A Place at the End of a Road: A Yin-Yang Geography

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Abstract: If one task of modern nation-states is to produce a commons or a known universe, a one-world world that is visible to all, what spaces are left for the uncommons? Drawing on a 2014 visit to a village, once a county town, just barely within the borders of China, we follow James Scott in asking not only how a state sees but what a state might be able to see, as well. To understand the uncanny (in)visibility of this place, we invoke Chinese yin-yang theory to reflect on the ways that human space transforms through time, partly hidden by yin shade and partly revealed in yang glare. The uncommons is not, in other words, an exterior to the one-world world; rather, it is a possible world that can make itself partly known in a mottled and ever-changing light and shade.

Keywords: commons, yin-yang theory, uncanny, traditional knowledge, China, the state

Résumé : Si l'une des tâches des États-nations modernes est de produire des communs ou un univers connu, un monde unique (*one-world world*) visible par tous, quelle place reste-t-il pour les in-communs? Partant d'une visite en 2014 dans un village qui siégeait jadis en tant que chef-lieu frontalier de la Chine, nous accompagnons James Scott en nous interrogeant à la fois sur ce qu'un État voit et ce qu'il devrait être en mesure de voir. Pour comprendre la (in)visibilité étrange de cet endroit, nous invoquons la théorie Yin-Yang chinoise pour explorer comment l'espace humain se transforme dans le temps, en partie caché par l'ombre du Yin et en partie révélé par l'éclat du Yang. Autrement dit, les in-communs ne sont pas externes au monde unique : ils constituent plutôt un possible monde qui peut se dévoiler partiellement dans un enchevêtrement de lumière et d'ombre en perpétuel changement.

Mots-clés : communs, théorie Yin-Yang, l'étrange, savoir traditionnel, Chine, l'état

James Scott (2009), in his search for the anarchist recesses of history, famously said that states have difficulty climbing mountains. Echoing Braudel (1966), Scott (2009, 42–43) argued that agricultural states struggled to "climb hills," as the "frictions" of rugged terrain and distance set "relatively inflexible limits" on their ability to supply outposts with food and supplies. According to this version of politics, premised on agricultural production and distribution and on the physical presence of state representatives on peripheries, states might mount expeditions into the hills, but their "physical, coercive presence … was episodic, often to the vanishing point" (62–63). Thus, Scott makes much of the "inaccessible mountain redoubts" that remained a "reliable zone of refuge" for those wanting to "keep the state at arm's length" (62–63).

This was not an offhand observation for Scott; rather, it was inseparable from much of his project. His brilliant work on the highland societies of the Asian region he calls Zomia has long sought to find and appreciate the geographical zones of freedom that exist above the reach of the Chinese, the Burmese, the Laotian, the Vietnamese, and the Thai states. The state formations in question differ a great deal among themselves, of course, making the problem of freedom from state recognition and control a different one for different locations. In this article, we are most concerned with a part of Zomia that is (just barely) within the borders of China. We ask, in part, not only how a state sees but also what a state might be able to see (Scott 1998). If one task of modern nation-states is to produce and regulate a commons, or a shared nature-culture, a one-world world that is accessible to and recognised by all, what spaces are left for the uncommon (Law 2015)?

In asking this question, we are extending our long-standing interest in the anthropology of knowledge. "Local knowledge" and "indigenous knowledge" – somewhat in keeping with James Scott's view of things – are topics that have counterposed stubbornly different ways

of seeing and knowing against scientific universalisms and hegemonic forms of domination. Anthropologists have begun to look for (only) partial connections between official realities and insistently different nature-cultures (de la Cadena 2015; Strathern 2004). Here, we will explore a situation in which "the state" has long been climbing mountains; however, what has been visible or knowable, or even salient, in this history remains elusive. We will argue that such elusiveness takes the form of an intimately entwined yin-yang dynamic.

Tracing the vicissitudes of government administration, especially in the wake of strong state socialism and in places thought to be mostly wild or anarchic, keeps the question of the commons as well as the uncommons – sometimes thought of as wild, exotic, unrecognised borders and margins – on our agenda. In this article, we take readers to one such place: Bijiang (in Nujiang Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China), known to some as a "ghost town" and to others as a "beautiful city of memory." In reading the visible surfaces of life in this not quite "lost" city – and, now, not quite village – we hope to sketch a history of a shifting relationship between the collectively knowable commons and a heterogeneous "uncommons" – those things that seek the shade of the forest edges in the mountains of Southwestern China. We will sometimes figure the relationship between the governmental bright light of day – the yang of the formal state with its strategies for life-in-common – and the relatively voiceless shadows of life in and near the dark forest – the yin of many different actors' tactics on an uncommon periphery – as a yin-yang process.

In what follows, we explore the logic of yin and yang as modes of action, hoping to show how this ancient Chinese conceptualisation of time, space and process can help us come to terms with the political challenges of sharing, or even perceiving, what we have in common with others.

But first, an introduction to Bijiang and its historical situation is called for. We hope a walk through the old county town of Bijiang can evoke the oscillating and unsettled temporality we have been finding in modern China. Perhaps we might even convert anthropological readers to yin-yang thinking, with its irreducibly processual and relativistic character. Ultimately, however, we expect this article to join others in this special issue in showing the way to the discovery of the (un)commons even in our everyday.

The Place and Its Moment

The old city site no longer called Bijiang belies the anarchist aims of James Scott's Zomia research. High on the heavily forested slopes of the Salween River gorge, this former prefectural capital shows that the Chinese state has effectively climbed into these wild mountains to administer its national commons regime. In the course of itinerant field research on "minority nationality traditional medicines," authors Farquhar and Lai have relied since 2010 on the goodwill of Chinese health departments and research institutes.[1] We have accompanied numerous government officials to climb mountains in search of minority nationality (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) healers. Rather than entering remote zones of freedom, however, which might be embodied by folk herbalists, we have been trying to catch "the state" (a heterogeneous and multiscalar affair) in the act of regulating and domesticating bodies, knowledge and nationalities in mountainous Southwestern China.

State projects are visible everywhere in Chinese Zomia. The government makes its presence felt in the arenas of public health and primary education, forest management and agronomy consulting, resource extraction and power grid management, nature conservation, propaganda, adult education, regulation of commerce and markets, product safety inspections, and customs and border control. In the service of all these government functions, agents of the state seek to know natures and cultures – sometimes scientifically – so they can be administered as part of a nation imagined as uni-natural but also multicultural (see Viveiros de Castro 2015). At the same time, our research continues to stumble upon different zones of not exactly freedom, but perhaps otherness and non-knowledge, or uncommonality, folded within the mundane and expansive everyday life of state power/knowledge.

"Bijiang" is no longer a place on most maps. It is a long-standing settlement – once a bustling county seat – that became a village (again) around 1986.[2] Located high above the Nu (Salween) River in Southwestern Yunnan Province, it is part of the narrow riverine prefecture of Nujiang, which runs along the Myanmar border. Its elevation is almost 2,000 metres above sea level – "at the snow line," some assured us – and it is reached by a well-built but steeply rising 12-kilometre paved road with many scary switchbacks. There is no bus; to get there, you have to hitch a ride on a truck or engage a three-wheeled motorcycle from the roadhead at the side of the river, about 900 metres downhill as the crow flies.

Lili Lai visited this town as a trekking tourist in 1995. At that time, it had already been administered as the village of Zhiziluo, rather than a county seat, for almost ten years. Bijiang impressed her at the time as an oddly uncanny place at the edge of the encroaching forest. In the summer of 2014, almost 20 years later, in the course of our field research on minority traditional

medicines in Nujiang Prefecture, we started hearing about Bijiang again. Three of the old doctors we interviewed, in their homes and clinics, all much closer to the river, made a special point of recalling their time in Bijiang when it was still a county seat, an important centre of state administration. These doctors had trained and practised in the People's Hospital there; all of them associated Bijiang with the development of their special expertise in knowing and using local herbal medicines. All of them also talked about their experiences of "going into the mountains to gather medicines" around the county seat. These three senior doctors associated Bijiang, and its government hospital and high forests, with a very special part of their lives, which have been significantly devoted to gathering very special medicines. The Bijiang of the past looms large in their oral histories and – we could tell without being told – in their sense of embodied efficacy as healers.

This is not just a place that matters in the fond memories of only three men, however. For one thing, all three of these doctors have been leaders in the delivery of medical services and of development in the prefecture; they have influenced several generations of disciples and students, and their particular combinations of global, national and local medical worlds have been seen, by some at least, as a treasured healing heritage for the area. Yet the particularity of their combinations of knowledge and skills, the specific riches they have gathered and remobilised as healers, is exactly the interesting and uncommon thing about medicine in these mountains. They embody effective skills and local knowledges that have been collected and refined over the decades of their careers as doctors – some of that time, as they love to recall, spent in Bijiang. Such specifically gathered persons, objects and events are the fascinating thing about Bijiang, making it appear as both a commons-place and as an uncommon place (or a non-commonplace).[3]

Yin-Yang Light and Shadow

Philologists argue that the earliest referents for the Chinese terms *yin* and *yang* were the sunny and shady aspects of a hilly landscape. Slopes that are sun-washed in the morning are reached by shadows as the sun's rays shift from east to west; the slopes on the other side of the valley are bright, even as night begins to arrive in the areas that had been bright in the morning. Yang light and yin shade move across the land; every piece of earth is yang some of the time and yin at other times. No fixed spot (a house, a field or a stream) can be lastingly classified as either yang or yin. Diurnal and seasonal yin-yang (light/shade, warming/cooling) oscillations form a natural-cultural temporality that is both cosmic and intimate. The north–south gorge of the Nu River, with its dramatic high mountains hugging both sides of the river, could hardly be a better place to embody yin-yang thinking. We found it an excellent place to reflect on partial connections and the vicissitudes of history and place. We could see the yin shade of secrets and forgetting and unspeakability encroaching uncannily on the edges of the proper and officially known world. Enjoying the dappled sun and shade of the forest's edge in Bijiang, we developed – in habitus, as it were – our common sense of how closely entwined the yin of everyday life in out-of-the-way places and the yang gaze of state agents are. In our invocations of yin-yang below, it should be possible to see that yin and yang aspects of existence arise from each other and are rooted in each other – intimately.[4]

The yin aspect of an oscillating reality should be a simple and mute other to bright yang visibility and assertiveness, operating in parallel and of equal value. In Southern Chinese usage, however, the "yin side" tends to make itself felt as uncanniness: hidden interiority, absence, the shady side of things, the past of the dead and the future of our own death, a zone of unknown dangers becoming evident in everyday life. It is no accident that in China's South, those suspected of sorcery are mostly women, marked as being relatively yin. Folk medicines in the region prefer to "bolster yang" with warming, stimulating and enlivening drugs and techniques. Such methods are useful in the fight against the unpredictable and sluggish powers of "wind-damp," so often seen in Southern diseases (Kramer 2017). Yet yin is a classic supplement, à la Derrida, to yang: there will always be yin things just beneath and behind the yang brightness of the known common world, and this supplement is essential to the configuration of the real (Derrida 1976).

Bijiang/Zhiziluo/The Forest's Edge

As we walked around Bijiang/Zhiziluo in 2014, we shared a sense of uncanniness and even awe. Perhaps what is most important about this place is also the most impossible to capture: every time we try to think of an example of some high mountain thing that escapes the world of common understanding, it quickly re-enters our common-sense commons, appearing as mundane, ordinary, classifiable. Partly because states (and, before that, empires) have been climbing these mountains for a very long time, there is nothing in Bijiang that, on the face of it, remains wild and free and outside of all formal structure. Everything has been seen before – if not by states, then by colonial administrators and military men (Hevia 2012). Credit, too, must be given to those explorers,

traders and forest collectors who climbed these mountains before we did, who established commercial networks and gathered natural histories (Giersch 2006, 170–177; Ma 2014; Mueggler 2011; Yang 2009, 23–41).

Why did Bijiang seem so uncanny and mysterious to us when we visited? Charmed by the place – by the pavement broken by tree roots, by the vines climbing over vacant dormitories – and alert to its "backward"-sliding trajectory, we avidly consumed every bit of history we could find. There are many stories to tell, some of them speculated into plausibility from mere shreds and patches of historical facts; we will return to a few of them. But first, we want to argue that when a sense of the historicity of places and networks is brought to bear on an ethnography that asks after the cultural commons or that seeks the ontopolitical uncommons (Blaser 2010; Pedersen 2011), we can perceive a certain oscillation. Reality swings and sways between the known, explicit, daylight, properly sorted world that can be seen by the state, and the uncertain, emergent, shady, slippery worlds that everyone's life touches but that they do not speak of (much). And this yin-yang oscillation takes place "in time," in the sense that there are phases when yang explicitness and knowability are most manifest for people (anthropologists, government agents, botanists, villagers), and there are phases when almost everything that is important is withdrawn into the yin shade – a matter of ancestors, plants, forest beings, Jesus Christ, and even the now-muted voice of the state.

Ghosts and Ruins

Acting on Lili's fond memories of the place, and its importance in the history of medicine in the Nujiang region, our small group of researchers made a visit to the place now officially called Zhiziluo (知子罗) village.[5] We knew a few things about the site: it had become an important part of the local lore in Nujiang, which tells that after the county seat was consolidated and moved to a riverside town in 1986, the government buildings, schools, hospital and apartment blocks of Bijiang had been rather abruptly abandoned. At that point, one is told by multiple sources that "the mountain villagers came down and occupied" the modern buildings, which were so different from their mostly isolated farmsteads, many of which were located even further uphill. Humorous (or condescending) images circulate, as we learned later that day when Lili found a long newspaper article online about Bijiang. This semi-official history included stories of villagers installing firepits for cooking in second- and third-floor apartments and offices, drunken parties in the vault of the empty bank, corn growing in the courtyard of the old public security bureau, and dances in the meeting room of the Party headquarters.

Even aware of some of this lore, we were not quite prepared for the ghost town quality we felt as soon as we arrived. All of us were accustomed to the bustling "heat and noise" (*renao*) of the county towns, townships and riverside market villages in the Nujiang area; if you have lived and travelled in China for a while, a sudden encounter with a deserted street lined with almost entirely empty buildings feels quite uncanny. "It's a good thing it's not lunchtime," we told each other, as the only businesses we spotted were a minimalist snack stand and a convenience store selling bottled sodas and instant noodles. The ubiquitous freezer box was there, too, and we all bought an ice pop to eat as we wandered down the street. Before long, we had a few ice pop sticks to dispose of; in many villages we would have just thrown them on the ground at the edge of the road, but we suddenly noticed that Bijiang had lots of large urban-style trash containers into which we could dispose of our sticks. Why? This was so un-village-like, and yet how much trash could such a sleepy rural place generate to put into all these big green bins?

The journalistic history we read later provided a partial answer to this rather yin-inflected question.[6] After the reorganisation and departure of the county government in 1986, trash collection and disposal services came to an end. After all, hardly anybody was officially registered to be living there at that point, and the Zhiziluo village committee, like those of other small villages, would have been very short of funds. But people from smaller nearby settlements "moved down" to the town with its ready-made buildings, and the piles of squatter-settlement garbage began to grow. By the early 2000s, the trash had become a public health crisis: the reporter writing the story we read spoke of "24 years without trash pickup" – clearly, as an urbanite, she thought of this situation as a nightmare. Around 2010, it is reported, the county and prefecture intervened and sent phalanxes of garbage trucks up the paved road to the old county seat. In the end, apparently 300 trucks were required to take all the trash away from Bijiang and down to the bottom of the gorge. (Who knows what happened to it after that? Perhaps it was a bonanza for one of the local landfill projects.) After that intervention, regular trash collection was arranged for the village, and trash bins were arranged every 50 metres or so along the main street.

These trash containers are well supplied with the civic slogans so typical of official China:

You, I and everyone under the blue sky: a beautiful environment depends on us all.

蓝天之下你我他/优美环境靠大家

For a lovelier home place, don't throw trash on the ground.

垃圾不落地/家园更美丽

Create a conservation model village; build a beautiful city of memory.

These slogans were not the only evidence of a certain post-urban construction of the place. More official notices along the main street also marked the recent establishment of Zhiziluo village and its environs as a forestry conservation station. As of 2011, we were also informed, the village had become a "cultural protection unit" (*wenwu baohu danwei* 文物保护单位). Clearly, we were not the only spectators trying to see Bijiang/Zhiziluo as both natural and cultural, both a present village and a past city, both a part of the state "cultural" commons and a place surrounded by a vulnerable "environment" needing "conservation." The administrative district, too, seemed to see Bijiang as rather excessively haunted by natural and historical excesses and out-sides.[7]

As we walked through the village, stopping to take pictures of the alleys and pathways that diverged uphill and down from the paved road, we were joined by a retired schoolteacher, who was at first anxious to prevent any of us from going down any of these paths. His advice was a combination of "it's not safe" (slippery, too steep, uneven surface) and "the toilets are down there" (and presumably too dirty for the delicate sensibilities of urbanites like us). He was eager to tell us all about the history of the village and his previous work as a teacher, and he surprised us by sharing that he was still the proud holder of an urban ("non-farmer") *hukou*, or household registration status.[8] Because he was rather drunk and wobbly, however, some of us – perhaps hoping to drink in the magic of the place in our own way – peeled off in other directions to escape from his monologue.

Judith walked to the end of the road and looked through the windows of the locked-up Christian church. There are many Christians in Nujiang Prefecture; Zhiziluo village is in the part of the county with the highest percentage of Christian population anywhere in China.[9] Some of these believers are members of long-standing communities with roots in the mission activities of evangelicals, who moved up into this gorge from the South and Southwest, probably starting around the turn of the twentieth century. The Zhiziluo church can hold a fairly sizable congregation, and it was beautifully cared for – even on this off-day, there was an abundance of fresh flowers inside. As with other churches in the area, signs over the door announced "Christian Church" and "And God So Loved the World …" (神爱世人). Though there is a famous early church just down the Bijiang road, founded by French missionaries at Laomudeng in 1938, Christian churches like this one mostly began to dot the Nujiang gorge area, in villages rather than administrative centres, after the national liberalisation of religion policy in the 1980s. Zhiziluo's village church was built in 2005, long after the county government had moved downhill. The congregation is almost certainly part of a network of churches in the region.[10]

Lili lagged behind our self-invited companion, Mr Li, to take pictures of the mountainsides surrounding the village. Her pictures show that Zhiziluo village is not the only settlement sited so far above the river, though it might be the highest site with so many buildings and its own community hall (about which, more forthcoming). There is a local pattern, perhaps of long standing, of homesteads grouped in very small, usually kin-linked, hamlets, high on the sides of the Nujiang gorge (compare with Leach 1954). We asked people about residing in downhill settlements, and they told us that many people around there still preferred to live in family compounds near their mountain fields and far from the main riverside road. Life is more pleasant in these home places, everyone says: the houses accommodate animals raised for food, and the forest and the fields are easier to get to. Swidden agriculture is still practised to some extent.

But the government has for a long time been trying to resettle these isolated farmers and hunter-gatherers (this is not all they are, of course) into proper, "modern" riverside villages, with cement-floored houses, a collective dining hall, large shared latrines with modern plumbing, bathhouses with showers, and good access to schools, buses, hospitals and proper jobs. This program has resulted in a series of modern-style villages clustered along the Nu River, but most are still uninhabited. These ghost towns of a different sort are weirdly tidy – no trash problem there! – because there are no people living in them. And they are already falling into disrepair after having been built only two or three years ago. Such unnatural villages are a memorial to a thus far failed dream of rational urbanisation, unlike the remains of an actual former city.

The old Bijiang county seat is a different kind of victim of China's urbanisation policy, having been deurbanised as part of a minor trajectory that runs counter to the hegemonic aims of government rural development programs. When it was reorganised and subsumed into two other riverside county seats, the main

argument for this move was the problem of the road: What if there were landslides on that steep and bendy road? A whole county seat would be cut off from the reform period economy, unable to participate in China's much-vaunted process of "getting on track with the world" (*zouxiang shijie* 走向世界). People interested in Bijiang, however, are also quick to point out that since the road was built, and since long after the county seat was moved, there have been no landslides at all on the road to Zhiziluo.

Marshall was the one in our group who most patiently listened to Teacher Li's histories. This voluble local resident, like the doctors we spoke with who had been trained here, derived much of his own sense of the significance of the place from his participation in its state-managed past. Once upon a time, there were lots of children and several schools, with attendant well-educated and globally aware teachers to staff them. Now, all that remains is Teacher Li's registration as a city dweller and his well-lubricated capacity to speak of history and the world.

Marshall and this local guide walked on past the church, following an older track off the paved road, and inspected some cornfields belonging to Teacher Li's daughter. Marshall asked about the possibility of a new road being built through the town. We had been hearing about a plan to build a proper road to the east that would go up over the ridges and switchback down to the major cities of Lijiang and Dali. Some people we asked, including Teacher Li, were sure that the new road would follow the track over the mountains that had been used for generations by mule carriers. If this were to happen, the new road would cut right through Zhiziluo/Bijiang, significantly re-enlivening the place, or perhaps returning it to a certain yang daylight world of full participation in the state and market commons.

Later in the day, the village party secretary of the nearby village of Laomudeng told us that it is actually very unlikely that the road would come through Bijiang. For that reason, he was seeking to develop more rural enterprises – an agribusiness in herbal medicines, or tea plantations – and at the same time to attract tourists to the "ghost city." This gossip reminded us, though, that places like Bijiang have never been isolated; all early accounts of these border regions between Yunnan, China and Northeastern Burma note very thick trade and transport activity, on foot and with pack animals. As early as 1912, a border control outpost was set up at Zhiziluo, which was already functioning as a market site and a node in networks of transport through a rather uncertainly configured border area (Luce 1961). By the time the prefectural government was set up there in 1956, Zhiziluo must have been a very lively and rather heavily populated place. In other words, something was already in place to administer in the eyes of the state of the People's Republic of China when it followed previous occupants uphill.

When we visited in 2014, a troubling future was forcing itself on these upland Nujiang areas, which our companion Gang Yue discovered in multiple conversations during his stay in the prefecture. A system of no less than 13 dams was planned in the Nu River gorge. In 2014, when we were there, most of them were still in the environmental, economic and political research phase, and we have recently heard that some or the whole of the project has been cancelled (again). But the prospect of significant flooding of the Nujiang gorge by these dams promised that the riverside road, the only artery that currently links all settlements of any size, would be submerged. New roads, new towns, new power plants, and new schools and hospitals would have to be built higher up the slopes. Bijiang might once again be closely linked to more urban centres of power, but at a very great social cost. Perhaps it is not surprising that locals like Teacher Li would rather speculate about a new road over the mountains to the eastern metropolis than a future of disastrous entrapment in a world about to be inundated.

At one point, when Marshall was not talking to Teacher Li, he climbed up into the stands of trees above the settlement. As a former coordinator and educator for environmental restoration programs in the US Pacific Northwest, he noticed that this forest was far from primordial; he estimated it had been clear-cut not more than 50 years ago. Still, the encroaching forest looked very dark and deep to the rest of us, and Marshall also received a warning that it was steep, slippery and dangerous up there. The following are some of his notes:

> I went up to near the forest edge past more corn terraces. I encountered almost no one until I got right by the edge of the forest, where I ran into a woman who was sort of puttering around. We had a very limited dialogue, but she suggested that if I went into the forest I should be careful because of slippery slopes/cliffs in the area. I told her I was a mountain-climbing kind of guy, and then she said something I couldn't follow at all. She repeated and pantomimed, at which point I figured out what seemed out of context – she was telling me to be careful where I step when I go into the forest and not step on plants; this she pantomimed by repeatedly stepping on a small forb growing through the cobble in the middle of the path and gesturing at the nearby forest. I've almost never been told this sort of warning in

> China. My assumption was that [this] was indicative of the locals tending/valuing plants (not really surprising). When I asked the woman about the forest's apparent youth, she said this tract of forest was there when she arrived in the 1980s, but it wasn't that big then, but that there were taller, older forests just up the slope.
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> When I walked through the forest, I could see there were signs of digging as well as some signs of picking on a few bushes (didn't look like typical deer/ungulate browse) – but I only did a very quick/short survey, going maybe 100 [metres] into the forest. Also on my way down to meet the others, I passed some plants laid out on a flat rock in between several trees.

Clearly, the senior doctors we had talked with, who had trained in Bijiang, were not the last residents to go up into the mountains to gather medicines. Local people were still climbing into the forest to protect, collect and process medicinal plants, laying them out to dry in sunny dry spots as they climbed. Note that Marshall found his forest adviser, this grandma figure, "puttering" at forest's edge – bearing in mind that in this place, the edges of the forest are quite frayed and indistinct and that the forest is invading the town like that "small forb growing through the cobble." His phrasing above indicates that, as a visitor, he did not know exactly what she was doing there and probably would have had some difficulty finding out in any detail, even had he been able to speak with her more effectively. Maybe she didn't even know exactly what she was doing there; cornfields don't need much tending in these parts in midsummer, so perhaps she was looking idly for some wild greens (*yecai* 野菜), which thrive in the mixed sun and shade at the edges of spaces used by humans, for a midday meal. She didn't venture to accompany Marshall as a forest guide as he wandered off the path, but whatever it was she was up to, she was clearly a person who often inhabited the "wild" forest. Also, she was encountered in a part of the village where the reversions of settlement to wildness and the incursions of civilisation into the forest were particularly obvious. This was a place, a person and an encounter that was neither yin nor yang but rather a particular relation between these processual poles.

The Yang State and the Yin Forest

Thus far, we have been emphasising the Bijiang that seemed, to us, to be far advanced in its process of withdrawing toward the uncommons, becoming other than the yang world of state administrative hierarchies and modernising progress. This, however, is not yet an entirely persuasive image. Even in Southwestern mountainous China, or in China's part of Zomia, the state has been climbing mountains very effectively for a long time; even in Zhiziluo village, it is still doing so. Even though on the weekend day we visited, the village committee office, the health station and the church were closed and locked up, we could not have pretended that this settlement was not functioning as a proper village, at least in the eyes of the state. Throughout China, a village is a definite thing: the fundamental unit of government. It has certain paperwork responsibilities, it must have a few elected or appointed officials working at least part time, and it must deliver services and undertake projects with money that occasionally arrives from levels above. We found a perfect example of Zhiziluo's official village status on a big green sign recording a 2010–11 development project organised by the township (which is located down at the river's edge): Zhiziluo received funding for "28 households, 106 pigs, 1 bulletin board," amounting to a total grant of about USD $24,000. This sounds a lot like a "natural village," to adopt a Chinese term. The unoccupied buildings, the weeds breaking through concrete, and the vines growing over rubble – these are not exactly a case of nature overtaking history and culture; rather, when the place is seen to be continuously working as a natural village, the invading vegetation and collapsed roofs are nothing but meaningless, excess objects on their way to becoming trash. This is how the state would see such things, anyway.

Yet locals persist in experiencing this settlement not as a natural village with a few extra features but as a "lost city." Indeed, one common name for the place is 废城 *feicheng*, the abandoned city, also translatable as the scrapped, or discarded, or ruined, or trashed city.[11] Surely, this widespread sense of the continuing presence of past glories informs the event and the narrative of trash management that we mentioned above. Memory contributes to the sense of uncanniness being cultivated in this "thrown-away" city. The rubbish containers now dotted along Zhiziluo's main street mark the continuing presence of a government that can move unwanted stuff away from rural settlements and dispose of it more or less properly elsewhere in the regional and national grid. The garbage trucks that still make their ways up and down the long road to Bijiang are thus repurifying not the administrative naturalness of present-day Zhiziluo village but – as the trash bins announce – "conserving … a beautiful city of memory."

There are, perhaps, many ways to stabilise this discarded city in our account. Even though the paved road ends in a cul-de-sac at the church, we are sure that Zhiziluo, as a node in networks of travel and transport, still locally anchors both licit and illicit flows of

people, forest products and contraband across the river, up the mountains and back down again to the big cities of Western Yunnan. As a node in a network, then, Bijiang may evade the direct control of state agencies, but it nevertheless participates in market logics and far-flung exchanges. Moreover, as a beautiful memory, Bijiang can be classified – made predictable – through tourism. Tourism became an issue for us on our visit when we noticed a couple of other strangers in town: a young trekking couple also touring the "ghost town." We had been hoping to find a village official to talk to about Bijiang's hoped-for future – the new road, economic development, forest and environmental protection programs and so on. Failing that, we stopped at another village, Laomudeng, on the way down the hill. There, we found the village head and party secretary at home in his "Farm Family Inn." He showed us his two spiffy guest rooms and talked about his plans for establishing highland agribusinesses in the area: tea plantations and herbal medicine farms. Though their plans are often frustrated – tourism is hardly a stable economic base for an area so remote from all capitals and accessed by a road that is so often blocked, and herbal medicines are notoriously difficult to discipline into plantations – dynamic rural leaders like this are good at suturing even "discarded" places into the national narrative of development.

But perhaps the most important stabilisation of Bijiang is historical: as a seat of government known for its strategic location on the border (there was once a customs office), its provision of modern medicine and medical education to the national hinterlands, its long-standing role in forestry management, and its China-oriented cosmopolitanism, Bijiang occupies a place in the official history of Nujiang. As such, the city is securely written into the past, as it was in the newspaper article we hunted up.

Chairman Mao's Bijiang

The past that led up to the reorganisation in 1986 was markedly "Chinese" or national, not just Zomian or regional. This national history has its own forms of embedded uncanniness. This point brings us to the final stop on our stroll through the town. Shortly before Bijiang was abolished, the county leadership built an impressive pagoda-style building to house a public library, just adjacent to the schools. Fronted by a plaza to be used for dancing and games (such as basketball and roller-skating), and hemmed in by government buildings several stories high, this pleasant space would have hosted the hot and noisy (*renao* 热闹) community life of a true county-level city. Around that same time, nearby blank walls were painted with portraits of Mao Zedong and quotes of his thoughts, rendered in his famous calligraphy. It has been almost 30 years, though, since the project was completed. Even when Lili was there in 1995, the posters were peeling and fading, the revolutionary sentiments on the walls seemed irrelevant and outmoded, and there was no seating in the pagoda's main floor meeting room. The Maoist state, the People's Republic of China, which had been administratively grounded in county towns like Bijiang with their yang "heat and noise" (*renao*), was fading from the strangely yin "cool and quiet" (*lengqing* 冷清) village of Zhiziluo.

A two-story-high painting of Chairman Mao is peeling from one wall of the former school; nearby, a classic image of the chairman as "the red sun in our hearts" gazes from greying eyes over the empty plaza. These remnants are the very picture of Bijiang's yangness gone yin. Such images of Mao locate the great leader as the warm and brilliant sun, rays of yang light emanating from his benign face. Still visible among the ruins is the magic of the state that once provided a totalising language for existence, generating a sunlight glare that seemed to reveal every thing or object in its knowable truth. And while before 1986, the gaze of the painted chairman scrutinised a great deal of official activity just below its high position in the town plaza, now his disintegrating eyes look down on very little beyond the encroaching weeds. The active centre of the village seems to have shifted to the other end of town, where the tidy little Christian church marks the end of the road.

There is no doubt that Bijiang is now less in the commons than it used to be. It seems to be unravelling from the all-China formation so carefully marked by border places like this, which were effectively Chinese even at these remote peripheries. This sense of an oscillating inward process, a withdrawal toward the shadows in these lush mountains, this yin-yang interaction that produces an ontological outer side to "the state" (Bennett 2010), turns our attention not so much to the unspeakable, unknowable other or the anarchic "different" of rural or mountain culture; rather, it makes us wonder even more about the intimate yin-yang oscillations within state regimes, then and now. Which things and processes escaped the gaze of the government in Bijiang, even in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s? Is there a more extensive escape in play now, a wider zone of freedom from state domination? At least the mountain rambles of our old doctor friends, as they searched around Bijiang for local herbal and animal medicines to enhance and localise their healing skills, were never incorporated into any

official histories. Even if official histories of public health in the prefecture and province note that herb-gathering was an official part of formal health education while Bijiang was an administrative centre, the knowledge that developed in that "field research" has mostly remained silent and local. Indeed, we suspect that some kinds of practical knowledge about forest products are really explained to nobody: it is just put to use.

Like the elderly woman Marshall found puttering at forest's edge, warning possibly clumsy human feet away from plants on the forest floor, the healers trained in Bijiang forged relationships with the wild creatures that thrived in the dark and damp of the yin forest. They learned to both protect and exploit the forest world, and they taught only a certain amount of this understanding to only a few disciples and some short-term health school trainees. Despite the best efforts of some biopiratical ethnobotanists we know, notwithstanding Laomudeng village's plan to grow tea and marketable medicines in new plantations on these slopes, and even within the scientific forestry programs in place, this kind of knowledge continues to escape all official grasp. The plucked leaves Marshall saw drying on a rock between trees just above the village are our trace-like evidence that the yin qualities of an uncommon place are still swinging and swaying into and out of view. Yang visibility slips into yin silence, and a yin congealing of substance makes the dark world in which natures-cultures can grow toward the morning yang sun.

Conclusion

One of the three Bijiang-trained doctors we met was Dr Hu (a pseudonym), the ex-prospective father-in-law of our local assistant in Nujiang Prefecture.[12] Dr Hu told us a lot about Bijiang and his youthful education there. But the language of the anthropological commons failed us: we found that the most interesting things we learned from Dr Hu are the hardest to properly grasp.

Dr Hu is 78 years old now. His career as a health professional began when he was 26, in 1963, just as the barefoot doctor program was being designed and expanded.[13] He was lucky to be chosen to participate in a series of medical training courses, one of them at Bijiang and another in the relatively big city of Lijiang to the east. Between 1975 and 1986, he was on the hospital staff at Bijiang, but with the reorganisation, he moved downhill to another county hospital. He had been retired from that job for 26 years when we met.

Dr Hu barely spoke standard modern Chinese ("the common speech," *putonghua* 普通话). His hearing is quite impaired, though he does well with the voices of people he knows well, such as our research assistant Li Na and his own family members. (In other words, his communicative life has a notable yin side.) At our initial interview, he warned us that he remembered very little and would probably be useless to us; still, he made an effort, and we learned much from him. What he dragged up into articulate awareness for us were the kinds of facts and recollections that gain importance as you reflect on them. Dr Hu's fond memories of practising herbal medicine in Bijiang – for example, his love of gathering forest drugs and his training of younger health workers – gained significance for us as we reviewed our notes. During our initial interview with him – in his son's county town apartment, where he and his wife were looking after their young granddaughter – he even told Lili, "I forgot I knew all this stuff, but when you come here asking questions, I find I can remember a lot."

Still, Dr Hu is in a forgetting mode. Much of what he once knew is slipping into the yin shade of an embodied unconscious. Perhaps because he has written a handbook of his best clinical rules of thumb for his son's eventual use, he may feel it is no longer necessary for him to convey information in conversation. He still sees the occasional patient, however, and runs an herbal dispensary in his home in Pihe Xiang, a roadside and riverside small town; we visited him there after he returned home from his son's county seat apartment.

Pharmacies like Dr Hu's exist in a grey area of the law in rural China. A national law that requires all medical practitioners to be licensed was passed in 1999. Dr Hu had already retired by then, so he probably made little effort to sit for the medical examinations required for licensing; he also met with little, if any, opposition to maintaining a medical practice from his own small-town pharmacy. After all, everyone knew that he had been well trained for primary care in official hospitals. In the eyes of a development-oriented state, however, allowing informal medical practice would, in theory, be inconsistent with the policy aim of "getting on track with the world" (与世界接轨). Although Dr Hu was able to shift his medical practice into the relatively yin interiorities of his private clinic (albeit on a market street), he seems nostalgic for his hospital (and Bijiang) years when everything medical fell under the red sun – very yang! – of socialist health policy.

To be sure that we were on the right side of the law (in this border county, where we had encountered some public security bureau nervousness), when we arrived in Pihe Xiang, we checked in at the police station across the street from Dr Hu's house to tell the authorities

whom we were visiting. The police waved us away, not even checking our identity papers. Presumably, they had no worries about Dr Hu, even though he was a proselytising Christian evangelist and had no licence to dispense herbal medicines. (There is a kind of yin-yang relationship going on across that market street in Pihe Xiang: the public security bureau can see this old-time village resident's private and non-legal engagements with local people's bodies and souls, but they look the other way.)

Dr Hu unlocked the door of his street-front pharmacy, where in the dim light we could see signs of recent use, despite the dust that had settled on everything from the road traffic just outside. The drawers of his old cabinets (one of them brought down from the Bijiang hospital years before) were well stocked with herbals; the prescription pad was at the ready. Perhaps most emblematic – and the note on which we want to end this account of yin-yang historicity in a border region river gorge – was the moth-eaten pangolin skin hanging on the wall.

The trade in pangolins for medicinal use is now illegal, and pangolin scales as medicines are expensive and hard to find (approaching the uncommons, one could say). This one, Dr Hu told us, he had acquired from the official drugs depot while he was in Bijiang, and he's been using it for prescriptions, scale by scale, in the decades since.[14] Because some scales had been removed from the tail end of the pelt, it was looking rather mangy. When he saw our interest, Dr Hu opened a drawer and enthusiastically fetched out a few individual roasted pangolin scales. He was still using these as ingredients to be decocted with other medicines and combined to make up all manner of tonics.

Dr Hu's clientele was, at the time, pretty sporadic, mostly consisting of neighbours and family members with chronic illnesses who had given up on the methods of hospital biomedicine. We imagine that these few intimates entered the cool yin shade of his dim and dusty clinic seeking his forest medicines and his understanding, embodied beyond speakable memory. They do not care that his service is not entirely legal and that he is not even able to hear everything that they say. Dr Hu, like many aging healers in these mountain regions, is slowly swinging toward the yin after a long life in the yang world of official public health.

His is the generation for whom Bijiang was formative of their skills, partly because it was a place where forest powers, like those of the pangolin, could be personally engaged with; it was a place where the yin of the forest and the yang of the town, the yin of healing interiorities and the yang of the visible state – painted on so many walls – were in constant play. Bijiang's pre-Maoist past as a stopping place for traders and smugglers, a place well known to travelling herbalists, a town of many nature-cultures vividly encountering each other, was forgotten when "Chairman Mao, the red sun in our hearts" began to gaze down upon the hot and noisy county seat. After 32 years as an administrative centre, Bijiang slipped into being a place that was once again in the peripheral vision of the state, where the bank vault has been repurposed for raucous drinking and the trash is sometimes forgotten about. But yin always gives birth to yang, and yang always gives birth to yin. Will Bijiang go the tourist route and return to the official world? Will Dr Hu eventually join the unremembered ghosts who make this former centre so uncanny?

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Notes

1 Marshall Kramer has been exploring nature-cultures on the Myanmar side of the border for a few years, as well.

2 Zhiziluo is the name of the settlement that was once named Bijiang. Between 1954 and 1986, Bijiang, sited at Zhiziluo, was first the prefectural capital and then a county seat administering lower level townships (*xiang*) and villages (*cun*); the prefectural capital moved to the city of Liuku in 1973, and the lower level units are, since 1986, all divided between two adjacent counties that have county seats far below historic Bijiang, by the river's edge. The county offices are now gone from Zhiziluo, and the settlement is administered – rather lackadaisically, it appeared to us – as a village, the lowest-level administrative unit in the Chinese state.

3 On gathering, see Latour and Weibel (2005) and Heidegger (1971).

4 The "dialectical" character of modern uses of yin-yang logic has been discussed by Farquhar (1994) and by all authors of Chinese medical "basic theory" textbooks published in China between the 1950s and the 1990s. Maoism's understanding of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics is not quite the same as the philosophy of history developed in Europe, tending to presume a nature-culture unity and borrowing from Engels's (1940) *The Dialectics of Nature*.

5 Our group consisted of the three authors and Gang Yue (professor of Asian Studies, University of North Carolina).

6 Lili Lai has argued that the "trash problem" associated with China's underserved villages has produced an "uncanny new village" (Lai 2016). Trash, or the undesired by-product of urban hygiene, has become a form of dirt in the countryside that uncannily reveals what has been repressed in the urban process of modernisation, which at

the same time constantly overwhelms all "rural" people's attempts to avoid being polluted by it.

7 See Bennett (2010) on the concept of "wild out-sides." Her discussion is consistent with our use of "the yin side" of things in this paper.

8 On the importance of household registration and the system's distinction between "farmer" and "non-farmer" citizens, see Brown (2012), Chan (2009), Kipnis (1997), Lai (2016) and Whyte (1995).

9 Nujiang's 2010 census records 342 churches and over 70,000 registered Christians over 18 years of age among Fugong County's total population of 90,000.

10 In Nujiang, we were working through a rather notably Christian network, and our local student assistant frequently told us about a Christian pastor who was a renowned faith healer and self-trained herbalist. We finally had a chance to visit him. While he elaborately prepared an herbal plaster for a patient with an old leg injury, the pastor spoke with us about his ministry and his healing practice. While his patient waited, she was shown Bible stories and sermons on DVDs; these widely available materials come across the border from "lawless" Myanmar. This pastor's reputation and his practice suggested a mode of existence that was escaping state proprieties and, up to a point, evading state control. This is one reason we classified "Jesus Christ" on the yin side in our discussion above.

11 A 2009 fiction film about Zhiziluo, directed by Zhao Dayong, was titled *Feicheng*; it is available in English under the title *Ghost Town*. Like our discussion of Bijiang's uncommons, the film emphasised memory and marginality in the squatter resettlement.

12 Thanks are due to Li Na, an MA student in anthropology at Yunnan University, whose family is of Lisu nationality and lives in the Fugong area of Nujiang Prefecture. Li Na speaks the Lisu language and, during our visit, was the former fiancée of Dr Hu's son.

13 Dr Hu began his working life as an accountant, and his given name (probably self-chosen) means "computing surpluses."

14 One of the handmade drug manuals in use for local trainings during Dr Hu's earliest years of medical practice reports that pangolin scales are a cooling medicine that can dissipate blood stasis and remove channel obstructions (散血通綌), lessen swelling (消肿), evacuate pus (排脓) and promote lactation (通乳). Now that this medicine has become rare and illegal, it has, predictably perhaps, become known in some areas as a virility enhancer as well.

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