

OUT OF THE MOUNTAINS

Changing Landscapes
in Rural China

Zhen Wang



Transformations in
Environment and Society

2018 / 2

Liangshan (凉山) is a mountainous region in Southwest China characterized by its diverse range of scenic landscapes. It also contains a large percentage of China's ethnic minority communities, including the largest population of Yi, who have resided in the region for over 3,000 years. Over this period, Zhen Wang argues, Yi culture has evolved together with the surrounding environments of Liangshan. In the last four decades, however, the People's Republic of China has undertaken radical economic development projects in the region under the banner of "building a new socialist countryside." Using a collection of photos, maps, and interviews with current Liangshan residents, Wang looks in detail at how these nearly 40 years of urbanization and rapid economic development have transformed the past, present, and future of the Yi and of China's rural and cultural landscapes.

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Preface

Christof Mauch

China's Liangshan Mountains: Vanishing Cultural Landscapes?

One day in late November 2016, Zhen Wang, a young professor from Huazhong University of Science and Technology in China, and a visiting scholar at the Rachel Carson Center (RCC), came to my office to discuss the project that she was working on. I found it curious that Zhen, who taught at a School of Architecture and Urban Planning, began to tell me about livelihoods in a nonurban remote and mountainous region of southwestern China; and about an ethnic group, the Yi people in Sichuan Province, to which she apparently had no personal ties. What was her fascination with this place?

I had visited several regions of China but never Sichuan, and the name of the legendary “Province of Abundance” reminded me mostly of the delicious cuisine that has its origins in that region. Knowing so little, I was intrigued to learn that dozens of different ethnic groups lived in the beautiful mountainous areas of Sichuan Province; that the group that Zhen and her students studied, the Yi, was the largest of those ethnic groups; and that Yi communities were known for their unique cultural practices and festivals. Zhen’s vivid descriptions of the Liangshan (凉山) mountains, of their fragility and beauty, and of the unique Yi culture had made me curious. And so just as she was about to leave my office, I asked her—fortunately, as I know today—whether she had any pictures of the region. When I saw the striking array of photographs that her students had taken, I was truly captivated: by the bright colors of the heavy clothing that protect the Yi from sharp mountain winds; by the graceful faces worn from life and work and weather; by the simplicity of Yi architecture; by the diversity of festivities and customs; and by the beauty of a rugged landscape that bears the traces of animal life and the marks of thousands of years of human cultivation.

It did not take long before Zhen and I came up with the idea of exhibiting a selection of photographs from the Liangshan mountains in the corridors of the Rachel Carson Center. Her exhibition became the first photographic exhibition designed by an RCC fellow. Others have followed: the RCC has since seen exhibitions on forest commons in the Romanian Carpathians (by Monica Vasile) and on cultural and natural monuments

in Albania (by Merita Dollma). Zhen Wang, however, was the one who started this tradition. This issue of *RCC Perspectives* is based on the 2017 exhibition of Zhen's photographs. It is the first photo essay we've done for *RCC Perspectives*. My colleagues and I felt that photographs, accompanied by an interpretive essay, were particularly well suited to document, analyze, and understand the hauntingly swift disappearance of traditional cultural landscapes such as those in Sichuan.

"Out of the Mountains" is published at the very time when China is changing more quickly and more thoroughly than any other country on the globe—and changing irreversibly. The year 2011 marked a watershed moment, when the rural population of China ceased to be a majority. In 2017, no less than 58 percent of China's population was living in cities, up from under 18 percent in 1978. Many have moved from high mountain regions to lower areas. At the same time, enormous cities have sprung up in the mountains: Sichuan's capital, Chengdu, with more than 14 million inhabitants is a case in point. The title of this volume also points to China's unique character when it comes to mountains. Seventy percent of China's land surface consists of mountains, hills, and highland plateaus. No other large country on Earth has such a high proportion of people living in mountains. On average, 1 in 10 people globally call mountains their home; in China, 4.5 out of 10 people inhabit mountainous regions.

Mountains shelter almost half of the world's terrestrial biodiversity. They hold tremendous resources of water, food, and energy. But mountainous areas have also, particularly over the last two decades, seen a rapid decline in arable land. In China in particular, mountains are home to vast and diverse cultural treasures. Ethnic minority villages are typically located in mountains, and their distinct traditions have contributed to the environmental stability of rural communities for hundreds or thousands of years. In fact, mountain villages have shown themselves to be considerably less prone to ecological and economic disturbances than urban environments. Recent social change, however, alongside agendas of industrialization and urbanization, has challenged the power of local sustainability. Construction activities and pollution have contributed to the vanishing of age-old cultural landscapes, to the weakening of mountain communities, and to the loss of ethnic worlds. Much of this change has come as a result of a policy that pushed for structural change in order to prevent economic slowdown and serious unemployment. Small-scale mountain farmers were regarded as unproductive; big farming companies and industry were seen, in contrast, as driving the economy.

Zhen's essay and her photographs are testimony to the ongoing cultural and environmental change in Liangshan. It shows how easier access to transportation, and modern technologies in telecommunication, agriculture, and industry are about to modify the face of a once-remote region. Above and beyond that, her essay discusses one of the biggest cultural challenges that China faces in the twenty-first century. It asks—through words and images—how economically poor but ecologically and culturally rich vernacular landscapes might be preserved into the future. Should they become fallows? Tourist sites? To what extent is industrialization compatible with cultural heritage? Is the world of the Yi people doomed to be forever lost? Or is there a way of preserving age-old traditions and living landscapes in a world that is urbanizing at a record speed in the mountains of southwest China and beyond?



Introduction

Liangshan (凉山) is a mountainous region in southwest China spread over 60,423 square kilometers and occupying much of the southern part of Sichuan Province. Along with its exceptionally diverse range of scenic landscapes and climatic conditions, it also contains a large percentage of China's ethnic minority communities, including the largest population of Yi (彝族) in the country, numbering around 2.65 million in 2016. The Yi are one of the region's most ancient ethnic groups, having resided there for over 3,000 years. Throughout this long history, their culture has evolved together with the surrounding environment. Liangshan is not merely the physical environment in which Yi communities have settled and grown, but a cultural landscape that has shaped—and been shaped by—the cultures of those living in it. As the Yi developed diverse ways of obtaining food and building shelters, and founded static settlements in order to control their own environments and resources, changes in nature influenced their cultural, spiritual, and intellectual activities, and these activities in turn have affected the natural environment.

Such relationships are revealed in the wealth of human-made and natural features evident in Liangshan's traditional settlements. Modified landscapes display recognizable and repeated elements that differ among regions, such as terraced hillsides, vineyards, orchards, or grazing pastures, all reflecting unique histories of transformation. Over the past four decades, however, traditional villages and rural landscapes in regions like Liangshan have undergone irreversible changes under the pressures of China's rapid industrialization and urbanization—a process that started with the famous four-character policy (改革开放), literally translated as “reform and opening up,” promulgated by Deng Xiaoping. More than half of the country's population has since migrated from rural to urban areas, leaving behind not just the physical markers of their past lives and the landscapes that they affected, but also the traces of their ancient cultures. As a result, unique cultural landscapes and accounts of their long and rich histories are now being lost at unprecedented rates.

Only very recently has interest in these largely isolated and forgotten areas increased. As urban dwellers are discovering the nostalgic desire to escape from the bustle of the city and to experience a rural life, they are turning increasingly to China's ethnic minority rural areas for a taste of the bucolic rhythms of a simpler time, and for a local world

Figure 1:
A bride and brides-
maids dressed in
traditional Yi clothing
© Jun-hui Xiang,
2016



Figure 2:
A Yi woman wearing traditional dress sits in a public square in one of the new Yi villages built by the Chinese government.
© Zhe Cheng, 2016

replete with colorful songs, dances, and clothing, as well as clean water, pure air, and expansive views. It is these strong ancient links between beautiful mountain landscapes and unique—now rare—minority customs that together form the primary attraction to tourists. However, during my research team's fieldwork in the area, we were deeply struck by the number and scale of industrial developments already transforming these traditional landscapes. The contrast between the beautiful natural environments of Liangshan and the unexpected evidence of damage caused by larger-scale human activities was startling. The demolition of forests and other habitats had significantly harmed local landscapes and ecosystems, resulting in drought, desertification, and water contamination, among other problems.

There was evident outward migration from the villages, sparking questions about the relationship between the “new” enterprises in the region and local ethnic minority communities such as the Yi, as well as about the potential for future employment, tourism, and conservation. It should be noted that—running against the grain of the idealized simplicity and draw of rural life—the remote and difficult conditions that have favored the development of the Yi's distinct culture are also the source of difficulties in their everyday lives. Historically, they have been poverty stricken. Their communities lack infrastructure, basic sanitary facilities, adequate health care, and rehabilitation services. Their houses still lack private toilets and bathrooms. In many cases, livestock share living spaces with people, and so the Yi are accustomed to placing crude toilets within livestock pens. Because of the low output of their traditional cultivation methods, their remote location, and the prohibitive costs of transporting crops to market, it is now difficult for the Yi to earn a living from farming, despite favorable climatic conditions. Work opportunities in the villages keep decreasing.

In 2014, with such issues and processes of transformation in mind, I began my research on the changing landscapes of ethnic minority villages in southwest China. Since 2016, this project has been sponsored by the State Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of China, and it was in November of that year that our research team set out to Liangshan to visit 21 families in eight villages, across three townships within the region. On our way, we took care to photograph the evidence of rural development policies as well as their consequences for local landscapes and cultures.

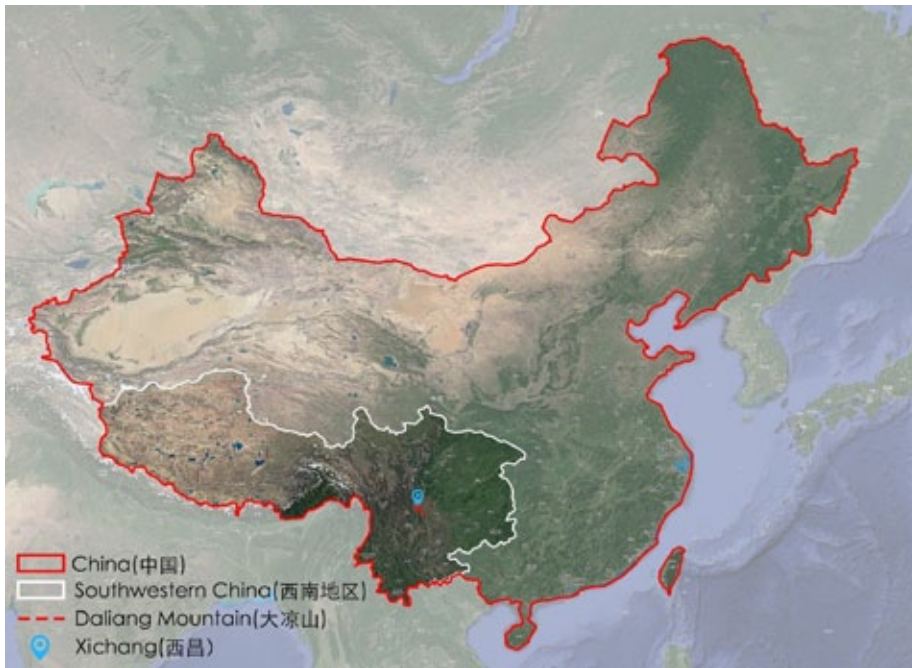


Figure 3:
A map of the research area
in Liangshan (大凉山)
© Xiao-chang Hu, 2017

The first site we visited was Xichang (西昌), located in the center of the valley of the Anning River (安宁河), the largest river in the Liangshan area and Western Sichuan Plateau. It contains nearly half of China's minority populations across 12 Yi minority counties, and is also an important political, economic, cultural, and transportation center for Yi people. Puge (普格) County was the second site on our field trip. It is dominated by Yi people, who make up over 75 percent of the population. Located in the east of Liangshan, it covers part of the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau. Mid- to high-ranging mountains deeply cut the whole area, with the Luojishan Nature Reserve (螺髻山自然保护区)

crowning the peak of Sichuan's most famous tourist area. The richness of environmental resources makes Puge famous for forestry, mining, and animal husbandry. Meigu (美姑) County was the third area of our trip, as well as the most difficult to reach, as it lies deep in the mountains of the Dafengding Nature Reserve (大封顶自然保护区), an important panda habitat that can only be accessed for a few months each summer before it becomes cut off by heavy snow. The landscapes within our research area are therefore complex and diverse, including high mountains, deep valleys, basins, and hills, all interlaced with each other and sheltering not only the secrets of traditional Yi settlements, but also more unexpected modern developments.



Figure 4:
The Anning River is the largest river in the Liangshan area and the Western Sichuan Plateau. It is normally dry throughout the year.
© Zhen Wang, 2016

Observing and documenting along the way, our research team compiled abundant resources on Liangshan's changing rural environments. We looked in particular detail at scenes illustrating recent and rapid changes to landscapes and land use resulting from the reform policies of the late 1970s; at transformations to the daily lives and social structures of ethnic minority communities; and at the new waves of outward migration and cultural tourism. Using a selection of photographs, in this volume of *Perspectives* I want to present some of these recent changes to Liangshan's cultural landscapes as well as their consequences. The aim of this work is to further develop understandings of how the everyday lives and environments of China's minority peoples have been transformed by nearly 40 years of rapid urbanization and radical economic development policies.

Hopefully, such a rare record will prove valuable to various fields and disciplines by, for example, shedding light on the possible effects of rural developments on future cultural tourism—activities of ever-growing economic importance in the Chinese countryside. Additionally, because cultural landscapes concern the physical representation of human activities on the Earth's surface, we want to highlight the importance of this concept as a relevant dimension in studies of the Anthropocene. Analyzing cultural landscapes in rural China in the context of the Anthropocene may assist in identifying and improving flawed development models as well as facilitating valuable interdisciplinary scholarship and collaboration. As the legacies of the close ties between ethnic groups like the Yi and the landscapes they have inhabited become overwritten by modern developments at rates and scales hereto unforeseen, and as the effects of these developments on such cultural landscapes become obscured and intangible, it could be that archives and documented accounts such as this may be the only way of distinguishing them in the future. More simply, I hope that this record of the little-known, long, and rich life histories of Liangshan's cultures will help ensure they do not fade away completely as they travel, with their people, out of the mountains.



Trading the Land

My first encounter with cultural landscapes in China occurred on a cold and wet February day in 2014, when I visited an ethnic minority village in a mountainous area of Mabian Yi Autonomous County, Sichuan Province. I was deeply struck by the conflict between the beautiful natural landscape and the effects of human-made environmental destruction. I saw the startling evidence of what seemed to be irrational endeavors that had traded environmental health and beauty for short-term economic growth: dams used by small, privately owned hydropower plants had disrupted the flow of rivers; mountains and hills had been cut open for mining and highway construction; and increasing numbers of new but ugly modern concrete structures stood alongside hundreds of old, run-down vernacular buildings, which nevertheless retained a much more harmonious relationship with the natural and cultural environments around them.

In China's rural mountainous regions, human influence on the landscape can be varied: quarrying, mining, the dredging of river sands, over-cultivation of farmland, land reclamation, deforestation, and other activities have all degraded the rural environment, causing serious harm to biological diversity. This degradation is the result of not only the intensity of new developments, but also of larger changes to the country's entire socioeconomic structure.¹

Alongside its nationwide economic reform policies, the state has instituted a series of new laws, codes, and norms for development over the last several decades that have aimed to promote rural economies and to strengthen environmental protection. At the same time, local people have been eager to develop their own regional economies and accelerate poverty reduction. However, these new opportunities also bring fresh challenges and conflicts, compounding the problems that rural people are already facing, such as the persistent and combined effects of water, air, and soil pollutants, invasions of undesirable foreign species into agricultural ecosystems, and other issues brought on by rural development.

Figure 5:
This farmer has recently moved into a new house built as part of the Chinese government's recently instituted "targeted poverty alleviation" project. Above him hangs a bundle of corn, a main staple of Yi agriculture.
© Xiao-chang Hu, 2016

1 For an analysis of the relationship between socioeconomic structures and landscape changes, see: M. F. Schnitz et al., "Relationship between Landscape Typology and Socioeconomic Structure: Scenarios of Change in Spanish Cultural Landscape," *Ecological Modelling* 168 (2003): 343–56, especially 344.

Multilevel Policies and Projects



Figure 6: Two elderly villagers sit in front of their home, which has been marked with a demolition (拆) notice. Under the government's rural development project, many old homes have been destroyed in order to build new ones in their place.
© Zhe Cheng, 2016

To understand recent changes to Liangshan's landscape, it is important to have a sense of the history of economic transformation in China. China's history as an advanced agricultural civilization stretches back thousands of years. Long considered one of the world's largest and most progressive economies, it faced several periods of stagnation and decline between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. Forty years ago, in a political shift away from Soviet Union-based social control and policy, China embarked on a new era of economic reform—one that has significantly transformed rural agriculture, settlements, and cultures. Motivated by the top-down policies of reformists within the Communist Party of China and pushed forward by Deng Xiaoping, this famous venture consisted of two principal components: industrialization and urbanization. The first two stages of the "reform and opening up" policy resulted in 20 years of developments involving more open ventures with foreign investment and the breaking up of long-established agricultural collectives. The reforms extended from several example cities (such as Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Xiamen) outwards to almost the entire country. Upon realizing that its policies would never be truly successful without the joint development of urban and rural areas, the government issued new strategies to eliminate poverty and to help develop rural economies.



Figure 7:
An old house in a traditional Yi village that has been newly decorated as part of the “new socialist countryside” project. Corn hangs outside its walls to dry.
© Zhe Cheng, 2016

In 2006, China’s eleventh Five-Year Plan, dubbed by party officials in Beijing as “building a new socialist countryside” (社会主义新农村), foregrounded the need for democratic administration, increased productivity, and more civilized villages, livelihoods, and social atmospheres in rural China. It also proposed extending agricultural chains, which would allow farmers to benefit from processing, preserving, storing, and transporting their own produce. This was followed by a new national “targeted poverty alleviation” (精准扶贫) project, launched in 2015 by China’s central government and led by President Xi Jinping. With the aim of eliminating poverty by 2020, the government has since dedicated huge sums of money to improving rural infrastructure and living standards. Ten key elements underpin the project’s aims: building village roads (村级道路畅通), ensuring safe drinking water (饮水安全), supplying electricity (电力保障), restoring dilapidated housing (危房改造), increasing income (特色产业增收), promoting rural tourism (乡村旅游扶贫), education (教育), health and family planning (卫生和计划生育), cultural development (文化建设), and constructing an information network for poor villages (贫困村信息化). To lift people out of poverty, the government has worked together with organizations and private donors to invest billions of yuan towards creating models of change through the development of sectors like tourism, housing, mobility, and education.

Increasing numbers of specialists, such as architects, urban planners, landscape architects, and environmental advocates, are volunteering in rural revitalization projects aimed at building the “new socialist countryside.” And more sustainably, people are attempting to find and link useful resources and build up business chains with the aim of creating job opportunities for local people. This has led, for example, to farmers partnering with investors to sell locally grown and organic agricultural products online.

These past 40 years of policy implementation have indeed led to unprecedented growth in China. The radical new economic turns have resulted in immense changes in Chinese society: more than four hundred new cities and towns have been constructed throughout the country, not only converting more than half of the population from rural to urban living, but affecting social life and culture along the way. These policies have also forced dramatic changes upon the rural landscape.

Land-Use Changes

In 1955, the Chinese government established a collective farming system whereby farmland was collectively owned and meted out to farmers in 30-year lease contracts. This system ended in 1982, when a wave of rural economic reform reallocated land to individual households, giving villagers more freedom to use their land for different economic activities, such as tobacco-leaf and sugarcane plantations, or silkworm cultivation. The more recent, rapid development of China’s urban economy then drove vast numbers of farmers to abandon their land and to migrate to cities in search of work. Few have since reinvested in their former agricultural fields. The huge swathes of “sleeping” land left all over the countryside led the Chinese government to issue a landmark policy document in 2008, which aimed to further rural reforms and development. Whereas under the 1982 reforms, farmers who had contracted land were only allowed to cultivate it themselves, one of the biggest moves of the new policy was to permit farmers to lease their land or transfer their land-use rights to other individuals or to companies. This move, which sought to boost the scale of farming operations and production, as well as to provide funds for farmers to start new businesses in different sectors, has meant that rural land use has become increasingly dominated by ranchers and big companies employing mechanized and modern cultivation techniques.



Figure 8:
Increasing numbers of Yi people are moving out of their home villages, located in Liangshan's mountainous regions, and into the river valley. This move often requires that they alter their method of cultivation in accordance with their new surroundings. Pictured, a farmer covers a planting bed with plastic mulch.
© Zhe Cheng, 2016



Figure 9:
New policies passed in 2008 by the Chinese government have allowed individual farmers to transfer their land-use right to investors, ranchers, and large agriculture companies. In some areas, this had led to monocultures of crops such as cabbage.
© Zhen Wang, 2016

Figure 10:
Sterile land in Liangshan
© Zhen Wang, 2016

Following such widespread land-use changes, the landscapes in the countryside have gradually changed. As the scale of production has grown, so has ecological diversity decreased: ranchers now work together to cultivate monocultures on small pieces of land formerly owned and worked on by individual farmers. Where once land was farmed by hand, providing jobs and livelihoods for both ethnic migrants and rural residents alike, companies now employ machines and pesticides in order to promote productivity and maximize profits. Clearly, these landscape changes have been the inevitable result of the 2008 policies and other efforts to build a “new socialist countryside” in rural China. And it is not just the land that has been affected by the new reforms, but also the lives of the people—such as the Yi communities—who have resided there for millennia.



Ripples of Change in Society and Culture

New Homes, a Vanishing Culture

There is an old saying that goes, “Yi live in mountains,” and which bears some truth. Historically, the Yi have preferred to inhabit high altitude regions between 1,500 and 3,000 meters above sea level, in order to safeguard themselves from war and prevent flooding. Only a minority of the Yi population has chosen to live in flatlands or valleys. As arable land is typically scarce in the mountainous region of Liangshan, slash-and-burn farming has been the Yi’s major method of food production, with paddy and corn cultivation their main agricultural activity in terraced fields.



Figure 11:
Embroidery is a traditional Yi handcraft.
© Fei Tian, 2016

Figure 12:
In traditional Yi villages, houses and buildings are scattered across mountainsides without rigid planning, in accordance with the shape of the landscape.
© Lan Ouyang, 2016

The Yi tend to take advantage of local topography by building their villages on sunny, south-facing slopes. Villages are laid out according to the shape of the landscape and without any rigid planning. Few villages adopt a distributed arrangement, opting instead for rows of buildings, a layout that ensures ventilation, lighting, and drainage. Such a setup lends convenience to their daily routines. With the hills to the rear of the village, farmers can tend to livestock and crops in the front, where water resources are located. This constellation reflects typical “good” *feng shui* (风水).



Figure 13:
The Anning River with the
Daliang Mountains stand-
ing in the distance
© Fei Tian, 2016

Throughout much of its long history, Yi culture has more or less developed in isolation from the outside world, creating its unique characteristics and shaping the landscapes of the Daliang Mountains. As our research group studied the villages there, we realized that most people did not understand how predominant their culture has been in the region and many of them—especially those belonging to the younger generations—are looking to leave the old and “backward” villages behind to live in modern cities. They care little for their ethnic identity and instead want to become—or at least live—like the Han people, China’s ethnic majority. Many say they never want to return to their home village. This recent and rapid phenomenon and other changes brought on by rural development have made it increasingly difficult for the Yi to maintain their unique culture.

Traditional Yi buildings are constructed from wood or clay. They rarely stand very high, and are often arranged naturally and freely, so that they harmonize with the surrounding nature. In the Liangshan region, houses are typically cobwood structures painted black, red, and yellow (the Yi’s favorite colors). Limited by environmental and economic conditions, these houses can be mainly divided into the following types: shacks, thatched houses, cobwood houses with antefixes, and houses with wood block tiles—all of which have a similar courtyard.



Figure 14:
The interior of a traditional Yi wooden house
© Fei Tian, 2016

The Chinese state's "new socialist countryside" policy, however, has challenged such living arrangements. As part of this initiative, the government has constructed numerous brand new villages on unused land, or relocated existing villages to nearby areas. Under this massive national policy, several model projects have been set up in ethnic minority areas in the hope of promoting "new socialist villages" throughout the countryside. One of the latest examples is the "New Yi Villages" (彝族新寨) project. These large, government-built residential areas are intended to house Yi families who previously lived scattered across mountains or valleys. Everything within these villages is new: new buildings, new livelihoods, and new social relationships—in short, completely new lives for their residents.

Although the designers of the new Yi villages try to give their buildings the unique characteristics of traditional Yi design, they struggle to bring them into harmony with Yi cultural practices. The typical wooden Yi house, for example, has a fireplace in the center of the living room—it is literally the center of Yi home life, where traditionally, families would cook or sit around and socialize. In addition, these spaces indexed familial hierarchies: according to Yi custom, only the most respected family members,



Figure 15:
This “new” Yi village
was constructed as
part of the Chinese
government’s “new
socialist country-
side” project.
© Jun-hui Xiang,
2016

such as the male patriarch or grandparents, could sit near the fire. For safety reasons, however, the homes in the new villages are not only made of concrete but also lack a fireplace. This style of home design has therefore wreaked havoc on Yi family life and has been widely criticized. During our interviews with residents of the new Yi villages, people complained about the new houses, which they feel have removed the core area of daily life in Yi households. The houses in the new villages—which are centralized in valleys or along highways in order to direct Yi livelihoods away from traditional mountain cultivation towards factory work or small-business ownership—are meant to represent a shift away from such ancient traditions towards new, modern lifestyles. Such drastic changes to social life have meant that although the Yi are offered the opportunity to buy inexpensive homes in new villages, many lose the sense of belonging they once had when they do so. The government has ignored such criticisms and continues to promote the new Yi villages as a model for ethnic-minority villages around the country.



Figure 16:
The fireplace in the center of the living room is literally the center of traditional Yi life: a space for cooking, socializing, and making music.
© Jun-hui Xiang, 2016



Figure 17:
Women dressed in traditional Yi clothing prepare rice at the fireplace. © Jun-hui Xiang, 2016

A Fading Religion

The change brought on by rural development has also affected religious practices and values that Yi communities have traditionally taken very seriously.² The regions that Yi people originally settled in were idyllic, with beautiful scenery, pleasant climates, and abundant natural resources, allowing for the development of rich cultures and lifestyles that were in harmony with nature.



Figure 18:
An empty temple
standing in a Yi village
© Zhen Wang, 2016

Bimoism (毕摩教) is the ethnic religion of the Yi. It has two types of shaman: one is the *bimo* (毕摩), meaning “master of scriptures,” who acquires his position by patrilineal descent after a period of apprenticeship or by formally acknowledging an old *bimo* as his teacher. The other type of shaman is the *suni* (苏尼), who must be elected. Both *bimo* and *suni* can often be seen in the streets, consulting ancient scriptures. Tradition prescribed that *bimo* could only come from aristocratic backgrounds, and although

2 Chunsuo Yang, “Research on Cultural Landscape in Yi Villages in Chuxiong Prefecture of Yunnan,” *Proceedings of the International Conference on Education, Sports, Arts and Management Engineering* (2016): 459–64, <https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/icesame-16/25850936>.

this rule changed about eight hundred years ago, bimo remain the more revered and perform services that the suni still cannot—they officiate at births, funerals, weddings, and religious holidays and they can read Yi scriptures. Both can perform rituals, but only bimo can perform rituals linked to death; in most cases, suni only perform some exorcisms to cure diseases.

With the Chinese government promoting “new villages” and modern lifestyles in order to promote economic growth and alleviate rural poverty, younger generations are losing their understandings of Yi traditions, and fewer young men

want to become bimo. A few indigenous Yi remain, however, who hold a strong ethnic consciousness and have organized special training programs for those who would like to become bimo. Some such programs are run with financial support from the government, and some are privately funded by individual organizers. I met the founder of one such program, Mr. Jiang, curator and chair of the Yi minority cultural center in Mabian Yi Autonomous County, located in the province of Sichuan. Mr. Jiang’s original Yi name is Qubi Xing-yi (曲比兴义), but he has also taken on a Han name, Jiang (蒋), in order to facilitate better communication with China’s ethnic majority. Curator Jiang was clearly very proud of his cultural background and has worked enthusiastically to safeguard and sustain traditional Yi culture. He seeks to showcase Yi culture to the nation, and even the world. Not only is he endeavoring to learn and record everything he can about traditional Yi customs, but he is also learning both the Han language and computer skills, in order to communicate with “the outside world” about the Yi people and their culture.

Despite the sense that some traditions are rapidly disappearing, ritual performances still play a major role in Yi daily life and are used for healing, exorcisms, invoking



Figure 19:
A bimo cutting a
branch in preparation
for a traditional Yi
ritual. © Xing-yi Qubi



Figure 20:
Mr. Jiang, curator and
chair of the Yi minor-
ity cultural center in
Mabian © Xue-hua
Wang

rain, cursing enemies, blessings, divining the future, and analyzing one's relationship with the gods. The Yi believe that dragons protect their villages from bad spirits. However, their dragon is neither similar to the dragons of Western culture nor the same as those found in Han culture. The Yi believe that bad spirits inhabit all material things and can cause illness, poor harvests, and other misfortunes. Besides the gods who represent their local nature (fire, hills, trees, rocks, water, earth, sky, wind, and forests), the Yi also worship deified ancestors

in a similar fashion to practitioners of other Chinese traditional religions, such as Confucianism (儒教). Long separated from the influence of modern developments, these “ancestor-worshipping rituals” (祭祖) remain completely unchanged. These are still the most important religious practices to the Yi and are crucial to the passing down of Yi culture from one generation to the next. After someone dies, their family sacrifices an animal, such as a pig, sheep, or chicken, at the doorway to their home, in order to maintain a relationship with the deceased spirit.

The Yi also believe in multiple souls: at death, one soul remains to watch the grave while the other is eventually reincarnated into some living form. It can be said that the ultimate spiritual pursuit of the Yi people is to return to their origin after death. Ancestors who have passed away will protect and bless their descendants in another world—a path that is closely bound to their fortune and misfortune. All of the Yi's religious rites and rituals are considered to be cardinal means of sending the dead back to their origin, and are therefore highly valued. When a family initiates the ancestor-worshipping ritual, the entire extended family gathers together and in many cases will sacrifice all of their possessions as part of the process.



Figure 21:
A bimo performing a religious rite by walking through a “sea of fire” © Xing-yi Qubi

Ongoing Inequality

Many of the hierarchies and inequalities of traditional Yi society have survived into the modern world. Liangshan Yi society remained a slave system right up until the Chinese central government’s “democratic reforms” in the region 1956. People were split into social groups: the Black Yi (黑彝), or nobles, the White Yi (白彝), or commoners, and slaves. White Yi were free and could even own property and slaves, but they were still subordinate to a local lord for whom they would work and fight in exchange for protection. Even today, there remain customs in place to identify people’s class origins, which have maintained social hierarchies; normally, Black Yi still disdain to marry the descendants of White Yi or slaves, but are very proud to marry Han people.

During our surveys, we also found that some of those people descended from slaves still rely on their former lords’ families, both financially and socially. They even live close to their lords’ former houses and properties. The families of such lords also still maintain a higher social class within local communities and exercise a level of control and authority by occupying positions like village head or local official.



Figure 22:
A small child helps
her family clean and
prepare food for the
coming winter.
© Fei Tian, 2016



Figure 23:
A home for the
descendants of Yi
slaves. Slave holding
remained a part of
Yi society until 1956.
© Fei Tian, 2016

In the new government-built Yi villages that we visited during the research trip, the transitions experienced by individual communities were quite varied and depended largely on the new villages' accessibility and their contact with the modern world. The most isolated villages, as well as particularly vulnerable groups within them, had the fewest opportunities to improve their livelihoods. Many were unaware of the government benefits to which they are entitled, which include state subsidies for the construction of new houses, as well as daily stipends for impoverished families to satisfy basic needs, such as clean water, food, transportation, and education.

Furthermore, within both traditional and new villages, it is the civic leaders (most often the descendants of Black Yi) who distribute money and benefits—often to families with whom they have closer social ties and relationships. This was indeed a more important factor for the successful integration of migrants in new villages than whether these villages were located in the mountains or the flatlands. With social inequality a common phenomenon in China's remote rural villages, wealthier people draw on their wide social networks to either improve their livelihoods or to migrate away from remote areas, while the people who really need aid—including the disabled, the elderly, orphans, and widows—are often the last to benefit from the nation's strong economic growth and de-



Figure 24:
Many young Yi study and work outside of their home village, only returning every December for the celebration of the Yi New Year.
© Zhe Cheng, 2016



Figure 25:
At an altitude of 4,000 meters, children in a mountain village stare curiously at a drone flying overhead.
© Fei Tian, 2016

velopment policies. This issue is compounded by the fact that many of the community's young, educated, or ambitious members migrate out of villages, leaving behind few opportunities for the establishment of democratic administrations. The troubling result of these processes is that while the rich continue to become richer and more powerful, the condition of China's rural poor has only gotten worse.

Education poses another serious challenge for rural ethnic minority groups. Because of low wages and poor living and working conditions, the number of village schoolteachers is in continuous decline, as is the number of schools. Therefore, it is difficult for the Yi to receive a strong elementary, vocational, or higher education. Moreover, China's policy limiting couples to one child (or, more recently, two children) does not apply to ethnic minority groups, so the relatively larger number of children per family makes it difficult for Yi families to fund an education for all of their children; most families can afford to send only one or two children to school, with boys normally receiving priority over girls.





Shifting People: Rural Migration and Tourism

Migration: An Unexpected Problem

In the eyes of both the people and the government, southwest China, an inland “ethnic minority region,” remains “weak” and lacking in public facilities. In accordance with the national development project of 2015, six million people belonging to ethnic minority groups still need to be relocated and provided with basic yet adequate living facilities before 2020. Although the future does not look promising for traditional ethnic villages, the central government has made large capital investments in rural infrastructure over the past decade in an attempt to improve living conditions, with varying success depending on the particular local conditions of the new developments. The development of existing settlements and the construction of brand new villages built for ethnic minority communities have become crucial drivers behind rural migration, as people move to new villages in the hopes of improving their livelihoods.

Migration to towns and cities has also been widespread. Many farmers practicing traditional cultivation in remote rural areas have found that they simply cannot compete with the large-scale agricultural activities of big companies. As the possibilities to make a living in these areas have diminished, many people, and especially young men, have sold their rural properties and sought work elsewhere. The lack of educational opportunities has also spurred outward migration from traditional rural villages. According to surveys we carried out during our fieldwork, numerous Yi families moved down from the mountains and resettled in river valleys or plains simply because there are more schools there for their children to attend.

Thus, contrary to many of their original objectives, the various economic and rural development policies of China’s government over the past decades have—by promoting persistent and increasing outward rural migration—resulted in a shortage in rural labor forces, and have left villages decaying and even abandoned. This phenomenon has led to a crucial downward turn in the countryside’s development and has now become one of the most serious social problems China faces, as it is accompanied by the appearance of “sleeping lands” (睡地) and “hollow villages” (空心村), “left-behind children” (留守儿童), depression amongst the elderly, increasing suicide rates, and several other issues. It was clear, too, that for many migrants the transition to life in their new homes was not easy.

Figure 26:
Due to the lack of male laborers, who have left their homes in search of more profitable jobs in towns and cities, women have taken over much of the work in Yi villages.
© Fei Tian, 2016



Figure 27:
The rapid economic development during the last four decades has brought with it many serious social problems. One of these is the “left-behind children” (留守儿童).
© Xiao-chang Hu, 2016

Most people migrating out of old villages have to rent farmland from locals in order to continue cultivating, or switch to other businesses to earn a living. Immigrants said they found it difficult to integrate into local communities: local people often viewed them as “outsiders” and harbored fears that newcomers would drain resources once belonging exclusively to them.

Tourism

Migration is not the only movement of people that economic reforms have spurred in the Chinese countryside. Although the “new socialist countryside” project intended to modernize rural areas and enhance rural living conditions, our field research revealed that most of the sites targeted for improvement—and especially those set up in ethnic minority areas—have actually become tourist attractions.

Indeed, these developments are responses to the recent increase in demand for nonurban experiences in China. Urban dwellers’ desire to experience traditional ethnic minority vil-

lages—their bucolic rhythms, unique architecture, fresh air, expansive views, picturesque landscapes—has seen tourism become one of the most significant ways of developing the economies of China’s rural areas.

Jenny Chio refers to “doing rural tourism” (农家乐) in China as “peasant family happiness.”³ In accordance with this idea, locals seek to create the right conditions for a possible attractive tourist destination by maintaining or discovering aesthetically alluring settings and landscapes, and by renovating their buildings to look quaint and local. The most common types of businesses in rural tourism are family-run guesthouses and restaurants. Such enterprises can allow village residents the opportunity to pursue their own life goals and aspirations alongside the growing tourism economy.



Figure 28:
Women undertake much of the labor in most Yi villages in the Daliang Mountains. © Fei Tian, 2016

Although natural landscapes are, in their own right, a major attraction for holiday-makers in ethnic minority regions, it is the rural landscapes’ close connection to the cultural practices of the communities who live there that draws tourists to the Chinese countryside. This identification of China’s rural areas as cultural, and not just natural, landscapes parallels the way in which, for example, the American West is associated with “cowboy” culture, and the Australian Outback with “stockman” culture. In China, this has led to the heavy commoditization of the cultural practices of the Yi and of other indigenous groups, making them appear affected and unauthentic when showcased in historical trails, halls of fame, and purpose-built guesthouses. All of these efforts try to attract tourists who will spend money at on-site businesses or on overnight stays. Tourism has now become the pillar industry for Chinese ethnic-minority villages. During my fieldwork, I found that people in some Yi villages have gradually abandoned their agricultural way of life entirely, and now make a living by “doing tourism.” If



Figure 29:
Villagers perform
songs and dances in
traditional Yi cloth-
ing to attract tourist
audiences.
© Zhe Cheng, 2016

this can provide Yi people with a means of improving their livelihoods in their home villages, perhaps more will remain in the countryside, instead of seeking work elsewhere. Furthermore, as the cultural practices of ethnic minority communities attract more tourists and business to China's rural regions, tourism might become one of the most important ways of safeguarding Yi culture. The national and local governments have continued to support Yi communities in their efforts to develop their regional economies, and have even launched some national parks, natural reserves, and wetlands projects in order to develop tourism in Liangshan.

In this way, the tourist industry is somewhat of a double-edged sword in rural China. On the one hand, Yi groups are trying to preserve and perform their own cultural practices in order to attract tourists from across the country, and maybe even the world. Perhaps this may be a sufficient way to save traditional Yi culture. On the other hand, although the government and local people have realized that the environment is a valuable resource for social and economic development, and have thus taken steps towards

protecting local nature, this too is done mostly for the purpose of attracting more tourists, who may themselves cause further environmental harm. In the midst of the changes to landscapes, cultures, and social structures brought on by the rapid development of the Chinese countryside, such inevitable environmental deterioration has been, and will continue to be, the most disquieting trend.



Figure 30:
A schoolgirl wearing
her "new" outfit,
which is designed in
traditional Yi style
© Fei Tian, 2016

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I am a neophyte both in sociological studies and in writing in English. I also encountered the brand new concept of the Anthropocene for the first time during my stay at the RCC. All of these generated increasing impacts on my research and I believe that they will continuously influence my academic career.

I was lucky to be one of the RCCers. I love Munich!

Zhen Wang

About the Author

Zhen Wang received a BA in Industrial Design from the Hubei Institute of Fine Arts. She completed an MA in architectural history and a PhD in landscape architecture at the Huazhong University of Science and Technology (HUST), with a doctoral thesis on landscape architecture and the engineering of hard armoring for urban riverbanks. Wang joined HUST in 2000, where she has taught Theories and Methods of Landscape Design, Sustainable Environmental Design, and several other courses in the School of Architecture and Urban Planning as an associate professor. She was a visiting scholar at the Rachel Carson Center, LMU Munich, from 2016 to 2017 and at Cardiff University in Wales, UK, from 2009 to 2010, in the School of Geography and Planning.

In addition to numerous academic papers, Wang has published two books: *Study of the Affinity for Urban Lake Landscapes Using the Space Information Database* and *Landscape Design Theory and Strategy of Urban River Revetment Engineering*. She is the cofounder and current director of the Administration Committee of the Water Fund—a nonprofit organization focusing on environmental problems caused by urbanization, as well as on the design, regeneration, and conservation of cultural landscapes in China. It is supported by the China Overseas-Educated Scholars Development Foundation. She has also been the principal investigator for a number of research projects at the provincial and national level, focusing on ecological environmental design and cultural-landscape conservation in China.

RCC Perspectives

perspectives@carsoncenter.lmu.de

Series editors:

Christof Mauch

Katie Ritson

Helmuth Trischler

Editors:

Jason Ludwig

Hannah Roberson

Samantha Rothbart

Harriet Windley

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society

LMU Munich

Leopoldstrasse 11a

80802 Munich

GERMANY

www.rachelcarsoncenter.org

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