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The Story of Secretary Wang: Hero,
Savior, Liar, Scoundrel

Tim Oakes

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It's a typical day for secretary Wang.* He's walking through the village, with a group of visitors in tow. They're students this time, from the local technical school on a Sunday outing. Wang is in his element, doing what he does best. His well-practiced narrative echoes through the tightly walled lanes of the village. ". . . and up here is one of our finest *menzhao*," he says, stopping beneath an ornately carved and elaborate doorway leading into one of the village's many courtyard houses. "Before liberation," he continues after the group gathers outside the doorway, "this was a very cultured village. Over one-third of the households were landlords! The door to one's home is like one's face; it symbolizes your status and wealth just like those luxurious reception rooms people put in their modern apartments today. These days . . ." But suddenly Wang's mobile goes off, playing its familiar little jingle. "Wei!" he shouts into it, and then rattles off something in rapid local dialect that I can't understand. This is part of the tour as well. I've never seen Wang get through a tour without his phone going off at least three or four times.

He slaps the mobile shut and shoves it in his pocket. "Let's see . . . where was I? Oh yes—these days Jiang Zemin and Deng Xiaoping consider the landlords the advanced representatives of economic progress. We should understand this. To me, they weren't landlords, they weren't exploiters. They were people who worked hard, saved their money, and advanced the village along with themselves." It's

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*A pseudonym.

almost eerie when Wang says this, because he could easily be talking about himself. He *is* talking about himself, as he follows in his ancestors' footsteps through the lanes and courtyard houses of the village. Secretary Wang is the new landlord of Niuchangtun.* He knows it. And everyone else in the village knows it. But his wealth is not land. What Wang holds a monopoly on is something much more sophisticated and valuable. He owns the culture and heritage of his village. And he has turned these into a very profitable business for himself, "advancing the village along with himself."

I first met Wang in 2002. A local scholar was showing me some of the villages where he'd been doing research for the past decade. I was looking at the area as the potential site for a new project on Guizhou's Tunpu culture revival. That was when I first got Wang's tour. We had lunch at his house, after which he pulled out various newspaper articles and stories that had been written about him. I started to become familiar with his history through what others had written about him. They all told the story of a model worker, one who had endured every hardship in his struggle for the betterment of his village and himself. He's an example for all of China's country folk to learn from, they said. I started to see Wang as both a sort of gatekeeper for my own project, as well as a compelling individual in his own right. I needed to learn more about him.

About a year later—in November 2003—I interviewed Wang for the first time as I was doing reconnaissance work for potential field sites. After the project got under way, my colleagues and I conducted repeated interviews in 2004 and 2005. While doing fieldwork in Niuchangtun, I often stay at Wang's house, eating with his family, interviewing him and interviewing other villagers about him. We have gotten to know each other through my repeated visits. Wang cultivates our relationship because of my potential role as a consultant and promoter of his village's tourism development. And I cultivate our relationship both because of his pivotal role in his village's development and because I now hold the idealistic and perhaps naïve belief that my work with Wang will ultimately make life better for everyone in Niuchangtun.

Through Wang I am attempting to tell three stories simultaneously. One story is simply a biography of one of China's millions of

*A fictitious place-name.

intelligent, dynamic, and driven peasants, one who has managed to navigate the twists, turns, and pitfalls of China's socialist (and now capitalist) modernization, and managed to somehow come out near the top of the heap. The experience has scarred Wang, both physically, and mentally. Yet he forges ahead with admirable pluck and enviable ambition.

Another story seeks to tell what happens when China's new economy of culture and leisure (Wang 2001) reaches the villages. What happens when a villager like Wang is confronted with the possibilities of a new regime of capital accumulation based on "culture"? What happens when an abstract and foreign concept like "culture" descends on a village with the promise of leading people out of poverty and giving them a newfound sense of prestige? Wang has been adept at grasping the potential of culture as a means of enriching both himself and his village, but his enthusiasm is not shared by all of his neighbors, and his talents for cultural promotion have come at the cost of alienating many of his fellow villagers.

The third story is more personal and reflexive. It is about what happens when a research project studying this process *also* descends on a village. What happens when the process of change you come to study is itself shaped by the fact that you have come to study it? It was my intention all along to develop a research project that would—through the practice of fieldwork itself—help guide tourism development toward more sustainable outcomes. Nevertheless, I find myself caught between a researcher's fascination with his subject and an activist's desire for intervention. And this is why my relationship with Wang is both so important and so difficult. He is both the primary agent of change through which my research might have a direct impact on Niuchangtun, and yet I also see him as one of the key obstacles to the kinds of changes that I have come to feel are necessary if Niuchangtun is to benefit collectively from tourism. My hope remains that our relationship will eventually enable a common vision to emerge in which we can both feel equally invested.

This essay thus narrates a moment in a research project that is not yet complete, and it tells a story that is ongoing. It is, in that sense, a very preliminary sketch of a history that continues to unfold.



Wang was born in 1943. He comes from a family of craftsmen. Weavers. A “petty-bourgeois” class background. When land reform was carried out seven years later, this by itself was not a damning class background. But Wang’s father had been a Guomindang (Nationalist) official; he had been mayor of the local township. And although his father had been shot dead by bandits when Wang was only three years old (not an uncommon occurrence in those days), his association with counterrevolutionaries weighed heavily against Wang’s family. Today Wang calls his father a Guomindang “collaborationist” who was forced into public service by virtue of the family’s inability to support itself through textile production.

Wang was the fourth of seven children. “A family of four daughters,” he says, shaking his head. “It was very hard for my mother. After my father’s death, we were very poor,” he says. “She had to support the whole family with her weaving, and making tofu.” His older brothers were able to work, however, and soon Wang was able to work too. He would have preferred school. He started attending classes at age 11 and excelled immediately, was even recognized with “student cadre” status as a result. Four years later, though, the village was thrown into the Great Leap Forward.⁵ Wang’s school was closed after villagers were mobilized to dig coalmines, cut down trees, smelt steel, and construct dams. Wang was 15 years old and in the chaos of those years roamed freely, finding opportunities to make money in the cracks of rapid collectivization in the countryside. Today Wang expresses no regrets over this key moment in his life, when the potential for the life of an intellectual was eclipsed by that of a shrewd and calculating businessman. Nor has the value of an education been something that Wang has sought to impart upon his own children. He has not hesitated to take his son out of school so that he may accompany him on business trips or pursue other kinds of work to enhance the family income.

⁵Guizhou was one of the areas that supported the Great Leap Forward most enthusiastically, and it was one of the campaign’s more radical regions of implementation. Although Beijing promoted the province as a model of the virtues of having been “poor and blank,” ultimately the Great Leap campaign reduced the province, like others throughout China, to political chaos, ethnic tensions, and famine. Between 1959 and 1965, the province lacked the ability to effectively implement any central political directives. In this environment, entrepreneurial individuals like Wang would thrive (see Yang 1996).

By the early 1960s, Wang was traveling back and forth between Guizhou and Sichuan, selling tobacco in Chongqing and Chengdu, and buying cotton yarn there to sell back in Guizhou, all for a tidy profit. It was easy money. "Back then," he says, "there were free markets everywhere. The opportunities for making money were endless for anyone willing to suffer a little." People could go into business as much as they wanted. The markets were especially big in Sichuan, he said. But he returned to the village in 1963 and, curiously, started working at a nearby hydroelectric station. Moves like this illustrate the political savvy complementing Wang's business sense. It's hard to say whether he sensed the political storm just gathering over the horizon, or whether he simply felt that more stable employment was a good idea. But the move gave Wang a shelter of sorts during the early years of the Cultural Revolution. By 1965 his intelligence got him promoted to the Propaganda Department at the station. He was 20 years old and for the first time in his life began to think that he had a truly promising future in front of him. He even managed to join the Communist Youth League, a feat that even today he compares to "ascending heaven" given his father's status as a "collaborator."

His unexpected tenure of political correctness was not to last, however. Within a year he had been sacked, a victim of the Cleansing of the Class Ranks campaign. The entire hydroelectric bureau, by virtue of its connection to the center, then came under attack by Red Guards. "They came out to the hydro station, called us all capitalist exploiters. They marched me around with an ox-head placard. I had to leave the station." Wang returned home, and though most people in his situation would have been expected to lay low and keep out of trouble, Wang went back to plying his old trade routes, finding spaces for business opportunity hidden within the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Whether his family's poverty compelled him to do this he won't say. But I'm tempted to believe that he was astute enough to recognize the risks he was taking. In fact, it turned out not to be worth the risk. Wang was arrested in 1972 and charged with profiteering. He spent three years in jail, and another three years in a labor camp.

In 1978 he was released and returned to his village. He immediately started sojourning again. His family pleaded with him to stay in the village but he wouldn't listen. He collected crude pottery from

villages and sold it in the provincial capital. He even sold paintings that he himself made. He sold anything he could get his hands on. He drifted around the country for a couple years. He went to Wenzhou, bought fake Rolex watches and sold them in Guizhou for a nice profit. He also went to Liangshan in Sichuan and bought silver jewelry from the Yi people, which he sold in Guangzhou, again for a nice profit. "In 45 days I made over 40,000 yuan," he said of the silver trading. This money gave him a basis from which to reestablish himself in the village. Wang is one of those people who is not fooled into making money for its own sake; he understands that money itself is unimportant unless it can be exchanged for power.

The way he puts it today, he was wandering about China when he heard the news of the Third Plenum, that pivotal meeting of Chinese Communist Party leaders during which Deng Xiaoping emerged, unopposed, to proclaim a new course for a country weary of political turmoil. The news struck him as an important opportunity and he decided to return to the village and invent a new life for himself, as village leader.

It's not easy to believe Wang when he says this. It is unlikely that anyone at the time really recognized the Third Plenum's ultimate significance. While the meeting clearly indicated that change was afoot, no one at the time knew what that would mean or where it would lead.* It is unlikely that the leadership itself understood the significance of the moment until the reform agenda became solidified over the next several years and an orthodox history of the reforms could begin to be written. But Wang's reinvention of this moment is still revealing of a mind that has been able to adapt orthodoxy to his own life story remarkably well. This ability to reinvent his life so that it aligns with the trajectories of power that continue to reshape China at a national or regional scale is something that Wang displays again and again when narrating his own story. It is also apparent from his current actions as leader of a village seeking to promote itself to tourists. But I am jumping ahead.

Wang is familiar with power in other ways, too. It is true, as he says during the tours he gives of his village, that over a third of the residents were landlords. Before liberation, Niuchangtun was not a

*For a political perspective on the relatively "unplanned" nature of economic reforms, see Fewsmith (1994). For similar views of the reforms from a rural perspective, see Gao (1999) and Zhou (1996).

village of farmers. Those who weren't outright landlords were typically engaged in some sort of trade. Mao may have turned them into farmers, but they maintained an identity as *kejia*, literally "guest families." In this region of Guizhou, *kejia* are known as people who came to the province to set up businesses following the initial waves of military colonization during the early years of the Ming Dynasty. They had specialized skills and typically regarded themselves as more civilized than their fellow frontiersmen. Wang articulates an identity as *kejia* when he tries to explain the underlying reasons for his success. It is as if his business sense runs in his blood. Farming was simply never an option for him. He is *kejia*. He does business.

So in 1983 he returned to the village, loaded with cash, and started a public welfare group (*gongyi xiaozu*) to help the poorer villagers. I see this as both a genuine effort to help those who were less able to benefit from the early reforms, and a calculated strategy to rehabilitate himself and position himself to gain power in the village. Wang is like that; he's both compassionate and willing to step on people who get in his way. He knew that decollectivization would require an entirely new administrative system, and he was savvy enough to position himself politically in anticipation of the change. And sure enough, by 1984 he had been selected village head, with the help of relationships with local officials he cultivated. Other villagers say he "bought" his appointment with gifts and other favors to the local officials who oversaw the transformation from commune brigade to administrative village. Today, others in the village say that Wang would never have been approved by the higher-ups (because of his family's bad class background) but for his bribery. But these are claims made twenty years after the fact, during a time when Wang's leadership has alienated many in the village. Back in 1984 Wang was the only one in Niuchangtun with both a vision for achieving prosperity and the cash to turn that vision into a reality. It clearly made him the obvious choice to lead the village into the reform era. Like so many others persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, the fact that Wang had done hard time in the 1970s gave his reformist credentials a stamp of authenticity that others could not match.

His first act was to clean up the village. He started a campaign to earn "civilized" status for Niuchangtun, which indeed was granted the following year, in 1985. He sponsored outdoor movies as a way of gathering villagers together to entreat them to clean up the streets

and alleyways, and wash their houses. He also aggressively pursued contracts with nearby urban businesses, setting up putting-out systems in the village for textiles and other craft products. By 1986 his successes were being noticed by the province and Niuchangtun was recognized as a model village. Wang was being invited to attend conferences and workshops on economic development. *Guizhou Daily* sent one of its best reporters to stay in Niuchangtun for two weeks. He wrote a front-page article about Wang, which was also featured in propaganda reports sent to other provinces. Wang says that people started to come from all over China to see the village and learn about how it was so quickly recognized as a civilized and model village. "They came from as far away as Xinjiang, Gansu, Fujian," he said. "This was the first time outsiders of any importance had ever been to the village." It not only brought outsiders to Niuchangtun, but more important, it cemented the village's celebrity image in the eyes of local officials. A few years later, when economic development strategies started to emphasize tourism, local officials naturally saw Niuchangtun as a likely target for development. And while much of rural China was witnessing the gradual rollback of many of the gains in living standards brought by the first wave of reform in the early 1980s (see Unger and Xiong 1990; Croll 1994), Niuchangtun saw steady improvement through the latter half of the decade. And Wang, of course, was doing well for himself, too. He had opened his own coalmine—technically a Township and Village Enterprise—but it was basically his own business. It remains a sore point for some of the other villagers even today, the first case of Wang really using his official position for personal enrichment.

But in 1992 he was severely burned in a fire. It should surprise no one that the fire was in a fireworks factory. Such fires have claimed the lives of thousands throughout China. Wang claims that his burns were due to his heroism—saving others instead of himself. It's a good example of my difficulty with Wang. On the one hand, he is a tireless worker, very smart, someone who has sacrificed for his village. On the other, this applies equally to his abilities for self-promotion and personal enrichment. I find myself admiring and despising him at the same time. His burns were severe. His hands were burned so badly he now has mangled stubs instead of fingers. He can use them just enough to hold a pair of chopsticks or his ever-chiming mobile phone. His face was disfigured. He lost all his hair and now wears a

toupee (which is badly in need of replacement). He spent years recovering, hooked on painkillers. He says the government didn't provide any support for his family during this time, and he grew disillusioned. And it's easy to say that many people would have just given up at this point. But not Wang.

In 1997 he left the village for Kunming. His son quit school and went with him. Broken and bitter, Wang did not intend to return. Clearly he felt that the village owed him something, but it remains unclear why he left. It's one of those rare periods of his life that he refuses to reinvent. He does say that it was the lowest point in his life, that he cared for no one but himself. It is likely that after spending years recovering in the hospital he was simply out of money and needed to return to sojourning. But before he left, he managed to build a new house for his family—not the kind of thing someone lost in the depths of despair tends to do. But throughout his life Wang had responded to hardship and uncertainty by returning to the road, and returning to the business of buying and selling. So here he was again, this time selling fruit on the streets of Kunming.

But in 2000, he says, some of the villagers went to bring him back. They claimed Niuchangtun was adrift without him and that they would support him if he returned to be village head once again. He agreed. Business was poor in Kunming; the money was no longer so easy, and he was getting older.

As fate would have it, his return coincided with the development of a new economic opportunity for Niuchangtun: the rise of Tunpu culture fever. He wasted no time in campaigning for the village's recognition as an "open air museum" of Tunpu culture.

"Tunpu" is a new label used by local scholars, officials, and, increasingly, villagers themselves for those descendents of early Ming soldier-colonists sent to pacify the frontiers and conquer Yunnan. While many throughout Guizhou can claim ancestry dating to the large influx of population that occurred in the late 14th century, Tunpu people are said to have maintained a unique set of cultural practices that have changed little over the ensuing 600 years. In the 1980s, local scholars started seeing in many of the Tunpu villages patterns of dress, language, ritual, and architecture dating to the early Ming. And because the early Ming was *the* formative period for Guizhou as a province (officially founded shortly after the Ming colonization, in 1413), Tunpu people have become the symbolic in-

heritors of Guizhou's distinctive heritage. Today, Tunpu culture is the subject not only of a great many academic books and research articles, but also of many articles in popular magazines, television documentaries, and travel programs. The second-best selling book in Guiyang bookstores in 2004 was *Six Hundred Years of Tunpu*, by two well-known local journalists (Yan and Gao 2002).^{*} And Tunpu is the focus of the drive to promote cultural tourism in central Guizhou, with at least one village having been turned into a pay-at-the-gate theme park as a result.

One of the most interesting things about Tunpu culture is the way that villagers themselves have come to understand it. While most were usually aware that their ancestors came from other parts of China many centuries ago, and most were even aware that their ancestors were soldiers sent by the first Ming emperor Zhu Yuanzhang to pacify and colonize the frontier, few regarded these facts as anything exceptional until local scholars started expressing their amazement at how well the villagers had preserved the traditions of their ancestors. And while the significance of this may have still escaped the villagers, the potential for a new source of income—heritage tourism—did not. Many villagers were quick to grasp the commercial potential of the cultural resources that scholars were claiming villagers had. And one of the quickest to grasp this potential was Wang.

As Wang tells it, way back in the 1980s, around the time his village was given “civilized village” status, he realized that the villagers should preserve all those traditional courtyard houses left behind by their landlord ancestors. While it's hard to believe that Wang himself was able to see the heritage potential of his village at such an early date (though it may in fact be true), what's most interesting is the fact that, true or not, Wang's personal history has merged with the broader history of reforms. His personal narrative—in his claim to have anticipated the growing culture and leisure economy of the 1990s—parallels the history China's rapidly changing political economy. Wang thus presents himself as a kind of spokesman not only for his village and his people but for the correctness of the reform trajec-

^{*}This claim is based solely on my observation of a posted list of “best-selling books in Guiyang” at the city's largest bookstore in May, 2004. *Six Hundred Years of Tunpu* was second on this list of 10 titles.

tory. Wang's oral history is by now so wrapped up in the rhetoric of his village tour that they become the same story.

Wang's village has become one of the recognized icons of Tunpu culture, primarily because of its magnificent architecture. The landlords of Niuchangtun left a tightly packed village of courtyard houses that remind one of old villages in Anhui or Zhejiang and, simultaneously, a frontier military fortress. Tunpu's appeal comes in part from its unexpectedness in a place like Guizhou, so far from those regions of China where one expects to find courtyard homes. Most of Guizhou's rural landscape is either too poor to have generated the kind of wealth to build such homes, or it is inhabited by minorities for whom courtyard homes are not a typical architectural custom. But the ancestors of the Tunpu were from the downriver regions of old money—southern Anhui, northern Jiangxi, Zhejiang—where courtyard homes were common. And they were later joined by merchants who built more ornate and luxurious homes than the fortress hybrids built by the colonizing soldiers. Niuchangtun is one of those villages of later arrivals—the *kejia*—dating only to the mid-to late Qing Dynasty, and thus features the more elaborate version of Tunpu courtyard architecture.

In the 1980s, the local government started to promote Tunpu culture for tourism development, but Tunpu remained mostly an intellectual project until 2001, when Beijing recognized Niuchangtun and seven neighboring villages for state-level heritage protection status. Wang was a key figure in generating local support for heritage status among the villagers. He says he came up with the idea of preserving his village's landscape back in 1985, when he was doing business in Wenzhou, buying fake Rolexes and returning to Guizhou to sell them where people had yet to learn that such things could be fake. The Wenzhou part of the story is what makes it so interesting. Traveling through Zhejiang and Jiangsu, he says he noticed how similar the houses were to those in his village, but he also observed that most of the old villages in that region were already "ruined" (*pohuaile*), and this convinced him that his village's old structures should be preserved. In this observation, Wang predated the local scholars by 15 years. It wasn't until the year 2000 that intellectuals began to tell villagers that they should really stop tearing down their old houses, because the houses represented a link with the past and with the prestigious world of downstream China — "China proper."

When Wang first told me this story, I was certain he was making it up. But after a number of subsequent visits, I am no longer so sure. It either confirms his amazing ability to anticipate trends in China's reforming economy, or it simply confirms his skill in reinventing himself to suit the times. Either way, the resulting portrait is of a very intelligent and extremely savvy person. Here's another example of his ability to either anticipate the broader trends of Chinese society or at least reinvent his history to match those trends: "Back in 1985 I was invited to speak at the No. One Middle School [in the nearby city]. I told the students to study hard, because after the year 2000 it will be a time of knowledge competition. Their manual labor won't be needed. So if they don't study hard, they won't have a future." The reason I initially doubted his story was because of the house he himself lives in — a brash two-story and thoroughly modern cement-block house with a satellite dish on top. Villagers call it the Wang Hotel. Wang has recently put some old stone and bamboo facing on the house to make it look older, but the fact is that he built it in 1997, long after he claimed to have seen the light of preservation while buying watches in Wenzhou. Wang told me that he had wanted to rebuild an ornate old-style house for his family, but was unable to because of his injuries. He couldn't work with his hands, so mangled from the fire were they.

Still, everyone else in the village says that no one even knew what preservation (*wenwu baohu*) meant until 2000. That's when the intellectuals started coming. Villagers say Wang's stories are the same ones the intellectuals started telling them in 2000. And they are right. A good example of this is Wang's readiness to claim an identity as a "Jiangnan" person, that is, someone whose ancestors came from the lower reaches of the Changjiang. Many of the Tunpu ancestors in fact did come from Jiangnan. But Wang's ancestors came from Shaanxi, a good thousand miles or so northwest of Jiangnan. His claim seems to be the result of being told by local scholars that Niuchangtun is a "Tunpu" village, and Tunpu is now promoted by the province and local government as the "living fossil" of Jiangnan culture of 600 years ago preserved on the frontier. Tunpu tourism is even marketed directly to consumers in Nanjing, with an offer to "come to Guizhou to see the lives of your ancestors!" Wang has been smart enough to see this promotion as opening the door to a new kind of cultural

capital for both himself and his village, and it's in this light that his claim of identity might be interpreted.

But I don't think Wang's claim of Jiangnan ancestry can simply be dismissed as a careful if disingenuous commercial calculation, either. Back when Wang was born, the people who are today called Tunpu were thought to be just another kind of Miao, another kind of frontier minority. They themselves always claimed to be Han, but by the 20th century the government basically thought of them as Miao. So part of the Tunpu fever going on in Guizhou today involves a rehabilitation of cultural prestige, with the civilization of Jiangsu and Zhejiang as the basis for that prestige.

Still, Wang's view of Tunpu culture is nevertheless derived from what he has learned from local scholars. And while Jiangnan equals prestige to him on the one hand, Tunpu presents itself as something a bit more complicated, owing to its ancientness. Wang is clearly a progressive thinker who views the past with considerable suspicion even as he recognizes its commercial potential. During one discussion, he was talking about the custom of *yanzihua*, a kind of fast-paced banquet repartee said to be a hallmark of distinctive Tunpu language. He was saying that few people in Niuchangtun were masters of *yanzihua* because Niuchangtun was *kejia* and thus more civilized than other villages. This prompted me to ask if he felt Tunpu culture was therefore uncivilized. This was his response:

In fact, this Tunpu culture is a kind of backward culture. Tunpu culture is an ancient kind of culture; it's been around a long time. Looking at it in terms of development, these people were very developed economically, had very developed knowledge. From the beginning it had very developed aspects. But in fact, this Tunpu culture . . . why do I put it this way? The cruder the better. So, this Tunpu culture has reached back 600 years and given it to us; this isn't contemporary stuff, so that's why I say this, it's a kind of ancient backward culture.

So yes, it's like that. But it has also filled gaps in knowledge. It is a culture of archaeological value. It is not a contemporary advanced thing. It just provides a kind of ancient culture for investigation and research. That's how I should put it.

For Wang, Tunpu is linked specifically to the scholarly investigations that introduced the concept to him in the first place. He does not really understand it in any broad anthropological sense (that is, "culture" as a way of life), but simply as the scholarly object of "in-

vestigation and research." As such, it naturally has commercial potential, and is perhaps easily something about which claims can be made without the notion that such claims have any real bearing on one's actual sense of identity.

At any rate, Wang has virtually cornered the market on Tunpu culture in his village. And for the rest of the village, "Tunpu culture" is basically regarded as Wang's private business, his property. When officials come, or scholars, or tourists, Wang is always there to take them on his little tour, pointing out all the features of its heritage. His tour is fascinating for all its instances of making connections with Jiangnan heritage. Most of this comes from the local scholars, with whom Wang has had much contact and from whom has learned much about Tunpu history and Tunpu culture. Wang's tour narrative lifts liberally from numerous scholarly reports that have been written about Tunpu culture. He's done his homework. His ability to narrate the scholarly language of "culture" with such articulation has also been instrumental in securing the continuing support of the local government, and because of Wang, today Niuchangtun is recognized as the Tunpu village with the best relationship (*guanxi*) with the local government. This has resulted in new roads, a new school building, and decreased tuition for village children. And he has managed to stop the construction of new houses since he came back in 2000. Niuchangtun has state heritage protection status, but throughout China the regulations such status entails are followed only to the extent local officials can enforce them. In most protected places in Guizhou, such regulations are relatively meaningless. But Wang has enforced them to the letter. In my first interview with him I asked how he had managed to do this.

"I enlist the gods for help," he says with a little twinkle in his eye and a smile on his face. "The people have all these folk superstitions, so I use them. I wrote an antithetical couplet and put it up around the village during Spring Festival. It said those who don't follow the preservation policies will be punished by the gods. People aren't afraid of me. They're afraid of the gods."

But people in Niuchangtun *are* afraid of Wang. In a neighboring village they have gone so far as to close the gates when he shows up so he can't enter the village. "He steals *our* tourists," they say. "Takes *our* revenue for himself." When I was initially interviewing other villagers in Niuchangtun, I would ask them "what is Tunpu cul-

ture?" No one could say. "Buxiaode!" [I don't know!] was the typical response. One even told me, "Wo bugan shuo!" [I don't dare say]. I gradually realized that these responses were not due to a lack of understanding about this new thing called Tunpu culture—though this is a reasonable assumption, since the villagers themselves have never referred to themselves as "Tunpu," and "culture" has always simply meant going to school and learning to read, which few of them have ever done. But it became clear that they *did* know what Tunpu culture was; they just didn't want to talk to *me* about it. Tunpu culture was Wang's business, not theirs. And I was just another of Wang's intellectuals. They initially saw me as little more than a business consultant trying to steal their secrets for the competition. To talk about Tunpu would also be like talking about someone else's property as if it were your own. "Talk to Wang about that," they would say.

The villagers saw culture as Wang's capital—they didn't dare mess with it. But like any successful business, Wang's Tunpu culture was viewed as thoroughly corrupt by almost everyone who eventually *did* talk to me. My research assistants should be credited far more than I with eventually establishing the trust of the villagers. I found myself sneaking around at night with my research assistants, talking to people in their houses, huddled around the stove with the dogs keeping watch. They wanted to talk, but they were afraid. It struck me as somewhat odd to be going to such lengths to talk about something as seemingly harmless as "culture." But culture was *only* understood by villagers as a regime of accumulation, rather than a way of life. And they viewed Wang's ability to dominate this regime as stemming from corruption. "How else could he have become so rich? He gives money to the officials. He owns a mine and doesn't have to pay taxes to the town. He gets the government to pay for his Tunpu culture festivals and then keeps the money for himself. We never see a cent." Some of the villagers claim that Wang isn't even really Tunpu himself, since his ancestors came from Shaanxi. "He steals Tunpu culture to make himself rich." One villager had his own ideas about Tunpu culture but wouldn't tell me what they were. He didn't want Wang to know the stories *he* had to tell about the ancestors.

In this context, my relationship with Niuchangtun remains complicated. Villagers see my project as a development project rather than a study in cultural geography or heritage tourism. And rightfully so. But this means that the villagers view my presence there as

part of the same broader set of processes that I myself have come to study. My association with Wang, of course, only reinforces that attitude. I am just another outside scholar, from whom Wang will be able to accumulate even more cultural capital. The project has thus forced me to come to terms with the goals of my relationship with Wang. While his ability to transform the abstractions of scholarship into an accumulation strategy fascinate me, I am also compelled to intervene in that process on behalf of the rest of the villagers.

Wang spends much of his time in the nearby city, drumming up business for his village and hobnobbing with officials. He goes, as the other villagers say, to *gao guanxi*, to make connections. On a recent visit to Niuchangtun, we arrived on one of those days that Wang was gone, "making connections." So much the better, we thought. Wang's absence gave us the opportunity to meet with other villagers without having to devise strategies of avoiding him so that others could speak freely. By evening, however, Wang had gotten word that we were back in the village; he hired a minivan and returned from the city straight away. He was waiting up for us, very agitated, when we returned to our lodgings from some late-night interviewing. He had just obtained a copy of the city's tourism development plan, and he wanted to hear my suggestions for how best to succeed within the framework of the new plan. But his agitation stemmed primarily from his growing sense of frustration with the lack of unity among the villagers, and his exasperation that they regarded him as corrupt. We talked late into the night beneath a dim lightbulb, huddled around the coal-stoked stove, cracking sunflower seeds. We talked about the need for openness and equality among all participants in development, and how I felt it was his responsibility more than others to foster this kind of environment for effective governance. It was our first conversation where I began to see Wang less as an obstacle to sustainable development, and more as the only viable option for implementing a feasible plan for the village's future as a tourist site. And as I write this, I maintain the hope that Wang's participation in our project will somehow yield a more democratic form of governance in the village.

What obviously fascinates me about Wang is the way he both symbolizes and embodies China's new cultural economy. He has not just benefited from the reforms. He has turned his personal narrative into a story that itself anticipates the reforms and thus is legitimized

by them. And at some point, whether he is telling things the way they really occurred or inventing it all for the benefit of his many interlocutors becomes irrelevant. Either way, his ability to turn culture into capital is both astonishing to me and fortunate for his village. The provincial leaders in Guiyang could learn a lot from his shrewdness. At the same time, he offers a window into the way the reforms have enabled personal enrichment at the expense of social alienation, on the way corruption has gone hand in hand with development, and how a readjustment of attitudes toward the past and toward culture have created an entirely new regime of capital accumulation.

I hope that my relationship with Wang will result in some adjustments in his style of leadership. The project will call for several more visits to Niuchangtun and my collaborators and I are planning on holding a conference on Tunpu cultural tourism in the nearby city, as well as publishing a book in China about our research. By the time these events occur, I'm hoping the story I tell is not one that has to choose between a fascinating research subject and a target of journalistic exposé. Instead, I hope to tell the story of someone who has transformed himself, along with his village, and both have come out better for it.

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