out of things, setting aside his own voice to let local systems of meaning speak on their own terms. As a scholar, as a teacher, and as a human being, Kevin listens. Patiently. And he expects you to do the same.

Later, I'll tell you about the goat and you'll see what I mean.

Back in the present, we are sitting in Kevin's apartment, a bustling center of activity. He is twiddling his thumbs, chomping his

corncob pipe, waiting for me to raise my objections. He has put on his wide-brimmed black felt hat, looking like he's walked off the set of a pioneer movie. He has two apartments actually, across the hall from each other, one for him, the other for his live-in students. We have been colleagues now for half a dozen years or more, the two long-term teachers in the Xining English Training Program (ETP). I am by far the junior partner in this endeavor, the entire enterprise being predicated on Kevin's twenty years in China and the intensely close relationships that have accrued, the loyalty and camaraderie that have grown based on his ability to see things through local eyes.

Yet junior or not, I am part of something. Something important. Our students are the first large group of Tibetans to be educated in Tibetan, English, and Chinese. They are an exceptionally bright bunch of students selected from all over the Tibetan Plateau, an area bigger than Western Europe. As part of their English training, our students write proposals for foreign funds, implementing projects and writing final reports, nearly single-handedly bringing benefit to their home villages. But our students are not the only brilliant stars in this equation. All of this replicates and depends upon Kevin's first generation of students who have grown up, become professors, become senior in their departments and are, like their teacher, focused on local lives, on the people who have no power to bring outside benefits to themselves.

Infectiously genuine and electrified with the desire to use their positions to good ends, our local partners are the key to everything that is happening, and bear the brunt of the price that must be paid to keep it all going. The group that is gathered around Kevin is poised on the edge of collapse at all times, working under a more or less constant yet dire threat of closure, always eking out one more semester, surviving creatively in whatever ways they can.

Yet there is no overt ideology motivating what goes on here, unless it is a meta-critique of ideologies. Certainly Kevin has read his Marx and keeps a firm analytical eye on who benefits. Clearly, he has read his Foucault, and he carefully tracks whose discourse has currency and cachet. Yet I believe he never met an ideology he didn't critique mercilessly. Kevin has, instead, chosen a focus that excludes

theory-wrangling and ideological accounting, using only enough theory to maintain his awareness of the irrelevance of urbane politics or abstruse concepts to the actual lived lives of rural people. To express this choice and the value he places on rural life, Kevin likes to play the yokel – hence the corncob pipe. But the lighthearted self-presentation is deceptive. He may not take himself too seriously, but his role is anything but trivial, and a well-considered critical stance informs everything Kevin does. Kevin once gave a speech during a monitoring visit to a village project that was exactly one sentence long – "You did a great job!" Such brevity was a kindness to local people standing in the sun, but also a commentary on the lengthy blathering that often accompanies such events. Kevin's modes of operation are sometimes cryptic, but never senseless.

The famous parties that took place at Kevin's house are an example of this. Though he clearly enjoyed those parties, they were also a critique of how the most intimate and significant aspects of a culture are so often missed by academics, and excluded from the stories we want to tell about our 'research subjects'. For Kevin, hosting local people and foreign Tibetological scholars in the same room brings out a bubble he enjoys bursting – Tibetans drink! Women drink! Old farmers know things, *even if they drink!* The cultural structures of drinking, singing, and joke-telling contain local knowledge, values, and insights that generally go unnoticed by people who have grown up with electric entertainments and forgotten how to creatively pass time in the company of others. Kevin's irreverence for academia expresses his awareness of how little salience its theories will ever have to rural life. In his little apartment, set at a juncture where powerful agendas – Western, Tibetan, and Chinese – intersect, Kevin eschews lofty analytical frames and keeps his focus squarely on the local, and its irreducibly multiple worlds.

Silence. Kevin may be comfortable in uncomfortable silences, but I am not. Still not sure how to voice my disagreement, I pour us each a shot of *baijiu*. A student comes in and sits next to me, taking my hand and addressing Kevin. He is very young, with little experience. Xining is the only city he's ever been to. Although he

came here to attend the ETP, he is now leaving without graduating to attend university abroad. Kevin identified him as a talent to be cultivated shortly after his arrival, gave him extra lessons, asked me to help him complete his application, and in a few weeks, he will be a student at Duke University. Understandably, he has a few doubts and concerns.

Sitting next to me, he grips my arm and peppers Kevin with questions about his possible majors. Kevin avoids answering his actual questions, but cuts through to the identity crisis at the core of his questions. Taking advantage of a gap in the dialogue, I speak up to address the question, clarifying the way US universities work, explaining that he will not need to choose a major right away. Kevin brings us back to what he sees as the matter at hand, with a discourse the student will remember for years, the general message of which is, "It is not important who you are, it is important what you do." At first, I think Kevin is missing the point, but then I see insight in the student's eyes and I see him relax and nod. The paradox of happiness is not lost on this man playing the rube; to be happy, we must turn from our own happiness and work for others. It's a simple fact and he keeps his grasp on it firm.

Kevin is not preoccupied with the nuances from which most academics make their living. He just wants to do something useful with his life. All his scholarship has been an attempt to save something worth saving, not an attempt to explain or interpret that value. He would rather ask local people what they see and think, and record their words. He would rather document as completely as possible with a 'show-not-tell' – nearly journalistic – attitude, exactly what happened and what the specific people involved said it meant. This is thick description and this is ethnography, but Kevin does not use either term, in the hope of sidestepping theoretical discussions that might distract him from getting on with his next project.

When I tune back in, Kevin is saying, "I can go to America and get a job. I will be grabbing iced beer from a big refrigerator and sitting under a tree on my lawn in front of my house on a summer afternoon. It will be fun for a few days. Then what? There is no meaning in that. Here, I don't have many material comforts, but my

life is meaningful. I can help some people. I don't have to wonder if it's meaningful or not when 50 households get water directly to their homes and don't have to carry water for four hours a day any more. It's not meaningful because I said it's meaningful. It just *is* meaningful. You will find a way to have a meaningful life. Just go and study what seems interesting to you at the time. Let's talk about it when the time comes. Just get the degree and come back. With that degree, you will be of use here. No one will ask what you studied. We muddle through life but then, if we are lucky, are able to be part of something that has great meaning." The student is nodding, much more relaxed now. Kevin is chuckling, and here endeth the lesson. If there are any contradictions in what he has said, he does not care to iron them out.

Kevin was born in California where his father worked as a logger, before leaving to work overseas. Moving back home with his mother to Pushmataha County Oklahoma, Kevin's childhood was spent in a sparsely populated area with a significant amount of rural poverty (7 people per square mile, 60% below the poverty line)¹ and a significant minority of Choctaw people.² While Kevin's own family were not considered impoverished in local terms, Kevin has nevertheless shown a strong appreciation throughout his career for the problems of rural isolation and poverty that must in some way have been prefigured in his youth.

Kevin's personal reflections on his childhood tend to settle on the eight-grade schoolhouse in Albion and on the library in Talihina where he roamed the stacks, in spite of its distance from his home. He is also fond of remembering the encouragement he received from his highly literate mother and grandmother and the support of excellent teachers he encountered both in Albion and in Talihina, where he attended high school. Not given to nostalgia and always willing to burst a bubble, Kevin also seems to enjoy relating surprising anecdotes and entertaining stories about the chiggers,

¹ <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>.

² Ethnic groups in the region also include the descendants of the Choctaw Freedmen who arrived with the Choctaw when they were displaced to the region by federal mandate a century earlier <http://www.african-nativeamerican.com/8-chocfreed.htm>.

ticks, and high humidity that made most seasons in southeast Oklahoma less than bucolic.

Life in Pushmataha County must have felt quite isolated from the ideological battles of the Cold War era in which he lived. There must have been a rural dismissiveness toward politics and urban cultural movements that would help explain Kevin Stuart. But Kevin is, finally, unprecedented. Searching for an explanation is useless. I think I learned that from Kevin, so it seems appropriate to apply it to his youth.

What we do know is that Kevin grew up in world where local lives were being reshaped by forces outside the community. Agricultural research was turning out better pesticides and better agricultural machinery that was steadily turning the economy against family farmers. In this setting, Kevin grabbed the reins by turning to agricultural science, earning a BS degree in Forest Management at Oklahoma State University and an MS in Forest Ecology at the University of Missouri.

In 1979, Kevin began a PhD in Soil Science at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, but after a year of exposure to a wide range of ideas at the East-West Center, a brief correspondence and interview with Michel Foucault, and with wise counseling from advisors Donald Worster and David Bertelson, the interest in local cultural knowledge that would guide Kevin's career had come to the fore, and he switched to the American Studies department.

It is a matter of interpretation now to speculate whether Kevin's aversion to excessive theoretical debate and his commitment to staying close to the source material may have complicated his relationship to academia, but in 1984 he suddenly migrated to Asia at the suggestion of a Chinese friend. In Inner Mongolia, Kevin taught for three years, getting his first taste of empowering local people with the international resource of English language skills. Kindly, his academic advisor, Professor David Bertelson, corresponded regularly to give guidance that was essential to Kevin's eventual completion of his dissertation, later published as *Mongols in Western/American Consciousness*.

This work is both informative on its topic and revealing of its author. In an era when Foucault and Said were two of the most

celebrated and influential theorists in the academy, Kevin sat down to deconstruct the ways in which Westerners have represented Mongols, without mentioning either of these scholars, almost certainly on purpose, despite their obvious relevance to his project. "Barbarians, racial degenerates, mental defectives, generally repulsive physical attributes, ghastly history, grassland wanderers"³ – this first, fragmentary sentence prepares the reader for what is to follow: a litany of carefully compiled, egregiously derogatory tropes that have persisted across centuries, resurfacing with eerie consistency in the mouths of multiple authors, across various genres and discourses. The stability and repetitiveness of these absurd and heartbreaking stereotypes speaks for itself. Who needs Foucault or Said to make sense of this blatant pattern? Published over ten years after Kevin arrived in China, but built on understandings he had certainly begun to develop in Inner Mongolia, *Mongols in Western/American Consciousness* can be read as Kevin's reminder to himself, and warning to everyone else, on the vulnerability of local people when they are treated merely as a topic of discourse, rather than as active participants in their own narratives. A close reading of this book might help us understand, to some extent, why Kevin has chosen to continue engaging in conversation *with* local people, and empowering them to speak about themselves, rather than retreating to the ivory tower to talk *about* them.

Kevin first came to China in a time of transition. A new constitution had been minted and a tumultuous era of ideological struggles set aside by Deng's black-or-white cat. Foreigners were allowed in, but many areas were still closed, especially minority areas. Kevin would have been immediately under scrutiny, of course, but those charged with the task may not have been entirely sure of their marching orders in a time of loosening controls. The excesses of the previous decades must have been on everyone's minds, but on few lips. Local people knew what they knew, but the stories being told were the stories that needed to be told, 'real' only in the sense of serving a real purpose. Surely it was an era to tune out canned narratives and tune into local voices, and a time to get

³ Stuart (1997:1).

on with improving lives to the exclusion of political agendas.

Never one to sit on his hands, Kevin traveled widely in the autonomous region and worked with Mongolian friends to record a television and radio program teaching English in Mongolian, the first such program to teach English in a minority language in China, which was still being broadcast in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Kevin then went to Qinghai Province where he taught at several colleges and recorded two TV programs – *English in Tibetan* and *English in Mongghul*. Later, Kevin returned to Ulaanbaatar as a United Nations Volunteer (UNV) and worked as an English teacher for the better part of a year, finally returning to Qinghai where he continued to work as a UNV English teacher for several more years.

It was during this period that Kevin began to collaborate with local partners on writing projects. Over the next couple of years, Kevin produced over a dozen articles on topics ranging from traditional medicines, foods and household materials, to traditional gatherings, rituals and folk entomology, with partners from both Inner and Outer Mongolia, as well as Qinghai. Kevin's work as an independent scholar had begun.

Kevin's prolific career as an on-site independent scholar has spanned an era when Tibetanist scholars in the West first established their tenuous grasp on Tibetan textual scholarship, and then exceeded that grasp by branching out into cultural studies, portraying Tibetan life in ways that have meaning mainly as currency in academic departments thousands of kilometers away from any actual Tibetan village. Over the course of his career, Kevin has steadily worked to simply, directly, and lucidly document and record local lives, voices, and meanings for posterity. In recent years, he has worked together with a team of local and international collaborators to create the journal *Asian Highlands Perspectives* – a forum for others who share Kevin's commitment to rich documentation of local worlds.

Kevin's scholarly production never slowed down his career as an educator. In the same years that he produced his nearly 200 articles and monographs, he has worked full time in the classroom, striving unremittingly to perfect his classroom practice. His now well-known teaching style has always emphasized local texts,

student-centered learning, and authentic practical application. Practical application, for Kevin, has been expressed mainly in student-written proposals targeting international funding agencies, seeking funds for community development projects in students' home areas. But Kevin has also supported many of his students to publish, and their output is impressive: autobiographies, regionally contextualized language teaching materials, multilingual dictionaries, cultural preservation projects documenting endangered traditions... the list goes on (just see his bibliography, following the introduction). English teaching for Kevin Stuart has never been of merely academic interest.

The contrast with English teaching in the region could not be more dramatic. Minority areas often had no English teachers when Kevin was starting his teaching career. To this day, language textbooks, even in major universities, feature irrelevant content which adheres to east-coast Chinese norms and in many cases exceeds those norms with a noticeably heavy-handed agenda that is already out of date in coastal areas. These materials are used in non-student-centered, exam-driven teaching that leads to few meaningful learning outcomes. In a typical textbook, the great leader bends down to help a child in the field, a princess looks back tearfully from Sun-Moon Pass, and shiny military hardware is paraded through the streets of the capital, where all young boys daydream of patriotic service. At the front of an English class, the typical teacher lectures in Chinese, and when he pauses once or twice to mispronounce 'a, an, the' or some other set of function words, this may be the only English spoken in the entire 90-minute period. Outside the classroom, university students with thirteen or fourteen years of English under their belt are unable to communicate with foreigners they meet, communicating instead in the foreigners' three month's worth of Chinese. In this setting, it was not unusual for Kevin's students to be accused of showing off when seen reading full-length English novels, as this represented a level of English proficiency unimaginable in the regional context.

Clearly, part of the context for Kevin's devotion to teaching is the sense that without education, community development projects amount to little more than handouts. But, more than this, I also

believe the energy Kevin has brought to his teaching is simply a human response, the natural result of seeing both a problem and the means to improve it. Kevin listened and kept his eyes open and asked people, and the problems became plain: teachers with little or no training or knowledge of their subject area, poor school management, and a scarcity of textbooks, school supplies, and other teaching equipment.⁴ In 2005, fewer than 43% of Tibetans in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) had a primary school education and the literacy rate was only 55.16 percent. In Qinghai Province, the literacy rate was 75.93% in 2005, but lower among Tibetans than in the population as a whole.⁵ Early on in his teaching career, Kevin listened when friends and students explained the situation, and the result has been a decades-long daily effort to gather international funding for educational projects.

In the early 1990s, when Kevin began teaching in Qinghai, there were, to the best of anyone's knowledge, about five Tibetans in China who were trilingual in Chinese, English, and Tibetan. In the early days, he was unable to help on any large scale, but did his best by simply opening his home to Tibetan and Monguor students who sought him out. His home became a center of learning not available elsewhere to minority students. His early scholarship and community development efforts occurred there, and his students from those days became lifelong supporters in all that followed. It was during this period that Kevin co-wrote the proposal for the Xining English Training Program (ETP) that would bring minority students from all over the Plateau to Qinghai Normal University to study English with foreign English teachers, a program which turned out more than five hundred fully trilingual students during Kevin's twelve years with the program. The majority of Kevin's students from this period went back to their home villages to become teachers, including the many who had been abroad to get degrees from international universities.

The simple fact of Kevin's presence in Qinghai opened many doors for many people. NGOs seeking to open offices in Western China inevitably noticed one or another of his growing list of

⁴ Stuart (2004).

⁵ National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), cited in Wang (2007).

publications as they began to research the area. Frequently, Kevin found himself opening the door of his little apartment to people representing organizations and seeking informed counsel about the region. When they staffed their offices, Kevin was often in a position to point out the unique skills of his students. In these ways, Kevin played an instrumental role in the unusual number of local people hired by NGO offices in the area and helped lay the groundwork for the development of a high number of grassroots NGOs in the province.

Thus, the impact of Kevin Stuart's life and work is not fully visible only through the numbers of publications and projects in his own name, but must include an evaluation of the extensive good works of his students and friends. In a real sense, Kevin is the butterfly, calmly churning up a hurricane. His first generations of students created the English Training Program, which increased his reach tenfold. Students he taught how to do projects established their own NGOs or staffed foreign NGOs and brought benefits to thousands. The students he sent abroad returned to become teachers, displacing non-local teachers and teachers with little knowledge of their subject matter. Others of Kevin's students have started their own businesses, cutting out predatory non-local middlemen. Kevin's scholarship has informed many scholars and this volume is filled with essays by just a few of these. For many years, Kevin's humble apartment has been an intersection of multiple worlds and the site of many meetings, including one international conference, but, more significantly, also facilitating contact between disparate groups on a weekly informal basis for decades. When I first bumped in to meet Kevin and found myself crashing his party, there was indeed more to it than met the eye.

But what meets the eye is never immediately meaningful unless one takes the time to surpass assumptions by asking obvious questions and listening carefully to the answers. In the winter of 1985, Kevin decided that he wanted to spend some time with Mongolians and learn more about their lives. He decided to do a survey as an interested independent scholar to better understand how local people lived. With a Mongolian colleague from Inner Mongolia University, he developed a questionnaire that asked,

among other things, about family livestock. As he sat in a yurt and drank mare's milk, he progressed through his questions, asking about each animal in turn and the uses to which the family put them. Finally, when the family seemed to think they had told him about all their animals, he looked over at the goat that was standing menacingly in a corner of the yard. "What about the goat?" he asked, thinking perhaps they milked it or would slaughter it. What use do you have for it? None, they replied. It is a god.

Sitting across from Kevin as he chomps on his corn cob pipe, I have been trying to rephrase this story he has told me to say 'they thought' it was a god or that it was a god 'to them'. Kevin has been gently declining these evasions. In that moment, early in his career, he understood something that he has practiced assiduously ever since, something that defines him as a scholar and a person and that he is unwilling to relinquish now, just to make me more comfortable. He is trying, in fact, to communicate something to me that he sees as being of the utmost value: *One must ask, and then listen in a way that allows for real, often amazing, answers.* In that moment in the yurt, Kevin completed a path he had been on for years, learning to center the local.

Once again, I find myself giving in. Which is to say that once again I see how I have been insisting on a foreign frame of reference and refusing to recognize the very real difference between my outlook and that of local people.

"OK," I say. "You're right. That goat was a god."

•••

The essays in this book are good examples of the kind of influence that Dr. Charles Kevin Stuart has had on people's lives both international and local.

Skal bzang Nor bu's essay introduces us to the tradition of *la gzhas*, a unique musical tradition from Amdo, performed by Tibetans, Salar, Mangghuer, and others in the region, but not shared by Tibetans of U-Tsang or Kham, thus highlighting the importance of locality as a dimension of cultural diversity above and beyond ethnic categories. In his contribution, Skal bzang Nor bu constructs an emic typological approach that provides insight into how these songs are viewed by their performers and audiences. He also gives

attention to the performance of *la gzhaz*, explaining how these songs are memorized in partially prefabricated chunks which are then selected in real time in response to the opposing singer's selection, artistically matching metaphors and ramping up or tamping down the mood and its intensity.

The next contribution is from Bianca Horrlemann, an historian whose recent work has traced the interface between the Gansu-Qinghai region and the West during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Horrlemann's essay shifts us from local perspectives with her reference work on eyewitness literature of early foreign travelers in the region. As visitors began to describe the Gansu-Qinghai region and classify its peoples, they set down an important snapshot of local life that still has value today, and Horrlemann's essay is an invaluable guide to that literature.

Limushishiden, a prolific scholar who has brought numerous aspects of his native Mongghul culture to light for international audiences, brings us back to a local perspective, by introducing us to the unique and powerful voice of Lamuzhaxi, a famous Mongghul singer. Lamuzhaxi discusses his long and illustrious career as singer: the songs he sang, how he learned them, and, perhaps most interestingly, the motives that drove him to his vocation.

The next contribution is from Mark Bender, a Sinologist and folklorist who has worked with both oral traditions and contemporary poetry of several ethnic minority populations in southwest China. Bender's contribution uncovers a narrative that weaves together local social and ecological realities. Hunting the local understanding of the musk deer, Bender constructs a vantage from which we are able to observe that for local Yi people of southern Sichuan and northern Yunnan, to meet the musk deer is to place local spaces within a broader cosmology, and to imbue actions with ethical and sacred significance.

In the next contribution, Professor Juha Janhunen, an expert on Mongolic languages, with extensive research experience in the Amdo region, examines the possibility of representing the languages of the Amdo Sprachbund with a pinyin Romanization system. In doing so, he explores these languages as a unit, thus

highlighting the convergence that has taken place among the region's numerous unrelated languages.

In the following chapter, with an incomparable attention to detail, Peter Knecht provides valuable insight into the practices of Mongolian folk healers of northeast Inner Mongolia. Following a rich and richly illustrated description of a healing ritual involving the use of a sheep's internal organs, Knecht delves into the possible origins of the practice, examining Chinese, Mongolian, and Tibetan sources for comparable practices. He concludes, like several of the contributions in this book, that although aspects of the ritual are traceable to the textual 'great traditions' that circulated in Inner Asia, there is also a significant, irreducible influence of individual agency and creativity.

In his contribution, Gerald Roche teases out ethnic, transethnic, and local contributions to cultural diversity, through the examination of rain beckoning and drought breaking rituals of the Sanchuan region, on the northeast Tibetan Plateau. Roche provides detailed accounts from informants of several instances when these increasingly rare rituals have been carried out within living memory. He then situates these rituals within a broad regional context, looking at similar practices throughout Northern China and Inner Asia. In doing so, he highlights both the shared transethnic aspects of cultural practices in Sanchuan and their local distinctions.

The next contribution comes from Daniel Miller, a rangeland ecologist and one of the first foreign researchers to valorize the traditional ecological knowledge and pastoral practices of Tibetan nomads. Miller places the practices of Tibetan nomads in a broad global context. Using a 'landscape' perspective that draws our attention away from political boundaries and towards holistic natural systems, Miller argues, firstly, that the Tibetan Plateau is a key environment in the global life support system. He follows this up by noting how the practices of Tibetan pastoralists are fundamental to maintaining this environment, and thus places the fate of the region's nomads at the center of humanity's struggle to live sustainably on the earth.

Taking up related issues of how we situate Tibet geographically and theoretically, Geoffrey Samuel, in his chapter, examines the ways in which studies of Tibet are situated within broader areal contexts. Extending his earlier work suggesting Southeast Asia as a meaningful context for Tibetan studies, Samuel here investigates the pitfalls and potentials involved with situating Tibet within a 'Zomian' framework. He explores the history and development of the concept of Zomia – a transnational upland area at the intersection of Southeast, South, East, and Inner Asia – and engages deftly with both the critical and sympathetic commentary the concept has received. Samuel concludes by arguing that a Zomian framework might potentially allow for useful insights into the Tibetan context, particularly regarding the role of geography on cultural and political forms, the nature of center-periphery relations, and the nature of religious diversity in Tibet.

Following, Nangchukja (Snying lcags rgyal, Niangjijia) provides a biographical account of Lha mtsho, a Tibetan pastoralist woman. Lha mtsho lived through what were, for Amdo Tibetans, the most momentous events of the 20th century, including the violence of 1958 and the famine that followed. Her story provides a rarely-heard perspective on events that are only now beginning to come to light.

In his contribution to the volume, art historian Rob Linrothe provides a detailed examination of two murals in Rebgong, and unpacks their unique historical significance. He begins his essay by discussing his first meeting with Kevin, and how this not only facilitated his own research, but also inspired him to facilitate opportunities for two of Kevin's students to study abroad – a perfect example of the broad impacts of Kevin's life and work. Linrothe then goes on to analyze two historically important murals from Amdo and discusses their significance in the development of local painting styles which demonstrate, as with other contributions to this volume, both local distinctions and individual creativity.

Mandula Borjigin, Narisu Narisu, and Chuluu Ujyediin, in their chapter, discuss the impact that Kevin Stuart, as educator, had on their lives, and on the lives of other Mongols in China in the 1980s. The authors describe how Kevin provided rare and valuable

opportunities, encouragement, and tools for Mongols to learn English. In this article, we see the emergence of a method that was to form the core of Kevin's educational and scholarly practices for the rest of this career: the empowerment of local people, and collaboration with them to share their perspectives and knowledge with broad international audiences.

The book ends with Bun khrang rgyal's Tibetan essay introducing Tibetan and English language teaching in the Domey (Mdo smad) Tibetan areas of China between 1997 and 2015. He focuses on the influence of the Xining English Training Program (ETP) on language teaching in the area. His discussion comments on teaching methods, students' academic performance, textbook design, curriculum, and students' participation in development work.

•••

For more than three decades, Kevin Stuart has quietly exerted considerable influence on scholarship on Tibet, China, and Mongolia, demonstrating a particular sensitivity to emic voices, facilitating collaborations between etic-emic viewpoints, but always striving to preserve and privilege the latter. It is possible when reading Kevin's writings, and the contributions gathered here, to 'center the local' by thinking within local horizons of meaning.

REFERENCES

- Stuart, Kevin. 1997. *Mongols in Western/American Consciousness*. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen.
- Stuart, Kevin. 2004 Royal Netherlands Embassy (Beijing) Stone School Buildings Project. Available online at: <http://www.thdl.org/community/commdev.html> (accessed 15 February 2007).
- Wang Shiyong. 2007. The Failure of Education in Preparing Tibetans for Market Participation. *Asian Ethnicity* 8.2:131-148.