In the late 1990s, Robert Barnett (2001) was one of the first Western observers-cum-academics in Sino-Tibetan studies to point out similarities between Western and Chinese representations of *Mythos Tibet* and between Western and Chinese political strategies implied in those representations. The construction of the spiritual land of peace and perfection of Shangri-La is one of those. Concerning the strategic invention of Shangri-La in China, Barnett observed that, in the late 1990s, there was fierce competition among officials in certain areas of China to claim the title of being the original Shangri-La (2001: 272). He added in a footnote: “The current front-runners in this competition are the leaders of Dechen Tibet Autonomous Prefecture [Diqing zangzu zizhizhou 迪庆藏族自治州] in Yunnan, where the claim is connected to tourism development and the construction of a new airport” (2001: 306). Barnett’s early observations have been confirmed by the recent evolution of the

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1 This paper is based on fieldwork carried out in the Yunnan Tibetan region in September and October 2002. My fieldwork was sponsored by the Paris-based Ecole d’Extrême Orient and by the ‘ESA 8047’ CNRS Team of Tibetology and Himalayan Studies to, which I express my gratitude.

2 Mythos Tibet, an International Symposium held in Bonn, Germany, in May 1996, was organised by Thierry Dodin and Heinz Räther in collaboration with the Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany. The papers presented in that Symposium are collected in Dodin and Heinz 2001.

3 For a complete list of Western pieces of literature on the myth of Tibet and Shangri-La, see Lopez 1998: 240, note 23. For the first Western language reports commenting on the construction of Shangri-La in China, see Xinhua 1997, and Korski 1997.
following political and economic events in Yunnan. According to official Chinese sources, on the 14th of September, 1997, during the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the creation of Yunnan Bde chen Tibet Autonomous Prefecture (TAP), Dai Guanglu (the vice-governor of Yunnan province) announced on all China media that after one year of intensive research and fieldwork, the Yunnan Scientific Team for the Research of Shangri-La had been able to prove definitively that Shangri-La was originally located in Yunnan Bde chen TAP. 4 Zhongdian—the capital of Bde chen TAP—was subsequently officially renamed Shangri-La (Ch. Xianggelila 香格里拉; Tib. Sham bha la). 5 The politico-economic launching of Yunnan Shangri-La was made concretely effective in September 2001, after the implementation of an important tourist promotion campaign of the Bde chen region. This campaign consisted of massive media coverage, significant efforts in the implementation of communication facilities and tourist equipment, changes in the brand names of local products, changes in the heading of official documents and in the inscriptions of traffic signs all over the region, and so on. 6 Shangri-La county is now an easy 45-minute flight from Kunming’s international airport, and the tourists are pouring in. 7

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5 The concomitant adoption of the Chinese toponym of Xianggelila (Shangri-La) and the Tibetan toponym of Sham bha la to say one and the same place, that is the capital of Bde chen TAP, create multi-evocative correspondences among the fictional and recently constructed world of Shangri-La, the Tibetan traditional notion of Sham bha la, and mahāsukha (Tib. bde ba chen po), the ‘great joy’ in Tibetan tantric literature.
6 One cannot but note that the Chinese politics of promoting the spiritual land of Shangri-La in Bde chen TAP is very different from the earlier Chinese official propagandistic rhetoric which has profusely described Tibet as the obscure and feudal land of poverty and backwardness. However, the promotion of the Yunnan Tibetan region has not prevented the traditional PCC denigrating rhetoric on ‘old Tibet’ from appearing in the Chinese media in recent years. These two kinds of discourse on Tibet (promotion and denigration) exist together in the Chinese press (see, for example, Jin 1991 and Huang 1999). A few recent Chinese articles have been reticent in welcoming the Shangri-La ‘discovery’ in Bde chen TAP in 1997. Some critical voices cried out that ‘old Tibet’ (including Bde chen TAP) could not be ‘Shangri-La’, and denounced a contradiction in the official Chinese discourse. Wang Xiaosong (Wang 2001: 27), trying to answer to those critics, writes that ‘old Tibet’ means the feudal political system of the old central Tibetan government which