

Crossing to the Other Shore: Navigating the Troubled Waters of Cultural Loss and Eco-Crisis in Late-Socialist China¹

By Zhou Lei

Abstract

Using the dual crises of cultural loss in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, and environmental degradation at adjacent Dianchi Lake as background, this paper coins a new term, *ignnowledge*, to describe a particular “technology of rule” in the Chinese political system. *Ignnowledge* is a power tied to culturally specific conceptions of modernity, development, politics, ecology, eco-politics, and environmentality.

Keywords: China; Dianchi; *bi'an*; ignnowledge; power

Introduction: Spatial Modernity Revisited and *Bi'an*

In “Contesting Spatial Modernity in Late-Socialist China,” Li Zhang explores the “cultural logic and politics of late-socialist restructuring in the context of China’s transition to a pro-growth, commercialized consumer society” (Zhang 2006, 465). By using her hometown, Kunming, Yunnan Province as an example, she presents the reader with an autobiographical-ethnographical analysis of a city struggling for “spatial modernity.” According to Li, “Kunming is just one of many Chinese cities undergoing the massive demolition of the old and the hasty construction of the new in the effort to become modern ... But spatial and architectural reconfigurations do not merely reflect recent socio-economic changes in China; they also transform the very modes of social life, local politics, and cultural identities” (Ibid., 461). Li’s argument about the spatial modernity of Kunming emphasizes “how the widespread sense of being late and the desire to catch up with the modern world is transferred to the spatial realm and plays a decisive role in shaping the late-socialist city space” (Ibid., 475).

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In response to Li's article, Christoph Brumann raises questions about key assumptions about modernity and modernization embedded in her analysis: "Why is the modernist, automobile-centered city embraced so enthusiastically in China? Could it be that Western modernity reaches Kunming in a mediated version, via Hong Kong, Shanghai or Tokyo, rather than directly from London, Paris, or New York?" (Ibid., 476).

The intertwined concepts of modernity, post-socialism, displacement, and disorientation raised by Li and Brumann form the background for this paper. The politics of the loss of cultural memory in Kunming, and water management at Dianchi, an adjacent lake, are closely connected with urban planning and the larger project to transform China. In this article, I explore these issues through a newly-defined term, *ignowledge*, and a corollary concept, *zhengzhi bi'an*, which translates roughly as "political other shore."

I coin the term *ignowledge* with reference to George Orwell's *1984*, in which it is said that "war is peace, freedom is slavery and ignorance is strength". The term is an assemblage of two words: ignorance and knowledge. These two form a connected and mutually reinforcing whole in current-day Kunming. *Ignowledge* is particularly apparent in officials' pursuit of "knowledge" from a starting point of ignorance. This vigorous collective pursuit leads to the generation of a jargon-laden and techno-centric form of non-knowledge. That this ignorance is rarely exposed as such concretizes it through speech and material practice into a specific form of governmental power-knowledge: *ignowledge*.

The latter term, *zhengzhi bi'an*, or *bi'an* ("other shore") for short, is a favored discursive trope in contemporary Chinese political speech employed at all levels of the bureaucracy. In its colloquial utilization, it serves to identify an end point within the national modernization program. Despite its vagueness, it carries authority through its connotation of concentrated planning and political power. Not just anyone can credibly declare a vision of a *bi'an*. Once a particular *bi'an* has been identified, it will be repeated in the media, in speeches, and in daily conversation for years, until new *bi'an* are declared and old ones discarded or delegitimized.

The term *bi'an* also has a particular valence and currency due to its historical meanings and deep etymology. Its opposite is *ci'an*, or "this shore." Both terms are derived from the two pillars of thought woven into the texture of Chinese civilization: Buddhism and Confucianism. They are integral to the Chinese conceptions of utopia referred to as *datong*, translated as "Great Unity," and certain articulations of socialism. More recently, they are associated with the concept of the "well-off society" (*xiaokang shehui*) forwarded by the current batch of Chinese leaders. According to Tong Shijun, "The idea of Great Unity, therefore,

corresponds with the Confucian idea of the world, which is central to the traditional form of cultural nationalism in China” (Shijun 2000, 279).

According to Tong, the scholar and prominent intellectual of modern China, Kang Youwei describes the Great Unity, wherein gratification in the present is perpetually deferred to the spatio-temporal realm known as *bi'an*. This analysis helps to explain the currency of the term in the theoretical and rhetorical arsenal of the Chinese state. Current conditions are in this way explained away as necessary, and the understood permanent condition is one of perpetual striving. It is a political and moral philosophy of spatial and temporal overcoming.

Tong demonstrates that Chinese historical conceptions of utopia as *bi'an* have been “attractive to modern Chinese thinkers such as Kang Youwei, Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong ... and the idea of the Great Unity (Great Harmony, or Great Community) of the world, comes from the Confucian book titled *The Book of Rites*” (Ibid., 279). By noting the common linkages between these thinkers’ writings and the language contained in strategic plans issued by the current-day Chinese government, interesting points of intertextuality emerge.

Kunming and Dianchi Lake: Sites of Cultural Loss and Eco-Crisis

Dianchi Lake and the Three Parallel Rivers region of southwest China are separate but politically interconnected watersheds in Yunnan Province. Dianchi is located in Kunming, the provincial capital. The Three Parallel Rivers region is where the upper reaches of the Irawaddy, Mekong, and Yangze run in parallel high-altitude gorges in the biologically diverse northwestern sector of the province that drains the Himalayas to the west. These water systems are now intertwined, owing to a major water resource crisis.

Due to the emergence of regional cooperation mechanisms, such as the Greater Mekong Sub-region and the ASEAN Free Trade Zone, Yunnan often finds itself in fierce competition for resources and market share with neighboring countries, as well as with national counterparts like Guangxi Province. Within this competitive regional context, Yunnan struggles to position itself as a gateway from the People’s Republic of China to South and Southeast Asia. The provincial government vigorously pursues regional cooperation by carving out new international corridors to Vietnam, Bangkok and Assam in India, through projects such as the Kunming—Bangkok superhighway, the Pan-Asia Railway, and the Sino-Burmese Stilwell Road.

Kunming is also pursuing an aggressive municipal-level development and modernization program through massive-scale urban construction,

the dismantlement of traditional housing, and the establishment of new so-called “development zones” (*kaifa qu*). All this is carried out under the tutelage of urban planners from Shanghai and Beijing. Shanghai municipality has been designated by the central government as a *duikou yuanjian chengshi* or “main socialist construction supporter,” charged with providing materials, funds, talent, and strategies for Yunnan and other similarly under-developed places. Thus, development lessons learned in China’s dynamic coastal regions are now being implemented as standardized strategies for the country’s allegedly backward interior. I will argue that generic application of “best practices” from Shanghai recycled through vacuous socialist-state developmental rhetoric involves strategic ignorance, or what I earlier dubbed *ignowledge*, of local conditions. This ignowledge contributes directly to the degradation of water resources in both Dianchi and the Three Parallel Rivers region, as well as the eradication of cultural memory in Kunming.

Production of *Ignowledge*

According to the “The 11th Five-Year Provincial Development Concepts and Future Goals in 2020,” one of the most important tasks in the 11th Five-Year Plan will be the establishment of new landmark buildings in Kunming. “We need to extract the local architectural style and blend it with modern elements, in order to elevate public recognition of Yunnan’s cities; conforming to the requirement of tourism and cultural industries, speeding up the construction of landmark buildings in cities; and, to lighten up the cities and decorate them with more green spaces, striving for eight square meters of green space per capita at the provincial level.”²

Current political discourse about the modernization of Kunming is also strongly bound to specific events. For instance, the 11th Yunnan Provincial Five-Year Plan is itself based on the national Five-Year Plan and thus reflects the national vision of modernity. The 1999 Kunming World Horticultural Fair was pivotal in this document, as central and provincial governments viewed the event as an opportunity to showcase a modern China at the close of the twentieth century. Preparations for the fair involved the demolition of many old buildings, erasure of many old streets, and their replacement with green meadows, horticultural settings, and high-rise buildings.

But rapid change in Kunming and Dianchi Lake has been underway for considerably longer. According to Li Zhang, “Kunming is one of the 24 renowned historical-cultural cities’ (*lishi wenhua mingcheng*) designated by the State Council in 1982. This special status gives a

2. Excerpt from *The Eleventh Five-Year Provincial Development Concepts and Future Goals in 2020*, Courtesy of Yunnan Provincial Library, Historical Archives Section.

city a significant advantage in marketing itself as a desirable tourist destination, and its creation reflected a growing concern on the part of the state that many heritage sites were at risk because of the blind pursuit of economic development and modernization" (Zhang 2006 465). In blatant contradiction to the intentions articulated by the "historical-cultural city" designation, it is now a common view among residents and researchers that from 1982 to 2007, Kunming and Dianchi Lake suffered more physical change than during any other time period.

A case in point of official ignorance production is The Eleventh Five-Year Provincial Development Concepts and Future Goals in 2020.³ A quasi-constitution and development plan about 25 pages long, it contains less than half a page devoted to addressing environmental protection. The rest of the document boldly declares a developmentalist vision for Kunming on the verge of becoming a "regional center;" a "manufacturing center;" an "international logistics center;" a "super-large metropolitan area with a population over ten million;" an "economic engine" stretching to Guangxi, Guizhou, Chongqing, Tibet, Vientiane, Bangkok, and Yangon; an "international railway hub" linking Yunnan with Southeast Asia, South Asia and East Asia; and a hydropower center tapping into the Three Parallel Rivers — in essence, a fully urbanized Yunnan with 24 million urban citizens by 2020. As such, the potential outcomes for Kunming cited as cause for caution in its 1982 designation are now embraced as the unabashed vision for the future, with no explanation given for the turnabout.

In the introduction to the document, its authors acknowledge its bold intent and their faith in scientific development, while dismissively brushing aside the concerns expressed less than two decades previously: "The new scientific development concept may drastically clash with the old development paradigms, old institutions, and old interest-sharing patterns. The resulting pressures and challenges will not necessarily develop into imminent problems, but if they do they can be addressed by

3. Courtesy of Yunnan Provincial Library (*Yunnan Sheng Tu Shu Guan*), I gained access to their government files section of the library and procured the full text of this strategic plan. This strategic plan is written by the Yunnan Provincial Policy Research Center, which is a government think-tank and has immense influence upon the knowledge circle of Yunnan, including universities, research centers, NGOs, companies and research institutes in different governmental departments. This strategic plan will be submitted to the provincial government leaders and finally approved as a quasi-constitution. It is worth mentioning that although this is a provincial strategic plan, it's a basic political administration requirement demanded by the Central Government, so all the provinces in China should prepare a strategic plan before they carry out their future plans; the strategic plan is analogous to the Central Government edition in format and its basic concerns with economic and social life. It is common for provincial governments to invite a cohort of experts from all around China to write up the strategic plan and in this regard, the strategic plan is symptomatic of the overall 'Ignorance' status of this country in this specific sphere.

our methods. Most important is to take advantage of new opportunities and strive upward amid difficulties, to maintain the momentum of economic development at all costs, and work toward realizing the second and third strategic steps on the path to constructing a ‘well-off society’ (*xiaokang shehui*).” In the coup de grace, the Plan describes its redefined “other shore,” in a passage festooned with the requisite nautical imagery: “Only through these means will the ship of Yunnan’s provincial development sail through treacherous shoals and reach a prosperous, rich, and blissful *bi’an*.”⁴ Ignnowledge has therefore allowed the ship of state to tow Kunming and its surrounding region in the direction of a drastically altered heading.

The Reality of Crisis in Kunming

Parallel to the official world of “scientific development” with its imagistic and hopeful declarations of *bi’an* and saturation of *ignnowledge* is the actual situation in Kunming and particularly at Dianchi Lake. The outlook for both provides little evidence to suggest a “blissful” future.

In July 2007, on the heels of a highly publicized water pollution case at Taihu Lake in the Yangtze delta, Dianchi Lake experienced an identical massive algal bloom. Green, rancid, sticky substances coated large parts of Dianchi Lake, according to reports.⁵ Days later, a Dianchi Pollution Administration Bureau official criticized local media for being unfair about the government’s long-term endeavors in the realm of pollution abatement, claiming that the lake was coated by a green substance almost every year and that the algal bloom was no worse than in previous years. Reports should not make a fuss or lump it with the severe pollution at Taihu, he said.⁶

In the same year, however, the local government had placed Dianchi Lake pollution at the top of its agenda. Although local residents no longer relied predominantly on Dianchi Lake for drinking water, officials believed that successful treatment of the lake’s pollution would be a powerful demonstration of the Chinese government’s “green transition.” The concept of “green transition” is part of the larger national project of “Socialist Modernization” and the realization of “Socialist Ecological Civilization” (*shehui zhuyi shengtai wenming*), a neologism coined by

4. Ibid. Compilation of Governmental Files, p. 127.

5. <http://news.qq.com/a/20070703/000947.htm>. This news story was written by the author, as a journalist of governmental news agency, and strongly disputed by local governmental officials.

6. A news story, first carried by the Chinese governmental news organization which secured a wide readership and spurred heated discussions. http://www.taizhou.com.cn/a/20070628/content_27393.html

President Hu Jintao in his speech to the 17th Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2007.⁷

The Same Old Story?

Environmental degradation at Dianchi Lake is, of course, nothing new. In 1969, a large reclamation campaign was initiated. More than 100,000 soldiers and public servants were dispatched to build new weirs and embankments, burying Dianchi's arable land. This campaign "transformed ... Dianchi Lake into an agriculture center, with other profitable businesses such as fisheries, forestry, farming, irrigation works, fertilizer factories, machine tool factories and electrical device factories; throwing up slogans [such as] 'fight against heaven and earth' (*zhantian doudi*) and 'fetch staple food from the water' (*xiang hai yaoliang*)."⁸ In May 1975, a dam 30 m in width, 6 m in height and 3 km in length was completed. It discharged over seventeen million cubic meters of water from Dianchi Lake and reclaimed 30,000 *mu* (4,941 acres) of arable land. The central government also invested six million yuan in a Haigen (local dialect for "embankment") Farm.⁹

Based on a historical review of reports on Dianchi, it is evident that the lake's pollution in recent decades has served a dual role. First, the pollution is a problem demanding specific solutions. But it also serves a second role, namely as an imagined worst-case scenario, a manifestation of a crisis imaginary, a perpetual problem and source of sorrows. In this sense, the Dianchi Lake pollution treatment campaign, in any era, exists dually as text and praxis. This is not to deny the decades-long, multi-billion-yuan pollution treatment campaigns that have been carried out there. Rather, the campaign continually reminds local people that the pollution has actually never been effectively addressed in a material sense, and it therefore consistently serves the political exigencies of the current moment. For more than two decades, people have lamented the same loss, made the same insightful decisions, phased in the same new-fangled policies, expressed the same complaints, and criticized the same phenomenon.

This process can be retrospectively observed in the 1980s, when frenzied industrialization aggravated the already extant lake pollution by

7. An explanatory piece published by Renmin Daily, China's major propagandist news paper, to expound the connotations of neologism *shengtai wenming* <http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/30178/6499114.html>

8. 50 Years of Yunnan: Milestones of Yunnan Socialist Construction, Compiled by Yunnan Provincial Historical Archives Bureau. People's Daily Publishing House. December 1999.

9. 50 Years of Yunnan: Milestones of Yunnan Socialist Construction, Compiled by Yunnan Provincial Historical Archives Bureau. People's Daily Publishing House. December 1999.

pumping tons of industrial waste and untreated urban wastewater into Dianchi's waters. Subsequently, rampant construction of high-end hotels and condos in the late 1990s and early 2000s has encroached upon the lake's shore seeking the added value of lake views, although the lake was by that time little more than a fetid open cesspool.

The rhetoric-laden media coverage of these events and their effects on Dianchi Lake between 1987 and 2007¹⁰ constitutes a kind of "textual governance" over this issue. By this I mean that the severe social and environmental problems that emerge at Dianchi historically have been addressed by officials at various levels of the Chinese government by means of a sort of governance through discourse – a discourse laden with ignorance.

My review of reports on pollution at Dianchi revealed that, far from an evolutionary process of enlightenment toward the problem of pollution, coverage has actually simply repeated itself over the years. In the late 1980s, the media reported thoroughly on the problems at the lake—ecological degradation, problematic urban drainage, new endeavors aimed at securing clean water, flawed urban planning, and new political statements on the issue. Although perceptions of the seriousness of the pollution varied from time to time, Dianchi Lake as an object of official analysis and representation has long been steeped in a *fin-de-siecle* narrative of crisis.

Local residents and officials often attribute environmental degradation at Dianchi to the reclamation campaign. But, according to my research and that of other experts in this field¹¹, although the campaign severely worsened the environmental situation at Dianchi Lake, many other environmentally abusive practices have been carried out before and after the reclamation. Regardless of the time period, people have pointed to pollution in the lake to explain feelings of sadness and misery, and to justify the necessity to carry out new construction campaigns.

Exoticism and Fantasies of Dianchi Lake

The lake serves a powerful symbolic function. For instance, the hills surrounding the lake have become a prime site for locating tombs due to their beautiful lake views and auspicious geomantic position. The practice of *feng shui*, maligned under Mao, has made a powerful resurgence in the contemporary era, further contributing to the allure of the area.¹² Even

10. In this paper, many names have been replaced by pseudonyms for the purposes of maintaining the impartiality and neutrality of the author.

11. http://phtv.ifeng.com/program/shnjd/200711/1117_1612_301167.shtml, an investigative story on Dianchi Lake pollution conducted by one influential Phoenix TV reporter which attributed the main reason of Dianchi environmental degradation to reclamation campaigns. Many news stories in the database I have mentioned have touched upon the same points but cannot be accessed through public internet resources.

12. Ibid.

though fouled with ghoulish slime since the mid 1980s, Dianchi Lake has not ceased to be an exotic site in the popular imagination. Time and again it is lovingly referred to as the “Shining Pearl of the High Plateau” (*gaoyuan mingzhu*), a moniker given by the late Premier Zhou Enlai, and repeated ever since by government figures, the media, and historians. It is also known as the “Birthplace of the Ancient Dian Kingdom” (*gudian wenming*) and the “Hometown of Dinosaurs” (*konglong zhi xiang*), since a dinosaur fossil was discovered at a small village in the environs of Dianchi Lake.

Since 1993, the lake has also been the setting for a tourist development called Ethnic Minority Village (*minzu cun*), sometimes described by anthropologists as a “Human Zoo.” In this village, local tourism developers showcase the rich diversity of “minority” cultures in Yunnan in an artificial primitive village featuring “typical” minority architecture styles and icons.

Workers at the “village” hail from various places in Yunnan and upon recruitment become contract laborers barred from returning to their villages for family reunions or other ceremonial occasions that clash with the tourist calendar. The responsibility of the “villagers” is to provide “authentic” cultural performances and accept the daily barrage of questions from tourists. Photos in newspapers and magazines purporting to represent cultural and festive celebrations throughout Yunnan are often taken at the village. In addition, when major policies are phased in, local news organizations come to the village to interview “ethnic villagers” and get quotes demonstrating broad-based, multi-ethnic consensus on the question of the day. Ignorance therefore allows a veneer of ersatz, imported cultural diversity on Dianchi Lake to obscure the very real destruction of cultural memory in and around Kunming.

Nostalgia for Dianchi and Old Kunming

The 1997 book *Old Kunming*¹³ is a compilation of memoirs by long-time Kunming residents, reflecting on their experiences and personal stories connected to the city and Dianchi Lake. It also contains sundry poems, folklore, anecdotes, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, doggerels, and oral histories to provide a vivid and poetic portrait of life enjoyed by past Kunming residents.

In these collected memories, Dianchi Lake is a huge watershed, where mountain springs, rivulets, and rivers all converge into a rippling vastness. In 1936, many citizens still traveled around the city by 500 small wooden boats covered by blackish curved roofs, floating in a zigzag of canals, and with busy docks dotted across the city. During sunset, against a crimson sun, local citizens lost themselves in the hustle and bustle of bazaars along

13. Zhu Jingyu. 1997. *Old Kunming*. Compiled by Kunming Daily. Kunming, China: Yunnan People's Publishing House.

the riverside, a place where people drew water directly from the rivers for cooking. The streets were cobbled and shining, mirroring the sophisticated wooden structures that stood along the roadside, beside ramshackle adobe houses no higher than three stories, lit by red lanterns and pre-industrial lamp posts. Although the night life might not have been as exciting as now, people got up late, especially businessmen, and the local government had to phase in regulations demanding that all the shops open for business in the early morning, even sending policemen to enforce the rules.

Current residents frequently recite these poems and narrations and hold tightly to the fairytale-like scenarios of this city. As one of my informants told me, "The old Kunming is really unforgettable: the trees, small lanes, old buildings, big courtyards linking one another, a clean Dianchi Lake which I frequented, playing hide and dive with my companions in the water full of fish and shrimps; the city was not so big, it was pretty much walkable. I could go shopping in those old buildings and go to different snack stands for different foods, which tasted differently from the things you can find today. And now they are all gone without trace, you cannot believe you are living in the same city. Now I hate all the traffic jams, concrete constructions, noise, and the endless road paving."¹⁴

Other reflections and memories evoke the darker side of the area's history: the poor drainage system which led to flooding of the streets when it rained, the roadsides always fouled with piles of dung and garbage, people living in poverty, with scarcity commonplace and people also suffering endless pandemics and disease. Ever since colonial times, when the French laid a 450km railway to Vietnam, sacrificing more than 70,000 Chinese coolies in the process, the local handicrafts and national industries withered under competition from wares from France, Vietnam, and Hong Kong. During the 1940s, when the Flying Tigers fought the Japanese alongside the Chinese, American soldiers bullied the locals. Service men lynched local Chinese people, crushed pedestrians to death only to then drive away, and raped Chinese girls. None of this was mentioned, however, in 2005 at the 60-year anniversary of the anti-Japanese War, when Flying Tiger veterans were officially welcomed back to the area as heroes. The authorities used ignorance to discuss the past while simultaneously permitting meaning to be erased.

In the summer of 1999, an exhibition of 365 old photographs of Kunming and its surrounding regions taken by the French consul, Auguste Francois, during the late Qing and early Republican periods, opened

14. Aged 45, this informant is now working at a police station in Kunming. When I interviewed her, she was in a small city in Mengzi, one important stop along the China to Vietnam railway built by the French during the colonial period, and which is now undergoing a similar change and reconstruction. "This small town reminds me of Kunming in my childhood time, but soon it will change too," she said.

to the public and instantly catapulted local residents into bouts of nostalgia. The pictures depict a world that fits nicely with the popular imagination of the city's past. From these reflections, people began to question the legitimacy and efficacy of recent development, especially the futile efforts to treat Dianchi's pollution. Their questioning is actually a collective moment in the process of redevelopment during which *ci'an* and *bi'an* are intermingled. The recollection of Kunming as a once picturesque and otherworldly place of quiet and happiness becomes a *bi'an* to be desperately pursued. In the ultimate irony, the "other shore" that is envisioned for the future becomes a refraction of "this shore" that was left behind in the past – long enough ago for its contours to have almost, but not quite, receded from memory.

Conclusion

By analyzing one example of how the notion of "Political Bi'an" is put in practice in the context of planning in contemporary China, we are able to observe the way in which bodies of scientific and folk knowledge are being incorporated into larger governing discourses. In this paper I have proposed the term "Iknowledge" to describe such discourses. As described in this essay, "Iknowledge," as a technology of "discursive rule" makes reference to a "Political Bi'an" as a moral and aesthetic justification for action while it enables a technocratic approach to planning that is based in a selective incorporation of local, often distorted, sets of knowledge about a particular planning problem. The most problematic aspect of "Iknowledge" is that this practice is not self-critical, but self-aggrandizing and self-referential.

In the case of Dianchi Lake it is possible to see how, among the villagers, there used to be a worship system related to water, the environment and human existence, a system deeply rooted in their collective memory. When fear of the omnipresent deities subsided, collective memories of a "Dianchi-topia" were gradually pushed out to the periphery of their spiritual territory and a new Iknowledge-supported modernization ambition emerged. The nightmare of pollution materialized and was echoed elsewhere throughout China.

Drawing from Charles Perrow, Ulrich Beck demonstrates that "science is no longer an experimental activity without consequences, and technology is no longer the low-risk application of secure knowledge. Science and technology produce risks in carrying out the experiments and thereby burden society as a whole with managing the risks" (Beck 1996, 36) The local knowledge and outcry for a secure future is drowned out by the irrefutable "Political Bi'an" and the supposed knowledge of meritocracy represented in "discursive governance." In this sense, the advent of "Iknowledge" is the time when the "darkest darkness prevails" (Ibid., 38).

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Zhou Lei is a Post-Doctoral fellow at the Institute of Sociology, Nanjing University. He holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the Yunnan University and was a Chevening Scholar 2008-2009 at the London School of Economics.