



Kham Aid Foundation
Minyak Cultural Preservation Program
Sichuan, China

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SUMMARY

Kham Aid Foundation is undertaking a comprehensive cultural heritage and tourism development program in the Minyak region, a colorful and culturally distinct group of Tibetans living in western Sichuan, China. The program includes the following elements:

Restoration of ancient houses. As of April 2007 one 700+ year old house has been repaired and will be used by the community for tourism activities. Several other houses are in need of repair and rehabilitation.

Disaster prevention. Kham Aid has provided fire-fighting equipment, electrician services, and training to families living in five historic structures.

Cleaning and conservation of Buddhist wall paintings. Four sets of wall paintings - two belonging to a village temple and two in private home chapels – have been consolidated to prevent destructive flaking and detachment. They are now being cleaned to restore them to their original beauty and make them useful for religious worship.

Community development. Working in concert with the local government, Kham Aid Foundation is assisting the people of Wayao village – the location of the two above-mentioned activities – to form a tourism business cooperative. Kham Aid is also assisting Wayao villagers with their educational needs.

Conservation Training. Experts brought to Minyak by Kham Aid Foundation are teaching local Tibetans rudimentary skills in repair of ancient stone houses and wall paintings conservation so that they can actively participate in preserving their own cultural heritage.

Monitoring and Advocacy. Kham Aid has been asked by other NGOs working in the Minyak region to evaluate locally-led repair projects. We were also invited by the provincial government to provide recommendations on which sites are worthy of legal protection.

MINYAK: BACKGROUND & SIGNIFICANCE

The Ancient Minyak Kingdom – once mighty in China

According to legend, the Minyak people are descended from a very large tribe that extended north to include the Xixia Kingdom in northwest China. Later migrating to the mountainous boundary between the eastern Tibetan plateau and Sichuan basin, the Minyak reached a peak of “unequaled brilliance” 800-1000 years ago when Minyak kings produced famed scholars whose influence spread across Tibet. They built stone towers more than 28 meters high, some of which still stand today. They developed a language that is only distantly akin to Tibetan and is still spoken by approximately ten thousand people.



Wall painting in a private chapel in Old Shade, thought to be about 700 years old.

Minyak's Legacy of Architecture and Art



Laha Tower, repaired in 2006. It is one of several stone towers, some more than 30 meters tall, that still survive in Minyak.

The Minyak engineers were and are skilled masons and carpenters. During the Kingdom's peak, they constructed dozens – perhaps even hundreds – of stone towers, some of which are still standing today. A few of these spectacular structures have received attention from a number of local and international organizations who are funding their repair.

During the Minyak kingdom's peak, well-off families constructed handsome and lavish in 3- and 4-story flat-roofed, post-and-lintel houses, often containing a private chapel filled with statues and other precious objects. The chapels were invariably decorated with Buddhist murals depicting deities, stories, and local history executed in mineral pigments and other local materials. The subject matter and style reflected the prevailing schools of painting and the Kagyu Buddhist lineage that was then dominant.

Starting in about the 14th century Minyak suffered from numerous invasions and the kingdom declined, although houses continued to be built. The Kagyu receded, to be replaced by the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. Probably the period of greatest destruction began in 1966 with the onset of China's "Cultural Revolution." This ten-year period was marked by social turmoil on a national scale. In Minyak there was a famine and approximately one in ten people died. It was also a time when Chinese government policy strongly discouraged practice of Tibetan cultural traditions, particularly religious worship.

During the Cultural Revolution, Minyak people could not maintain or repair their historic buildings, and many became too badly damaged to restore. What was worse, untold numbers of ancient books and other precious objects were smashed, burned, or stolen. This included all portable religious paintings.

Most houses now in Minyak are newly built, but thanks to the efforts of one influential lama-architect, a handful of ancient houses have been preserved in a few villages. Some of these contain chapels decorated with wall paintings - the only surviving examples of ancient Minyak art.



Wayao Village

KHAM AID FOUNDATION ACTIVITIES IN MINYAK

First major project site: Wayao Village

In 2005 Kham Aid undertook a regional survey of surviving ancient structures in Minyak. The structures – temples, homes, towers, ruins – were evaluated as to their cultural and historic significance, and their suitability for training and for cultural tourism development. As a result, Wayao Village was selected as our first major program site. Wayao is located 4 km from the Shade township headquarters at the heart of what remains of Minyak. The village contains the following notable features:

- Four houses ranging in age from 700 to 900 years old, most in good condition
- Two private chapels containing wall paintings, probably about 200 years old.
- One community temple, also with wall paintings.
- Excellent access, nearness to other tourism sites, and overall potential for cultural tourism development.
- Strong local support from village, township, and county governments.

Wayao Village as a future center for cultural tourism

The Wayao Village Committee is working with Kham Aid Foundation to develop the village as a showcase for Minyak culture. The Committee has leased on of the ancient houses which belongs to a family called Gongtsa and contains a chapel with wall paintings. A Minyak Culture Exhibition Hall sited with the Gongtsa House will be the village's tourism centerpiece.

The Gongtsa House is L-shaped house, with three stories and a courtyard enclosed by outbuildings and a neighboring house. The first floor is a stable; the second is the main living area, including a kitchen/living room still in virtually original condition, with an open hearth, centuries of soot layered on the walls and ceiling, and rows of medieval-looking cook-pots. The third floor holds the Buddhist chapel with its ancient wall paintings, a partly enclosed roof area, and a "long-drop" toilet. The Wayao Village Committee is being assisted by Kham Aid Foundation to create a legally registered tourism cooperative. The role of the cooperative will be to create a master tourism plan for the village and to regulate the creation of tourism businesses to reduce competition and spread community benefit among all members. This cooperative, with the assistance of our advisors, will develop tourism enterprises in the Gongtsa House such as a restaurant, guest house, and stage show featuring Minyak songs and dance.

The community possesses a great many artifacts, including ancient Buddhist texts, Minyak costumes, textiles, paintings, and antique household items. These items will be displayed in the Gongtsa House. The house-turned-museum will be the chief draw for visitors and potentially a profitable business that will lift living standards in the village.

Program components completed or currently underway

- Structural repairs to the Gongtsa House – one wall and the roof have been replaced.
- Villagers have been trained in techniques of repairing walls and roofs of existing ancient houses. Eleven villagers are being trained as wall paintings conservation assistants.
- Usage rights of the Gongtsa House has been transferred to the Wayao Village Committee for development as a cultural tourism resource.
- Conservation of paintings in the Gongtsa House chapel, the Patsen House chapel, and
- Kyilhakhang Temple is partly completed, funding secured through November 2007.
- Wayao's tourism cooperative is in the early stages of organization and will be established by the end of 2007.
- Business development by the Wayao Tourism Cooperative will take place in 2007.
- A survey of locally made handcrafts will be done in 2007 to determine what products can be adapted for sale to tourists.



Member of Kham Aid's art conservation team at work in Wayao Village.



Top: Gongtsa House front façade. Bottom: repairs to south wall of Gongtsa House (October, 2006). Temporary shoring is visible where the wall has been dismantled.

Program components planned pending availability of funding

- Rehabilitation of the interior of the Gongtsa House.
- Conservation of murals at three other villages in Minyak, two of which are believed to be at least 700 years old and are of great significance to Tibetan art history (though less suitable for tourism).
- Establishment of village tourism cooperatives at other Minyak areas, including the Laha Tower and Pengbuxi Twin Towers.
- Archeological survey, excavation, and inventory of the ancient houses in Wayao Village and other sites.

THE TEAM

Project Staff

- Project Director: Pamela Logan
- Logistics and Procurement: Wu Bangfu
- Project assistants: Tenba Tenzin and Adrol
- Architectural conservators: Minyak Choekyi Gyeltsen, John Sanday
- Wall paintings conservators: Luigi Fieni, with five Nepalese assistants.
- Archeologist: Richard Roberts
- Cooperative business development advisor: Zhao Jun
- Tourism Business Development and Planning: Kellogg Corps, Northwestern University
- Handicraft product development advisor: Elaine Bellezza



October 2006 wall painting team, including Luigi Fieni (center right), project director (back row left, and

Partner organizations

Minyak Cultural and Environmental Service Group, a local nonprofit association officially registered in Kangding County. Its goals are to preserve and promote traditional culture, to participate in biodiversity conservation and environmental protection, to increase community livelihood capacity, to foster a harmonious relationship between man and nature in the Minyak area.

Wayao Village Committee. The chairman is Wayao Party Secretary Tsedo. Tsedo is a strong leader who is much respected in the village. Other members of the committee include the village headman, Tsering Norbu, owners of the four ancient houses in Wayao, the caretaker of Kyilhakhang Temple.

Shade Township Government. They have selected Wayao Village as a pilot site for the New Socialist Rural Construction Program. The township government will be joining with Kham Aid to help Wayao prioritize the village's infrastructure needs and develop strategies for increasing income.

Sichuan Cultural Relics Bureau. This government organization is devoted to cataloguing and protecting sites of historic and cultural significance in Sichuan province.



Left: Meeting of Wayao Village Committee in 2006. Right: Minyak traditional dress.

Commitments by Chinese government entities

- Wayao to be included in a regional tourism promotion efforts (County Culture and Tourism Bureau)
- Install piping to bring water to the Gongtsa House, (Shade Township Government)
- Widen the access road to Wayao Village and other infrastructure projects (Shade Township Government)
- Allow permit-free cutting of timber for Gongtsa House repair (Shade Township Government)