

Michael J. Hathaway

# Environmental Winds



Making the Global in Southwest China

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MAKING THE GLOBAL IN SOUTHWEST CHINA

*Michael J. Hathaway*



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## CONTENTS

List of Illustrations vii

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

1 • Environmental Winds 8

2 • Fleeting Intersections and Transnational Work 41

3 • The Art of Engagement 73

4 • Making an Indigenous Space 116

5 • On the Backs of Elephants 152

Conclusion 185

Notes 189

Glossary 219

Bibliography 223

Index 251

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

- Map 1. Map of China 9
- Map 2. Map of southern Yunnan 34
- Figure 1. Educated youth in Xishuangbanna 16
- Figure 2. The old traditional forester and the new social forester 20
- Figure 3. Auto repair class at Breakaway: A Women's Liberation School in Emeryville, California, 1973 with Chinese poster of female tractor driver 28
- Figure 4. Mao Zedong on the cover of *The Black Panther* newsletter, 1969 30
- Figure 5. "Support America" poster from China 31
- Figure 6. Cultural Revolution woodcuts 32
- Figure 7. Prince Philip with Chinese scientists, 1986 45
- Figure 8. Slicing wild banana stalks for pig food, 2001 75
- Figure 9. Bamboo and grass houses in Xiao Long, 2001 79
- Figure 10. Poster of protected animal species in Yunnan, 1999 93
- Figure 11. Cover of WWF's *Agroforestry Handbook* 98
- Figure 12. Dai sacred landscape 139
- Figure 13. Hani sacred landscape 139
- Figure 14. City bosses pose with tamed elephants in Wild Elephant Valley, 2001 180

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## *Introduction*

IN THE SUMMER OF 1995, in an old greenhouse in the dry hills above Santa Cruz, California, a chance meeting would inextricably pull me into the world of environmentalism in China. My admiration of a rare orchid with delicate purple petals and intricate designs led to a conversation with a man named Karl Bareis, who told me that this specimen was brought from Southwest China to France in the late 1800s. I knew a bit already about Bareis, a renaissance man fluent in Japanese, a bamboo expert, and a cultivator of rare tropical fruit, and I was interested to learn that he himself had just returned from this region, along China's remote mountainous borders with Myanmar and Vietnam, on an ethnobotanical expedition. I had just finished my undergraduate thesis on global environmental politics in the Brazilian Amazon and was trying to find work in China. My wife, who had lived in Nanjing for a year during the mid-1980s, was eager to return to China. I too was deeply curious about "actually existing socialism" in China and what impact, if any, global environmentalism was having there.

Bareis talked excitedly about his trip, including how his group tried to track down "medicine men," as he called them, who knew how to find rare wild herbs and cultivate them in garden plots. He gave me the address of a fellow explorer, Xue Jiru (Hseuh Chi-Ju), a retired professor who first earned international fame in the 1940s.<sup>1</sup> Under great difficulties, Xue had collected botanical samples of a deciduous conifer tree, the Dawn Redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*), long thought by botanists to have gone extinct during the age of the dinosaurs (Hseuh 1985). Xue sent the specimen to Harvard's Arnold Arboretum, which welcomed his prized discovery. His pressed leaves and careful handwriting remain there to this day. I wrote to Xue and was delighted when, nearly seven weeks later, I received a warm reply, inviting

me and my wife to spend a year teaching at his institution, the Southwest Forestry College in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province.

Our flight to Kunming had a one-day layover in Hong Kong, where I stopped in at the small, bustling office for World Wildlife Fund-China (WWF). I met the energetic American director and Hong Kong staff, who saw their job of promoting environmentalism in China as a daunting task. However, the director also suggested that “if there was something called ‘environmentalism’ anywhere in China, Yunnan was the place to find it.” He contrasted Yunnan to Nanjing, where he had lived for years and where there seemed little love of the natural world. In Nanjing, one of the few remaining endangered Yangtze River dolphins just barely managed to survive in captivity, neglected in a pool filled with green algae blooms. In Yunnan, he said, there were still herds of wild elephants, which was a surprise to me. He was depressed about China’s environmental future, but Yunnan Province gave him hope, both because it maintained a surprising diversity of flora and fauna and because of the conviction, energy, and abilities of a group of Chinese experts with whom he worked—people I would later get to know well.<sup>2</sup>

The next morning we landed in Kunming, one of the many cities in China barely known to the West but bustling with millions of people. Within a day my wife and I met Xue in his small apartment. He sported a blue “Mao suit” and an ebullient smile and was starting to stoop with age. He sat us down on the sofa and slid open the glass door under the TV set, grasping a thick glass bottle that was filled with red lycium berries and two dried geckos, their bodies lashed to a bamboo frame with red string. He poured us each a cup of strong spirits. We were introduced to Xue’s son, a shy man in his forties, who had a single-minded passion for bamboo, and his granddaughter, then in high school, who was urged to “practice English.”

Xue had learned English as a youth, and like many of his fellow scientists who matured during the 1930s and 1940s, China’s “age of openness” (Dikötter 2008), his sensibilities were strongly influenced by that era. At the time he fostered strong international connections, hoping not necessarily to move abroad but to contribute to China’s development. His son had grown up “between Russian and English,” after China split with the Soviet Union in 1962 but before the beginning of the “reform period” in 1979, when China began to actively reach out to the capitalist world and English became important again.

Some hours later we left his apartment, slightly woozy from the reptilian brew and in possession of a beautiful book, *The Gaoligong Mountain Na-*

*tional Nature Reserve*, written in Chinese, produced by his research team as part of an ecological survey to create a new nature reserve (Li and Xue 1995). We soon became friends with Xue and a handful of his elderly peers, scholars who had come of age during a time of exciting cosmopolitanism and intense debate over China's future. They were friendly and active, optimistic for a new China that they said "cared about science, again." At first I didn't know what they meant by that "again." It took me months to realize that this and other sporadic remarks referred to an often tragic past, for many scientists had suffered greatly from the 1950s to the 1970s, accused of being "imperialist running dogs" or of practicing "bourgeois, capitalist science." Starting in the 1980s, however, many of these scientists were "rehabilitated," and their peers and superiors increasingly respected their past accomplishments and offered them new opportunities. Many older scientists began to encourage their children and students to pursue a scientific career, as it offered hope to advance themselves and the nation now that China was in a period of relative calm and stability. They understood that interest in the environment was now growing, and they were hoping to make of it what they could during their old age.

Some of these older scientists and their younger peers used a metaphor to describe these changes: "environmental winds" (*huanjing feng*). "Winds" (*feng*) was a word I often heard when people talked about the past, to describe times when political movements (like the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution) brought life-changing consequences.<sup>3</sup> The fact that they chose this particular term, typically used to describe powerful social transformations, to refer to changes associated with environmentalism indexes some sense of its intensity. We were in Kunming for barely a week before we started to feel the breadth and force of these environmental winds, although it took time to understand many of their effects. In part, the winds signaled a marked shift in past understandings and desires for a different future. Wastelands were no longer understood as places that had not yet been converted into agricultural fields but were seen, instead, as ecosystems and habitats. Similarly, swamps that had been drained were restored as wetlands. Scientists and others discovered undocumented wild animals and plants, classifying some as endangered and quantifying overall levels of biodiversity. People like Xue were asked to document and plan these kinds of changes, create maps for ecological protection, devise new strategies, and train nature reserve staff in new methods for collecting ecological data and protecting the reserves.

As I traveled out of urban Kunming and visited remote upland villages I soon realized that these environmental winds often brought dramatic and sometimes drastic changes for millions of rural Yunnanese. Unlike the scientists, very few rural people had a salary, and for almost everyone money was “hard to find” (*qian henman zhao*). I was struck by the seeming similarity of urban life in 1995 between Kunming and major North American cities, but I found that lives in the countryside were strikingly different. Many of the rural citizens I met in 1995 (and lived with during fieldwork from 2000 to 2002) built their lives directly with their own hands in a way rarely done in North America. They built their homes out of trees they chopped down and sawed, and adobe bricks they dug and dried in the sun. They plowed fields with oxen, raised or hunted animals, cooked with wood they gathered from the forest, and grew almost all of their own grain and vegetables. I knew some “back to the land” people in California who tried to be self-sufficient, but in China such activities were not a personal idiosyncratic quest but a widespread social phenomenon. Such relative self-sufficiency was not an age-old practice but actually fostered by a “grain first” policy starting in the 1950s, when the Chinese state pushed rural residents to focus on grain and dismantled many rural cash-based craft specialties such as making paper or cloth from cotton and silk and turned these crafts into urban industries. For decades the government exhorted farmers to kill grain-eating pests such as waterfowl, clear land to expand fields, and use more chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The government largely ran on grain, not cash; rural residents paid taxes in bags of rice and wheat. In turn, the grain was key to international trade and rationed to urban residents, who in 1980 made up only 20 percent of China’s population. Yet by the 1990s, after forty years of strong pro-agricultural policies that served to expand and intensify production in rural areas, farmers in some places saw new people coming to their villages, exhorting them to behave differently; officials showed them maps indicating that village forests were now requisitioned and placed under state protection, forest guards enforced these mandates, and police confiscated guns as part of new antihunting regulations. Village children learned different ways to think about nature and sustainability and criticized their parents’ hunting and farming practices.

Back at the college in Kunming, my wife and I were quickly caught up in these winds, and our Chinese colleagues and friends asked us to assist them in many ways. We were there during a period later referred to by some Chinese experts as “the gold rush”—a time of burgeoning interest in Chinese

cultural and biological diversity. These experts taught us a whole raft of acronyms, asked us to edit reports for environmental nongovernmental organizations, write proposals to European governments for hosting environmental projects, and coach them for visa interviews at foreign embassies so that they could attend scientific conferences. We were invited to participate in conferences and workshops hosted by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Ford Foundation, groups promoting social forestry and investigating the gendered dynamics of subsistence activities.

At these conferences I saw how Chinese participants positioned themselves in relation to visitors from Cambodia, Vietnam, Nepal, Italy, India, England, and the United States. By organizing these conferences, they helped forge international connections and worked on translating issues and concepts, helping them to travel between these different places. The conferences, all using English as a common language, would often stimulate active discussion and debate over how to understand and reconcile what they often described as "foreign concepts" (*wailai sixiang*) and "Chinese conditions" (*zhongguo guoqing*).

This book explores the lives of these scientists and rural farmers as well as two other groups who were caught up in these environmental winds in Southwest China: state officials and expatriate (foreign) conservationists.<sup>4</sup> It shows how these actors and winds brought unexpected and transformational changes to the area's natural and social landscapes. These groups noticed and reached out to the environmental winds in different ways.

I pay particular attention to the world of the Chinese experts and how they helped make Yunnan into one of China's most important places in the global environmental ecumene. Others might regard these people as mere translators or even culture brokers, but I came to see them as much more. They did not just passively wait for or respond to international interest but sought out connections and helped to generate energy and interest. They helped connect Yunnan with international circuits by positioning their province as a space of great biological and cultural diversity. This was particularly difficult in the mid-1980s because outsiders often viewed China as an environmental lost cause—what Vaclav Smil's influential 1984 book described as a "Bad Earth," which was already plundered and had little wild nature left worth protecting.<sup>5</sup> In terms of culture, many saw China as a land of social homogeneity and uniformity; it was the land of the "blue ants," masses of peasants in blue Mao suits.<sup>6</sup> Despite these difficulties, Chinese

experts sought out and built connections with people and organizations around the world to create new narratives and foster new relationships. Through multiple and varied efforts—conducting research, carrying out projects, writing and publishing in English and Chinese, mapping coordinates and producing data sets, creating lists of endangered plants and animals, recording indigenous knowledge, and hosting and initiating international conferences—Yunnan’s experts were building their province into an important environmental hub.

Yet the experts did not accomplish this solely by themselves. They relied on villagers who maintained compelling indigenous knowledge. Their efforts were also boosted substantially through the persistence of valuable tropical rain forest and charismatic animals like the Asian elephant, which were used to show that China still possessed vibrant cultural and ecological diversity that was well worth protecting. They brought together these people and animals to foster a hub that linked them as part of an emergent global environmental network.

My conversations, observations, and interactions with Chinese scientists, officials, rural farmers, and expatriate conservationists led me to wonder how one might understand the often striking divergence and unevenness of such networks, both between and within countries. I knew that the texture of environmentalism was so different, for example, in the United States and Brazil (the two countries I was most familiar with), but I did not know how it could also be so different within one country. I found that a neighboring province, Guangxi, had similar levels of biological diversity, but it remained relatively ignored by this network. How was it that Yunnan went from a place that was stigmatized in China as backward, isolated and poor, and barely known abroad, to becoming a global hub of environmentalism? This led to two of the key questions that underlie this book: How are global connections made, and why do they happen so differently in different places? The Chinese metaphor of “winds” turned out to be particularly useful for grasping some of the answers to these questions.

Many scholarly and popular accounts portray globalization as flowing across the world like a flood, submerging local differences under a universal force (of Westernization or capitalism). I argue instead that there is no singular form of globalization that affects all places equally. What is often understood as “the global” is both quickly changing and highly diverse, with multiple globalizing logics, aims, and aspirations. This is precisely because every day there are many people in many places who are actively engaged in

*making* what we understand as globalization. Globalization, then, is not the self-propelling movement of one form, logic, or modality but a place of articulation and human work that not only transforms what is often described as the global *but actually brings it into being*.<sup>7</sup> In my use of the Chinese concept of “winds,” it should be stressed that such forces are not understood as natural and beyond human intentions but as created by people’s efforts. This book explores how many efforts to forge and maintain connections are not actually successful, and if they are, they can become transformed into something quite different from their origins.

Since my initial year in China in 1995, I have been swept up in this world of Chinese environmentalism, and I have watched with great curiosity and interest how it has emerged and continues to change over time. Over six trips lasting a total of more than three years, I have conducted archival studies, carried out interviews, attended workshops, and spent eighteen months living in two rural villages that were part of international conservation projects. I continue to watch and participate in these emerging worlds, even now as I live in Vancouver, Canada. It turns out that Olivia Xue Hui, the granddaughter of Xue Jiru (the botanist who first welcomed us to Yunnan in 1995), came to Simon Fraser University (where I am now a professor) to earn a master’s degree in environmental studies, conducted fieldwork on Tibetan pastoralists in Northwest Yunnan, and later worked for The Nature Conservancy in Yunnan. In China and Canada we have talked on more than one occasion about how much things have changed. New environmental issues are gaining center stage, and my peers in Yunnan now emphasize emerging controversies over dam construction, biofuel plantations, and forestry projects aimed at addressing carbon storage and global climate change. We know, however, that even while living in Canada, we are still part of Yunnan’s changing environmental winds. Through the ongoing work of diverse organizations and individuals (including myself), the winds have changed and are continuing to change the lives of many people we know, as they are caught up in these transformations.