INTRODUCTION

Ethnobiological research conducted throughout much of the world has shown that traditional environmental knowledge among indigenous groups is often highly specialised, and frequently entails extensive knowledge of medicinal uses of local flora and fauna (Berlin 1999; Hunn 2002; Moerman 1998; Voeks 1995). I began research with Tibetans in Rgyal thang in 1999 hoping to find just such extensive medicinal plant knowledge. What I discovered, however, was an interesting dynamic between a pervasive local repository of information on medicinal plants, average working household knowledge of a few medicinal plant species, and a discourse of plant knowledge loss that I argue is intricately connected to other discourses of subjectivity among Rgyal thang Tibetans.¹ This is accompanied at the same time by a popular emphasis on milk and barley products as having medicinal properties that I argue has critical symbolic significance for local Tibetan identity.

In this paper I have three main objectives. The first is to briefly discuss my findings on household knowledge of medicinal plants in Rgyal thang. Although the discourse of common householders centers on the loss of knowledge of how to use local plants medicinally, they do not completely lack knowledge of remedies altogether. It is important to keep the latter in mind as a counterbalance to local proclamations of diminished knowledge not because it is somehow more objectively true than the discourse of knowledge loss, but because it provides a context

¹ Throughout this article I use ‘household knowledge’ in contrast to the knowledge of specialists in the area, such as doctors of institutional Tibetan medicine (who are trained in formal institutions and practice at local hospitals and clinics or privately) as well as village doctors (who are trained in lineage traditions and practise privately).
within which to understand local discourse more clearly. My second objective is to analyse the discourse of lost medicinal plant knowledge (knowledge loss) in relation to discourses of commodification (of medicine) and ethnic identity in the Rgyal thang area. In the domain of self-healing remedies, the commodification of medicine has displaced local knowledge in the subjective experiences of Rgyal thang Tibetans. In terms of ethnic identity, since the modern subject in this area of China is in part defined by ethnicity and since ‘traditional’ medicine (and by implication knowledge of medicinal plants) is linked to ethnicity throughout the nation, Rgyal thang Tibetans gauge their own medicinal plant knowledge (or lack thereof) in terms of their ethnic identity. Finally, I turn to an analysis of the symbolic importance of milk and barley as integrally connected to the discourses of subjectivity with which Rgyal thang Tibetans are engaged. In essence, the reported effectiveness of milk and barley, as remedies for general ailments and to maintain good health, combined with the symbolic power of these products, creates a dominant discourse in relation to other discourses of subjectivity. An analysis of this dominant discourse, then, becomes central in understanding the subjective world of Rgyal thang Tibetans. I employ James Scott’s idea of ‘everyday forms of resistance’ (Scott 1985, 1990) to discuss the agency of Rgyal thang Tibetans in creating their own sense of worth and identity given the current socio-economic conditions within which they are living.

**RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY**

Rgyal thang is located in the southernmost reaches of Khams. Of the six *sgang* ‘ridges/highlands’ of Smad Mdo Khams, Rgyal thang is located in Spom ‘bor sgang and roughly corresponds to present-day Shangrila County in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Diqing Zangzu Zizhizhou), northwest Yunnan Province. Essentially there are two Rgyal thangs: Rgyal thang1, which refers to the greater cultural (and previous administrative) area, and Rgyal thang2, which refers to the core town of the greater cultural area. The research presented in this

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2 Zhongdian County was officially renamed Shangrila County (Xianggelila Xian) in May 2002. I use the Chinese name of Diqing (Tib. Bde chen) Prefecture to highlight its creation under the modern Chinese state.