

# CONVERSATIONS WITH SACRED MOUNTAINS

A JOURNEY ALONG YUNNAN'S TEA CARAVAN TRAIL



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Laurence J. Brahm

# DISCOVERY PUBLISHER

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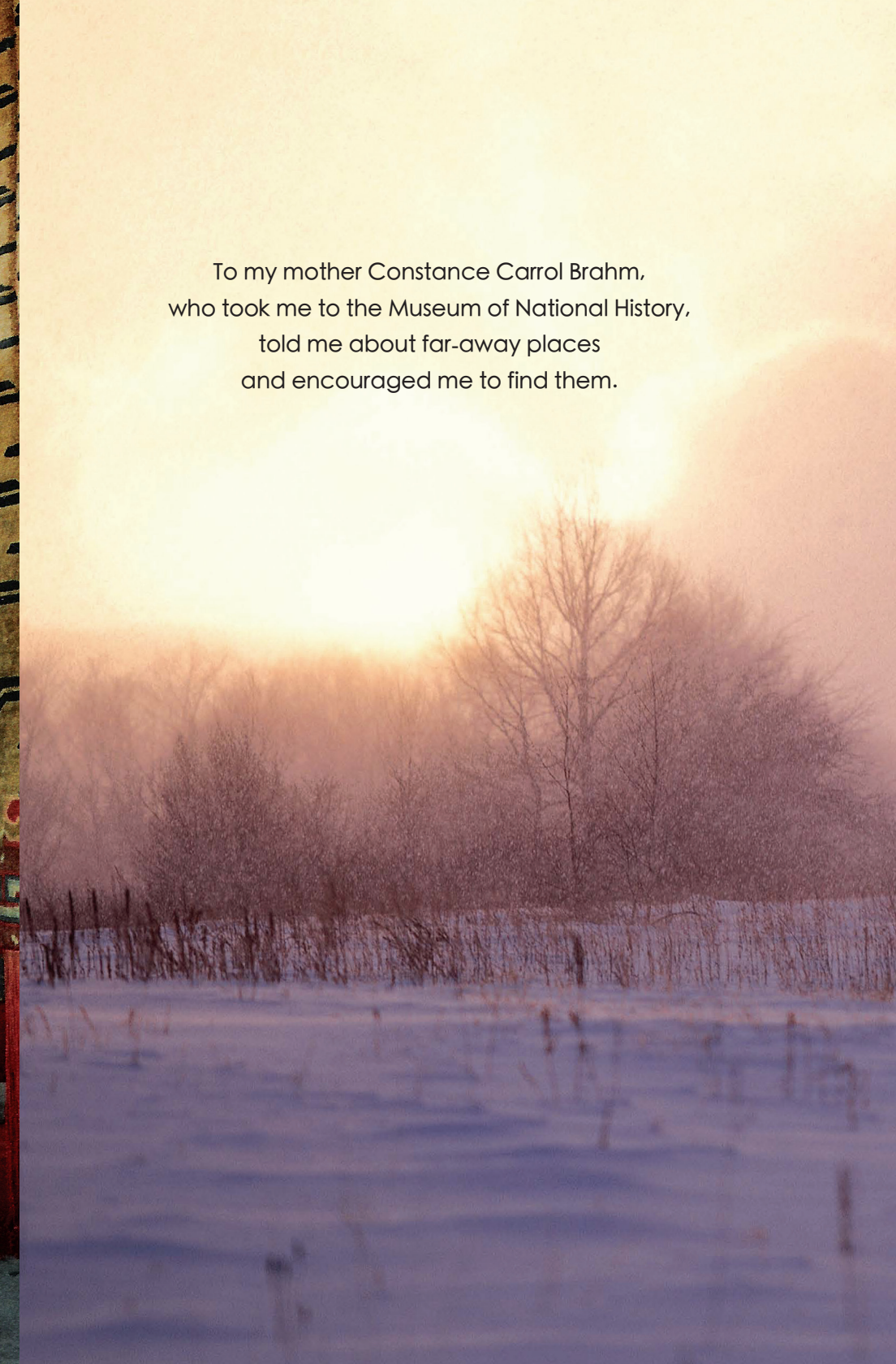
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To my mother Constance Carrol Brahm,  
who took me to the Museum of National History,  
told me about far-away places  
and encouraged me to find them.





# Preface

After two decades of involvement with China, as lawyer and then investment advisor, I witnessed a nation — once entirely state-planned and ideologically propped — turn into a free-market paradise. Within a decade, the capital city became overwhelmed by Western brand infatuation. Materialism became the dominant social value, gradually replacing the important place of culture and traditional values in the society. Some called this the trade-off for development. Amidst traffic jams in Beijing, I began to wonder.

I wondered where this might lead to years later. Would China, a nation so vulnerable to extreme changes in social outlook, find itself on the cusp of another pendulum swing? Sensing China's social tectonic plates verging on another shift, I decided to find out.

While China's mainstream society is hypnotized by money worship, a tiny fraction thinks differently. At a quick glance, one might not think there is much in common between artists, environmentalists, rock and pop singers and fashion designers. But as one thinks of artists who have established their studios in Yunnan and Tibet, and an ethnic dance studio in Kunming which aims to preserve traditional songs and dances, or of



monks who have set up Internet schools for nomads, and backpackers from Guangzhou and Beijing heading to western China, then again, maybe there is.

Among these different groups, I found several common threads, which tied them together. First, they were all heading for western China — to places like Yunnan and Tibet — which represented an escape from materialism. Second, they were embracing their own ethnicity, seeking an independent non-Western identity. Third, environmental protection and cultural preservation were their overwhelming concerns. Fourth, Buddhist values were reviving and spreading rapidly.

Many people considered it outright crazy when I suddenly closed my legal and investment advisory practice in Beijing to become an independent media producer in 2002, embarking on the production of a multi-media project “Searching for Shangri-La”. I was joined by one of China’s most celebrated music composer, San Bao — an ethnic Mongolian — for whom the project became a re-discovery of his roots.

While trying to find Shangri-La, the legendary kingdom (said to be somewhere in western China) described in James Hilton’s novel, *Lost Horizon*, the exploration was in fact to uncover and document — through writing and film — China’s new counter-culture movement. This movement was concentrated in the cities of Kunming, Dali, Lijiang and Lhasa, which are fast becoming art colonies that assume a hip 1960s atmosphere.

Between 2003 and 2005, I traveled, filmed and wrote throughout China’s western regions. We started by filming a rock concert held in Lijiang, now trying to host an annual

world ethnic film festival. Beijing artists are escaping to Dali — a burgeoning artist colony — where I met an artist-turned-Buddhist who had built a glass house alongside Erhai Lake to meditate over water.

Environmental activists have set up eco-tourism hotels while fighting big developers in Zhongdian — one of the world's 200 bio-diversity zones as yet uncontaminated. There, the party secretary, a Tibetan, has banned the public use of plastic bags.

Ethnic sounds are everywhere, fused into a Chinese new age pop movement spearheaded by Dadawa, as is ethnic clothing, China's newest fashion social statement. Small scale grassroots initiatives aimed at sustainable development can be found everywhere throughout this region.

I was greatly inspired by three particular individuals whose stories set me on the road in my search for Shangri-La.

The first, Tibetan artist Ang Sang, founded an art commune in Lhasa, and spends all his free time designing Tibetan clothing and art motifs for a factory of handicapped Tibetan workers. Established by a monk who applies Buddhism to social work, today, the factory, which only manufactures Tibetan crafts on the principle of maintaining tradition, not only supports the fifty handicapped working there, but also an additional hundred orphans — many of whom are also handicapped. The monk is not only a factory director, but also a father to everyone in the social structure created around both factory and school that it supports.

The factory, which struggled for years, suddenly made a lot of money during the 2003 SARS outbreak when people in



major cities that were stricken, like Beijing and Guangzhou, bought Tibetan incense, believing it would drive away bacteria and disease. Tibetan friends later pointed out that China's most materialistic cities were the ones worst hit by SARS, while the regions of Tibet, Qinghai and Yunnan did not record even a single case.

The second, a monk — Jigme Jensen — opened a cheese factory located in the remote mountains of Qinghai Province. By purchasing daily deliveries of yak milk, he provides rising income to nomads, thus encouraging maintenance of their traditional lifestyle. Yak milk cheese income is re-invested into building schools, so nomad kids can receive free education plus 24-hour Internet access.

I was particularly moved by the third, Yang Liping, a Bai ethnic minority and China's most celebrated dancer, who returned to Yunnan, forsaking comforts of Beijing's prestigious Central Ethnic Dance and Music Institute, to establish her own studio in Kunming. Traveling deep into Yunnan's interior, she finds yet untouched villages where dance and music are still an essential part of oral tradition. According to Yang, everything will be lost within a matter of years through development. This is what motivates her to recruit village youth to her Kunming studio, video-record their dance and music, and choreograph performing arts programs to keep traditions alive. Yang now supports 80 minority kids at her studio through sporadic donations and personal savings from a lifetime of performances, while living in spartan conditions—representing this celebrity's painful and powerful commitment to preserving



her people's ethnicity.

These initiatives are taking place without government financial support, in parallel yet against the backdrop of China's rapid economic development and increasing materialism. This activism is driven by a minority whose efforts are compelling and draw a following of intellectual youth with a newfound conscience. Despite the globalization onslaught, these activities are quickly converging into a trend with the potential to become an alternative value movement.

But this is not an antagonistic "anti-" movement as such. China's disparate "alternative global value" groups adopt positive approaches to activism pursuing small but meaningful grassroots initiatives, rather than attacking institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and World Economic Forum — often perceived as bulldozing ethnicity and cultural individuality.

As I went on my search for Shangri-La in 2003 by trekking the Tea Caravan Trail in Yunnan Province, I observed how everywhere, young backpackers from cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou were challenging conventional values of both Chinese GDP and Western consumerism. Many were transformed Buddhists traveling in search of its source in the Tibetan plateau. I came to learn how Tibetan Buddhism is spreading rapidly throughout China and taking root in many major cities like Beijing and Shanghai. In Buddhist philosophy, a "revolution" does not necessarily mean a violent political-social transformation, but rather, the completion of a circular rotation; a turning of something onto itself. Maybe this is what is happening.



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# KUNMING

If you want to hear the words of spirits...  
Then I suggest you find the mountain.

**Kunming** is the capital of Yunnan Province. The airplanes from Beijing arrive here. The airport reminds me of Bangkok, which all goes to show that this is probably the only province in China that has gotten its act together on tourism. This is because the people of Yunnan look south to Thailand and Southeast Asia for their inspiration. Less influenced by Beijing, they try a different approach here.

Of course, there is nothing new about this. In ancient times, Chinese emperors banished rebels to Yunnan. In those days, Yunnan was considered the furthest border of the Chinese empire, inhabited by hill tribes locked in by mountains and valleys and who clung on to their cultures. As for those rebels banished there by the emperors, they learned to survive in the hills from the tribes.

When I first visited Kunming over 20 years ago, it was a charming city of old wooden and gray brick buildings tottering along canals in leafy tree-lined streets. Now all the old buildings are gone and the trees have been uprooted. It is a so-called modern city consisting of lots of cement and glass. The city charm was obliterated for the international flower exhibition years ago and the local government thought it would be very international to destroy everything relating to the natural environment of their city by covering all the flowers with cement. So when you arrive in Kunming, it looks like any other Chinese city. But it is the starting point of any journey in Yunnan. One must begin the journey by leaving the city.

Kunming has become a kind of rock-and-roll town. Factories



along the old canals have been converted into studio lofts, where a number of creative artists work between the seasons. Like travelers, these artists really use the city as a stepping-off point to other places along the Tea Caravan Trail.

The Tea Caravan Trail literally runs north to south from Simao and Pu'er, Yunnan's rich tea-producing soil valleys. One route cuts south through the Red River Valley, extending to Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar. The second and main route runs to Dali, Lijiang, the Lugu Lake, Zhongdian, and overland past sacred Kawagebo Mountain to the holy city of Lhasa. From there it veers off to Shigatze, then to Nepal and India.

Each of the main stops along the Tea Caravan Trail has its own ethnic minority and each has its own sacred mountains. This story is about following the trail and talking to the mountains.



## Sampling Disillusionment

I was born in New York City. I guess you could say I grew up in New York City. I lived there until I was ten years old. Then I moved to Connecticut.

One of my earliest memories was of sitting on the carpeted floor of our New York apartment, leafing through *National Geographic*. I was just a little boy. I was so fascinated by the photos — I could not stop looking at them. What fascinated me most were those pictures of laughing children, women with colorful bandannas wrapped around their heads, tribal headdresses of dangling old silver coins, and timber houses precariously built on stilts somewhere in Asia, tucked in misty valleys, propped on mountainsides. Somehow I wanted to go to these places and stay in one of those houses.

These places seemed far away. Sometimes, I caught glimpses of them on the 5 p.m. evening news with Walter Cronkite. Green Berets patrolling villages. I could see them sometimes in the scratchy footage, pushing through brush. I did not understand why so many soldiers wanted to blow up those timber houses on stilts. People told me it was to save the women and children wearing bandannas.

I remember, as a child, wandering through the Museum of Natural History in New York, dwarfed by huge dinosaur bones, big feet, stuffed bears and stuffed Tibetan antelope. I seemed to stare for hours at a long American Indian canoe. There were

exhibits of manikins dressed in bearskins and wearing shaman masks, the force of which filled the entire room. I would stare up at the shaman masks for what seemed like hours.

The museum fascinated me. Cavernous corridors led into rooms with more manikins in traditional costumes — Eskimo, African, Arab, and Polynesian. As a young boy, I stared at the manikins, wondering what life was like for people in these places who really wore these clothes. Then one day, the museum opened its Asian room. I went to see it.

The hill tribe images returned. I could not get them out of my mind. Once again, I wondered what it would be like to live in a timber house on a mountainside with nothing else around, except poppy flowers floating in the wind and the sound of one's own echo dreamily calling out from within the depths of a chasm cut through terraced fields by a river flowing from melting glaciers in mountains that can never be climbed. I thought about climbing the mountains.

Then I moved to Connecticut.

I took a course in high school on India and Southeast Asia. Interesting how two enormous land and cultural masses encompassing a millennium of history could be compressed into a single half semester class and taught to American high school students as “India and Southeast Asia”. It sounded like something a cheerleader would say at a football match.

What they forgot to teach us in class was that the source of these powerful cultures is three rivers — the Ganges, the Mekong, and the Yangtze. These rivers meet before a sacred Tibetan snow mountain which cannot be climbed. After



listening to a few more lectures, I began to look for the old *National Geographic* magazines.

I found them. In fact, I found a map tucked inside one, illustrating where all of the hill tribes of continental Southeast Asia are — Vietnam, Cambodia, Burma, Thailand, and a Chinese province called Yunnan. I had never heard of Yunnan before. It was not on the Walter Cronkite news reports. There were romantic illustrations of the Miao, Dai, Yi, and Long Neck Karen. They lived in timber houses on stilts propped on hillsides. They wore bandannas.

I remember unfolding the old map and using scotch tape to paste it on the wall over my desk where I did my homework. I told my mom I was going to memorize all the names of the tribes. I did. Then one day, I forgot about the map, and the tribes. I left it pasted on the white plaster wall in my childhood bedroom. I had already left.

I arrived in China in 1981 as a student. Everyone was wearing green and blue. I did not see any of the colorful hill tribe costumes that I had seen in *National Geographic*. All I saw were some dreary-eyed Tibetans hanging out at Beijing's railroad station with lots of other people sitting on over-stuffed blue and green canvas bags, sleeping on the bags, waiting for a train ticket back to somewhere where they had not come from too long ago or would not be in a hurry to go back to again. Why were they all waiting for a train ticket? I soon learnt that, in those days, even to buy a train ticket in China, one had to use *guanxi*-connections.

When I left China at the end of 1981, I went to Hong Kong.

In those days, Hong Kong seemed like the center of everything, indeed, it was the center of China business. Business was the center of life. Everybody talked all day long about business. Yes, I forgot about the hill tribes in their steamy mountainside timber cabins on stilts. That all faded in my mind under the intensity of contract negotiations and the shrill of deal making, market runs and currency fluctuations on the open, forward, spot markets — to be discussed over coffee in the morning, tea in the afternoon, and drinks at night until early morning.

During the 1980s, I worked as a lawyer writing contracts for multinationals investing in China. I worked for a British law firm in Hong Kong, wore a black suit, a blue shirt with a white collar and cufflinks. I dressed like this every day. Sometimes, I felt as if I could not breathe — stuffed into this suit that was stuffed into elevators stuffed with people going up through floors and floors and layers and layers of photocopied documents in skyscrapers of photocopies reaching to the sky. I would ride up and down the elevators every day. At night, I would dream of the photocopies.

That was the life of a lawyer specializing in China trade in Hong Kong during the 1980s. Actually, none of the so-called “China experts” really understood what was happening in China in those days. But that was not the point. Neither did anybody else. So it was quite sufficient to ride up and down the elevators of prestigious central financial district luxury office towers and talk about things that you really did not understand. For lawyers, accountants, consultants and night club hostesses,





everything discussed was billable by the hour anyways, and priced relatively in accordance with the real estate printed on the address of the name card, which you presented to potential clients with both hands and a slight bow.

When it came time to leave the office and go on vacations, most of my lawyer colleagues would hit the beaches and bars in Manila, Phuket, Pattaya, or play golf. Golf was extremely important to lawyers, bankers and their clients. They would whittle away enormous amounts of time trying to fit little balls into slightly larger holes using instruments totally unsuitable for the task. I never joined these golf vacations.

Instead, I went to those hill tribe areas. I was looking for timber houses on stilts, leaning on hillsides in misty valleys beside mountains which could not be climbed. I trekked through poppy fields in northern Thailand, found the Hani and the Yi tribes living in timber houses on stilts, wearing colorful headdresses made of old silver coins. They looked just like the ones I used to look at in *National Geographic*. I began to photograph them. I kept taking pictures, just like the ones in *National Geographic*.

To my surprise, these tribes had something in common. They all spoke the Yunnan dialect of Chinese. The tribal elders explained, once upon a time, they came from Yunnan, a province of China, a place called “south of the clouds”. It was a place of sacred mountains connected by a trail that used to be the caravan route for tea which they grew on mountainsides beside their timber houses on stilts, until they were driven out to Thailand during the years of civil war, where they stayed

and grew opium. The tea went, by horse, following a route connecting one sacred mountain with another, eventually reaching Lhasa. The story confused me and I really did not understand. I was too busy taking pictures.

I brought in my backpack some magic tricks, and performed them at night sitting by the hearth. The Hani and Yi were fascinated. Convinced I was a witch doctor, women brought me sick children, asking for cures. Men asked me if my magic could ward off bullets from their black powder hunting muskets. I confessed that I was not a witch doctor. This incident disturbed me. I would come to learn that the IMF, World Bank and other such organizations performed simple tricks. Many ethnic groups in various stages of social and economic transition are similarly led to believe in the illusory powers of witch doctors.

The hill tribe infatuation kept me trekking. From hiking the Himalayan foothills of Nepal to jungles of Malaysia, I took a canoe up river looking for headhunters. Going from one Malaysian Chinese river trader's home to another, I made my way into the Borneo interior, finally finding longhouses of hunters who once hunted heads. I wanted to see the heads. Sure enough, skulls of Japanese soldiers taken in World War II hung from the center of a lodge. I slept in the lodge, under the heads. In the morning, I took more pictures.

Then I trekked through Nepal, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, visiting the hill tribes — Hani, Yi, Miao, Karen, and Hmong. After all of these trips — trekking and photographing — I would end up with the lawyers, bankers and businessmen



talking over cigars at the Mandarin or Foreign Correspondents Club in Hong Kong. Over lobby lounge music, cigars and after-work drinks, I would show them pictures of the Borneo skulls, the Burmese Long Necks, and Lao women weaving along the Mekong. They showed me pictures of girls they picked up at the bars in Phuket or Manila, during weekends playing golf. They thought it was strange that I did not play golf.

Then one day I sold my apartment in Hong Kong and gave everything away — tribal blankets, weavings, silver bracelets and statues of elephants. I put the photos in boxes, and packed the boxes into storage. The booming China market gold rush was calling in Beijing. As the boxes collected dust, I forgot about one thing — one day, they would have to be opened.

## A Peacock

I first saw Yang Liping in Yunnan in the very early 1990s. I believe it was 1991. Her “Peacock Dance”, mimicking a peacock, was both shocking and beautiful. I was stunned and mesmerized watching her live performance in Xishuangbanna, sitting together with a delegation of central bank officials from Beijing.

I had traveled to Yunnan as a legal advisor to a team of officials from the People’s Bank of China to research and draft a law for negotiable instruments in China. Monetary policy had become my specialization after advising the central banks of Laos and Vietnam. The delegation had chosen to meet in Kunming and then Xishuangbanna, the home of ethnic Dai tribes, who are a lot like the Lao. After discussing regulatory restrictions for the manipulation of money, I slipped out the back door of our hotel, rented a jeep, and drove off into the hills looking for the Dai. I found them living in cramped villages built on stilts along misty rivers beside lonely white pagodas.

I saw Yang Liping again in 1992, this time on television. I was sitting in a dirty, run-down Sichuan restaurant in Lhasa, eating spicy *toufu*. The tiny television in a corner of the restaurant showed her performing the Peacock Dance for an audience that included some of China’s heavy-weight leaders. Somehow the last thing on my mind was the remote possibility









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# CONVERSATIONS WITH SACRED MOUNTAINS

A JOURNEY ALONG YUNNAN'S TEA CARAVAN TRAIL

**W**hat makes a Mountain Sacred? In his search for the mythical Shangri-La, writer/filmmaker Laurence J Brahm embarks on the ancient Tea Caravan Trail in Yunnan, China. His journey takes him across Kunming, Dali, Lijiang, Lugu, Zhongdian, and Kawagebo. In these cities that have been developed into popular tourist spots, he learns about the waning cultures of the ethnic minorities such as the Bai, the Dai, the Yi, the Naxi and the Mosu. He meets various individuals, including the famous Chinese dancer Yang Liping, who fight hard against the onslaught of modern development to preserve their ethnic cultures and identities. They share with him stories about the misty mountains that stand majestically in this land "South of the Clouds" and how they are sacred to all the ethnic minority groups that live in the regions.

Follow Laurence's journey and find out how only when one engages in a conversation with a mountain will one truly discover why it is sacred.

