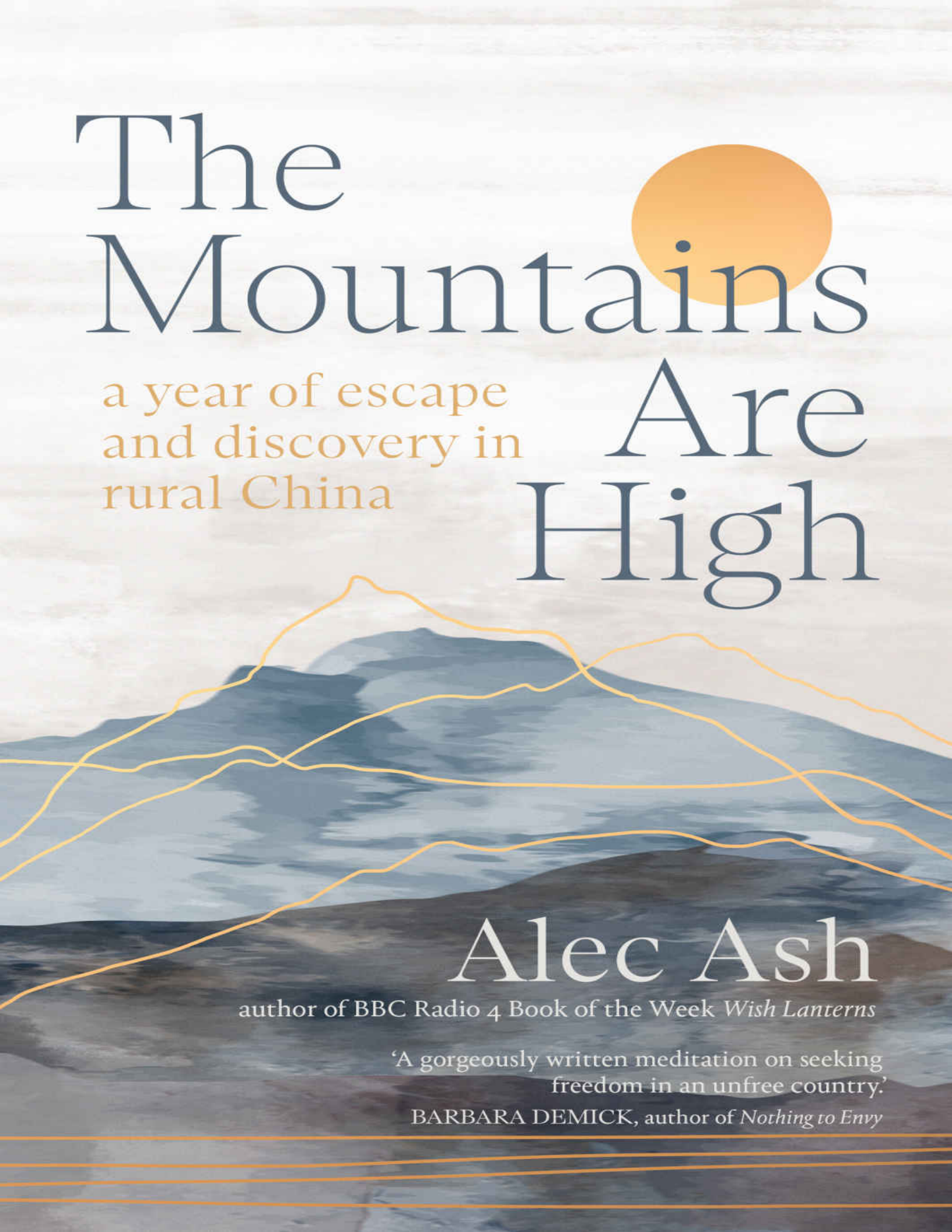


The background of the cover is a stylized illustration of a mountain range. The mountains are rendered in shades of blue and grey, with yellow lines tracing their ridges and valleys. A large, solid orange circle, representing the sun or moon, is positioned in the upper right quadrant, partially overlapping the word 'Mountains'.

The Mountains Are High

a year of escape
and discovery in
rural China

Alec Ash

author of BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week *Wish Lanterns*

'A gorgeously written meditation on seeking
freedom in an unfree country.'

BARBARA DEMICK, author of *Nothing to Envy*

The Mountains Are High

Alec Ash is a writer and editor focused on China, where he lived from 2008–2022. He is author of *Wish Lanterns* (Picador, 2016), literary nonfiction about the lives of six young Chinese people, a BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week. His long-form articles have appeared in *NYRB*, *LARB*, *Dissent*, *The Guardian*, and elsewhere, and he was a stringer for *The Sunday Times* and *The Economist*. He was previously editor of *LARB China Channel*, founder of the writers' collective The Anthill, and contributed to two anthologies of literary reportage, *Chinese Characters*, and *While We're Here*. Currently he is editor of the *China Books Review* at Asia Society.

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For my mother

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Almanac

For Dali, Yunnan, in 2020–21
(Chinese Year of the Rat)

SPRING

Dry, clear skies. Cold nights, warm days. T-shirt weather by March. Occasional strong winds. Rhododendron, cherry blossoms, quince, magnolia.

Festivals: Chinese New Year (25 January), Lantern Festival (8 February), Mountain Festival (26 March), Tomb Sweeping (4 April), Third Month Festival (7 April), Beggars' Festival (20 April).

SUMMER

Rising heat, peaking at 30 degrees Celsius, broken by the summer monsoon. 144 millimetres of rain in July. Cherries, peaches, summer vegetables, mushrooms.

Festivals: Butterfly Festival (7 May), Three Spirits Festival (14 May), Rice Transplanting Festival (24 May), Dragon Boat Festival (25 June).

AUTUMN

Temperate, chilly in the evenings. Rains sputter out by October, heat rises again. Chinese asparagus, Sichuan peppercorn, water caltrop, marijuana.

Festivals: Torch Festival (14 August), Ghost Festival (2 September), Lake Festival (24 September), Mid-Autumn Festival (1 October), Double Nines Festival (25 October).

WINTER

Pleasantly warm in November, low of 4 degrees Celsius by January. First snowfalls on the mountain. Winter beans, avocado, nuts and berries, sugar

cane.

Festivals: Christmas (25 December), New Year's Eve (31 December), Laba Festival (20 January), Chinese New Year (12 February, Year of the Ox).

The mountains rose in folds above me. Forested contours, fading from deep greens to distant pastels. At their foot sat a squat crimson temple, the character for Buddha flaking off its facade. A weathered granny in an indigo apron filled a can with spring water that flowed down from the hills. Incense lingered in the air from the temple's smouldering brazier, mixing with the faint scent of rotting garbage that villagers had dumped next to the mountain trailhead.

Tracing that path to the top, I would stand at the ridge of the Cangshan massif: 4,000 metres high and cloud-shrouded. Its nineteen peaks stretching to the horizon like stegosaur spines. The forest falling beneath me, thick with pine and spruce. Below it all a huge lake, shaped like a titan's ear that had fallen from the firmament. The Old Town by its shore, watched over by three pagodas built by monk kings in the 9th century.

This was the valley of Dali, in China's rural south-west. I had come here to escape the city, the ruts of a life left behind. Here I would meet the other urban transplants too, each seeking their own Shangri-la. The hippies and yuppies, bohemians and bourgeois, environmentalists and survivalists, home schoolers and retirees, Taoists and Buddhists, psychonauts and oneironauts, dissidents and dropouts. Refugees of modernity, opting out of China's honking high-rises to live far from the nexus, trying to be free in an unfree country. As the saying went: 'the mountains are high and the emperor far away.'

That is what brought me to the mountains, to the temple, to the village that would be my home for this year of changes. By day, sunshine pierced clouds that rolled off the peaks in waves. At night, moonlight limned the darkling mountains with a pale cast, swallowed them in silence. What would I find at the top?

I began to climb.

PRELUDE: New Year

Sometimes, something has to change. The heart baulks. The tension snaps. The urge strikes to begin anew, an itch that grows until we can bear it no more. Or change is thrust upon us, unbidden — a new job, a new relationship, a windfall, an accident, a divorce. Most difficult of all is inner change. Yet the challenge of transformation is measure of how deeply we long for it. What we need most is that which we dread to begin.

The year 2020 brought change for me, as it did for many. Not from pandemic or tragedy, though catalysed by heartbreak and moving home. Underneath it was a deeper call: the need to reevaluate what is important in life, a summons we are not aware of until it knocks on our skull, rapping from the inside out. The pressure builds, while we tell ourselves all is well. But by a certain point, the rap-tap-tap cannot be ignored.

Born, bred and educated in mossy Oxford, England, the first decades of my life had been quiet, privileged, sheltered — the proverbial frog in the well, who thinks the circle above him is the whole sky. On graduating, in 2008 I studied Mandarin at Peking University for two years, thrust into a foreign culture and an urban pace that were unfamiliar. My ceiling had burst open; the frog was out of the well. After a stint in London, in 2012 I returned to Beijing as a writer and editor, and didn't look back for another seven years.

Foreigners in a foreign land, we guzzled at the firehose of China at the peak of its growth and ambitions. The cultural novelty and chaotic news cycle alone were enough daily stimulation for a lifetime. The sheer size and pace of Beijing was thrilling, galvanising. The protean beast of China charged forward, and we were fleas clinging to its back, along for the ride. Every day I learnt something new that challenged my perspective. Every night was a night out. By the next morning, the city felt new all over again.

Those teenage years of the 21st century were a debutante time for China on the world stage — as for me in my twenties — when anything seemed

possible. After the economic opening-up of the 1980s and 1990s, in the 2000s and early 2010s the country felt it was tentatively liberalising, inch by inch, with an active civil society that seemed on the brink of changing the nation's sclerotic politics. The capital attracted artists, rockers, free-thinkers and thrill-seekers from all four winds. Others were busy getting rich, sucking at the marrow of the world's most vibrant economy.

By 2017, something had changed. Xi Jinping was in his second term and flexing his muscles as a strongman. Then he removed term limits from his office entirely. China was tightening rather than opening. Economic growth was slowing. The first reports of internment camps in Xinjiang were surfacing. Human rights lawyers and feminist groups were arrested. Relations with the West soured. Journalists were booted out of the country. The artists and activists fled ship. Income inequality and unemployment were rising. Beijing no longer felt like the hub of a dynamic nation, but the nexus of a police state.

In the central *hutong* district I lived in, migrant businesses were forced out. Bars and cafés were bricked over in what residents called The Great Brickening. Graffiti-covered walls were plastered in fake tiles, giving a Potemkin-village faux-historicity to the neighbourhood. Live music venues and other favourite haunts closed. The once buzzy capital now felt soggy, like a cruller dipped in too much soy milk. When I arrived in Beijing, I had promised myself I wouldn't become the cliché of the bitter expat. Now, in 2019, I was getting the seven-year itch.

Cities are hard, unforgiving things, but there has always been something unliveable about Chinese cities in particular. Soviet super-blocks crammed with concrete high-rises. Roads blocked by fencing down the middle to prevent jaywalkers. The miasma of traffic fumes and smog that suffuses the air. The problem is not Communist control so much as capitalist excess, the familiar litany of urbanisation and its discontents. Long commutes. Honking cars. Nameless neighbours. Cramped apartments. Ballooning prices. Bad air. The toxins of city life that accumulate in the liver of the soul.

It was hard to feel anywhere else was doing much better. Donald Trump was fostering division in the United States. Britain was tearing its hair out over Brexit. There was a rancour in the culture at large: a self-righteous and confused anger, fed by social media, that split communities or pooled them into self-validating puddles. Even the elements protested at our abuse of the environment, with wildfires and floods ravishing a heating planet. Inequality was deepening: the haves having more, the have-nots less. Some days, lost as a cog in the news cycle, there seemed little to hope for.

Or perhaps what was deteriorating was me — becoming more calcified and cynical in my thirties, just as I had promised myself I wouldn't. Old friends left Beijing, in the great churn of expat life. My long-term relationship was having problems that I chose to ignore. Without a new project after my first book was published, I was feeling listless about work. Put simply, I was in a rut. I wasn't yet ready to leave China, but I needed a retreat. Somewhere to wait out the winter, until spring came again.

Rap-tap-tap. I remember the knock on my door, the literal wake-up call. A local official, informing me in neutral tones that the walk-up building I lived in was an illegal structure and due to be demolished. If you had asked me if I wanted to go, I would have said no. I needed the push to realise it — I was ready for a new horizon.

Something had to change.



I first fantasised about moving to Dali while scrolling through my friends' posts on the messaging and photo-sharing app WeChat. I lingered on a post from Zhazha (literally 'Boom Boom'), an ebullient, thirty-something Chinese photographer I hadn't seen in a while. It turned out he had also felt burnt out by Beijing, and had moved to a rural village in a far-flung corner of the nation. Flipping through images of his new digs, I wished I had too. His farmhouse had a cobbled yard: grass poking between the cracks, foliage-fringed, with a Taoist yin-yang formed from pebbles at its centre,

next to a persimmon tree and a reading bench. The house itself had old wooden beams, and a skylight boasting a view of the three ancient pagodas Dali was famous for, with towering mountains as their backdrop.

From my city apartment, it looked like heaven — space to think and breathe, away from the smog and the honk and the hurry. Zhazha bought vegetables from his village market, grown in fields nearby; he spent long, lazy days hiking up to hidden waterfalls in the hillside; he focused on creative projects, without having to worry about rent or living costs. Later, I asked him why he had left Beijing.

‘Beijing used to be very fun,’ he said, ‘but it’s difficult to live in and to earn enough money, so I didn’t like it. I discovered actually I wasn’t happy. So I migrated to Dali in order to find a new way of life.’

Finding a new way of life was a quest I began to hear a lot. Perhaps because I sought it myself, I started to notice how many around me did too. In China, city malaise was writ large by the nation’s sheer scale and pace of urbanisation. They talked of it as ‘city sickness’. In the space of forty years since the 1980s, China had squeezed in the industrialisation and economic growth that Western countries had taken centuries to achieve. But now its citizens were stepping back to ask: what was it all for? I’m richer, but am I happy? After economic and career development, what about personal development?

A new buzzword was starting to appear online: ‘involution’. The Chinese, *nei juan*, literally means to be ‘rolled up inside’. If you worked twelve hours a day, then you were ‘rolled up’ by overwork culture. If you were a student whose parents jam-packed your weekend with back-to-back extracurricular and exam-prep classes, then you were ‘rolled up’ by the education system. If you were commuting for two hours to pay off a shoebox apartment and buy a car so you could attract a wife, you were ‘rolled up’ by social conventions. Jack Ma, then China’s richest man, praised ‘996’ work hours — 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week — as a ‘blessing’ (for his bottom line, at least). But bloodsucking capitalism had begun to clot. It was the rat race, the hamster wheel, and the rodents were revolting.

Why should I work so hard, they thought, when I'm just running to stand still? The best jobs were taken, the pie already divided up. In today's China, it was difficult to move ahead and easy to fall behind. One blog post likened *nei juan* to the prisoner's dilemma, using an image of a concert where those in the front rows stood up to get a better view. If everyone sat, the view would be the same — but because some were standing, everyone behind them had to as well. Not social evolution, but involution.

A solution was proposed: instead of standing or sitting, lie down. The word used for this, *tangping*, literally meant to 'lie flat' but signalled a deeper opting out of the system. If the game was rigged and social mobility impossible, why even bother? Quit the rat race; sleep in instead of working late; break the cycle. The most extreme form was to escape the city altogether — that hub we had gravitated towards in search of opportunity, only to be disenchanted. That was what Zhazha had done, fleeing to country climes. The rural environment of Dali in south-west China was already jokingly dubbed the 'capital of lying flat'. Others called it 'Dalifornia', for its good weather and chill vibes.

This back-to-the-land trend was a direct reversal of everything upwardly mobile Chinese people used to hold dear. For decades, those born in the countryside had wanted only to escape its poverty. Now, since 2011, more people lived in urban than rural areas. Yet for the generations born in China's mega-cities, some wanted to get out — to return to the soil where their forefathers had come from. Instead of chasing bright lights in the big city, they dreamt of open farmland and the quiet life. After forty years of urbanisation, the flow was reversing.

It was still a minority who were privileged, or crazy, enough to quit their city jobs. Some were the enriched middle class, seeking a patch of sun to lie in, equivalent to a Londoner's cottage in Tuscany or a lake-house in upstate New York. Others were penniless urban workers who wanted to drop off the grid and reinvent themselves entirely. Either way, this inverse migration from city to country, once a trickle, was becoming a stream. Zhazha was an avatar for the trend: a thirty-something creative professional fed up with the

city, who wanted to live his own life instead of someone else's expectations of what that should be.

'My parents' generation worked hard all of their lives to leave the countryside and move to a township so I could have better opportunities,' he told me. 'They didn't understand why I would go back to the countryside.' His father, a carpenter from rural Shandong province, had been overjoyed when his son went to Beijing, the first in the family to attend university. While he had hoped Zhazha might work in a bank or state company, he would still brag to neighbours that his son was a photographer not a farmer. It was only a matter of time, surely, before Zhazha would marry, buy a flat, and make good on the urban dream.

When his son moved to Dali, thirty-five and still unmarried, Zhazha's dad was at a loss. When he was young himself, Zhazha's grandfather — a subsistence farmer — would grow vegetables just so the family had enough to eat. All he and his wife had wanted was for their son to escape that life of toil. But now his son was living in a countryside farmhouse, sending pictures of his vegetable patch as if it was something to be proud of! 'It's very simple,' explained Zhazha. 'They think I'm a failure.'

It had taken just two generations for a Chinese family to pass from pre-industrial agrarianism to post-material urban malaise — for the grandchild of farmers to return to the land.

'I just think there's more to life than what everyone expects you to do,' Zhazha said. 'To have a job and a car and a house and earn lots of money.' His unease was a refraction of China's story at large, where worshipping at the font of economic development had left a spiritual vacuum at the nation's heart. What now? What next? Am I happy?

'That's why I really left Beijing,' Zhazha added. 'It's not just the traffic and how expensive everything was — everyone complains about that. I wanted a quieter life where I can do what I want to do and find out who I really am.'

The mountain valley of Dali that he chose for his escape seemed the epitome of that new life. Antithesis of involution. Capital of lying flat. Dalifornia. It spoke a promise of escape and change for a disillusioned

generation — and in the mire of my own malaise, it held an allure that was difficult to resist.



Tucked away in the highlands of Yunnan province, south-west China, Dali sits in a fold of the Hengduan mountain range, which rises westward to become the Himalayas. At an elevation of 2,000 metres, the terrain keeps climbing until the border of Tibet, 300 kilometres north-west. Myanmar is half that distance away, and Laos a little further to the south-east. Nestled into these hills of South-East Asia, in antiquity Dali was a trading post on the southern Silk Road — shifting jade, ivory and spices — and along the ancient Tea Horse Road that connected the tea terraces of Pu'er to the Tibetan plateau. Until a century ago this was at the heart of what scholars term 'Zomia', the ungovernable mountainous zone between nations. It is a good place to hide in.

The valley itself was formed some fifty million years ago, when the Indian and Eurasian plates collided. Ripples from that tectonic kiss crumpled the earth all the way from the heights of Everest down into Yunnan. One of those ripples is the Cangshan massif, a stretch of mountainside that overlooks Dali from the west. 4,122 metres at its highest point and extending forty-four kilometres, the Cang mountains (pronounced 'tsang') comprise nineteen peaks, snow-capped in winter, with eighteen gorges between them — cut into the earth by glacial erosion — whose swift streams trickle down from the top. An evergreen conifer forest of pine, fir, and spruce coats the range, giving Cangshan its name: the Verdant Mountains.

Those eighteen streams feed into the lake of Erhai (pronounced 'arr-hi'), which sits squat in the centre of the valley, forty kilometres long and shaped like an ear. *Er* is a homophone for 'ear' in Chinese, while *hai* technically means 'sea', so named by Mongolian invaders who hadn't seen an expanse of water so large. Its waters bleed out into the upper Mekong, which runs

south — parallel with the Salween and Yangtze from their sources in Tibet — until those three great rivers of Asia, travel companions for this stretch of their journey, part ways. The fresh water and plentiful fish of Lake Er were the lifeblood of Dali for millennia, with settlements rising by its shores and a tradition of cormorant fishing.

The Chinese saying ‘to have mountains and water’ describes an ideal place of natural beauty, peaceful and remote with balanced *fengshui*. Dali has both. Most residents of the valley live on the western bank of the lake, where the terrain slopes gently down from the foothills of the mountains to the lapping shore. At the southern tip of the lake is the larger town of Xiaguan, the ‘lower pass’ — so named for when the mountain passes into the valley were heavily fortified. At Lake Er’s northern end is the less built-up ‘upper pass’. In between are villages and farmland, with no buildings permitted higher than three storeys.

Halfway between the lower and upper passes is Dali’s famous Old Town. Once capital of an ancient kingdom, later a Ming fortress, its thick walls once enclosed four square kilometres of cobbled lanes, with hulking arched gates at each compass point. Now all but the western and southern walls have been torn down, and more streets are paved than cobbled, though the gates remain. Yet the stone homes, curving roofs and leafy courtyards that speckle its labyrinthine ways still give the Old Town charm, while just outside the walls to its north-west the three ancient pagodas cast their long shadows, relics of a bygone age.

The locals of Dali are an ethnic minority called the Bai people. The province of Yunnan is home to twenty-five of China’s fifty-five minorities; further up in its highlands are the hill-tribe Yi, the shamanistic Naxi, the matrilineal Mosuo and the Buddhist Tibetans. *Bai* literally means ‘white’, named for the moon-coloured furs of their ceremonial headdress, though their everyday clothes are mostly blue. With their own topolect (but no written script), religion (folk-deity worship) and festivals (chiefly Torch Festival at the end of summer), the Bai were culturally a world apart from China’s Han majority. Long before migrants from the outside arrived in the valley, Dali was theirs alone.

No more. Once an independent kingdom, Dali fended off invasion by the Tang dynasty but fell to the Mongols in the 13th century, and was later folded into the Ming Chinese state. Han migrants settled in the valley, as well as Hui Muslims and other groups. The Bai people sinicised, incorporating Chinese customs into the fabric of their everyday life. Yet they were still far enough from the centre of the Chinese state to be left alone, hidden in the remote poverty of their otherwise idyllic valley.

Over the last few decades, Dali has attracted a new kind of outsider. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was a rare traveller who stumbled into the valley. Back then, the Old Town and surrounding villages were undeveloped, with dirt tracks, farmland and crumbling houses. The same mountains that made Dali picturesque kept it poor, obstructing the modernisation that came first to China's eastern seaboard. Yet this was what the travellers were looking for: a rustic escape from explosive urbanisation, and a refuge from the politics of the cities — including for dissidents who fled here after the Tiananmen crackdown, such as the poet Liao Yiwu who lived there in the early 2000s.

By the new millennium, Dali had also become a go-to destination for the in-the-know backpacker, a northern extension of the banana-pancake trail through South-East Asia. Part of the appeal was that marijuana grew wild in Dali's hills (and still does). It was an easy place to get high, in both senses of the word. In those days, local Bai grannies would sit along the main strip of the Old Town — dubbed 'Foreigner Street' for all the Western backpackers — and hawk their self-picked wares at passing foreigners in broken English: 'Ganja, ganja?' This continued until local police cottoned on that the plant had uses besides twining into rope and chewing its seeds, and told the grannies to stop pushing.

Some travellers who came to Dali never left. Arrivals from Chinese cities rented stone houses in the Old Town, for as little as a few thousand yuan a year. A Taiwanese hippy community settled into what became known as 'Taiwan village'. An American writer for Lonely Planet, Chris Taylor, liked Dali's vibe so much he decided not to include it in his report, fearing that too many outsiders would descend. Two other Americans

opened a café called Salvador's (after 'the other Dali'), next to a few dive bars — Bad Monkey, Bird Bar, Lizard — serving those outsiders who had made Dali their home. They were the best kind of layabouts: living cheap in courtyard homes, sampling the local herbs, taking it easy and hoping their secret paradise wouldn't be discovered.

Yet discovered it was. Already the town of Lijiang to the north had touristified, rebuilt after an earthquake in 1996. It took Dali's government longer to catch up to the commercial prospects of its natural beauty, but in the mid-2010s the Old Town was renovated, rents were hiked, souvenir shops set up stall, and the hippies moved out to surrounding villages. Dali was back on the map. It became a trendy escape from the hubbub of the cities, for both tourists seeking a temporary break and reverse migrants looking to reinvent themselves.

In 2014, Chinese folk singer Hao Yun penned a hit song that captured the zeitgeist: 'Go to Dali'. 'Are you unhappy in life?' went the lyrics. 'Haven't laughed for a long time and don't know why? Go to Dali! Go to Dali! If you're not happy and you don't like it here, why not head west, all the way to Dali?'

These city arrivals in the countryside were dubbed *fanxiang qingnian*, or 'returning youth', although every generation was represented. Some called themselves *xinyimin* — the 'new migrants'. Others used a simpler term: 'new Dali people'.

Some old-time new migrants complained that Dali was changing, commercialising. But that change was inevitable, now that the valley had been 'discovered' all over again. And it was change that those who moved here sought above all else. A new way of life. A new home. A new perspective. And when the sea change crashes over us, we must find the readiness to be swept by its tides, lest we drown in brittle resistance.



Inertia is as powerful a force as any motion. While I envied the Dali lifestyle from a distance, it was a vague, unarticulated longing, not an actual plan to move. I didn't follow through on the fantasy until circumstance catalysed a tangible change in my life.

My fiancée and I had met in 2013, in the queue at a Beijing bookshop, both fresh in the city and in the bloom of our youth. After two years of friendship, we began dating. There was a kiss in a hammock on my rooftop; another in the rain after a park run. I could feel myself falling in love slowly, irresistibly, like melting chocolate. I proposed during a hilly hike on the outskirts of the capital, on one knee in a pagoda outside a temple to the folk god Guandi. We planned to marry in the summer of 2019. But a chasm opened up between us, despite our attempts to close it, and it became heartbreakingly clear that the marriage would not be a happy one. We called off the wedding two months before it was due, tried one last time to save the relationship, then split up on holiday in Istanbul — where we had planned to go for our honeymoon — at the beginning of 2020, two days into the new year.

Moments from the fortnight following the break-up are frozen in my memory like murals, with dark space in between them. Listening to the Beatles song 'Let It Be' on a ferry ride right after we made the decision. Flying back to China on my own the next day, dazed. Sitting on our couch two weeks later, my bags packed by the doorway, as we watched our cat, Catsby, play in the dappled light on the floor — arm in arm, not saying a word, but knowing what we meant. Walking out of the door, numb in body and mind, watching everything I thought I knew in life fall apart, but coldly, as if it was happening to somebody else.

The heart rebels at any attempt to put its story into a neat chronology. Is that it? it cries. Is that all? Just another failed relationship among a multitude, that died a death of a thousand cuts? What of the moments that bound us — the nights giggling at in-jokes, the slowly unfolding love, the shared struggles and hardship and doubts and tears? It wasn't just her that I had lost, the woman I could see myself growing old with. It was a whole vision of my future, a hope and dream of what my life would be. Without it,

I felt cast adrift. I looked ahead, and had no idea of what came next, or where I would be for it. Knowing that she must feel the same only made it worse, for we could not be there to help each other.

In that lacuna of hopelessness came an idea. I could go to Dali.

I had already visited Dali a few times by now, to see Zhazha and other friends, but moving there had been impossible with the compromises that a relationship and career involved. Now, following the break-up and with remote editing work, my fantasy of decamping to Dali was not only possible, but felt natural. A place to hide, to heal, to find something new. I was fleeing to the mountains for the same reasons the reverse migrants did: to escape the city, the rat race, but also the personal tumults that drive us to seek deeper metamorphosis.

There was a new high-speed train connection to Dali from Kunming, capital of Yunnan, that made two hours of a journey which used to take up to eight by bus. I bought a one-way ticket and, carrying a single duffel bag and backpack of essentials, boarded the train that would take me to my new home.

There is a Chinese fable that has given me succour in times of need, 'The Old Man Who Lost His Horse'. It tells the story of an old man whose horse runs away.

'What a tragedy,' his neighbours console him.

'Who am I to know if it is tragedy or not?' replies the old man. Sure enough, a few days later his horse returns, along with two wild mares.

'How wonderful!' his neighbours congratulate him.

'Who am I to know if it is boon or bane?' replies the old man. The next day, his son shatters his leg while breaking in one of the mares.

'How tragic,' his neighbours say again.

'Who am I to know if this is bad or good,' comes the reply. And when soldiers come to conscript young men, his son is spared.

So the story, and life, goes on.

Sitting on the train to Dali, I passed through tunnel after tunnel as the tracks cut through Yunnan's mountainsides. Holding back tears when I thought of what I was leaving behind, I consoled myself that I did not know

if this situation was tragedy or gift. Part of me felt like it was the worst scenario: on my own again, back to square one. Yet, in a cockle at the back of my heart, I could not help but feel excited too — and guilty at the excitement — at this new freedom to begin again. Was this what I had wanted all along? Had I been looking for an excuse to strike out on my own? The thrill of what I might find in Dali cohabited with the pain that hit me like a lead pipe when I thought of her face, her smile, the timbre of her voice. I was a mess of contradictions.

It was becoming clear to me that I had been more deeply unhappy than I had let myself admit. Something had been wrong; something was missing. The malaise I had felt in Beijing, the lack of fulfilment in my relationship, were symptoms of something deeper. ‘City sickness,’ the back-to-the-landers called it. It felt more than that. Spiritual sickness? Third-of-life crisis? Any tag felt pat, clichéd. But there was a hole inside me, and I needed something real and lasting to fill it. What that was, I did not yet know. I did not know if I would find it in Dali. I did not know how long I would stay. I did not know if this was good or bad. I only knew that the train kept moving, and after one more tunnel I would arrive.



There is a myth in China — originating in a 5th century classical poem — known as ‘Peach Blossom Spring’. In the tale, a fisherman rows up a remote brook into a dense forest. Finding a cave at the stream’s source, he clambers through a tunnel to emerge into a hidden valley. High mountains enclose a secluded garden of blossoming peach trees, with plentiful crops, fresh water and stunning scenery. He is greeted by a village of friendly folk, whose ancestors had stumbled upon the valley when escaping the unification of China by its tyrannical first emperor. Here, ‘the old and young are all happy and carefree,’ living in harmony with nature and the flow of the seasons. It is utopia on earth.

The fisherman stays for a blissful period, then leaves. Despite warnings that it is to no avail, he marks his route out of the valley and on his return to civilisation tells others of its existence. But try as they might, sending out expeditions to locate the valley, nobody is able to find Peach Blossom Spring again.

This escapist tale held particular appeal at the time of its writing, during the bloodily turbulent end of the Eastern Jin dynasty. After writing it, the poet, Tao Yuanming, gave up his own post in the civil service to disappear into the mountains, explaining: ‘Birds in a cage long for wooded hills / Fish in a pond yearn for flowing rills.’ In his vision of paradise, Tao noted that there was no official bureaucracy or political strife. His fable of a contemplative life close to nature entered the Chinese consciousness, in much the same way that the myth of Shangri-la has in the West.

Shangri-la, indeed, is a retelling of the same mythos through an Orientalist prism. In James Hilton’s bestselling 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*, which coined the term, it is three Brits and an American who crash-land in a Tibetan mountainscape, after their plane is hijacked while fleeing war-torn Afghanistan. Taken in by a nearby lamasery, they find themselves in the temperate ‘Valley of the Blue Moon’, cut off from the rest of civilisation, where ageing is halted and there is no war or crime. What’s more, there are distinctly European mod-cons: central heating, a library of English classics and a grand piano, all run by a 250-year-old French Catholic monk. As in its Chinese counterpart, the protagonist — British diplomat Hugh Conway — eventually leaves Shangri-la, never to find it again. Both stories seem to acknowledge that earthly paradise is unattainable, a reverie.

Nowadays, the stories of Shangri-la and Peach Blossom Spring conjure wider fantasies than just a hidden locale. They stand in for all our hopes and dreams of the life we want to live, the person we want to be. We chase the physical place still, because we seek internal escape and project that externally. But deep down, we know it isn’t there. Even the root of Thomas More’s coinage ‘utopia’ implies that it is ‘no place’.

That doesn’t stop us from feeding the fantasy — or cashing in on it. In 2001, the government of Zhongdian, a Tibetan township in Yunnan, north-

west of Dali, officially changed its name to Shangri-la (or *Xiang-ge-li-la* in the Chinese phoneticization). This fake paradise sits in an alpine valley featuring grasslands, wild horses and an icy lake, a short drive away from snowy mountains and a national park. Yet the ‘ancient’ town of Shangri-la is a tourist trap. Rebuilt in 2014 after a fire ravaged its centre, it was reconstructed with shiny interiors and government-issued shop signs, all in the same font and colour, selling Tibetan tchotchkes and yak hot pot.

The nearby town of Lijiang, halfway between Dali and Shangri-la, has a better claim to the title. It was here, in the 1920s and 1930s, that an American botanist called Joseph Rock wrote dispatches for *National Geographic* about local flora, geography and the customs of the Naxi minority — dispatches read by James Hilton, and said to have inspired his novel. Rock’s village, at Jade Lake, sits in the shadow of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain: a craggy, snow-tipped peak that resembles Blue Moon Mountain in *Lost Horizon*. A nearby tarn — the mountain perfectly reflected in its cobalt waters — was recently renamed Blue Moon Valley, and now attracts hordes of selfie-takers on the Shangri-la trail.

Others tried to create their own idyllic escapes in China, far from the madding crowd. The artist and writer Ou Ning left Beijing to establish a rural commune in the countryside of Anhui province (only for it to be dismantled by local government). In the village of Qixi, on the outskirts of Guangzhou, an intentional community of escaped urbanites set up an organic farm within sight of the high-rises at the edge of the city. And in the tea hills of Fujian province a project called Another Land, halfway up Mount Lao (literally ‘Mountain of Toil’), provided wooden shacks and farmland for dropouts from modernity. Making their own shelter, clothes and food, the founders were mocked on Chinese state television as ‘delusional’ for ‘challenging modern civilisation’ — but riposted that society’s ‘conventional value system’ didn’t make them as happy as life in the mountains did.

These escapees were continuing a long-standing Chinese tradition of rural recluse. Besides Tao Yuanming, several other imperial civil servants quit their posts to pursue the simple life. The most famous is Su Shi, a court

official of the Song dynasty who fell out of political favour and retired to the countryside, renaming himself Su Dongpo for the sloping farm he lived on. Religious hermits have resided in the mountains of central China for millennia. And the Taoist sages, from Laozi to Zhuangzi, chose the life of wandering poverty over the proximity to power of their Confucian counterparts. For them all, as today, the dream endured of finding a Peach Blossom Spring to hide away in.

Dali — to me as for others — still felt like the best contender. My first trip there had been in 2009, when I was still fresh in China, backpacking up the north-west Yunnan trail with my then girlfriend. Dali's cobbled streets and narrow watercourses, in sight of its snow-tipped mountains and crystalline lake, captured my imagination. This felt like the real Shangri-la. That its once undeveloped quietude had been disturbed by tourism and migration did not change that symbolism for me: reclusion, freedom, escape. It is not where you are that matters, but what you make of it. Not a location, but a mindset. Shangri-la has always been a quest for mental refuge, more than physical.

As I thought this, I emerged out of the last dark train tunnel, to be blinded by the sun. There it was — Dali. Even the name carried a utopian undertone: the characters literally translate as 'Big Ideal'. Sunlight sparkled on the lake. The mountain peaks peered curiously over the dusty buildings of Xiaguan. Just like in the story of Peach Blossom Spring, I had come out of a long tunnel into a remote valley — hidden from the world no more, but still charged with meaning and promise.

This would be my home now, for the Chinese New Year to come. It was a move born of loss, but one stamped with the hope of renewal. Dali was no perfect idyll, I knew. Yet our paradises have always been created within.



I arrived to live in Dali on 18 January 2020, one day before my thirty-fourth birthday and one week before the Year of the Rat began. A new year, a

fresh start.

Zhazha had found me a spare room in his village, while I looked for my own place. Sanwenbi, or Three Brush Village, was so named for its historical association with Dali's scholar-monks of old, who penned religious texts with calligraphy brushes. It was just north-west of the Old Town, in the shadow of the three Buddhist pagodas built in the 9th century. The back two pagodas leant slightly — said to have been knocked off balance by an earthquake in 1925 that devastated the valley — while the tallest pagoda at the front of the triangle, stretching seventy metres to the heavens, had been restored in the 1990s. A clear pool of water nearby, named Reflection Pond, mirrored their domed tips, and a labyrinth of alleyways wove threads behind them into the fabric of the village.

The centre of Three Brush Village was a small, two-storey temple to Kui Xing, a folk deity best known as the god of literature and examinations, balancing with one foot on a turtle while holding a book. Just down from it was Zhazha's courtyard home, with his photography studio, X Space, fronting onto the cobbled way. An artisanal coffee shop across the path sold expensive single-origin brews to the new migrants of the village, while a local vegetable market next to it flogged fruit for pennies.

I was staying in a shared courtyard, further into the maze. My host was a yoga teacher from Fujian province called Yaling: a sinuous woman with dark skin and a mad laugh. Not cut out for an office job, she had travelled around India for years before settling in Dali seven years ago. She taught yoga to the new migrants, with blithe disregard for protests of inflexibility, twisting her pupils into contorted shapes closer to torture than tantra. Her older brother, a shy, balding man with a widow's peak who went by the nickname Lemon, lived with her. He spent his days procuring tea from plantations up the mountainside to sell online, and his nights sampling his leaf while reading self-help books.

Brother and sister lived in what some might call squalor, others simplicity. Their home was a stone farmhouse they had restored minimally, with dust falling from wooden beams and plaster chipping off half-crumbled walls. There was an outhouse toilet, and a kitchen to one side of

the yard that looked like it was going to collapse. They had converted the cowshed next to the main house into a studio, knocking up a mezzanine with just enough space for a mattress, and rented it to a young couple from Shenzhen. My room was a threadbare square facing the yard, empty as a prison cell — just a table, bed and chair — while a purple bougainvillea crept slowly through the barred window.

Yaling spent her mornings in the courtyard, tending to a plot of soil next to a persimmon tree, where she had planted greens and tubers in meticulous order. In the afternoon she fried, boiled and stewed them into winter soups and stir-fries, while Lemon sat cross-legged at the tea table under the eaves, pouring out ritual servings. The Shenzhen couple stayed in the solitary confinement of their cowshed, playing video games on an enormous screen that took up the entire space. Frankie was a *League of Legends* champion, and earned money by live-streaming his campaigns, while his girlfriend dropped acid and painted psychedelic self-portraits with spiders crawling out of her face. A line of cacti Yaling had potted along the rooftop as guard rails completed their prison-like isolation.

At first, this did not live up to the Dali of my imagination. Where was the Shangri-la of fantasy, the fertile valley and fields of joy? Then I realised: we were in it. Except this utopia was even simpler: four high walls in which these hermits could hide away from the world all day, living simply and cheaply. Their yearly rent was 7,000 yuan — about a thousand dollars — which is what I had paid each month for a cramped apartment in central Beijing.

I asked Yaling if life got monotonous, between her gardening and cooking and yoga, barely ever leaving the courtyard. She looked at me with something between pity and contempt, like I was a city boy still on city time.

‘It’s fully perfect,’ she replied. What I had seen as constraint, she saw as freedom. ‘I can do what I want to do, every day,’ she continued. ‘I don’t need to worry about money or what other people think I should be doing.’ For her, freedom was not to achieve the conventional ambitions society wanted of her, but to give up on them. It wasn’t political freedom, she knew

— she was still in China — but it was a financial freedom she would have never found in the West or in the city.

‘I came to Dali to escape the mainstream,’ she said. The metaphor is the same in Chinese — *zhuliu*, the main flow of water — and the new Dali people often self-identified as *fei zhuliu*, ‘non-mainstream’ or counterculture. Yet Yaling continued: ‘In fact you can’t escape society; it’s the biggest river in the world. You might go to one of the smaller streams, like us, but they also feed into that big river.’ At least, she concluded, ‘they let us do our own things here.’ In Dali, the waters could flow past, without sweeping her up in them.

Chinese society was full of conventions that Yaling had come here to escape. Owning property and a car. Working overtime, a slave to the mortgage. Gaining status according to the expectations of others. Marrying early, having kids. She was single, had no interest in being in a relationship, and hated the assumption of others — her parents in particular — that she wouldn’t be happy unless she was.

‘When I stopped listening to other people telling me what I should do,’ she concluded, ‘I started really being happy.’

It was the same for her brother, Lemon, who was in the process of divorcing his wife back in Fujian province (they had married young, at the insistence of his parents). Zhazha was also a committed single, and had come to Dali in part to get away from family pressure to produce an heir.

‘Society talks about getting married as the highest point of a person’s life,’ he said. ‘But that just means you decline from there ... Being on my own is real freedom.’

I was not yet used to being single again myself: to defining my identity on my own, not through another. At times, it felt sad and lonely; at other times, it was liberating. Yet the pain of separation was still raw, and in that first week after moving to Dali, I can barely account for the hours of the minutes of the seconds of the days. I slept in. I watched YouTube. I stared at the wall. I scrolled through Facebook. I felt sorry for myself. It seemed like I was living someone else’s life, not my own. I slipped into the same routines as my yardmates — drinking tea with Lemon, sharing Yaling’s

home-grown meals, retiring to my bunk with my devices, in the prison of my Shangri-la.

For the whole day of my birthday, I sat on a ratty brown armchair under the eaves, its upholstery half torn out, swallowing me in its foam. Next to the chair was a bucket, positioned to catch droppings from a sparrow's nest in the rafters above. The sparrows — a twittering couple — had recently hatched a brood. The drip-drop of their poo pellets was like clockwork as I stared vacantly out at the yard. Looking up I could see their little beaks cawing for attention, while mummy and daddy flew out and back, bringing morsels to regurgitate for their young family, their love-nest.

When I was a child — at the brink of the new millennium — I looked at 2020 from the distance of twenty years, and assumed I would have a nest of my own by now. At thirteen, I had a conception that by my thirties life would be a long and stable plateau, stretching to death with little change. That I would arrive somewhere and stay there — form the shape of my life, pour the mould and let it settle. Marriage was part of that mental image, children too. Yet my 2020 vision had turned out to be anything but. I was beginning the year alone, nestless, uprooted, on foreign soil once more.



Migrants in search of new pastures have been coming to Dali for a long time. Like the mythical inhabitants of Peach Blossom Spring, the progenitors of Dali's native ethnicity, the Bai people, supposedly came here fleeing war in the north — migrating south from China's central plains during the war-torn Three Kingdoms period in the 3rd century. Discovering rich farmlands on the banks of Lake Er, they settled in Dali.

Local legend tells that back then, the lake rose much higher than it does today, right to the foothills of the Cang mountains. The valley was populated by black dragons, they say, who live underwater in Chinese mythology. These dragons weren't happy about the humans who had stumbled into their realm, and were responsible for natural disasters, mostly

flooding, to make their lives difficult. Luckily, a giant bird — a Garuda or Roc — came to battle the dragons, driving them away, and the water levels receded.

For most of its storied history, Dali has been a literal land apart. The ancient Dian Kingdom, in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, encompassed much of present-day Yunnan. In 738 CE, a local lord called Piluoge united the disparate tribes (or *zhao*) of the region into one ‘Southern Tribe’, the Nanzhao Kingdom. He took Taihe — an ancient city on whose ruins Dali is built — as its capital, for the natural defences that the valley provided. For the best part of two centuries, the Nanzhao survived as an independent state the size of France, nestled between the two empires of the Tibetan Kingdom and the Chinese Tang dynasty. In 754, the Tang sent an army to conquer them, but never got past the high mountain passes.

The Nanzhao expanded south into present-day Myanmar, Laos and Thailand, and soon controlled much of South-East Asia, all the way up to the Tibetan plateau. Several times they invaded China’s westernmost city of Chengdu, and conquered it once before being repelled. Later, they hit upon the simpler idea of a marriage alliance with a Chinese princess. This failed to take place before the Nanzhao’s chief minister murdered the royal family and usurped the throne, plunging the land into civil war in 902.

By 937, the land had reunited again as the ‘Dali Kingdom’, under a local general, Duan Siping. Back then, Dali was already known as a spiritual kingdom. One of the latter Nanzhao kings had converted to Buddhism, and in the 9th century built the three pagodas — each sixteen storeys high, with a statue of Buddha facing out in each facade. A Buddhist temple complex topped the hill above them, Chongsheng (‘Lofty Saints’) Temple, reserved for royalty. Of the twenty-two kings to rule Dali in its independent history, ten of them gave up the crown to become monks, and the rest are still talked of as ‘monk kings’.

In 1253, Dali met the same fate as the Eurasian steppe: Mongol conquest. Genghis Khan’s grandson Kublai Khan was in charge of the invasion, having first brought the Tibetan Kingdom to its knees. The Dali Kingdom resisted at first, until — according to legend — a local betrayed a

secret pass by which the Mongol army could access the valley, Thermopylae-style. Dali was Kublai Khan's back door into China, where the Song dynasty eventually fell, ushering in the Mongol Yuan dynasty in 1271. Dali was formally a part of this dynasty, but retained de facto independence under the rule of the Duan clan.

The valley only became fully incorporated into the Chinese empire in 1381, when the Ming dynasty conquests of Yunnan crushed the last remnants of Dali's army. The Ming troops dredged the marshes next to Lake Er, reclaiming tracts of land along its west bank, and built the walled fort that is now Dali Old Town. Arched gates to the east, south, west and north were the only way in through its twenty-metre-thick walls. Inside lived the Han Chinese outsiders and their families, while the local Bai — dubbed *minjia*, or 'folk peoples' — lived in villages higher up, in the shadow of the mountains.

After the Manchu invasion of northern China in the early 17th century, the last Ming emperor fled to Yunnan and put up a futile resistance to the Qing dynasty, before he was tracked down and strangled to death in Kunming. Two centuries later, in the Panthay Rebellion of 1856–73, Dali again tried to assert its self-rule. The Muslim Hui people — who had originally settled in Yunnan as part of Kublai Khan's army — rose up across Yunnan. A local lord called Du Wenxiu led the rebellion from Dali, which he declared an independent kingdom once more. For years he tried to expel the Manchus and Han from his land, but ended up with his head expelled from his neck.

After the fall of the Qing in 1911, during China's warlord era, Dali was part of a 'Yunnan clique' holding their own against the northern hegemony. During World War II it remained unconquered by the Japanese, and was strategically vital for the Burma Road that supplied the early resistance, and for the American 'Hump pilots' who flew over Yunnan's mountains to reinforce the Allies from China's wartime capital of Chongqing. After the Communists won the Chinese Civil War in 1949, Yunnan was also the last stronghold of the Nationalist army, who continued an ill-fated insurgency until 1958.

As at the beginning, it was its high mountains that made Dali so intransigent through the centuries, so protected from outside influence. Yet no mountains are high enough. Over the last seventy years of Communist rule, as China developed, railroad tunnels were blasted through the mountains, more Han migrants arrived and the same structures of government were set up as in the rest of China. Once an ancient, independent kingdom, Dali was a land apart no longer — or only if we made it so in our minds. Two millennia after its first migrant settlers, a new breed of outsider was invading, more unstoppable than the Ming army or the Mongol horde: city escapees.



Chinese New Year in 2020 fell on 25 January. The Chinese calendar is lunar, its cycle marked by twelve or thirteen waxes and wanings. Each month has thirty or twenty-nine days, with a new moon on the first day and a full moon on the fifteenth. To keep this in line with the solar seasons, an intercalary ‘leap month’ is inserted every three or two years, so the date of the new year jumps around, but always lands on the second new moon after winter solstice — generally in late January or early February by the Gregorian calendar.

To name each year, the Chinese zodiac of twelve animals is combined with the five elements — metal, wood, earth, water, fire — to create a sixty-year cycle. (A more complicated version includes the ‘ten heavenly stems’, ‘twelve earthly branches’ and *yin* and *yang* years.) The year 2020 saw a resetting of this cycle with the ‘Year of the Metal Rat’ — the first in the zodiac, as the rat won a mythological race among the animals that determined their order. (It did so by hitching a ride on the ox, who waded a river ahead of the pack, though one might have thought the dragon would have an edge on them both.)

Named the *gengzi* year in Chinese astrology, this year was infamous for bringing destruction every sixty years that it rolled around. In 1840, the

gengzi year witnessed the First Opium War; in 1900, the bloodshed of the Boxer rebellion; in 1960, suffering and famine during the Great Leap Forward. In early 2020, there was no indication yet of what plight the world would face if the curse of the *gengzi* year continued — though there were early reports, mostly ignored, of a new virus in Wuhan.

Chinese New Year, or Spring Festival, is an occasion for fresh beginnings as much as its Western cousin. In the days before it, Yaling swept the yard, as is customary for a clean start, literally and figuratively. She took down the strips of red paper pasted to either side of her front gate — poetic couplets written on them in the fading calligraphy of yesteryear — and put new ones up in their place. To the right of the gate: *‘Heaven and earth have vital energy.’* On its left: *‘The courtyard is cleaned by spring winds.’* Across the top: *‘New year brings new things.’* On the door itself: the character 福 for fortune, upside-down as the phrase ‘upside-down fortune’ is a homophone for ‘fortune has arrived.’

At this time of year, most Chinese people returned home for the *tuanyuanfan*, or family-reunion dinner. But with the virus spreading from Wuhan, many stayed where they were. The reverse migrants were content not to leave Dali, in any case.

‘My family is here; this is my new home,’ Zhazha said flatly. ‘Why would I go back?’ He dreaded the prospect of seeing his parents, sure that they would shame him for still being a bachelor without a stable job. This was a common anxiety at Spring Festival for younger generations travelling home across the nation. But in Dali the city transplants had broken free of social expectations entirely.

On New Year’s Eve Yaling, Lemon and Zhazha borrowed a set of DJ decks and threw a party in my new courtyard, for our family of misfits. They strung up fairy lights, cooked up a storm, and played electronic music through a pair of subwoofers large enough to take down a gnu. It was customary to set off fireworks at midnight (supposedly to scare off a mythical monster terrified of loud noises and the colour red) and long strings of red firecrackers had been laid next to boxes of fireworks, ready for ignition.

As dusk fell and their friends arrived, I met the other urban refugees of the village — dropouts from the mainstream who had moved to Dali to lie flat in peace. Each went by a nickname, as if to assert their reinvention. There was Big Bear, a thickset Beijinger with a mane of curly hair; Pigeon, a dreadlocked stoner with a wry grin; and a corpulent, middle-aged former government-worker they just called Boss. Each had their own story of why they had left the city to come to Dali. But in the warming glow of the fire pit and the rice wine, their stories blended together: they had come to be free.

This quest for freedom was a refrain repeated in Dali to the point of self-persuasion, as if saying the word enough would make it true in a nation full of political constraints. No longer content with material gain and conventional success, they were seeking personal fulfilment instead: a private mouse-hole, hidden from the state, away from urbanisation and capitalism, by the shade of the mountains and the glimmer of the lake.

I could feel that infectious freedom too, that abandon of escape. This drunken group of city transplants in the countryside were not just cutting loose, but cut loose from the bonds that had bound them. Adrift down a side stream, they didn't care what the rest of the world thought or did. Gone was the city sickness, the pressure they had dragged behind them in trying to get ahead, that had rolled them up in involution. Here they could simply be.

Yet in the middle of the revelry, I was hit by a wave of loneliness stronger than I had let myself feel until then. I drowned in it, while I stood pretending to smile among these strangers. Self-doubt about this hide-out consumed me. In moving to Dali, was I just running away? In looking for a new start, was I simply escaping the hard work of commitment? Was this another false utopia? Or maybe, after three of the most mentally tiring weeks of my life, I was just burnt out.

It was cold, and minutes to midnight. Yet there was a gentler crispness to the winter air. A half-forgotten memory of other transitions. A freshness in the atmosphere I could feel with every in-breath, deep in my smog-addled lungs. It was undeniable: the first hint of spring.

For us new Dali people, this was an experiment in a different way of being. To opt out of the city, of the system. To set light to our old lives, in the name of something new. And the bass thumped and the cheers chorused and firecrackers spattered and fireworks blossomed and it was midnight and the courtyard exploded to greet the Year of the Rat, the fresh start, the resetting of the cycle. A midnight gust swept through the party, carrying a promise with it: spring winds are blowing.

SPRING: Wind Season

Wind, flowers, snow, moon. These are the four elements of Dali, according to a local expression — and the name of its beer brand. Some delineate it geographically: the southern pass into the valley is notoriously windy; the northern end is celebrated for its flowery fields; the mountains to the west are snow-capped; and moonlight reflects off the lake to their east. Others say it is seasonal, with spring winds, summer rains that feed blossoming flowers, autumn snows on the mountain, and moonlit winter nights. Yet all agree that late winter and early spring in Dali is windy season.

Out of nowhere, a gentle breeze can pick up into a howling gale. As cold air from the lake displaces warmer air above the land, sudden gusts blow with a dusty fury, then recede just as quickly into quiet expectation of the next huff or puff. At night, the wind howls out of the mountainside, like a pack of starving wolves. Even when the air is still, it is suffused with a silent charge, as if restraining its power to sweep the world clean at the turn of the seasons, the intake of a new breath.

Spring winds blow off the cobwebs of winter, clear away the detritus of hibernation. They keep us moving, fill our sails. They can also be destructive, even deadly. Yet demolition allows for creation — without getting rid of the old, how can we make space for the new? Wind also spreads seeds: it blows them far away, to take root in fertile new soils. The winds of our life buffet and crack and break us. But only the broken seed is born.

In search of this new start, I was looking for my own courtyard in Dali. My spare room in Yaling and Lemon's yard was already feeling small, like the four walls of my mind when I spent too long inside it. I needed space to stretch. I had bought a cheap second-hand car to get around the valley — a Citroën beater I nicknamed the Red Herring — and in the first week after Chinese New Year, blushed with new beginnings, I went exploring.

Courtyard-hunting is a favourite Dali pastime. Touring the villages of the valley, you look out for a crumbling stone wall in between newer or occupied homes. You climb it to see if there is a weed-filled yard on the other side, and a house that might yet be rescued — left fallow by whichever country family moved out to the city, the opposite direction to yours. In your mind, you are already refurbishing it: positioning the sofa, introducing the cat, knocking up a shelf, picking which book to read on a rainy day. A day's wandering can be filled with a dozen lives that might be. Then it's onto the next lead, the next village, the next life.

If a place really catches your fancy, then you are on the fixer-upper's path. You ask around, track down the owner, negotiate a ten- or twenty-year lease, then renovate the crumbling farmhouse to your liking — all for the same cost as a few square metres of real estate in downtown Shanghai. This work can suck a perfectionist down for many months, even years. But that is the point: a project to get busy with, a new life to build, one scrubbed wooden rafter at a time. Every village was peppered with the fixed-up houses of Dali's new migrants, each seeking their own rural hideaway.

My own courtyard hunt was a crash course in the geography of Dali. I started to the south of the Old Town, just above the lower pass of Xiaguan in the village of Fengyangyi — a cobbled stop-off on the ancient Tea Horse Road. The courtyards I viewed here were falling apart in beautiful decay: flaking mud walls; weeds and bamboo breaking through the yard-stones; half-tiled roofs exploding with dry grass. Nature reclaiming its due. But I wasn't thrilled by the prospect of installing a toilet from scratch, or of using a communal outhouse in the middle of the night, so I moved on.

The next village up was at Guanyintang — a spilling-out of residences around a pagoda erected to Guanyin, the bodhisattva of compassion. Legend tells that Guanyin disguised herself here as an old crone, scaring off invading Chinese troops in the 8th century by throwing an enormous boulder at them, a rock that still rests below the pagoda. Yet, as with Three Brush Village, it was close enough to Dali's Old Town to have a more built-up feel, with strips of restaurants and a sprinkling of tourists. I had come to Dali to escape the crowd, so decided to cast my own stone further.

North of the Old Town, traffic dies off on the main tarmac artery that extends all the way to Tibet. To the west of the road, the mountains rise up like a threat, with paved veins climbing up through farmland to a sprinkling of villages in their foothills. The first left turn led to Wuwei, or ‘No Action’ Temple, named for the Taoist principle of effortless flow. Hidden a short hike up into the forest, this temple also taught kungfu classes for outside visitors. It was an appealing location. But in the village down the slope, a stone quarry interrupted its tranquillity with buzzing saws and dust clouds: the Tao of resource extraction.

Past it, the villages thinned out, each with an intriguing name when translated: Two Ducks, Winding Stream, River Crane, Lovers’ Cave. Some clung to the mountain, others to the lakeside, with protected farmland in between. Near the north end of the lake, before the upper pass, was Xizhou (literally ‘Pleasant Town’) — a photogenic tourist town with historic old homes, including one renovated into a boutique hotel abutting a ripening canola field, next to coffee shops and a peninsula that stuck its tongue out into the lake. But here was too far a drive, and I felt like I was chasing red herrings.

Seven clicks north of the Old Town, I turned off the main road opposite an arched entrance to a rose farm, then climbed through blueberry fields to reach Silver Bridge Village. I had friends here — a Chinese Australian married couple, Rio and Locky, who lived in a shared courtyard with other city escapees. They were showing me a smaller courtyard home nearby, which they had already renovated as a work studio for Rio’s tailoring business, but no longer needed as they were about to open a sourdough bakery.

It was 150 square metres of pure charm. There was a small courtyard, with a tea table forged from three stone slabs like a sacrificial altar, and a garden patch with an osmanthus tree, rosemary bush and explosion of weeds. A half-abandoned bonsai tree clung to life in one corner, amid a pile of junk and leftover construction materials. Two comfortable wicker chairs under the eaves faced the yard, where bamboo fencing separated it from the neighbours.

The house itself had two storeys, propped up by ten-metre-high pillars of pinewood. These were called ‘hundred-year wooden homes’ by locals. It was built in the 1930s, out of stone, plaster and great wooden beams, interlocked without using a single nail and featuring ornamental carvings, while the metre-thick outer walls were made to withstand earthquakes. In the Bai architectural style, the tiled roof curved up at the corners, with clay cat figurines perched on top to scare off bad spirits. On the outside wall, slogans from the Cultural Revolution were crumbling off the plaster in faded red paint, barely readable: ‘XX nation XXXX build XX healthy life.’

An animal pen off to one side had been converted into a kitchenette with a glass roof. Most important of all — luxury of luxuries — there was an indoor toilet (seat not squat!) and a shower. Skylights had been cut into the roof, bathing the bedroom in moon-glow at night, and the wood-slatted windows upstairs had been replaced by glass panes to let in more light. Downstairs was a spacious studio, with a dressmaker’s table, sewing machines and mannequins; upstairs was an open attic, with a high-beamed ceiling and deep alcoves where the ancestral shrine once stood. Everything was buried under clutter and caked in dust, but I could already imagine my writing desk here, looking up at the mountains and down to the lake.

Here was the seclusion I was looking for. This felt like it could be home. There was still a lot of work to be done on the place, but the hardest jobs of the renovation had already been completed. Rent was minimal — the equivalent of 2,500 dollars a year — and I took on the remainder of the lease for seven years. It even had a name: the Mountain Studio.

Before I stepped through those doors, I had felt unrooted in Dali: second-guessing my move, unsure of how long I might stay. Self-doubt is the shadow of new starts. Now, I had made the commitment to let my past life go and begin the next chapter. I had the space to think in at last — a yard of one’s own. A gust of wind rose up as I stood in the house that would be my home this year, as if to agree.



I moved in on the first day of spring. The Chinese calendar has twenty-four ‘solar terms’ as well as its lunar months, to keep the waxing and waning of the moon in line with the earth’s journey around the sun. Each of these mini-seasons has a two-character name — ‘Grain Rain’, ‘Lesser Heat’, ‘Descending Frost’ — that speaks to the weather and harvests at that time of year, hence it also being called the rural calendar. Spring and summer solstice are among the solar terms, as well vernal and autumnal equinox. The start of the cycle is *lichun*, the ‘Standing of Spring’, when temperatures begin to rise. This year it fell on 4 February, as I drove up to my new home.

The first thaw of spring was in the air as I parked in Silver Bridge’s basketball court, which had been converted into a makeshift car park next to a row of outdoor exercise machines and a ping-pong table. Outside the convenience store on the corner, a grandad was selling vegetables and had set up a spinning wheel game for children, with prizes varying from sweets to a hamster. I paid one yuan for a spin, and won a goldfish in a bag of water. I carried it, along with my few possessions, up a dirt path and into a stone archway, past a woodshed to my front door.

Inside, the Mountain Studio was a mess — overflowing with junk, overgrown with weeds, dust-coated and grimy. The electricity wiring couldn’t handle the lights and water heater on at the same time, and the water pressure was a dribble. But it was home. All I could do that first day was unpack my stuff, attempt a shower, beat the dust out of the mattress, then crash onto it. Moonlight shone through the skylight above my rafters as I slept.

I was awoken early the next morning, as the first sun rays pierced an east-facing window cut into the thick outer wall of the bedroom. There had been a noise. There it was again, a tap-tap-tap in my half-unconscious mind. Something outside was obstructing the sunlight, dappling it as it danced across my bleary eyes. A tree? A bird? Reaching for my glasses, the shape

came into focus: a human face, pressed close to the dirty glass of the window, peering in at me as I lay half-naked in bed.

Fully awake in an instant, I pulled the sheets over me. The face produced a finger in front of its nose, presumably attached to the same body. The finger pointed at the front door behind me, and the face disappeared. Soon enough, a knock came from that direction. I threw on some clothes, too sleep-drunk even to be irritated, and opened the door to find a portly man in his thirties, who barged in abruptly and told me he was the village mayor.

‘Flying rubbish,’ the man announced.

‘I hello sorry,’ I replied — brain working fully not yet.

‘*Rubbish ... is flying,*’ the mayor enunciated slowly, as if talking to a child who just wasn’t getting it.

‘I’m very sorry sorry,’ I doubled down, assuming that if garbage was indeed volant it was somehow my fault.

He repeated the two words again — *la jī fei* — making a squiggling motion with a finger to draw the three characters on the air, as if that would help. This time, the last syllable descended angrily in the fourth tone of Chinese — not the high first tone I had interpreted as ‘flying’ — and the phrase clicked into place: ‘rubbish fee’.

This I could deal with. My brain was warming up. I understood the concept of both garbage and a fee to pay for its disposal. Clearly this man wanted money. Perhaps if I gave it to him, he would go away. I launched into a slurred but solicitous speech, the essence of which was that I was willing, indeed enthusiastic, to pay whatever rubbish fee he asked for, on the spot, right here, just say a number, I had various means of payment and could expedite the process, especially if it involved him leaving my yard promptly and allowing me to go back to bed.

Mayor Li, showing surprise and delight that I spoke Chinese, not gibberish after all, asked for one hundred yuan and wrote a painstakingly slow receipt on a slip of pink paper. Almost casually, he asked me where I was from and what I was doing in his village. It dawned on me that the opening gambit of the rubbish fee was a pretext for finding out who the new gringo was. Gossip travels fast in the country, and somebody had clearly

tipped him off after seeing me arrive the day before. Apparently satisfied with my answers, having exchanged our paper rectangles he left, with a warning about the new virus from Wuhan that was spreading, and an offer to sell me some N95 face masks that I accepted.

Two hours later, I was woken again by the sound of 1980s Chinese pop ballads blasting from outside the same bedroom window. I went out to investigate, and the mystery of the flying rubbish fee was resolved as a garbage truck pulled up at the corner of my house, piping songs out of a tinny but powerful loudspeaker. Metal stairs were fixed to the back end of the pick-up truck, which a queue of villagers ascended to drop in trashbags and loose garbage, until it was a precariously balanced heap and the impatient driver moved on.

After coffee it was time for a walk, to explore the village. Silver Bridge had about 1,000 homes, the mayor had told me, running a kilometre and a half from north to south. A bridge over a narrow gully marked the centre, from which the village derived its name: twelve centuries ago, the village had housed workers building the three Buddhist pagodas, who carried stones and silver over this bridge. An archway called 'Old Bridge Tower' marked the spot, at the south gate of the original village. The stone walls around it had long since been torn down, but the south and west gates still stood proud.

The main square of Silver Bridge, as in all the villages of Dali, was overshadowed by what they called the 'big green tree': a hulking twist of trunk and branch that villagers said was as old as the village itself. Underneath it was a well of drinking water that came straight from the mountain streams, and three pools past it: the first for washing clothes, the second for scrubbing vegetables, the last for cleaning meats. A stone bench ran along one wall, warmed by a row of elderly villagers dressed in blue — aprons for the grannies, tattered jackets for the grandpas. Here they spent their days chewing hemp seeds and gossiping, and their evenings watching square dancing, a favourite pastime of the women of the village.

In the middle of Silver Bridge was its other, administrative nucleus: the government building, with a Chinese flag wafting above it next to an array

of loudspeakers for public service announcements, and a health clinic next door. My yard was at the southern end, near the boundary of another village. Down the dirt path from my door was a convenience store, another stone bench packed with gossiping grandads, and a mahjong parlour out of which a constant clickety-clack spoke of rising and falling fortunes. A spirit wall past it blocked any malicious spirits from entering the village and interfering with their luck.

There were three temples in the village, each at the trailhead of a mountain path. Two were Buddhist, but the central temple was to the local folk religion of Dali, where each village worships a different god, often a deified historical figure. This temple was alive with burning incense and prostrating bodies, while food offerings for the gods were being prepared in a kitchen off to one side. Statues of an eclectic mix of deities emerged out of the smoke like visions, to the sound of tinkling triangles and rhythmic chanting as grannies paid obeisance to the gods that protected their home.

As I stood in this feast for the senses, I could not quite believe it was my home too. My mind flashed back to Beijing, London, Oxford — the urban settings that were all I had known. Part of me was lost in the newness of it all. Another part was suspicious of this romanticisation of the countryside. There were as many ugly concrete buildings in the village as quaint older ones, and what I thought of as picturesque, others did as poverty-stricken. Yet it was quiet and there was space to breathe, which was all I needed.

Behind it all, the forest. The mountain. The tea fields and pine trees and craggy peaks that looked down over this valley, this refuge. Here, nestled at the toe of the foothills, for one of the first times in my life, I didn't want to be anywhere else.



When lockdown began, I couldn't be. The coronavirus had escaped from Wuhan, and travelled across the country over Chinese New Year. By early February, the nation was in panic. Alarm spread on social media and in

group chats. There was a run on face masks, though Mayor Li made good on selling me some — albeit at a high price. Outsiders were ostracised, and residential units, from city compounds to rural communes, shut their gates.

I had come to Silver Bridge just in time. Days after I moved in, a new policy was announced that closed the village, allowing residents to leave only once every two days. Guardian grannies were stationed at the head of all roads into the village, with a piece of string hung across the way as makeshift barrier. I was given a cheaply printed ‘Village Movement Passport’, which they stamped each time I went out for supplies, first recording my temperature with an infrared gun, point-blank to the forehead.

I asked one of the grannies how she felt about the measures.

‘We’re protecting the nation,’ she replied proudly, grinning with the joy of usefulness as she pulled the trigger.

In urban China, restrictions were much more extreme. Indeed, the epidemic was a city problem, and threw into sharp relief the advantages of country living. Instead of being confined to a shoebox apartment, I had a sunshine-filled courtyard, with free run of the village and mountain trails at my back door. Fresh groceries were grown and sold by villagers. Our water supply was piped in straight from mountain streams. We were far enough away from the epicentre to escape the virus. It was a good place to weather an apocalypse.

Confined to my solitary sequestration, I set about fixing up my farmhouse. Armed with brush and bin bags, armoured in gloves and dust mask, this was a formidable task that would take most of the month. I plugged in an audiobook of *Robinson Crusoe* and got to it.

By the shipwreck, my yard was cleared of miscellaneous wood and construction junk, with the tea station and rescued bonsai tree neatly set up. When Crusoe had rigged up his hut, my kitchen was clean and functional, gas cylinder under the hobs. By the time he found a footprint in the sand, I had rewired the electricity, caulked the toilet, scrubbed the woodwork and installed a water pressure pump for the shower. During the fight with mutineers, I waged war on the bedbugs in my mattress. When Crusoe left his island home, mine was complete — the house gutted of junk, stuffed

into storage or thrown out, while a dust cloud clung to the ceiling like in a nuclear winter. It was an empty canvas once more.

Part of my Dali experiment was to live with fewer possessions. In leaving Beijing, I had thrown out half a lifetime of miscellaneous objects that I had forgotten I even had. There were whole drawers of junk accumulated over the years. Salad spinners and garlic peelers I had bought optimistically and never used. Clothes and knick-knacks I had taken at friends' leaving parties, only to give away at my own. Books I had only stared at the spines of. Tchotchkes I once thought might be decorative but had never looked twice at. The dragon's pile of a hoarder, ready to be purged.

In coming to Dali, I had brought only the essentials. It surprised me how little I required to meet my needs. A bed, a toothbrush, a stove, a frying pan, a table, a chair, a computer, a phone. I had one good pair of shoes, one warm jacket, and a few clothes to cycle through. All the entertainment and literature in the world was digitally available. Yet as I organised my new house, I found myself fighting down the urge to impulse-buy comfort items on e-commerce apps: kitchen extras, plusher fittings, decorative miscellany, the latest gadgets. Just like Robinson, having met my survival needs I wanted more. This too was how I had filled the hole in me: with stuff.

If only my mind was as easy to declutter. I kept busy during the days, but at night my emotions overwhelmed me. Loneliness and regret swirled in a cesspit of unprocessed feeling. Thoughts chased themselves like a snake eating its tail — an ouroboros of anxiety. What was I doing here? Where had my life diverged from the vision I had for it? Would it all be okay? In lockdown I was trapped with myself, and I didn't always like that company. Above all I thought of her — of the life and the relationship left behind me. The first time I cried myself to sleep, I realised I had been too numb to shed tears for years.

In isolation, I turned to my devices for false comfort. The village had signal and Wi-Fi, like much of the Chinese countryside, and I was as hooked on my phone as ever. Glued to the news, doom-scrolling, I despaired at the state of the world from the comfort of my couch. Twitter

was a snakepit of righteousness, pride, anger and envy, each camp taking their side and refusing to listen to the other. Ten minutes of YouTube became hours, sucked into a K-hole of cringe compilations and algorithmic recommendations designed to enrage. Lonesome nights were swallowed up in pornography. Anything to distract me from myself. It wasn't until I tried to cut back that I realised how dependent I was on my digital drugs. In every idle moment, out came the screen, each finger tap a tiny bite.

A doubt pervaded my dreams, a heavy terror that something was wrong or missing. I would be woken by a cock crowing or a beam of sunlight to sudden confusion, then slow awareness that this unfamiliar bedroom was mine. The truth was, I had chosen to be alone. Chosen to break up, to isolate myself, to be far away from those who knew me. To hide from it all, a retraction of the self. By turns it felt cowardly and brave. But I did not doubt that it was necessary. And I began to understand that changing where I lived would not change me; the same cycles would repeat until something deeper shifted.

Almost all the spiritual traditions talk of leaning into solitude, of the necessity of retreat. In Sufism it is *khalwa*, a withdrawing from the world. In Taoism it is the hermit's cave. In Buddhism or Christianity, meditative confinement and silence. In secular life it is 'vacation' — a word that implies the search for emptiness after life and work burn us out. We all want to get away. But what we need is a deeper sequestration, a disruption that shows us what we really value. At some point, we must all go to the mountains.



As it turned out, I wasn't alone. The first squeaking of company came a few days after moving in, when I heard the pattering of tiny feet above my bedroom. Appropriately for the Year of the Rat, it turned out a small family of them shared the house with me. They occupied the liminal space of the woodwork, scuttling along plywood boards that lined the ceiling between

downstairs and upstairs. In the silence of the small hours, I could hear them squealing in what was either a spirited fight or a full-on rat orgy.

As I stocked my kitchen they became bolder, leaving their in-between world for crepuscular raids on my larder. I bought foam filler and plugged the gaps — only to discover that they ate the foam with relish. I shoved steel wool inside, but it was a losing battle: the rat family always found a way. I laid glue traps, but didn't have the stomach for sustained genocide. Rat poison was commonly used in the village, but it killed more pets than vermin. In the end I shored up my defences, and we settled on peaceful cohabitation: them in their world, me in mine, each pretending the other wasn't there.

I also met my human neighbours, who arguably saw me as an invasive pest as well. My farmhouse was originally one side of a larger courtyard that was shared by five families, with a communal kitchen, outhouse and woodshed. In the renovations made for migrating outsiders such as myself, the courtyard had been split in two by bamboo fencing. The Bai ethnic family who lived opposite had demolished their old farmhouse a decade ago, building a more modern concrete home in its place, while mine remained a relic of their past.

These neighbours, the Yangs, were a family of three generations: octogenarian Granny Yang; middle-aged Auntie Yang; and adult grandson Little Liu, whose father had died fifteen years ago of lung cancer, a common killer in the chain-smoking countryside. Little Liu had dropped out of middle school to help out at home; now in his late twenties, he was unemployed and spent most days at home watching TV. His mother had retired at fifty, living off her pension and benefits from her husband's untimely death. The granny, at eighty-two, was the most active of the three — every day she went out to work the farmland just down the slope, the same fields that she had harvested since childhood.

Most villagers in Silver Bridge shared the same surname — in this case Yang, although Liu and Li were also common. To simplify, everyone just called each other Auntie or Uncle (or Sister or Brother, Granny or Grandad, depending on age). As almost all working-age adults had sought

employment in nearby townships, the village was populated by the elderly and the very young — those left behind by urbanisation. Gone were the days of Granny Yang's childhood, when everyone farmed the fields together. Now most remaining adults worked in construction, and the harvests were for supplement not subsistence.

This was the great irony of Dali: just as villagers were moving to the city, city folk were moving to the village. Each sought in their new home what they had lacked in the last: greater income and financial freedom for the country-born; a quiet life and rural escape for the urbanites.

I asked Little Liu what he thought of the city escapees, such as myself, moving in.

'Dali's weather is very good,' he explained — an oft-repeated refrain, delivered with pride and finality — 'so people from all over China want to live here.' He had a baby face and one squiggly eyebrow, like a slip of the pen, that gave him a half-perplexed expression. 'I wish I could leave,' he added. 'But I didn't go to high school, and I don't have many working skills. So I'll stay here.' He seemed fine with that too.

Yet the village was changing around him. Those who were earning in nearby cities had, over recent decades, saved enough to knock down their hundred-year-old stone homes and build newer concrete ones on the same plot. While the Yang family's new bungalow was modest, many of these faux mansions were two or three storeys high, full of unfurnished rooms waiting for the owner's retirement, or for their son to move into after marriage. They also signalled status, that the family had made it; to still live in a farmhouse was a mark of poverty. Some had architectural quirks to set themselves apart from the pack: one featured windows of different shapes and sizes, ovals and octagons and rhomboids; another was tall and thin like a watchtower, to gain status from height that they could not afford in breadth. Even the dirt roads of the village were being concreted over, one by one, as development came to the countryside of Yunnan.

From my writing desk, I spied on the Yang family over the bamboo curtain. Every morning at dawn, Granny Yang would hobble to the woodshed to fill her wicker back-basket, then chop it in their kitchen —

bang! thwack! thud! — to feed the wood stove and heat her tea. Auntie Yang would water the rows of potted plants she collected, sweep the yard and lay out chillies or sweetcorn to dry. Little Liu would wake up at noon and drag himself back to the TV room. Auntie and I would chitchat over the fencing, and she invited me over for dinner. Once I caught her fighting with her mother — one wielding a dust brush, the other the pan — with the ferocity of five decades of cohabitation.

They spied on the foreign agent, too. Many times I caught Granny Yang peering over the fencing as I did house or garden work, chuckling to herself like I was doing it all wrong. She didn't speak Mandarin, but chided me in the Bai language that I could only smile and nod in response to. When I installed my Amazon smart speaker (one city comfort I had brought with me) she jumped whenever Alexa said something — searching my yard to see where the female voice was coming from. Whenever I passed Granny and her friends on the stone bench outside my door, I was convinced by their sudden hush that they had been gossiping about me.

A week into lockdown, I was stargazing in the wicker chair under my eaves — a clearer Orion than I had ever seen — when the screech of a boombox next door broke the quiet. I peered through the bamboo fence to see Auntie Yang and a dozen women her age standing in two lines, holding red fans, while the blaring decibels of an upbeat pop song, 'Beautiful China', assaulted my tranquillity.

'The sun is singing / The earth is colourful / The mountains are like a painting / The flowers are blooming.'

Pumping their hands and feet in enthusiastic choreography, the two rows of aunties exchanged dance moves to this folk-disco drone, shuttling sideways and back like crabs changing their minds.

'Come, come, come, come, let's sing together / Hit "like" on the glorious new era!'

Twisting their arms up with a shake of the hips, they came together in a circle, opening their fans like a petal blooming in the sunlight, before the song's bridge descended into electronic thumping and nobody seemed sure what to do.

‘Beautiful China, hey, hey, hey! / Sing together, beautiful China.’

The chorus rescued them, and after some more kicks and pivots the dancers returned to their opening positions, pulling a last shape for the finale.

‘Awesome China, brilliant new era / Come, let’s sing it together!’

At the outset of its greatest health crisis since SARS, China was not doing awesome. Early cover-ups of the viral outbreak in Wuhan had forfeited the window of containment, and the censorship machine was in top gear after the death of a whistle-blower, Li Wenliang. Entire cities were shut down, their streets empty. You could hear the economy grinding to a halt. The rest of the world looked on with concerned incuriosity, assured that the virus would not affect them.

Yet in the mountains of Dali, the pandemic never reached us. Just thirteen people had been logged with the coronavirus, and these cases were swiftly contained. Our distance from urban centres helped, the same remote terrain that had stymied the Tang invasion of old. Indeed, during those weeks of enforced isolation, the valley fulfilled its promise of retreat: the alleys of the Old Town were empty of tourists once more, eerily beautiful with shuttered stores framed by high snowy peaks. It was as if the rest of the world didn’t exist.

In March, after a month of lockdown, restrictions lifted and Dali residents were free to roam — just as the virus went global. The guardian grannies took down the string that cordoned us off, and went back to their fields and their gossip. The only local casualty was the career of Mayor Li, who was pulled in for questioning by his superiors when they heard he had been selling government-supplied face masks at inflated prices. I was told this by the convenience store owner, and it all clicked into place: the mayor’s insistence I bought masks from him; the unusually high price. He had done the same to other gullible outsiders. Mayor Li kept his position, but I didn’t hear from him again for months.

At this inflection point of history, it seemed the whole world was undergoing change, whether we wanted to or not. The curse of the *gengzi* year was manifesting. To those of us who had left the metropolis, we felt

vindicated. The virus was a city problem, not ours. Too many humans living on top of each other; man's disrespect of nature and wildlife biting us back. As new migrants to Dali, with local produce and fresh outdoor air, we were happy to be far away from it all. For now, at least, we were content to live in a bubble.



Early March was the second month of the Chinese calendar, and the third solar term — called ‘Awakening of the Insects’, for when spring showers were supposed to wake up bugs and other creatures hibernating in the earth. As flies and bees started to buzz in and out of my yard, and an enormous, bright-yellow wasp spider wove her web next to my bonsai tree, it seemed they had got the message that spring was here.

With our new freedom of movement after lockdown, I too ventured further out into the village and valley. Here I met the other residents who had come out of their own hibernation: the reverse migrants, urban refugees, city dropouts and holiday- homers who called themselves the ‘new Dali people’.

There were two broad categories of migrants to Dali: the hippies and the yuppies. The hippies tended to have arrived earlier, even decades ago. They had come to drop off the grid, to live simply, close to nature, to smoke weed and do what they wanted with the hours of their days — including, and especially, nothing at all. The yuppies had moved in more recent years, as the valley developed and Dali became a trendy destination for the escaping middle class. They took their city savings with them, refurbished old courtyards or bought flats in new villa complexes. There was some mutual envy between them: the yuppies aspired towards the hippy lifestyle; the hippies complained about being poor.

At the far north end of Silver Bridge Village was one of the oldest remaining hippy courtyards in Dali. Founded in 2012, the ‘Om Cave’ — named for its Zen vibes — was an enclave of hippydom against the

encroaching gentrification of the Old Town. This farmhouse was tucked away down a narrow, cobbled alley past freshly seeded sweetcorn fields. An abandoned, brightly painted tandem bicycle marked the entrance, weeds growing among its spokes in the middle of their wild garden. Atop the stone walls of the yard sat a blue statuette of the Monkey King, overlooking an outhouse and shower next to a compost heap, a vegetable patch, and a slackline rigged between two trees.

Inside, the denizens had built a wooden sauna, yak skull hanging from its door, next to a stone pool of clear mountain water that they jumped in after working up a sweat. The old house had five spartan bedrooms, minimally renovated, plus a treehouse they had erected on stilts in a bamboo grove at the back. The kitchen looked like it was about to fall apart, and they had built a pizza kiln in the back out of packed earth and brick. Under the eaves facing the front gate was a tea table; a calligraphy scroll hung above it with the character *Fo*, 'Buddha'. The centrepiece of the yard was the fire pit, lined with stones, where they would gather at night to eat, dance, get high and play the didgeridoo until dawn.

The Om Cave hippies were a rolling turnover of dropouts, bohemians and backpackers — a mix of Chinese and foreigners — who would stay for a few months, or a few years, then move on. It was a split-off from an earlier artists' commune by the lakeside, 'Eclipse Lab', founded by a Russian musician, Piotr — a huge bear of a man who eventually returned to Siberia — and a dreadlocked Italian, Fabrizio, who told me the space was a social experiment to 'live without rules ... in an anarchistic way', before he left to officiate ayahuasca and frog-licking ceremonies in the jungle of Peru. The Om Cave was currently populated by three Chinese women in their late twenties and early thirties — Lili, Xiaoxiao and Huating — and a younger man, A Qing, with equally long hair.

Together, they spent their days in creation and contemplation, hidden away from the mainstream of society. They painted trippy art on the walls; transformed garbage into sculpture; sewed their own clothes; inked their own tattoos; grew and shared their food; held talking circles to make communal decisions; had naked sauna sessions chanting 'Om' in the

steamy darkness; organised trance parties and music jams and masked ceremonies around the fire. Their door was never locked; nor was there anything valuable enough to steal inside.

They were continuing a tradition of intentional communities in Dali that went back decades. In the early 2000s, the Rainbow Family of Living Light — an American counter-culture group that came out of the sixties — chose Dali's forested hillside for one of their yearly Rainbow Gatherings, a utopian congregation that rejected consumer culture in favour of natural living. But local authorities objected to hundreds of long-haired, half-naked hippies descending on their autonomous ethnic administrative zone, and began to crack down on the hippy households. The Om Cave was among the last holdouts.

At the southern end of the village, near my house, was another shared courtyard, established in 2013: the 'House of Science'. While the Om Cave held fire circles, drum jams and naked saunas, the House of Science was all about the practical and the rational. It was named for all the technical knowledge they had accumulated in order to renovate, plumb, wire and problem-solve this crumbling stone house to turn it into a home — along with other science projects such as constructing a rocket-mass heater, and an earthen bakery kiln capable of reaching temperatures above 500°C. They knocked skylights into the roof, converted an unused coffin they found in the attic into a coffee table, laid a brick kitchen counter, and built a separate studio in the back.

Their yard was wild: an outgrowth of weeds and greens sprouting around a large orchid tree. In the middle of it all were the collapsed walls of a caved-in cowpen. An abandoned bathtub at the back served as a compost bin, next to the vegetable garden. A crippled dog — dubbed Lucky for his miraculous rescue after a traffic accident that left him without hind legs — dragged himself around it all, spraying pee like a firehose to stake his claim and help fertilise the plants.

Here lived Rio and Locky, the Chinese Australian couple I had rented my courtyard from; Dane, a Canadian rock climber and ironically self-professed Satanist; and Mu Jing, a tomboy musician with close-cropped

hair and a hyena laugh. With a more masculine energy than the Om Cave, and a strict no-drug policy, those who passed through the House of Science tended to be outdoorsmen and mountaineers, derisive of the Om hippies — although there was a long tradition of members of both households sleeping with each other.

If these two courtyards were yin and yang at the village's extremes, in between them were the yuppies — the escaping middle class from China's cities, newer arrivals who had descended on Dali in the last half-decade. Walking the breadth of Silver Bridge, mountains hulking to the west, I got used to spotting these yuppie houses. Tucked between the new concrete homes of the locals, perhaps one old farmhouse in twenty showed signs of fancier renovation: a new-tiled roof; full-length glass windows; a patio with scrubbed pine frontage; shining metal stairs leading to a barbecue grill on the roof; a tree-slung hammock; a perfectly trimmed lawn. They stuck out like sore, if manicured, thumbs.

Some of their inhabitants were early retirees, seeking peace and quiet in the country. Others were couples, or families with young children, or single mums, or bachelors and the newly divorced. I would bump into them as they tended their gardens, and invariably be invited back for dinner. There was no need for introductions: we had all escaped the city to live in Dali, and felt instant kinship. Within the first few weeks of exploring, it felt like I had met someone from every province in China. But mostly they came from the three big cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou — known by the shorthand 'Beishangguang'. When I asked why they had moved here, their answers were variations on a theme: to change their way of life; to get away from the mainstream; to live simply; to breathe fresh air.

There were also those just passing through. Up the path from the Om Cave, abutting the sweetcorn fields at Silver Bridge's northern edge, was an inn called Temple. It borrowed its name from the local Buddhist temple behind its back wall, but had been opened a decade ago as a rehab for city-dwellers strung out on substances — a temple of recovery. Past a pool full of koi carp, a trickling waterfall fell over a carved stone face of Buddha, rippling the waters with his beatific tears. There was a neat lawn, simple

wooden rooms around it and an expansive, tatami-matted activity room on the second floor. Now the space was used for week- or month-long yoga retreats and meditation workshops, booked out by city groups seeking a break from the gridlock of their souls.

Smack in the middle of the village, next to a bee farm, was a larger boutique hotel called Tree & Field. The owner, a rich architect from Beijing, had bought up several courtyard houses and converted them into a complex of chic, spacious rooms with four-poster beds and gilded bathtubs with a mountain view, investing a million yuan into the refurbishment. The hotel bar faced a statue of a unicorn grazing in a bamboo grove, and across from the obligatory koi pond was a ‘secret kitchen’ where the chef served modern twists on Chinese dishes, using locally grown organic ingredients. The most expensive room cost 5,000 yuan a night, around 700 dollars — the same as the annual rent for the whole House of Science.

While the clientele at Tree & Field parked their BMWs outside, villagers picked past them on their way to plant the crops some of them still lived off. This rural poverty was part of the appeal for the tourists, many of whom talked admiringly of how ‘simple’ and ‘down to earth’ the locals were, or praised the ‘ethnic flavour’ of the Bai folk religion and customs. A new generation of enriched urban Chinese, it seemed, had discovered the charm of a countryside their ancestors had struggled so bitterly to escape — taking pictures of farmers who earned in a day a fraction of what they paid for a single meal.

Yet the new Dali people were changing the character of the countryside they admired. While the influx of city money helped some locals who rented out their homes, or worked in construction to renovate them, the market price for both was still cheap, and much of the income generated stayed in the pockets of the moneyed class who ran the businesses. Meanwhile, reverse migration was driving up the cost of other services in the Dali area, pricing out the villagers. And I was part of the trend. I asked Auntie Yang, my neighbour, what she thought of the urban migrants in her village.

‘There are lots of rich people in Silver Bridge now, I think,’ she said, ‘but in my hands I don’t get any money [from it] ... They have their lives and we have our own.’ Like the fence we were talking over, a bamboo curtain separated local from outsider.

Whether hippy, yuppy or something in between, the new Dali people were here to stay — and fresh arrivals were coming every season, a surge already building to escape the pandemic lockdowns of China’s densely packed cities. The valley attracted a bohemian sensibility in particular — the kind of yoga-pretzeled, macramé-weaving, hemp-wearing vegan with an investment portfolio, roughly mapping onto the Western coinage of ‘bourgeois bohemian’ or ‘Bobo’. (One new migrant I met, an Amerta movement coach from Beijing, was literally called Bobo, though she hadn’t heard the term.) It was hard to think of us as roughing it in the countryside when another neighbour made her own kombucha and biscotti. Dali was not quite country or city, but something in between.

Yet we had all come to seek the same grail: disruption of a life that wasn’t working. Some were content with a holiday break. Others sought a more permanent change. Many of the new migrants told me they had come for a month, but ended up staying for years. For both the valley and for us, it was too late to go back to what came before.



Nutshell was born into the urban anonymity of Yangquan, Shanxi province — just another small Chinese city of a million humans. For a dozen years he worked for state TV, producing documentaries that lionised China’s economic growth, scientific prowess and political inevitability, with flashy graphics and endless slow pans over new apartment blocks, statues of Communist founding fathers and military parades.

‘I was tired every day,’ he told me, as we sipped tea on the front porch of his Dali home, two villages north of mine. ‘Every day I was saying what a glorious nation China was, but in my heart, I didn’t feel enthused, I didn’t

feel I was contributing anything to this world. It was just propaganda, it was empty ... like telling yourself you are happy.'

The last decades of his life had all been about making it in the city. Studying. Working. Commuting. Working. Earning. Sleeping. Commuting. Working. Getting married. Commuting. Working. Earning. Buying an apartment. Commuting. Working. Sleeping. Having a baby. Commuting. Working. Sleeping. Earning. Burning out.

'I felt I was on train tracks,' he continued, 'and they only led in one direction, the direction my parents said I must go in.' Nutshell looked to his future and saw the tracks stretching before him until old age and death, with no turn or end or slip switch.

In 2016, Nutshell derailed the train. He quit his job. With his wife, he sold their city apartment and almost everything in it. They pulled their daughter out of the competitive primary school they had just got her into. They said goodbye to friends and family. In their Trumpchi car (a popular Chinese brand) they drove three days across the nation to Dali, inspired by a documentary film they had seen about it. There they rented a plot of land in River Crane Village, two kilometres north of Silver Bridge, by the banks of one of the brooks that rolled down from the mountains, Spirit Source Stream. They hired a local construction team and built a bed-and-breakfast hostel from scratch. This was to be their new life.

The Mountain Inn had three storeys, with twenty rooms in expectation of the visiting tourists, each with a lake view from their vantage point up the hill. Murals and calligraphy painted on the walls spoke of Bai ethnic flavour, as did the curved roof corners. In their spacious garden he transplanted persimmon, pipa, pomegranate and Japanese banana trees, and a grapevine lattice. A short zip-line sped to a sandpit, with climbing frame and swings for their daughter, Guoguo. Stepping stones over a shallow pond led to a secret back door, which opened onto an orchard by the banks of the stream. Here, Nutshell planted pear and lemon and apple and bayberry and peach, waiting patiently for them to grow. He hammered together makeshift wooden hives and started a new hobby of bee-keeping.

And he took up a long-neglected passion for painting, filling the walls of his inn with abstract landscapes in watercolour and ink.

Running bed-and-breakfast inns, or *kezhan*, was a popular choice for new migrants in Dali. It gave them a home to live in, a renovation project to keep busy with and a stream of income without sacrificing the stay-in lifestyle. Nutshell's wife and daughter loved it here, and he was trying to persuade his parents to move out too.

'I have so much space around me now,' he said — his deep-set eyes ageing him past his thirty-eight years, while a sprig of jet-black hair hid a few brightly white strands. 'It helps me find out who I really am.'

When I asked his wife their main motivation for the move, she replied more simply: 'for our daughter'. This was a common refrain for families who moved to Dali with young children. Guoguo was ten now, and they didn't want her to go to a state-run school anymore, or to grow up in the city. When she had started primary school back in Shanxi, they had been horrified to discover that from Grade One she was already being prepped for standardised exams.

'They want to create children who are all the same,' her mother said. 'Schools in the system focus on communal-style education. We chose natural education so her own true nature is not obliterated, so she can understand what she likes and who she really is.' So they had come to Dali, where there were alternative education options. Guoguo was now in a Waldorf school in the township near Silver Bridge Village, set up specifically for migrant families. And she couldn't be happier.

The only problem Nutshell couldn't escape here was money. He had put all his savings into the construction of the new inn, and had to take out a bank loan on top of it all, which was still far from paid off. With fewer guests passing through than he had hoped for, he was worried he wouldn't meet his costs. Now the first wave of the pandemic meant his rooms were empty.

'When I moved to Dali,' he said, 'I wanted to not live my life always thinking about money. But I can't escape that aspect — even here, I still worry about paying the bills.' Everything had a price, even the simple life.

‘But I’m probably going to worry about money wherever I am,’ he reasoned, taking a reflective sip of tea. ‘So I might as well do it here.’

The other challenge was social: everyone back home thought he had gone mad to give up on everything he had worked so hard to accumulate in the city. Nutshell was okay with the disapproval of his friends, but his parents’ attitude was harder to reconcile. In their eyes, he was throwing his life away. He used to have everything they had hoped for him: a stable government job; an apartment; a car; a wife; a good school for their granddaughter, who would perhaps do even better when she grew up, maybe move to the provincial capital. From their own childhoods on the rural edge of their hometown, they had seen its development swallow up the countryside — that was the future. To go back to the land was to admit defeat.

Self-reinvention wasn’t easy. Nutshell knew that. He was working on his parents, even trying to persuade them to move in with him for their retirement. He was working hard to promote the Mountain Inn, to stay in the black. He had uprooted his old life not just for himself, but for all of his family.

‘All of life is to start again,’ he said, finishing his cup. ‘To create a new life.’

Listening to him, as the insects of spring buzzed around us in the warming heat, I realised how comparatively easy my own self-reinvention had been in moving to Dali — even in moving to China. Without dependents, or the weight of such conservative social expectations, it had been as simple as packing a bag. With my remote work that paid Western rates, editing articles and teaching English literature online, I didn’t face half of the financial burden that Nutshell did. I had found plenty to complain about in my old life (ever a favourite hobby) but didn’t appreciate how good I had it.

Yet both of us had moved here because a deeper satisfaction in life had eluded us. I had always thought that to find that, I had to add new elements to my life. But here in Dali, under the baking sunshine, I felt that

subtraction was the answer. ‘Simplify, simplify, simplify,’ as Henry David Thoreau had put it. Maybe I didn’t want more, but less.

Looking back at the life behind him, Nutshell realised he did not need so much after all. A plot of land to build a home on. A patch of sun to lie in. A garden for his daughter to grow in. He looked over at her in the sandpit. The characters of her name, he explained, meant ‘nut’. He had stopped using his own birth name, Li Rui, when he moved to Dali. Instead, he invented his new nickname, ‘because Nutshell protects Nut’.

Once bound in a nutshell, now he was king of infinite space.



The new Dali people often gave themselves new names when they moved here. Some called these their ‘Dali name’. Many had a hippy flavour, in the bourgeois-bohemian style. Within my first months in the valley, I met a Cloud, a Dragon, a Cloud Dragon, a Mountain, two Swallows and three Leafs (whether they were named for tea or another herb was left unspecified).

Ocean and his wife, Moonlight, a couple in their fifties, had moved to Silver Bridge Village from Xinjiang seven years ago. They spent their days gardening, practising tai chi and creating musical instruments from scrap metal, from kalimbas and flutes to a Mongolian horsehead fiddle and a Kazakh dombra.

Big New was a former bar-owner from China’s north-east, who had opened a bed-and-breakfast just around the corner from my yard, dubbed Primeval Inn for its wood-and-mud architecture. ‘If you’re going to make a change,’ he said, explaining his new name, ‘better make it a *big* one.’

One silver-haired migrant, who sold hand-made wooden spoons and bottle openers, introduced himself to me as LIGO, spelling it out in English: L-I-G-O. When I asked what it meant, he decoded the acronym with a grin: ‘Life is Good!’ I asked what the ‘O’ stood for. He paused, then clarified: ‘Life is Good ... Oh!’

I had an invented name in China too: Xiao Kai (literally ‘Little Success’), coined for me by a Chinese friend years back when I first moved here, and marker of my own reinvention in a foreign culture. Xiao Kai’s personality, when speaking Chinese, was slightly different to my own in English, as if I was also trying to become someone new. I wondered whether a different name brought about a new self, or just obfuscated it.

Self-invention can be self-escape. And escape can be the problem, not the solution. Yet just as spring winds sweep fallen leaves off fresh buds, for the new Dali people it was emblem of their desire to change. There was an implicit agreement that we didn’t call new friends by their old names — or even ask too much about their previous lives. That was behind them. More than a new name, or a new place to live, the city transplants sought a new way of being.

If there was a guiding mantra to the Dali life, it was ‘natural living’ — a phrase I heard too many times to count. The simplest explanation I got, besides living close to nature, was in the idiom of *shunqiziran*: to ‘abide by nature’. (Or, in Dalifornian, to ‘go with the flow’.) In short: to let the natural state of affairs be, and live without excessive ambition or grasping for material possessions or success.

This post-materialism — born of disillusionment with the capitalist nation that China had become — was for some rooted in socialist utopian ideals. Some even harked back to China’s early Communist era, ignoring the horrors of the Mao years to wax nostalgic about a time when everyone was equal and communal mission meant more than personal wealth. For others, the underpinning went further back still, to ancient Chinese philosophy.

Taoism was a popular belief in Dali. Both a religion (*dao jiao*) and a philosophy (*dao jia*), it meant different things to different folk, from gods and demons to self-help wisdom. One twenty-something new migrant in Silver Bridge Village nicknamed Mengmeng (‘Dreaming’) had formally trained as a Taoist priest when he left his hometown, and made a living in Dali performing *fengshui* consultations and exorcisms from animal-spirit possession. The owner of Temple, the rehab-turned-yoga-retreat, had the

same qualification and styled himself *Daozhang*, or Taoist Master. He kept a shrine to the ‘Three Pure Ones’ in a back room, including a deification of Laozi known as the ‘supreme old man on high’.

Yet for most in Dali, Taoism was simply a philosophy of life to which they subscribed. Many kept a well-thumbed copy of Zhuangzi’s teachings on their bedside table: an itinerant Taoist sage of the 4th century BC whose irreverent collection of anecdotes *Wandering on the Way* began with a chapter on ‘Free and Easy Wandering’ — another mantra in Dali, out of which the philosophy of natural living had sprung.

One of the long-term new migrants, who had moved to Dali from Sichuan two decades ago, chose to go by the name Tao here. Dressed in shabby hemp clothes, middle-aged with dark skin, a wispy goatee and black hair falling past his shoulders, he did have a Taoist sage-like air to him — though I couldn’t decide whether his almost always being drunk confirmed or undercut this. A carpenter by training, Tao had also taught Chinese philosophy to schoolchildren, before giving it all up to live a more hermetic existence, walking in the Cang mountains or along the shore of Lake Er, and working on his courtyard home.

‘I wanted to get rid of my old lifestyle and find a new one,’ Tao told me. He had come to Dali back when it was just a hippy town off the beaten track, to pursue what he called the ‘non-material life’ — not to obtain things, but to cast them off.

Whenever I dropped in on Tao he was always hammering away at something, covered in sawdust and dirt. He lived in Green Peach Village, just north of the three pagodas, and had rented the most dilapidated farmhouse I had seen yet. Having fixed up the main structure long ago, he was now building a log cabin in the field behind it. Still in its early stages, the cabin was a skeleton of stilts rising from the earth, with cross-beams where the raised floor would go. He gathered scrap wood for it — plenty of good pine logs were discarded when local houses were demolished to build concrete homes — and followed a blueprint in his brain, balancing on the timber to build struts for the roof beams.

I asked what the new cabin was for.

‘Drinking tea,’ Tao replied as if it was a stupid question. ‘Looking at the scenery. Thinking. Doing nothing.’

That was the Dali dream. I got the impression that the function of his cabin was not as important as the creation of it: the simple pleasure of making something. ‘I want to build my life with my own hands,’ he put it, ‘not by selling my labour.’

When he wasn’t woodworking, Tao would invite his friends over to kick a shuttlecock around in his yard — a feathered *jianzi*, which a circle of players kept aloft with their feet and knees, similar to a hacky sack in the game of keepy-uppy. They would kick it around for hours, in meditative concentration, then retire to his farmhouse to drink beer and smoke weed. Tao loved marijuana. It grew wild out of the stone cracks in his courtyard; there was a large female plant by his front door and a more bountiful clump in his back garden. Enjoying all the fruits of the earth was part of his understanding of natural living, and he told me that the Taoist sages definitely would have smoked grass — though not Confucius, the prude.

While in his cups, Tao had a penchant for philosophical digressions, often lengthy and difficult to follow. He indulged in reflections on the nature of reality, discourses on classical Chinese philosophy, tangents on how to expand human consciousness. (‘Marijuana is Buddha,’ he once stated confidently.) His favourite thinker was Zhuangzi, and he compared his life to the parable in *Wandering on the Way* of the turtle in mud: a humble existence unattached to status, riches or public praise but living his best life.

‘Confucianism is for those who want to advance, to get promoted,’ he opined, while sucking on a joint. ‘Taoism is for those who think that is not the road to happiness.’

At this he pointed to a gnarly tree in his back garden, near the framework of his cabin. It was old and twisted, roots bucked up, trunk lopsided, branches curling to nowhere. ‘You see,’ Tao sniffed, ‘it’s useless.’

I considered this non sequitur, feeling offended on behalf of the fine old tree.

Tao reminded me of the story: on one of his wanderings, Zhuangzi came across an enormous tree, and reflected on its worth. The branches were too twisted to be used for beams, the trunk too gnarled to turn into a coffin, the bark too toxic for medicinal use. Yet the reason the tree had grown so large, and could cast such pleasant shade for him to lie in, was precisely because it was too useless to be chopped down. Zhuangzi wrote: 'Everyone knows how useful usefulness is, but no one seems to know how useful uselessness is.'

In coming to Dali, Tao had followed a long tradition of Chinese hermits retreating to the valleys of uselessness, from Tao Yuanming's Peach Blossom Spring to the Taoist sages, the Buddhist recluses to the drunken poetry of Li Bai or Su Shi. 'I don't want to be useful either,' he said. 'If you're useful, then people want something from you.'

Opting out of society also meant he was free to criticise it. The emperor was far away, after all, and in Dali he felt he could say what he liked. As well as migrating internally within China, he was a Chinese example of 'inner emigration': withdrawal of the self from a government and a culture that he did not like — a rejection of politics originally coined for Nazi dissenters and Soviet dissidents.

'Xi Jinping has gone crazy,' Tao told me. 'He's just like an emperor now. He likes to pretend he is a Confucian leader, but he just wants to control the people ... 90 per cent of China has been brainwashed. Chinese society is like a manure pit. And out of the manure came the biggest fly to lead it.'

His own rebellion was a passive refusal to participate.

'I'm not trying to change politics,' he admitted, 'I just don't want to be a part of it.'

Capitalism was as bad as communism, in Tao's eyes. What he hated most was society's conventional definition of success: a salary, owning property, insurance, a pension, family dependents, the bubble reputation — the same definition that might have labelled him a failure, even though he was perfectly happy to be seen as such.

‘Too many people,’ he summarised, ‘pursue money but don’t realise that it doesn’t make them happy. They get money and then they just want more money, it’s endless ... People think suffering is not having enough,’ he said, ‘but I think suffering comes from having too much.’

I thought about why I had felt unfulfilled over the last years. Certainly, I had chased the same goals — success, status, life milestones — just for the sake of them. But in the fantasy of it all I had not realised I was not happy, until something in me broke. Even now, nodding along to Tao as if an observer listening to an intriguing theory, I could not quite imagine that it might apply to me as well as others.

‘The problem with China,’ he added as an afterthought, ‘is that it developed too quickly.’

This stopped me for a beat. Wasn’t development a good thing? The economic miracle, lifting millions out of poverty?

‘Not if you forget who you are,’ he continued, ‘if you forget what’s most important. When China started to develop, it made everyone move to the cities and created a lot of inequality. It made a beautiful birdcage for its population, but they didn’t know they weren’t free. Instead, they just chased money, and lost the natural way of living.’

To abide by nature — both outside and within. Bored with talking, Tao picked up his hammer and went back to building his cabin.



The new Dali people found many ways to counter the culture, to opt out of the norm. Talk of escaping life ‘inside the system’ — *tizhi nei* — and living ‘outside the system’ — *tizhi wai* — was pervasive. For some it was in hippy communes. For others it was in the Taoist lifestyle. For the middle-class parents who moved here, though, the rejection of mainstream society centred on Dali’s burgeoning alternative education scene.

Intrigued by Nutshell’s story, I dropped in on the Waldorf school, just down the road from my village, where he had enlisted his daughter. Non-

traditional schooling had been booming in China over the last decades, with over 200 Waldorf schools across the nation where fifteen years ago there had been none. Dali, in particular, had become a hub for home schooling and other models of alternative education, under the general umbrella of what the parents called ‘natural education’.

The school, a combined kindergarten and elementary, was in a newly built courtyard home by the side of a trickling stream and asparagus fields, with ink paintings of storks and other motifs on the white walls. Inside, a large Japanese banana tree cast shade over the courtyard playground, with activity rooms for the classes off to each side. Kids’ paintings and Play-Doh sculptures lined the walls, and each child kept a scrapbook to jot down stories or sketches from what they learnt. Every day they went out into the fields to play in the sunshine. The curriculum was designed to be a holistic education, inspiring creativity and imagination instead of teaching specific skills.

The parents I met there shared the same complaints of China’s state school system, the strictures of which had driven them out of the cities.

‘They’re like factories producing the same product,’ said one parent, surnamed Li. ‘The biggest problem is exams,’ she continued. ‘As soon as they enter primary school, they start doing exams. The teachers teach them how to pass the exams. They don’t teach them anything else.’ This was known as *tianya*-style education: ‘stuffing a duck’. So they had escaped the conveyor belt and moved to Dali, sacrificing city earnings for the sake of their children’s growth.

Yet alternative schooling was still an outlying minority. This Waldorf school had just twenty or so students. And in China, anything trying to exist outside the system faced challenges from government. Despite having an official licence to teach primary school-aged students, local authorities did not approve of the school. An education official had visited at the beginning of term, one of the teachers told me, and declared that the school had to move to the town of Xiaguan by summer. Ostensibly this was for a lack of fire exits in the current location, the teacher said, but she thought that was

just an excuse to standardise alternative schools, and to keep what they were teaching under closer watch.

Some parents, including Nutshell, were already planning to pull their children out. What was the point of natural education if it couldn't be in nature? A group of them were talking of opening their own home school instead and poached one of the Waldorf teachers to join them. If they couldn't work within the system, they would try to fly under its radar.

Home schooling is technically forbidden in China, where education up to high school is both free and compulsory — but in practice, who was to know? The mountains were high, the emperor far away. Another parent I talked to, who preferred not to be named, was a dedicated Christian and didn't want her six-year-old son to be taught in any 'Communist, atheist school'. For two years she had lived in a tent on the mountainside, to save on rent, educating her son herself. 'Why let them fill our children's heads with rigid ideology,' she said, 'when I can teach him how to read and write and about God.'

A happy medium between the extremes of state school and tent school were the farm schools of Dali. These were off-the-radar early education institutions — mostly kindergartens, which could go unlicensed — which had sprouted all over the valley, opened by the new migrants specifically for the young families among them.

One of the first farm schools, called Bamboo and Fields, had been founded in 2011 by Xiao Wangye, an early Dali migrant with flowing hair and a fierce smile, who was a pioneer of natural education. She told me there were two paths a parent must choose between for their child: 'One path is in technology and cities. The other path is in nature and the countryside.' She wanted to give children a chance at the second path, instead of blindly following the first. 'We look at the whole course of a person's life and development,' she said, 'not just the knowledge they gain. If you give them enough love and freedom, they will grow naturally into the person they really are, not just what this society wants them to be.'

I asked if this mode of education might disadvantage the children when it came to applying to schools or jobs later — if playing within the system

wasn't necessary to advance. She dismissed this as a lack of idealism, but also reminded me that it's just kindergarten. They did have a small class at primary school level, but none of the farm schools taught middle school. The children could still rejoin the herd. Yet some parents were committed to keeping them out of the state track for good, hoping to apply overseas where Chinese exam results were less all-deciding, seeing more harm than good in playing the game.

Xiao invited me to visit her school for a ceremony celebrating the spring equinox. She had designed a school-year curriculum based around the turning of the seasons, using the lunar calendar and solar terms, with a special focus on Chinese festivals. The westernisation of Chinese schools was another bugbear of hers; she wanted to teach the children their own heritage, and the natural flow of the year. This ceremony was to demonstrate the fresh growths that came from the earth in springtime.

Bamboo and Fields school was in the middle of agricultural land close to the lake. It was little more than a converted farm — a row of three wooden lodging rooms refashioned into classrooms, next to a brick kitchen covered entirely in ivy like something out of a fairy tale. There was a sandpit, a wooden platform for performances, a grove of bamboo trees and a domed greenhouse in the middle of an empty field, next to a neat vegetable patch and a rabbit pen. Out back were two grazing goats. The mountains, snow receding from their peaks, rose behind in the distance. A dozen preschoolers ran around it all.

There was no separation of classes at Bamboo and Fields: everything was taught together, holistically and in connection to the natural surroundings. To learn maths, the children counted the heads of bok choi in the vegetable garden, then picked a few for both subtraction practice and lunch. To learn writing, they watered the flowers lining the fields then wrote a passage to describe it, next to crayon drawings. To learn to express their emotions, they painted watercolours and talked and played music in a room full of instruments.

One of the three teachers at the school, Swallow, quoted a passage from a Taoist text, the *Daode jing*, to explain the philosophy of her classes to me.

She wrote it on the blackboard, as she was going to teach the phrase to her students anyway:

一生二 二生三 三生万物

One becomes two, two becomes three, three becomes all things.

‘Here we don’t teach children facts and statistics,’ Swallow said, as if to a new pupil. ‘They learn that a seed becomes a plant, then that plant can become two plants, then three, then a whole field ... The acquisition of knowledge is not the only way to learn. All living is learning, everything we experience is learning, and knowledge gained in life is deeper than in books or school.’

We are the products of our upbringing — of the values we are taught. My own education had been privileged but also pressured, elite but goal oriented. As I looked at the kids running outside, hands dirty with loam from a fresh planting, I felt a pang of jealousy for their childhoods, for the lesson that they need achieve nothing more than happiness.

Suddenly, the piping melody of a flute wafted over the grass. The dozen preschoolers of Bamboo and Fields arranged themselves into a neat line at the sound of it, dressed in matching green outfits they had helped to make themselves. One of their teachers, also dressed in green, was standing in the middle of the newly planted field, next to the greenhouse. The children formed a circle around him, stepping carefully. Around the patch of tilled earth, other seeds were just beginning to bud, green heads poking out of the soil.

With the teacher, the children stomped their feet on the soil, imitating the thunder god who, in Chinese legend, shakes the crops into life and awakens the insects of spring. They twinkled their fingers in falling jazz hands, gesturing for spring rains that nourish new seedlings. Bending down into a crouch, they rose up in a sun salutation, mimicking the germinating buds. Finally, they chanted *kekeke* (the sound of plants stretching taller, apparently) to help the flowers they had planted to grow. The symbolism of it all — young shoots, growing taller — was lost on the children, but not on the teachers who joined in the chant. *Kekekekekekeke*.

The green flautist picked up his tune again, and led the line of students to the shore of the lake. For half a second I had an image of him as the Pied Piper, leading the children into the waters: a spring sacrifice. Instead, they cut branches from an overhanging willow tree, twisting them into wreaths to crown the kids' heads like elven royalty.

The troupe performed a short play on the wooden stage, tipping empty watering cans over the heads of their classmates, who jumped up like fully formed plants. After a lunch of spring rolls, which the children helped make themselves, they wrote poems with Swallow, copying out set phrases to create a Tang dynasty form of four lines of seven characters each:

*All is clear for ten thousand li
Fresh rains shake the earth
The spring wind blows huhuhu
The mountains are covered in green*



Those mountains were only getting greener. Spring in Dali was in full bloom now and, after the equinox, daytime temperatures climbed higher up the twenties. The cherry trees that lined the road up to my village were in the pink of their blossom. The hillside above them came alive too, with lighter shades of lime, as new shoots supplanted the deeper greens of yesteryear.

The burning, high-altitude Yunnan sunshine pierced brightblue skies until late. We were significantly west of Beijing, but China's single time zone meant that the sun rose and set two hours later here, from eight am til eight pm — an aeon of sunlight to kill our free time with. Already, the days were longer than the nights.

I was feeling more settled in the valley now: my nights less dark, my days less lonely. I was getting acquainted with my new home: meeting the new migrants of Dali and making new friends. But I had also come here to get away from it all, including from other humans. So I began to explore the

mountainside above Silver Bridge Village, which sloped up to the peaks that towered 2,000 metres higher.

Each of those peaks had a poetic name, from Three Suns Peak, directly above me, south through Snow Spirit Peak and Exultant Echo Peak to Horse and Dragon Peak, the highest point of the massif at 4,122 metres. From there the ridgeline descended to Setting Sun Peak and the lower pass of Xiaguan. Local lore held that the whole range was the back of a giant sleeping dragon, fused into the terrain, its ridged scales jutting up.

Eighteen glacial gorges separated the nineteen peaks, each carved by a running stream. These had names of their own, from Black Dragon Stream to Green Jade Stream, which marked the start of the Jade Belt Path — a winding traverse cut through a tract of the mountainside that was protected as a natural park. Here too were cascading falls and pools, including the Seven Maidens Pools, where mythical dragon maidens had bathed in the moonlight — or that's what the tourists who took a cable car up to see it were told.

The first time I had taken that cable car, the year before, it had been clear that some visitors from the concrete jungle had never encountered this kind of greenery before. I shared a carriage with a young family from Shenzhen, whose seven-year-old daughter glued her nose to the window, stared wide-eyed at the forest and asked: 'Daddy, is this nature?' She had lived all her life in a high-rise, and the only foliage she had ever seen was the trees in her compound park. As I walked up the mountain paths now, I felt that humans were not designed to live in cities.

With the coronavirus lockdowns now preventing urban dwellers from travelling to Dali, it meant those of us who lived here had all this nature to ourselves. I hiked the Jade Belt Path alone, the only person up in the middle of the mountain. I bought a one-man tent, and went camping in the forest glades above my village, under stars that stretched to infinity. I traced the myriad donkey paths up into the hillside, mapping them in my mind (and on GPS) as they branched off to dead ends and tea fields.

Silver Bridge Village was nestled between White Stone Stream and Spirit Source Stream — each carving its way down a gorge from the

mountaintop. The former was a wide riverbed of shale and stone, named for the chalk and marble rocks that were carried down it. In the Ice Age this had been a glacier, and near its base it had deposited an enormous boulder of metamorphic schist, twenty metres high and cloven in two, as if flung from the heavens by a titan. Indeed, locals said it was put there by one of the Eight Immortals — legendary Taoist figures of the Tang era. A shrine had been cut into the rock face, with offerings of fruit and candy left below an image of the Immortals crossing the sea. On the crag, Dane from the House of Science had (with permission) bolted a score of rock-climbing routes. There he taught me the sport, while the waters of White Stone Stream gargled below.

Marble was mined higher up the mountainside, or it used to be. Dali was so famous for this resource that the word for marble in Chinese, *dalishi*, translates literally as ‘Dali stone’. Besides tiling the floors of the nouveau riche, locally the stones were cut open to reveal patterns in the coloured veins within — swirling lines redolent of misted rolling hills, as in a Chinese landscape painting — to be framed and sold in cross-sections. But due to over-extraction, marble mining was now banned. Big red signs at the trailheads warned locals against the practice of ‘collecting stones’, and a marble quarry higher up was shuttered.

On one hike up a path past a bouldering spot by White Stone Stream, I passed three local men in their sixties walking down from the top. Each carried a thirty-pound slab of marble, slung to his back by a bandana around the forehead, as they picked their way carefully down the narrow pathway. We chatted while they stopped for a breather, and the three asked me not to tell anyone I had seen them. It was a few hours until dusk. I asked them if this trail reached the top of the mountain, and how long it would take.

‘You’ll get there tomorrow,’ one answered, a twinkle in his eye. ‘If you last the night.’ The trails were dangerous, he said, and every year people died on the mountainside. Most were ‘outsiders’, who assumed the climate at 4,000 metres was the same as at 2,000 metres. They died from exposure at the top, where temperatures drop dramatically at night, or from an accident when they were too far for help to reach them. I thought of a story

a friend had told me, about an acquaintance of his who bled out after cutting his leg during a night-time descent. They found his corpse in the morning. The same friend, a Canadian climber who knew the mountain well, had also come across a cave pit with three human skeletons in it — two children, one adult — who had fallen in and were unable to climb out.

I left the peak for another day, and returned home as carefully as I could.

The Cang mountains could bring death, but they also sustained life and livelihood. Tea fields were dotted all over the hillside above my village, their low trees lined neatly, each plot farmed by a different household. The aunties and uncles of Silver Bridge were already picking the spring tea buds, twisting the top three leaves off to place them carefully in wicker baskets, ready to be withered and rolled. There was a tea factory up the slope as well, with large woks on brick stoves where workers dried out the fresh pickings, then laid them out in the sunlight and let them oxidise to the degree that the type of tea called for. Mountain tea from Yunnan commanded high prices in the city, up to 1,000 yuan — 140 dollars — per kilo.

Other villagers, like the men I had passed, collected marble stones to sell in town, for around one hundred yuan, which would be cut open to reveal the swirls inside. Or they uprooted rhododendron trees from high up the mountainside, carrying them down on their backs to sell to the new migrant households, who replanted them as a courtyard feature. Once I crossed a stream to find a group of locals sifting it for precious metals. Those same waters, rich in minerals, were piped directly into our homes, just as many of the herbs and medicines on sale in Dali markets were foraged from the forest.

Walking these trails became a regular pastime in the warming weather. Some were cut deep into the earth, wide enough for donkeys to bring supplies up and down. Others were scrabbly dirt paths, their tendrils splitting off into the tea fields. Others were overgrown, hidden or led to thistly dead ends. All cut through the depths of the pine forest, occasionally emerging into a sudden meadow where the ridge of the mountains was visible, its snowline receding, reclaimed by rock and shrub.

The mountain was a place of worship, too. Shrines to mountain deities marked the way up at almost every trailhead. Just up the path from my house was a squat concrete box that housed three figures: a mountain god, a lake god, and a deified Laozi with a flowing white beard. A nearby temple celebrated Mountain Festival at this time of year — the third day of the third lunar month — to commemorate a local girl who fell in love with a prince of the Nanzhao Kingdom whom she encountered in the forest. The history of these hills — the myths they carried, the glaciers they once held — weighed deep in the earth as I trod above it.

The forest itself, I learnt, was actually quite young. Many of its trees had been cut down in the Mao era, for timber to feed the backyard furnaces of the Great Leap Forward, as had happened across vast swathes of Yunnan. That was the attitude of the Communist revolution: the natural world was there to serve the schemes of mankind. Mao himself had said that ‘man must conquer nature’. The forests of Dali had been replanted in the 1980s, and the local government was now scrambling to protect its natural resources after years of over-use. I wondered if mountain gods ever got angry.

As the dry, hot air suffused the valley, we were now at the height of fire season. Every year wildfires raged on the Cang mountains, spreading up the forested slopes from villages, spring winds carrying the flame to the next branch. The government posted fire rangers to guard the trailheads, checking hikers for lighters and blasting warnings over loudspeakers in the villages. Yet the mountain was too large and porous to control. The most common cause of fire was cigarette butts, the rangers told me, but also fireworks, or kids playing with fire, or sunlight striking just wrong through a discarded glass bottle.

Later, I saw the devastation first hand when a wildfire lit up a section of mountainside five kilometres north of Silver Bridge. From my house, I could see a high plume of black smoke above the forest, snaking up in the menace of its slow dissipation. From this distance, only a hint of rouge was visible at its base, where hundreds of rangers had assembled to fight the blaze, while trucks blared by carrying scores more from the emergency fire

service. A helicopter helped their efforts, hovering over the lake to dip a giant bucket hanging from its frame into the waters, then flying up and tipping the bucket over the flames. It repeated the trip again and again, as firefighters doused and directed and blocked and begged the raging conflagration.

The fire frenzied through the night, and was extinguished in the early hours of dawn. Nobody died directly in the blaze, and they had held it back from the nearest houses. But on one of the helicopter's last descents to the lake, it had lost control and plunged into the water. All four crew members were killed. An investigation was launched into the cause of the fire, but they never found who started it. I asked the fire rangers what would happen if they did catch them, and the reply was matter-of-fact: 'Prison.'

These rangers were temporary workers, drafted locally from the villages and sent up to live in spartan shacks in the forest, where they stayed for rotations of five days until their relief came. They were paid a pittance for this — just 200 yuan a month, according to one — and were mostly elderly, with no other work to do besides farming. The shacks had no electricity, though they were given a gas cylinder, a stove and a supply of vegetables. Once, I came across two of them peeling bark from a tree branch, to soak and boil until it was soft enough to eat. 'Just for fun,' they told me — a bit of local knowledge learnt in harder times, now applied to pass the hours and diversify their diet.

I felt a new respect when I looked up at the mountains. These slopes had sustained the people of Dali for millennia, offering firewood, food, water, worship, profit. They brought life; they brought death. Now they called to a nature-starved generation of outsiders — spoke to something in our souls that yearned to be closer to Mother Earth. We had moved here as if drawn to its power. And maybe, if we spoke back to the mountain, it could bring new life to us as it did to the forest in spring.



There is a saying in Chinese I have always liked, *luoyeguigen* — a falling leaf returns to its roots. It speaks to the cycles of nature, and of life. In spring is laid the seed of autumn, just as autumn's fall feeds next year's growth. Yet the phrase is most often used to describe the elderly who return to their ancestral homes in the winter of life.

Li Guanyu was one of them. He was eighty years old, born and raised in Silver Bridge Village, before he left to farm and work in another township in Yunnan after he got married. Two decades ago, he moved back home to retire, called to the place of his birth. His son, who ran a construction firm in Xiaguan, had built a three-storey concrete home on the site of their old farmhouse, just around the corner from my house. But Li Guanyu refused to move in, and the concrete box was left empty. Instead, he converted the crumbling woodshed next door into his retirement shack, and lived there with his wife, cooking meals on a wood stove and sleeping on a hard raised platform, as he was used to.

The characters for Guanyu's given name meant 'watching the universe'. Whenever I passed him, he was always sucking on a long tin pipe stuffed with local tobacco, sporting a vacant expression as if pondering some mystery. Often he would knock on my front gate, or just stroll in unannounced if it was open, for a chat. I kept some English pipe tobacco myself, for evening puffs under my eaves, and he would invariably make a beeline towards it, filling his bowl to the brim while we talked. He told me about his childhood in the village, when it was so poor his family only ate meat once a year. Now they could eat meat every day, buying cuts of freshly slaughtered pork at the market.

'The change is very big,' he said, sucking on his pipe. 'But the environment is the same.' I asked why he had felt called back to Dali, later in life. 'Because this is my home,' he said simply, as was his style. 'It is a good home.'

Other retirees felt so too, and not just those who were born here. Among the new Dali migrants of the valley, there were arrivals from every generation, and many were in their silver years. They had relocated to find the same peace and quiet that Li Guanyu had, up in the mountain villages.

Their falling leaves sought country roots, and even if Dali was not their ancestral birthplace, this is where they wanted to grow old.

Retirement age is early in China — sixty for men, fifty or fifty-five for women — and Dali's temperate climate and low costs made it an appealing option for the long autumn of life. Some retirees fixed up country cottages to live in. Others moved into newer villa-style apartment complexes that were being built across the valley, with names such as 'Mountain and Water Space' or 'My Little Dali Courtyard', driving a property boom that was set to make the fortunes of those who could afford to buy. While migrants like Nutshell joked that they had taken early retirement in their thirties, these had come to put their feet up for good.

In Silver Bridge I would often pass by the home of Teacher Zhou, a recently retired primary-school teacher who was perfecting the garden of her own Dali courtyard while waiting for her husband, who was still working in Guangzhou, to hit sixty. With a beatific smile that shone through her gold-rimmed spectacles, she favoured long flowing robes and wafted around her neatly manicured lawn to trim her vines or water her cacti. She had sequestered herself in the village last year, away from the hubbub of the megalopolis, and was learning brush painting by sketching scenes of village life, including one portrait of a procession of grannies passing my house, with the caption 'Home of the Foreign Writer'.

I also dropped in again on Nutshell — the inn owner — when his parents finally came to visit Dali. As I arrived, his father, leathery skin tanned by sixty summers, was inspecting the vegetable patch, while his mother sat drinking tea with her daughter-in-law, crunching sunflower seeds with her chipped incisors. Both parents grunted their disapproval at Nutshell's life choice in moving here, pointing out all the empty rooms. Yet after tea his father went to recline in the folding chair on the veranda, sprawling in the brilliant Yunnan sunshine, and watched his granddaughter play in the sandpit. He commented, to nobody in particular: 'This would be a good place to retire.'

Another elderly couple I met later took retirement a step further, and transferred their official registration documents to Dali. The *hukou* is a form

of internal passport in China, conferring local privileges to citizens based on their place of origin, and has long been a shackle on those moving from countryside to city. While urban migration was always possible — just get on a train — these migrants were disadvantaged by the rural documents of their birth that prevented them from buying property in the city or enrolling their children in better schools. The dream was often to transfer their rural *hukou* to an urban one (those from top-tier cities being the hardest to obtain) as stamp and sign that they had made it in the city. To transfer an urban *hukou* back to a rural one was so unthinkable that there wasn't even a clear process for it. Who would want to try?

Yet that was exactly what Doctor Chen, a former maternity doctor from the bustling metropolis of Chongqing, did. In 2014, she and her husband moved to River Crane Village in Dali — the same village as Nutshell — where a government pilot scheme was allowing transfers from urban to rural *hukou*. This gave them rights to buy their courtyard home outright, and also to rent farmland directly, which was not otherwise possible for reverse migrants in the valley. After three decades of urbanisation, in which country folk were abandoning their fields, now it was returning city folk who wanted to change their status to rural residency, for unimpeded access to cleaner air and a natural setting to wind down in.

Doctor Chen and her husband rented six *mu* of land (about an acre) down the hill from their village. They hired a team to knock up a 'temporary building' on stilts (permanent structures were not permitted on farmland), straddling a brook that ran into a large pond past it. They planted roses and rice and lotus, saturating their fields with mountain water. They cooked, hosted guests or just sat and drank tea all day — ever the favourite Dali pastime — while watching the spring winds buffet a boat moored on their pond, in the shade of a bamboo grove.

'We couldn't wait to get out of [Chongqing],' Doctor Chen told me. 'We hated the weather, the smog, the traffic. Nobody knows each other, you don't talk to your neighbours.' Here, by contrast, she was friends with everyone. 'It's like when I was small again,' she recollected, returning several times to the phrase 'connection to the earth.' She called it *haodi*: the

good earth. The phrase has particular associations in China, an atavistic draw to the soil that raised their ancestors. Doctor Chen had helped give birth to generations in the city with no connection to the land, but she still remembered the good earth from her childhood — when the mountainous outskirts of Chongqing were still wild and concrete had yet to infect their green. So, when her work was done but there was still strength in her to till the land, she returned to her mother's arms.

Perhaps that was what we all sought. Space to think and feel in. To build something with our own two hands. To put our feet up and enjoy the sun when it shone. To tend to our crops. To stop doing, and simply be. To rest, at last.



One morning, I was cloud-watching in my yard over a cup of locally grown coffee. The clouds of Yunnan — the province ‘south of the clouds’ — are always beautiful, but those in Dali I found transcendental. They rolled off the mountainside, or congealed into towering shapes: fluffy cumulus, hovering lenticulars, wispy cirrus, pierced with the colours of the rainbow as sun rays impaled them at different times of day. I could spend hours watching them float by, thinking of nothing in particular, a world away from myself.

I was startled out of my reverie by the sound of firecrackers outside my door. In the Chinese countryside, firecrackers generally portend either a wedding or a special festival. Walking out, I saw a procession passing by my home — a score of villagers in matching dress carrying a palanquin, led by a paper banner held aloft and a musician tooting ditties on the reedy suona, a Chinese trumpet. Yet something about the ensemble was off: everyone was dressed in white, the palanquin was empty but for a photograph and a box, and a woman at the back of the queue was wailing loudly. This was no marriage, but a funeral.

The deceased was Grandfather Li, a cousin of Li Guanyu. He had lived in the last home at the top of the village, by the Buddhist temple at the mountain trailhead. Theirs was a squat brick courtyard, guarded by three chickens who would squawk and peck at me from the entrance like a paltry (or poultry) Cerberus.

Grandfather Li had worked the fields of Silver Bridge Village all his life. He had been sickly for months, and passed peacefully ('from being old', according to one mourner) a few nights back. He was eighty-two years old, although someone else insisted he was eighty-three. There had been a wake that lasted a day and a night, then he was cremated. Today his ashes would be laid to rest up the mountain.

The procession wended through the village in a loop, stopping every twenty metres to set off firecrackers and set down ritual food offerings, for the spirits that would guide his soul. Leaving a charred trail behind it, the train of mourners chugged up the hillside to the mountain god shrine, where, as a last offering, they burnt the decorative banner that led them, while the suona sang its last complaint. I asked the middle-aged woman who had been bawling through it all what her relation was to the deceased.

'I'm not related,' she said neutrally, then continued to cry out the dead man's name in a high-pitched howl of grief. It turned out she was a professional mourner, not uncommon in China, hired by the family to add gravitas to the proceedings.

The procession dissipated, leaving three members of Grandfather Li's immediate family to continue up the mountain path with his ashes and photograph. I followed them until we reached a columbarium that housed funeral remains in neat chintzy lockers. Here they laid Li's ashes to rest, locking them in a numbered, gold-plated box in the wall, placing tangerines as an offering on the floor in front of it. Finally, we returned to their courtyard, where a feast was laid out for everyone who had joined, to drink and laugh and celebrate Li's life.

Among them were his granddaughter, Sister Li, and her own infant child in a bassinet — who gargled goodbye to her great-grandfather, last of a generation who had lived through an era of China's history inconceivable to

that which she would inhabit. Sister Li had left Dali years back, to work in a machine-parts factory on China's east coast with her husband, and hadn't been home in over a year. But she had rushed back to see her dying grandfather, making the long train journey to show him the latest generation of the Li family. Yet there was a delayed connection on the last leg of the trip, various travel restrictions to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, and then she missed the first bus up to the village from the station. When she arrived, she told me with tears in her eyes, he had passed just two hours earlier.

Death was all over the hillside. On my walks, every now and then I would come across a patch of graves set among the tea fields — squat stone tombs resting above ground, with marble headstones that bore the name of the deceased in a vertical inscription, alongside their ancestral family tree. I was familiar with the design: my neighbour Granny Yang's own headstone was propped up next to the woodshed by my front gate, awaiting her end as a *memento mori* every time she collected wood.

The Cang mountains were the traditional resting place for the Bai people of Dali. It was where they came from; it was where they would return to. Yet a recent regulation forbade mountain burials: there just wasn't space for everyone up there anymore, and the construction of traditional tombs was controlled. And so the columbarium had been built to house cremated remains instead. Granny Yang's tombstone would go unused, and her daughter Auntie Yang still grumbled at the wasted expense of getting it pre-carved.

Soon after the funeral, on 4 April, was China's national tomb-sweeping festival, Qingming, or 'clear and bright' — fifth of the twenty-four solar terms. This was an occasion to visit the graves of one's ancestors — who are worshipped in Chinese folk religion — and to pay respects by clearing off the weeds. In Dali, it was also an excuse for a family day out and a picnic up in the forest, where most of the old graves had been planted.

An important part of the ritual was burning paper money — cashable in the other world — and lighting joss sticks for the departed. This made the day a unique challenge for the fire rangers, who had to enforce a strict

prohibition of this ancient custom out of the very reasonable fear that it would spark a wildfire. The mountain graveyards were scattered with plastic gallon cans of water just in case, next to red banners that warned, ‘Who disturbs the mountain, who goes to jail.’ Some families risked a small flame or incense stick anyway, fearing retribution for lack of filial piety even more.

For those with more recently departed family members, whose ashes were in lockers at the columbarium, there was no tomb to sweep. They hiked up anyway, to lay fruit and candy below their numbered box, or cleaned away its dust with a cloth. Yet behind the building, just up from a fire rangers’ station, was a whole slope full of graves. Here the other families of the village gathered, arriving in dribs and drabs, carrying young children and lunch boxes, for a spring outing to visit their great-great-grandparents.

It was there that I ran into my next-door neighbours, Auntie and Granny Yang, both of whose husbands were buried on this hill. Little Liu, the grandson, trailed behind them with a bucket of cement mix and a trowel, and re-cemented the base of his father’s and grandfather’s graves in turn. Once touched up to satisfaction, they laid fruit offerings below, along with a single shot of sorghum liquor for each grave. To either side, they propped up unlit joss sticks. No tears, no words — they were business-like, and did not tarry. When I asked how she felt sweeping her husband’s early grave, Auntie Yang simply replied ‘*yinggai de*’: ‘It’s something that should be done.’ The dead were dead; the living, not yet.

This year’s tomb-sweeping festival was also a National Day of Mourning, to mark the fatalities of the early Covid epidemic. Overseas, it was now a fully-fledged pandemic, while in China there were almost no new cases following draconian city lockdowns. In Dali, it was easy to feel removed from this crisis the world was facing, and the loss it brought to so many. The isolation we sought here meant that we had escaped the worst of it, hiding out in our mountain mouse-hole. To be far away from the mass of humanity was the point.

With the West locked down and China's border closed, I was stuck here now. I didn't mind that — it was my choice — but I could not help but feel a pang of homesickness too, far from my homeland. Standing in the middle of that field of graves, ancestors of a culture not my own, the doubt flashed across my mind again: why am I here? Am I learning about a new culture, or just fleeing my own? I thought of my parents, of their health, and felt the pang of being 5,000 miles away. I thought of my ex — a different form of mourning — and had never felt more lonely than among the dead. We all have our tombs to sweep.

I walked back down the mountain, and returned to my cloud-gazing. A solitary cirrus cloud was blown by winds across the blue, before it dissipated into nothingness.



In the third lunar month of my first year in the valley, I was beginning to feel more rooted in my new life here. Dali was in the full summer of its spring, and the early winds had died down into hazy hot days of piercing sunshine. In this fine weather, one new pastime I had picked up, along with the other new migrants, was gardening.

When I first moved in, the garden patch in my yard was overgrown with weeds. It took a full day just to pull them all out — tugging up deep root systems, yanking sticky tendrils off the wall, then tilling the earth with a hoe until it was virgin once more. I began to compost my kitchen waste, layering it into the soil with any earthworms I could find. I used my glass-roofed kitchen as a greenhouse incubator, growing seeds in a tray on top of my fridge, then replanting their shoots in the garden. I rigged up a trellis, and transplanted a young passionfruit vine I had bought in a local market. Finding a discarded cactus lying broken by a village path, I propped it up in the corner soil, hoping it wasn't entirely dead. A neighbour gifted me an aloe vera plant he had found up the mountain; its gooey bloods were salve for my sunburn when I spent too long outdoors.

Watching these efforts bear fruit after a couple of months brought a deep and natural joy. My seeds had germinated, forming imperceptibly slowly into tomato and aubergine and courgette and lettuce. The abandoned cactus had sprouted a son from its head. The passionfruit vine was colonising my trellis with alarming speed. The neglected bonsai was thriving. My osmanthus tree had pushed a new layer of foliage skywards, and was beginning to flower. When I harvested my first baby tomatoes and leaf greens, pairing them with a home-made loaf of bread and labneh spread, I felt a greater satisfaction than I had known possible for such a simple thing: to eat what I grew myself.

At the age of thirty-four, I was also finally learning to cook. I had lived in cities all my life — ten of them in China, where eating out is cheap and easy — and had never picked up how to make more than pasta and stir-fries. It took moving to the countryside during a pandemic to realise how reliant I had been on others: restaurants; delivery services; bottled ingredients; pre-made sauces; microwave meals. How minimally I could fend for myself in the convenience economy. But if self-sufficiency was a goal of the Dali experiment, then being able to feed myself seemed a good place to start.

Stocking my kitchen outhouse with a laboratory of seasonings, sugars, acids, fats and starches, I set about building a layman's repertoire of Chinese and world dishes. Cooking was a favourite pastime of the Dali migrants, and my main teacher was Lili, one of the denizens of the Om Cave and a new friend. She taught me to tuck my fingers in when I chopped; showed me how to make a bain-marie from chopsticks and a porcelain plate; how to strain labneh or ricotta with a muslin cloth; how to scale, gut, batter and flash-fry a fish. I learnt to ferment kombucha, bake bread and pizza, and make my own pickles and jams. I bought a sausage-stuffer and hog casings to crank out my own bangers. A local granny kept a cow and sold me raw milk, which I tried and failed to skim and churn into butter and cheese. But slow-heating it with some culture made for a tasty yoghurt, which I devoured every breakfast over home-baked granola.

Fresh produce was plentiful in the village. Every morning an uncle sold cuts of pork on a metal table by the mahjong parlour, culled at dawn. The convenience store next door sold fresh eggs from local farms. A farmers' market was held on the third, eleventh, eighteenth and twenty-sixth of each lunar month — though it was only the elderly who followed the Chinese calendar, and everyone else had to look up the right date. This market spilt its wares into the lanes outside my home, and later colonised the basketball court. Here, next to the waftings of grilled tilapia and tofu, villagers sold their own fruit, vegetables and tubers alongside Yunnan specialities such as rice pancakes, crispy fried locusts, cured leg of ham, and a range of roots and flowers that I had no idea were edible. It was a cornucopia of organic delights, without a plastic wrapping in sight.

These local markets were replicated in every village in Dali, but the granddaddy of them all was the annual 'Third Month Fair': a two-week jamboree beginning on the fifteenth day of the third lunar month (generally early April), held on a cobbled road that sloped up from the Old Town's mountainside gate. This festival traced its origins back to the earliest traders of Dali, who came up from South-East Asia or down from Tibet, converging on this crossroads of the southern Silk Road. Now it was as much a show as a market, with singing performances by local Bai groups, and horse races on a track just up the hill — although due to pandemic restrictions, this year it was live-streamed online.

At Dali's village markets you could buy everything you didn't know you wanted, from mountain honey to Burmese jade, and get anything done from fortune telling to ear cleaning. There were a variety of medicinal cures on offer, including wild root teas harvested from up the mountain and one sign advertising an alarming-sounding 'snake powder' tonic. You could wade through a paddling pool and pick out a live fish to take home, or point at a bird in a cage to have it slaughtered and plucked for you. One regular stall in the Silver Bridge market displayed rows of dentures, where a man with a cigarette hanging off his lower lip could pull a tooth or give you a filling right there.

Occasionally I would bump into the other city transplants at these markets, weaving in between the stalls, filling wicker baskets strapped to our backs with vegetables for the chop. When I met someone new, I had learnt not to ask what they ‘did’ in Dali. This question was a give-away that I was new — it was city thinking, ritual status-placing, the verbal equivalent of a glance down and up. The first time I asked it of Tao, the carpenter-philosopher building his own log cabin, he looked at me with disdain and replied: ‘I live.’

In Dali, sometimes it seemed that we judged each other not by what we did, but by how little. While locals worked dawn to dusk just to get by, we had come here to pass our days cooking, gardening, doing DIY or just sitting around drinking tea in each other’s courtyards. There was a romanticisation of this ‘simple life’ in the country, but ours was a privileged version of it. Among the reverse migrants, the yuppies either worked remotely or lived off their savings, and the hippies made do by busking or selling handmade jewellery, clothes, incense and soaps. Both felt the same tug of long lazy afternoons in the sun. Dali gave us a new life, but it was the graveyard of ambition.

Career was just one conventional standard of success that the new Dali people liked to reconsider. Other mores they rejected included the accumulation of wealth and possessions, the consumption of mass-produced goods, and over-reliance on modern technology. As Tao put it: ‘You have to ask yourself if the way you live your life makes you happy, or if you just think it makes you happy.’ He mentioned a movie, *Hacker Empire*, and said we needed to escape it. I took out my phone to look up the reference: it was the Chinese title for *The Matrix*. ‘Most people are living in the Matrix,’ he explained. ‘Ninety-nine per cent.’

This dismissal of the mainstream could feel a little tiresome at times — as if only they were enlightened enough to be Neo — but it crossed my mind that the reason it irked me was that it applied exactly to me. My own definitions of success had mostly related to career and personal milestones, that I either passed or fell short of (such as failing to get married or buy property in my mid-thirties) but which left me unsatisfied either way. Even

if I did top one of those hills, it was revealed to be a false horizon: past it, there was always something more that I coveted, a higher peak to attain, or a fear that what I already had would be taken away from me.

The truth was, for all of my new hobbies and the idyllic locale I was in, I was still unhappy. The deeper malaise was still there, the underlying disease — a dis-ease in the soul. It was clear that moving home alone wouldn't fix it. I thought of those weeds in my garden plot, their roots that crept deep into the substrate. My mind felt like that, when I dared to look at it: a system of winding roots and tendrils, of behaviours and patterns formed in childhood, that I could not even see let alone pull out. I baulked at the prospect of trying to de-weed my brain, when all I wanted was to flood it with dopamine. I had changed location, but physical change was not enough: I needed to change my mind. And that is the highest mountain to climb.

The most obvious way in which the Matrix still had me was through my smartphone. In idle moments, its dark glass called to me with the promise of stimulation, of escape from my emotional state: a numbing agent, a comfort blanket. Obsessively checking the news. Watching 'epic fails' on YouTube, or pranks on TikTok. Getting jealous of friends' successes on social media. Getting sucked into fantasy. A slave to notifications, the red dopamine-release button. I tried to cut back, and found I could not. My brain screamed for stimulation — deprived of its drug, I could not simply be content on my own.

Long before the internet, Thoreau had parodied the impulse in *Walden*: 'Pray tell me anything new that has happened to a man anywhere on this globe,' said the newspaper junkie, unaware he was caught in 'the dark unfathomed mammoth cave of this world'. So to his pond he went, to 'spend one day as deliberately as Nature'. It was another favourite book of the new Dali people, living on their shelves next to Zhuangzi.

Following their lead, I began a digital detox. Off went the smartphone, into a lockbox in the evenings. I restricted internet access on my laptop. I cultivated offline activities: running, meditation, tai chi, piano. Binge reading instead of binge TV. All this was, of course, the absolute worst. But

when I was out gardening, or cooking a meal, it kept my hands and mind occupied enough to find I did not need the drug as much as it told me.

I started talk therapy, over Zoom, and learnt tools and tricks to regulate my emotions. For decades I had convinced myself that the solution to pain was always intellectual: if I thought about a problem enough, then I could figure it out; I could fix me. But I would get stuck on a thought or a feeling, like a fish on a hook. Now I was taught to expand into my emotions, and so let them be; to defuse my thoughts, and so let them go. If I let a worry float away, unsolved, then began the next right thing, I could find a modicum of freedom.

The new meditation habit helped too. This was especially popular among Dali's new migrants, who sat for hours or joined week-long retreats, pursuing mindfulness just as their burnt-out counterparts in the West did. I had done a ten-day silent retreat in north Thailand the summer before, to learn vipassana, but all I could manage on my own at home was ten minutes a day. Even that short sit cleared my cortisol, helping me to let go of anxieties I had accumulated, gunk in the pipes. The more reluctant I was to do it, the more necessary it was to quiet the raging monkey in my mind, which clawed at the walls of my skull.

When I failed to quit my digital addiction on my own, lost in the sweet oblivion of screen-time, I swallowed my pride and joined a twelve-steps programme for it. Here I learnt a simple wisdom: that self-will is not the solution but the problem. That in deflating our egos we can find the humility to accept ourselves as we are: not specially gifted or unworthy, just human and imperfect like everyone else. There was a great paradox at its core I could not yet understand: that on admitting we lacked control, the answer was to give up the quest for control, and to believe in a power greater than us instead.

Tendrils by tendrils, I started the work of de-weeding my brain. When caught by a negative thought or urge, I would look up at the mountains above my yard — immense, immovable, ancient. That was a higher power, if anything was. When hiking up those paths, I felt respite. Solitary walks became a balm for my recovering heart. In nature I was calmed. In the

shade of the pine forest, where new buds were growing, there was nothing to think about except putting one foot in front of the other. It felt like I was getting to know myself all over again — or perhaps for the first time.

It occurred to me that in my fantasy of Dali, the appeal had been in the isolation of it. To remove myself from society and city, out of a romantic, wounded self-image — a wanderer above the sea of smog. Yet isolation is internal. I had felt it in high-rises; I had felt it at parties; I had felt it in a relationship. Out of heartbreak and self-pity, though, there was a solace. Up in these forested hills, I felt what it meant for loneliness to transcend into solitude: to love myself instead of relying on someone else to. We are healed in the green.

The old leaves had died, the scars of yesteryear entombed in new rings of wood. ‘Yet still the unresting castles thresh,’ went the Larkin poem, ‘In fullgrown thickness every May. / Last year is dead, they seem to say, / Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.’

Spring winds had scattered the seeds. It was time for fresh flowers to bloom.

SUMMER: Flower Season

Rhododendrons purpled the mountainside. Orchids lit up the village with their fragile bulbs. At higher altitudes the flower of the pheasant berry, called ‘ghost blows the flute’ in Chinese, raised its sepulchral head. Their gaze followed the sun that beat down over a litany of bright Dali days. Later in the summer, rainy season would begin, our own mini-monsoon. But for now, the lake glistened with sunshine, the mountains were alive, and the days of our month of Sundays blossomed with them.

The fourth month of the rural calendar began near the end of cruel April, followed by the solar term *lixia*, the ‘Standing of Summer’. The Third Month Fair had finished, and Beggars’ Festival followed it — a day-long folk religion celebration at Three Brush Village, where chickens were slaughtered by the gutters of the temple, with food distributed to any beggar who arrived. I had settled into my routines, and my neighbour across the bamboo fence, Auntie Yang, was now rehearsing nightly with her dance troupe.

I had been in Dali for a quarter of the year now, and by some measures it was beginning to feel like home. Certainly, the valley had its qualities: proximity to nature, temperate climate, fresh produce, cheap costs, vibrant community. Yet home is more than just a place: it is a sense of belonging, and the bonds to those we care for. Home is a choice. I had chosen to move here to escape what was behind me, attracted by Dali’s fantasy of reinvention. The outside of my life was changed, but not yet the inside. I was meeting new people, but nobody here had known me long and I didn’t yet feel I belonged. I had chosen to be alone.

Except I wasn’t. At the beginning of May I adopted a small white dog, a ‘Chinese village dog’, as the breed was known, or in local parlance *tugou* — literally a ‘dirt dog’. With doleful eyes, a shy temperament from her traumatic early years in a rescue shelter and a tendency to run in orbit-like circles, I named her Moon. My solitary mountain walks became runs with

her, panting our way up to the columbarium, then back down through the tea plantation to a hydropower station by Spirit Source Stream, before looping back past the budding blueberry and sweetcorn fields to home. When I was feeling down, she consoled me. Sometimes all we need is the touch of another living thing.

One morning, I was woken by another animal — the sound of a squealing pig. Pulling on some clothes, I went outside to see the driver of a small van, little more than a steel frame on wheels, unload a reluctant porcine cargo from the back. As he pushed the enormous hog into the yard of the family across the way from me, I felt sorry for this intelligent animal that knew what was coming next. But I also knew what it portended: tomorrow there would be a wedding.

Bai weddings in Dali are often held at the family home of the bride. Like all such receptions in China, they are purely ceremonial, the couple having already stamped their marriage registration at the local administrative bureau, often months back. The party is for their parents to show them off, and an excuse to eat far too much food. In this case the bride, Yang Xuhui, was twenty-four. Her groom, Yang Leichuan — the shared surname was a coincidence — was twenty-seven, from another village down by the lake. They had been introduced by mutual friends less than a year ago, and the groom's family had paid a bride price of 80,000 yuan (over 10,000 dollars) to confirm the match. Like other country weddings I had attended in China, I got the impression the couple was not particularly familiar with each other.

The day before the party was dedicated to preparing food for it. The protesting pig was trussed up, held down by a conspiracy of uncles, and dispatched with a long steel knife into the heart. Its blood was collected in a pan, to be congealed into cakes, then the carcass was carried outside. One of the uncles produced a gas blowtorch and methodically blackened the cadaver, to burn off its bristly hair. Its skin was so thick that a wash and a rub later, he could slice it off in neat strips of *shengpi*, a Yunnan delicacy of raw hog hide.

Once gutted, its intestines washed out with a hose, the flesh and fat of the beast were set aside. Two super-sized woks were set up outside over wood-fired brick stoves. The uncles carved up the pig to boil or deep-fry it in great chunks, wasting nothing from trotter to tripe, bung to brain. Meanwhile, a small army of aunties set about washing vegetables, scaling fish, chopping taters and frying dough balls. By the afternoon, there was an impressive panoply of dishes laid out on a half-dozen tables in their yard: salty preserved duck eggs; bread-battered pork cubes; flash-fried greens; sour fish soup; sweet sticky-rice poppers; slices of seasoned pigskin. The battalion of chefs ate their fill, leaving the rest to re-heat the following day, while pillars of wok steam sent a smoke signal to the rest of the village: tomorrow we feast.

There was no need for an invite. The next morning, any neighbour who wanted to just showed up — greeted at the gate by an uncle with an oversized red ledger, who noted down each household's name, connection to the family, and how much money they were bringing in a red gift envelope. In a rotation of tables under colourful bunting, the single pig fed some 200 humans, while its braised whole head surveyed the scene from the parents' table of honour. As the token foreigner at the feast, they had given me a seat by its left ear.

The groom, a potbellied young man with a baby face, had been getting steadily drunk through the feast at the insistence of his friends, performing obligatory toasts to each table. Yet his bride was nowhere to be seen. After lunch I asked him about this important missing element, and he said they were about to go 'collect' her now. This was an old Chinese tradition and a symbolic act: to bring the bride from her family's house into her new marital home. As we were in the bride's home to begin with, she had decamped to a beauty salon in the town of Xiaguan instead. The groom invited me to join in the procession of cars that would fetch her back. In the shotgun seat of my ride, a groomsman identifying himself as Brother Tiger lit firecrackers with his cigarette and threw them outside the moving vehicle, in riotous celebration of his friend's nuptials.

At the beauty salon, they collected his bride in her white wedding gown, though her bridesmaids insisted the groom hand out red envelopes of cash before she was relinquished. The motorcade drove back to the village. On the way, we parked by a statue below the three pagodas that I had passed by many times yet never lingered at. It was a golden Garuda, the mythical roc-like bird that had fended off Dali's black dragon of lore. Here, on a circular plaza underneath the Garuda's stern gaze, the cars unloaded and a giggling gaggle of friends surrounded the groom for his hazing. This custom, *naohun* ('disturbing the wedding'), was a more modern tradition, and an excuse to have some fun humiliating the groom.

Brother Tiger mercilessly instructed Groom Yang to strip down to his red underpants, then peer-pressured him into putting on a pair of fishnet stockings. The bride, in her white wedding gown, was given a piece of string to hold in one hand. This string was attached to a strip of firecrackers, and the groom reluctantly tied the string at its other end to his most intimate body part. Having verified this with a playful yank, the pyromaniac Brother Tiger proceeded to light the firecrackers. The bride led her husband around the plaza as he jumped about, trying to keep his unborn children safe while sparks flew under him. Next, the groomsmen tied him to a pole, wrapped him with clingfilm and threw eggs at him. The plaza was clearly a popular hazing spot, because I noticed a small red government sign affixed to a step: 'Resist vulgar habits; celebrate a civilised wedding.'

Cleaned up and back in his suit, Groom Yang returned to his parents-in-law's home, where the elder generation were still eating and drinking, none the wiser as to this ritual humiliation. Here, led by the pipings of a Chinese trumpet and introduced by a microphoned MC, the bride and groom performed the tea ceremony, the most important ritual of traditional wedding parties in China. In turn, they kowtowed before their new parents, poured them each a cup of tea and called them 'mother' and 'father' for the first time. An egg yolk stain was still visible on the groom's suit, but he was too drunk to care.

Afterwards, I asked the couple which part of the proceedings held the most meaning to them. 'None of it,' replied Bride Yang, who had changed

into a red dress to conform with Chinese tradition. ‘It’s all for them, not for us.’

When the feast was finished and the tables cleared in the late afternoon, there was a final surprise. At last I found out what my neighbour, Auntie Yang, had been practising her dance moves for all spring. Her troupe paraded into the yard, kitted out to the nines in embroidered white and pink outfits, each wearing the traditional Bai headdress: a crescent of fur with decorative tassels that represented the four elements of wind, flower, snow and moon. They were introduced by the MC as the ‘Flower Girls’ dancing group, then whipped out their colourful fans, and launched into a choreography of ‘Beautiful China’ that I had seen them practise a hundred times.

Upstairs, the married couple had retired to their bridal bedroom. An enormous wedding photo of them posing in front of the lake hung on the back wall, above fresh red sheets. The long-suffering groom was now surrounded by the bridesmaids, who made him do push-ups and hand out hundred-yuan notes to his embarrassed bride — just so he knows who’s boss. By now, both of them looked utterly exhausted. But they had survived the day and its mix of customs: Han and Bai, old and new. Soon they would be left alone, to finally get to know each other.

I retired to my house across the path, feeling just as exhausted from watching it all. For all the hubbub of the wedding, it left me feeling even less like I really belonged here. To the villagers I was just another foreigner passing through Dali: a novelty attraction at the wedding, whom they found it fun to take pictures with. Would this ever be home for me too? I thought again of my ex — of the wedding we had planned but never held. Roses bloom and die. But when the bright petals wither, that is when a flower bears its fruit.



Wedding season was in full flow, and not just for locals. Dali was trending across China as a picturesque location for bridal photo shoots or *hunshazhao*, where an engaged couple takes pictures in full wedding kit next to scenic backdrops, generally before the marriage registration or ceremony itself. Richer couples travel to a special destination for it, and can spend more on the photos than they do on the wedding.

Services catering to them had shot up around Dali, with photographers, make-up artists and rentable wedding gowns or matching couple outfits. There was even one in my village: Primeval Inn, the bed-and-breakfast opened by the north-easterner whose Dali name was Big New. When renovating his courtyard, he told me that ‘looking good in photos’ was the main criterion. There was a sunken tea table recess in the middle of a koi pool in front of carved wooden rafters, a cherry tree and hanging love seats, framed by the mountains behind it all. A back room was stuffed with billowing wedding dresses, and Big New would take his guests up to the tea fields or down to the lakeside for their pictures.

Travel restrictions from the first months of the coronavirus pandemic had lifted by now, and the valley was filling with tourists again. For the socialist Labour Day in China there was a five-day public holiday, which began on 1 May, and Dali Old Town was uncrossable for the throng. As well as the picturesque mountains and lake that had drawn them, there was now the phenomenon of *renshanrenhai* – ‘mountains and seas of people’. Lake Er was invaded by brides in white gowns or red dresses, posing with parasols while teams of photographers held up light reflectors and directed their poses.

Drawn by Dali’s Instagrammability, other tourists rented fancy cars — shiny pink Beetles and lurid yellow BMWs — and drove them around the circumference of the lake, taking selfies next to a car they couldn’t afford to buy against the backdrop of the mountains, then posted the pictures on WeChat to show off to their friends. Yet just as these bucolic charms attracted outsiders, so too did they change the fabric and economy of the valley.

As I drove around Dali in my own battered red Citroen, every now and then I would pass a patch of farmland with a curious crop indeed. Mirrored platforms rose from the soil, facing the lake and reflecting it on three sides. Love seats and fairy lights hung from trees. Mounds of earth had been crafted into hobbit hills, with colourful circular doors in them that led nowhere. In the middle of one field, a woolly llama was tied to a post, looking confused as visitors took snaps of it. At first, I thought I had stumbled into Teletubby land. But these were just a new type of business: selfie farms. With rural chic in high demand, some farmers realised they could earn more charging entrance to beautified fields than by planting them with crops — selling not corn but corny.

The photo-shoot BnBs and selfie farms were piggybacking off several new trends in Chinese society. The first was *fugu*, literally ‘to return to the old ways’: a rural nostalgia and celebration of rustic aesthetics that was China’s version of cottagecore. Just a generation ago, a crumbling country courtyard had been a sign of poverty to be ashamed of; now it was a hot commodity for posts on Xiaohongshu, ‘Little Red Book’, the Chinese equivalent of Instagram. Influencers would wander around the same sort of fields their grandparents had toiled in, dressed in hemp clothes with peasant-style straw hats, or even pretend to harvest crops, as fodder for their followers.

The second trend was ethnic dress. Some wore *hanfu* for their social media photos: old-style clothing from the Han dynasty, with colourful robes and skirts, cloth shoes, belts, jewellery and fans. Others got braids done and rented Bai ethnic costumes, dressing in embroidered aprons and fur headdresses — the equivalent of a white tourist in Arizona dressing up like a Native American to take pictures. Livestreamers on Douyin, the Chinese TikTok, set up all over the lakeside and farmland, haloed by portable light circles like Jesus trying to go viral. The successful among them became *wanghong*: web stars with huge followings, with groupies tracing their footsteps to the most photogenic spots.

This back-to-the-land social media trend had been started by a vlogger called Li Ziqi. Born in 1990 and orphaned young, she was raised by her

grandparents in the countryside of Sichuan province, then dropped out of school at fourteen to try to make it in a nearby city, working as a waitress and singer. After slaving for minimum wage with no breakthrough in sight, she returned home to rural Sichuan. There she planted crops, shucked corn, made traditional handicrafts and cooked country dishes — and captured it all on her video blog, posting artfully edited videos of herself making nettle soup or dying a dress with grape-skins, to the calm twanging of classical Chinese music. She became an internet sensation, tapping into a longing among urban Chinese to escape to a simpler life. By 2020, her channel had 27 million subscribers on Douyin. (The following year, she sued her distributors for over-commercialising her brand and stealing the profits.)

One of my new neighbours in Silver Bridge, a young woman called Yiyi, told me that Li Ziqi was the reason she had moved to Dali.

‘She gave us the inspiration that we could follow her life,’ Yiyi said, propping up a pair of round glasses that had a habit of slipping down her nose. Her name meant ‘One One’ — a family epithet, as she was an only child. But in Dali she had chosen a new nickname, Qianduoduo. This translated as ‘lots of money’ and struck me as an unusual choice for a Dali name. I asked about it, and she explained simply: ‘It’s because I want to make lots of money.’

Born in Harbin in China’s north-east, after slaving for six years in marketing and sales, earning 2,000 yuan (less than 300 dollars) a month to work ten hours a day, Yiyi became disillusioned with the conventional career path as a way to make money. So, on her twenty-eighth birthday, she quit her job, left her shoebox flat, gave her cat to a friend and followed in the footsteps of Li Ziqi to the countryside of Sichuan. Eventually she crossed into neighbouring Yunnan province, and settled in the equally bucolic climes of Dali to try to recreate her favourite vlogger’s success.

Yiyi’s big plan was to create a video channel in Dali that would rival Li Ziqi’s in popularity, earning from adverts and affiliate product sales. It was all worked out: locations scouted, local camera and production team hired. The content would be similar: planting vegetables, shopping at local markets, renovating a farmhouse, going on mountain hikes. All she needed

was a star, and her bright idea was that a foreigner would set her channel apart in the domestic market: a little extra dancing-monkey value for subscribers watching on their subway commutes. She planned to call it 'Foreigner Farmer'. Then came the ask: with my Chinese, she thought I might be the right foreigner for the job.

In between Silver Bridge and the next village north, Winding Stream, is a half-mile of fields that face west to the mountainside — doused in sunshine at dawn, bathed in ochre at twilight. It had become a favourite trail for my runs with Moon, between a rose garden on one side and a vegetable field on the other. Here, Yiyi took me to see where the videos would be shot. We traipsed up the hillside, through a small tea field to an abandoned shack that overlooked the lake. It was a spartan cabin with a rotting wooden roof: an abandoned farmer's storage shed with agricultural tools inside and rows of empty beehives behind. It also appeared to be a popular toilet for wild dogs.

'This will be your home,' Yiyi announced.

It turned out that she did not expect the Foreigner Farmer to actually *live* there. The videos would be nine parts artifice: all I had to do was pretend to live in such picturesque dilapidation. I would get dressed in the morning, slog up the path, get back into my pyjamas, then they would film me emerging fresh in the morning dew, as the sun rose over the lake. I was to be filmed renovating the house, but only for show; they would do the actual work, so it looked charming and rural on the outside, while the interior would be filmed elsewhere, where there was an actual bed.

In other videos, Yiyi continued, I would conduct a variety of tasks that I did not need to actually perform. When I went out picking walnuts in the mountain groves, they would buy enough walnuts to fill my basket first. When I planted and harvested crops in a bamboo farmer's hat, they would use another farmer's field for the shots. When I biked around the lake, they would drive me to various scenic points to film me cycling past the camera. As she talked, Yiyi's plans got wilder and wilder. She wanted to create warrens for a family of rabbits who would be my pets; to build a treehouse for me to read philosophy books in; to convert an old bus that lay rusting

down the path into a coffee-and-cocktails bar to host my friends in — all for the precious clicks.

‘It doesn’t matter if it’s real or not,’ she explained, ‘so long as it looks good.’

The financial model was that, on top of adverts, beneath each video there would be links to affiliated products on the e-commerce site Taobao. Under the walnut-picking video, fresh walnuts from a local vendor; for the crop-harvesting video, bamboo hats and rubber farming shoes; for the cycling trip, expensive road bikes. Each time a subscriber bought one, her channel would earn a commission. She had calculated that for every 10,000 views, they would earn one hundred yuan — then showed me the view numbers on Li Ziqi’s videos, each in the tens of millions. You do the maths, her eyebrows danced.

Incurably camera-shy, I declined Yiyi’s proposal to be the Foreigner Farmer. Instead, I introduced her to another foreigner in Dali who I thought might make for better talent (but who was later deported for smoking weed). Eventually Yiyi abandoned the idea, and moved onto a new plan to open a high-end alternative school for rich parents in the valley.

Dali’s rural idyll was being cashed in on, both for and by the outsiders who were moving there. The simple life had been commodified, assigned its affiliate price. Alongside its real farmers were the selfie farmers, there for the charm of a country setting that their very presence was changing. And I was part of it, renting a farmhouse and driving up prices. In bringing our money and mindset into the valley, we were price-tagging the intangibles that money couldn’t buy in the city. In seeking a more authentic life, we had fallen back into the matrix of digital simulacrums — fake happiness displayed online.

Perhaps this bothered me because I had been taken in by it: caught up in a fantasy of rural escape after seeing Zhazha’s social media posts from Dali back when I was living in Beijing, and imagining my life like that. But when fantasy meets reality, it is exposed. Like other migrants to the valley, I had transplanted here but so far only changed the appearance of things. True renewal comes from more than just a turning of the soil.



Among the new Dali people, some turned their gaze inwards to find the answers. Spirituality and faith were in thin supply in China, where the twin gods of progress and commerce took their place in an atheist mainstream. The old beliefs had been hollowed out by years of religious crackdowns, both during the Cultural Revolution and after, leaving a spiritual vacuum at the heart of the nation. In the cities they had got rich, and developed materially, but inside something was missing. So they came to Dali, seeking a quiet place apart to pursue the inner life.

There were a number of spiritual teachers in the valley. One balding middle-aged Chinese man who lived in my village introduced himself as a Sufi priest. Originally from Shenzhen, his birth name was Zheng Wei but he now went by Abdul. Ten years back he had quit his job and travelled the world to ‘look for the truth’. In Cyprus he met his teacher, Sheikh Nazim Al-Haqqani, who gave him his Arabic name. Now he taught Sufi meditation, with a focus on heavy breathing while visualising the word ‘Allah’ and chanting in Arabic. After one session, the group went outside to bounce on the trampoline in his yard — an important way to relax and open the breath, Abdul explained, if not ancient practice.

A Hindu household lived two villages north. This was a shared courtyard of believers, all young Chinese women, informally led by a hypnotherapist nicknamed Xiaojing, or ‘Little Tranquillity’. They kept a schedule of devotional activities on a whiteboard in the kitchen: hour-long meditation sits each morning, to open their chakras; regular puja rituals and mantra chanting; painting mandalas together; sewing clothes for tiny dolls of Krishna; study sessions to read the Bhagavad Gita; and a rota of who was cooking the vegetarian meal for that day. Upstairs, Little Tranquillity showed me their shrine to a 3,000-year-old Hindu guru called Babaji — who, she sincerely explained, was still alive and watching over them.

Various Christians were hidden in the woodwork, too. As religion was tightly controlled in its official forms, most Chinese Christians worshipped in informal, off-the-grid churches. On one walk near my village, I stumbled across a curiously shaped circular building up a mountain path, which was signposted as 'Healthy Life Company'. It turned out to be a Christian community of recluses who — under the guise of health company registration — lived together in a panopticon design around a central prayer space. The Taiwanese priest showed me around, and introduced me to the three Christian families who lived there with their young children and elderly parents. Together, they grew vegetables, cooked, ate, sang and worshipped.

I also met religious Taoists, Muslims and Zoroastrians in Dali — all Chinese from the cities, shopping for the right fit for their beliefs. Every Wednesday in the Old Town, a Baha'i group met for discussion and prayer in the house of Faraz, an Iranian who had moved to China decades ago. In the hippy courtyards it was common to meet a self-described pagan, animist or shaman (a qualification that seemed to involve wearing a headdress and banging on a sheepskin drum). One group worshipped the Chinese god of tea, ritually chugging tiny cups as a form of meditation. As Little Tranquillity put it: 'For everyone there is a different path. But the object is the same. When you feel God, you feel it.'

For most of my life, I had been dismissive of religion in the name of rationality. Yet as I learnt about these spiritual communities, I tried to keep my scepticism in check. This instinct was ingrained for me — the product of my upbringing and mental habits. Yet that cynicism, or intellectual dismissal of faith, had only made me miserable. And when I spent time with the Hindus, the Christians, the drum-banging shamans and trampoline Sufis, it seemed that they were happy, mostly. Their faith offered a peace and quiet their souls needed, wherever their bodies were. It was a deeper change, one that went to their roots.

By far the largest belief among Dali's spiritually inclined, as across the nation, was Buddhism. Here there was no theist conception of God, although the cosmology was intricate. Whether treated as personal

philosophy or organised religion, its beliefs, practices and code were shelter for the soul to take refuge in. There were several Buddhist canteens in Dali, offering vegetarian meals for free — with the proviso that guests ate in silence and did not waste a single drop of rice, enforced by bowl checks at the exit. Various Buddhist meditation centres offered week-long retreats. Even the armchair Taoists, such as the carpenter-philosopher Tao, followed Buddhism as well, in the syncretic tradition of China where belief systems were not mutually exclusive.

Especially among younger urban generations, Buddhism was newly fashionable. Over the last decade there had been a wave of what was dubbed ‘Buddhist youth’ — millennials who loosely followed Buddhism, wore prayer-bead bracelets, maybe had an Om wrist tattoo. The more hardcore among them had fled to rural boltholes to seek meaning beyond the material. They were a symptom of the larger trend of *tangping*, lying flat, and overlapped with another buzzword: *foxi*, literally ‘Buddhist-style’, which in popular culture meant ‘laid back’, ‘going with the flow’. Perfect for Dalifornia.

Cloud Dragon, one avatar of the Buddhist youth I met, was a musician who lived a hermetic existence in an orchard farmhouse up the mountains. He had shaved not just his head but his eyebrows too, and tattooed lines of Sanskrit scripture in their place. He wore long flowing robes and cloth shoes, carrying a bag of flutes slung across his back like an itinerant bard. A dragon was tattooed across the back of his head, and a swastika across his chest. The meaning was Buddhist — right angles pointing left — and he insisted he had never even heard of Hitler. I still advised him to cover up if he ever went to Europe.

Among the shared courtyards of the Dali migrants, a few that I stumbled into were established specifically for their members to pursue *xiuxing*: self-cultivation, especially in Buddhist tradition. For most, this was done in the privacy of their homes, in seated meditation and group study. Like the Om Cave, many such courtyards had their own spiritual-sounding names, including Meditation Forest and Soul Garden. And so, at dusk one day in

early summer, I found myself knocking at the door of what perhaps was the ultimate goal for us all: Seeking Serenity.

Founded by three Buddhist sisters who had met online in religious forums, the Seeking Serenity courtyard was nestled next to farmland in a village halfway between mountain and lake. It had been established a year ago, and was open to all new members who wanted to pursue self-cultivation full-time (and who could chip in for rent). Now it had almost a dozen members, with strict gender segregation. At 4 am they rose for morning meditation, and did study sessions in the library. In the afternoon they worked in a back room tangled with computers and webcams, making short videos about Buddhism for their WeChat account (most viewed: 'Prepare for Death with Buddhism'). In the evening, they put on public classes. Curious to learn more, I had come to attend one.

I was the only student in the class, which was held in their library with cushions facing a projection screen. The sister presiding over the class had taken a vow of silence, so there were no introductory words. Instead, the class consisted of two video clips. The first was an animated zoom-out: a blade of grass; a field; China; the Asiatic continent; the earth; the moon; then planets and stars of ballooning size: Saturn, Jupiter, Sol, Aldebaran, Rigel, Betelgeuse, the Milky Way, the Andromeda galaxy, the universe and beyond. There was no explanation of how this related to Buddhism, but I got the cosmic gist.

The second clip was two minutes from the Marvel movie *Doctor Strange*, where Tilda Swinton pushes Benedict Cumberbatch out of his physical self into his astral self, transporting him through other planes of existence in trippy CGI swirls, before telling him to 'forget everything you think you know'. At that the class ended, its intention presumably to blow my mind with MCU wisdom. There was no Q&A.

Later I talked to another of the founding sisters — a diminutive woman in her twenties, with a shaved head, spectacles and a quiet calming voice — while we ate figs on the Seeking Serenity rooftop. In Dali she had taken on a Buddhist name, Kongxuan, meaning 'Empty Profundity'. For years she had worked for a Shanghai oil company until, during a trip to Tibet, she had

decided to dedicate herself to the life of the spirit. She had been a Christian at university, and still felt a connection between the two faiths ('Jesus was a big bodhisattva,' she said). The essence of her belief now was simple, psychologically admirable and exactly the lesson I needed to hear as I wrestled with my own mind.

'In self-cultivation,' she told me, 'our aim is to get rid of all our mental disturbances, to cast off our feelings and thoughts to reveal our true nature underneath.'

For Kongxuan, the modern world had got in the way of this simple message. 'We've had the answer to human happiness for almost 3,000 years,' she said. 'But we forgot it. Especially in modern society ... people are bored. Their material condition is high, their technology is like magic, but they can't find meaning in their lives ... For example, in your England I hear there are a lot of depressed people, because it rains so much.'

I felt I should object, but couldn't think of grounds to do so.

'But all our disturbances are inside ourselves,' Kongxuan went on. 'We blindly chase happiness in external things, we are busy and bustling every day, but inside we feel lost and empty. We want to be happy, but you feel happiness for a few seconds and then it's gone. In fact, we shouldn't seek happiness at all.'

'What should we seek?' I asked, though I felt I knew what she would say.

'Serenity.'

The word she used, *pingjīng*, could simply mean 'calm' or 'peace and quiet', but it implied balance as well. Hearing Kongxuan talk, I realised my own attempts at finding peace had been too surface-level: moving to Dali, but still centre of my own universe. The goal had been happiness instead of serenity. I was looking for something external to fix me, seeking Shangri-la where it did not exist. What I needed, what we all sought, was closer to equanimity — to be untroubled, whatever the circumstances.

'They change their environment,' Kongxuan said of the new Dali people, the serenity seekers. 'But their minds are still the same. They need

to control their moods, instead of being consumed by them. All emotions are impermanent.'



The field was full of zombies. Dotted in the darkness, they swayed on the spot. Arms slack, heads lolling. Higher brain function impaired. Eyes wide and wild in the ecstasy of their hunger. Dressed in torn rags, flesh exposed. Some trampled their patch of ground into mud, frenzied by a rage within. I half expected them to turn and rush me as soon as they smelt fresh meat. But the music was too loud, and the zombies didn't care.

Some of the new Dali migrants had come not for enlightenment but followed a simpler calling: to party. Where a decade ago it had been the clubs and live houses of Beijing and Shanghai that attracted China's partygoers, over the last several years that scene had been driven underground by campaigns to 'civilise' the cities, and crackdowns on drug use. Music festivals had been shuttered, and foreign musicians disinvited if they supported political causes that were anathema to the Party. Some of the music scene moved inland to Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province. But others fled the urban sweat-box for the grassy fields of Dali, hedonism's last escape in authoritarian China.

Field raves were a staple here. Materialising out of nowhere, a party would descend on a glade up in the forest, or fallow farmland down by the lake. During the day, the decks, sound-system and lights would be rigged. At dusk, a crowd would dot the field in pointillistic colours, arriving from all over once word spread. By night, the bass would throb the soil and dancers would pound it down. Around midnight, the police would arrive in response to a noise complaint and tell the organisers to turn it down, but the volume went up again after they left. In the small hours, the party would peak, moonlight bathing the ravers in their bliss. By dawn, only the most hardcore and tranced-out of them were left. By lunch, the kit would be

packed back up, empty bottles and cigarette butts gathered, undead dispersed, and the field was returned to nature as if nothing had happened.

At the start of summer there were two longer festivals as well. Dali Flow Fest was a week-long carnival of flow arts, from poi to juggling to dragon staff, run by a Chinese French couple who performed fire-poi shows as the 'Fire Nomads'. Dalirium was a three-day psychedelic trance party higher up in the mountains, where the ravers could bliss out far from the prying eyes of the masses. Dali had become ground zero for China's psytrance scene, which had absconded from city clubs to camp in the hills instead. The festival popped up in a different forest location each year, with tents pitched in between trippy glow-in-the-dark decorations, while the ravers swayed to epileptic light flashes and trance-inducing basslines, many off their faces on pills.

Given China's strict drugs policy, I was surprised at how much acid was knocking around the valley. Southern Yunnan was infamous for its heroin trade, smuggled in from the Golden Triangle across the border, and marijuana-use was tested for in sporadic crackdowns, but hallucinogenics such as LSD slipped under the radar. For the Dalirious rave-goers, psychedelics were not just recreational; they were an antidote to the malaise of the modern world, and freedom from the social and psychic conventions that bound them. Psytrance raves were not to numb their minds, but to blow them.

One of the organisers of Dalirium was a former government bureaucrat from a provincial Chinese city, who chose to go by the English pseudonym Andy. Pushing forty, he had a wiry frame, buzzcut hair, dark skin and a religious intensity to his eyes.

'I was the smallest kind of official,' he told me. 'That job is ninety per cent stamping pieces of paper.' In his thirties he had quit his job, left most of his possessions behind and backpacked around South-East Asia, India and Tibet — the Chinese pancake trail — before settling in Dali a number of years ago. The first time he dropped acid and listened to psytrance music, his eyes were opened to a new way of being.

‘The majority of people are walking blindly in their life,’ he said with a twinkle. ‘Tens of thousands of people are working in offices like I did, but they are trapped inside a small box. Their way of thinking is very fixed.’

The cure was what he called *xiandan*, or ‘immortality pills’. The word literally meant ‘celestial pellet’, and referred to mythical elixirs of life such as those that China’s first emperor, Qin Shihuang, supposedly took daily to achieve immortality. (Ironically, it was the mercury in them that killed him.) Yet Andy was talking about LSD. The way he spoke about it, and about counterculture in general, we could have been in Haight-Ashbury in the 1960s. It struck me that China was going through something similar, sixty years later. Andy wanted to shake the nation out of its consumerist brain-death, one rave at a time, like a Timothy Leary of the mountains.

‘My mission,’ he said, holding eye contact with the fervour of certitude, ‘is to open the minds of the Chinese people.’

Andy’s temporary home in Dali was an old brick house high in the foothills to the north of the valley, a short trek above the folk temple of the nearest village. Next to it was a Ming-era watchtower, squat and stone, with small windows for archers — one of several disused towers that had guarded the mountain passes from invasion. There was a small meadow beside it, with a fishpond and an expansive view of north Dali’s gentler, forested slopes.

It was here that Andy had set up a sound stage with top-end equipment, and threw full-moon raves. When local authorities tried to crack down on the gatherings, using fire prevention or pandemic policy as a pretext to shut them down, they just relocated further up into the forest, in a game of cat and mouse between Party and party.

At one of these field raves, I stumbled across the zombies. I pitched my tent to stay the night, as moonlight bathed the partiers in luminance. The hills were alive with the sound of electronica. Light flashes lit up the forest. A giant glow-in-the-dark cobweb was strung up to one side, which you could walk through as if entering a trippy Narnia. Behind the stage, two fluorescent painted eyes stared down at the revellers. There was a poi show by a group called the ‘Fire Spirits’, who breathed fire and swung flaming

balls and staffs. The music was a helicopter whirring overhead, pierced by alien birdsong. The earth shook with bass. An American calling himself Monkey walked around in a Harry Potter wizard hat, distributing acid he had bought on the cheap from a Grateful Deadhead in California the year before. Through it all, the zombies swayed in their private universes, eating their own brains — a Chinese generation turning on, tuning in, dropping out.

A middle-aged painter from Beijing, who had moved to Dali for artistic inspiration, asked if I wanted an ‘immortality pill’. As with religion and spirituality, I had long been wary of hallucinogens. But Dali was rubbing off on me, and the idea was to be open-minded. After an hour, the psytrance music started to make sense. The droning clicked into place, fused with a breeze tickling my skin. Night colours swirled, shifting in the black. Grass under bare feet like electricity. Thought jumping association into on. Body moving blood silver flowing. Time tripping treacle slowing. Lights exploding mind ballooning. Within without inside throughout. Darkness ending dawn ascending.

Enlightenment for the Dali escapees came in many shapes, forms and colours. That night, at least, we would rave, rave against the dying of the light.



Dali’s home-grown, tamer version of outdoor parties were the Bai ethnic festivals. As summer heated up, there were more of them, and I would drop in as I explored more of the valley. Something was beginning to shift in me, as the chill nights of spring gave way to balmy late evenings. Where before I would stay inside when I could, now I was going out more days than not. And while still in the throes of heartache, I also felt a freedom in my solitude that I did not know I had lacked until I tasted it.

Butterfly Festival, a pageant of Bai song and dance, fell on the fifteenth day of the fourth lunar month — a full moon, as mid-month by the rural

calendar always was. It was held at Butterfly Springs, a park to the north of the valley famous for its appearance in a 1950s Chinese romance film set in Dali, *Five Golden Flowers*. Due to the association — as with the Chinese folk tale of the Butterfly Lovers, whose love story transcended death — this was supposedly an occasion for single youths to find a partner. In practice it was full of parents trying to set their children up.

A week later was *Raosanling* or ‘Circling the Three Spirits’ festival. For this three-day event, besides a market fair and temple worship, the main draw was also the singing of love songs. Under the big green tree in the village square of Qingdong — Lovers’ Cave — folk gathered from villages up and down the valley, despite a thinner crowd due to the coronavirus. Clumps of uncles played the two-stringed *erhu* or the three-stringed *longtouqin*, the dragon-head violin, while permed aunties sang folk tunes.

‘On the mountains the flower song is sung,’ went the lyrics of one ditty. ‘The love songs of the lake reach all four winds.’ Another tune in the official songbook read more like propaganda, with lines including ‘The civilised people gratefully thank the Party’ and ‘Everyone became rich after Reform and Opening Up’. I began to doubt the ancient provenance of these love songs.

For all these professions of love, whether to sweetheart or the Communist Party, one important element was missing: young people. This was the case for most of Dali’s festivals: it was the elderly who kept alive the traditions, while working-age adults had moved to the cities, or had no interest in heritage when modernity afforded more opportunity. I asked Little Liu, the young neighbour across my bamboo fence, what he thought about the Bai festivals.

‘I don’t follow that kind of thing,’ he dismissed. ‘That’s for the old people, their generation.’

Most common of all were temple festivals, held in every village across the valley. These religious celebrations popped up as suddenly as the field raves did, except with slaughtered chickens and chiming chants instead of DJ decks and light shows. You could tell one was happening by the plume

of smoke that rose over a temple roof, from both the incense brazier and the temple kitchen.

There was a plethora of local religions in Dali. The region followed its own branch of Azhali Buddhism, a sub-strand of Vajrayana that blended Indian tantrism with local folk customs, going all the way back to the conversion of the kings of Nanzhao. Most temples were syncretic, amalgamating different traditions together. In Eight Mothers Temple, by the lakeside near Xizhou, different corners housed statues of local gods, Taoist sages, hell demons, Buddha, Guanyin, Confucius and the Monkey King. If they all might be real, why not hedge your bets? For good exam results, bow to Kuixin, the scholar god balancing on a turtle. For a smooth pregnancy, ask Sunzi Niangniang, the ‘Auntie of Grandchildren’. For business success, put in a word with Caishen, god of wealth. For thorny problems, go to Mahakala, a Tibetan god of hell whose blackened face, livid eyes and necklace of skulls guarded his followers against ill fortune.

The folk religion that was particular to Dali, however, was called *benzhu jiao*, or ‘local lord’ worship. Each village followed a different folk god, mostly deified figures from history or legend. In one village it was the Bai warrior Duan Chicheng, who supposedly defeated a giant marauding serpent by letting it eat him in full armour, then cutting his way out from the inside. In another it was an ancestral lord who had saved the villagers from drought, and was thought to protect the village still. Sometimes it was an outsider, as in General’s Cave Temple to the south of the valley, whose deified figure was Li Mi — the defeated Tang-dynasty general who had invaded Dali in the 7th century, only to be co-opted as a religious figure by the locals. In the township nearest to me, the folk god was none other than Kublai Khan, Mongolian invader and founder of the Yuan dynasty (depicted by a statue that looked distinctly Han Chinese).

In the central temple of Silver Bridge Village, a wooden statue of the local lord sat at the back, in between Mahakala and the god of wealth, with his wife and children next to him. His name was Duan Ju, and supposedly he had been a general in the Nanzhao army, over a millennium ago.

According to legend, he had fallen in love with a Nanzhao princess, but the

king disapproved of the match — until Duan Ju saved the princess from a giant snake, and married her. On the first day of every lunar month, and once a year on a bigger festival day, the elders of the village would pay Duan Ju his dues in the form of food offerings and chanted mantras. Laying out plates of pork, chicken, eggs, fresh fruit and prawn crackers, they lit incense and chanted for his continued protection of Silver Bridge.

Some villages were twinned with others, by a special relationship between their folk gods or because they shared one local lord between them. For these villages, once a year, there was also a festival of *jiebenzhu*, or ‘collecting god’. Here, the effigy of the deity in question was carried in a procession from one village temple to another, where it would confer its blessings for a few weeks before returning.

I attended one god-collecting parade, where the folk deity of a mountainside village (its historical chief from centuries ago) was transported to another temple down by the lake. The festivities kicked off with a dance in the temple courtyard, featuring three locals dressed in elaborate costumes as a tiger, a monkey and a pig — characters from the fable *Journey to the West*. To Chinese trumpet fanfare, they loaded the effigy of their god onto a small palanquin and, in a snaking procession of musicians, worshippers and tourists, we walked down to the twinned village, where the local lord was placed behind the glass of the other temple, looking rosier for its day out in the sun.

These local festivals had also become photo-fodder for visitors to the valley. It was all part of the ‘charm’ that brought them out here — myself included. At *Raosanling* and other festivals, there was often a circle of tourists taking pictures and flying drones overhead. This exotification of Bai culture felt a little uncomfortable. It was reminiscent of the ‘ethnic minorities park’ I had visited in Kunming, Yunnan’s capital, where zones for different ethnicities featured dance shows in traditional dress, like in a zoo. Yet the Bai singers and musicians of the god-collecting procession, in their headdresses and indigo-dyed waistcoats, seemed to welcome the attention.

‘It keeps our traditions alive,’ one dragon-head violin player told me. ‘Young people aren’t interested in this, but the outsiders, they like it.’

Some of those outsiders, especially the newly religious ones, disapproved of local folk god worship as literal idol worship. Kongxuan, the Buddhist sister from the self-cultivation courtyard, dismissed Dali’s Azhali Buddhist temples as well as its folk deities. ‘They are not really following Buddha, they are just worshipping a statue and hoping it will give them what they want,’ she said. ‘They ask Buddha for help one day, then their local god the next day.’

As for me, I envied their devotion. That kind of faith — a belief in something bigger, and the serenity it brought — was still lacking in my life. The folk worship of the village was as alien to me as the other faiths that the new migrants followed: the Baha’i, the Sufis, the shamans and the loosely spiritual whose beliefs were just as syncretic. I had only ever worshipped knowledge, advancement, getting and having. Was that not idol worship too? I found solace in thinking there could be another way.

One man’s superstition is another’s faith. We collect our own gods.



There was a holy site in Dali that kept coming up in conversation, but which I had yet to visit. So one May morning, I drove around the lake to its eastern shore, then another hour inland on winding country roads. Eventually, I dropped into the foothills of another of the region’s famous, if lower, peaks: Chicken Foot Mountain.

Counterweight to the western Cang mountains, Jizushan was so named for its craggy promontories: three pointing forward, one back — like a chicken’s foot. It took five hours to hike to the top, on a paved path populated by fearless monkeys poised to snatch your snacks. At the peak, 3,240 metres high, a monastery perched on the cliff-edge, Golden Peak Temple, from where I could just see the glinting waters of Lake Er as the

sun set across it. I spent the night at the monastery inn, and the following morning saw the sun rise over a miasma of morning mist.

Chicken Foot was a Buddhist holy mountain, famed across China as a monk's retreat. This reputation went back to the legend of Kasyapa, an original disciple of the Buddha who supposedly flew here from India in order to meditate in its high caves. Now monasteries and nunneries dotted its slopes, and it was a popular destination for Buddhist pilgrims coming to retreat from the world. On the way up, I had passed various other monasteries, each with an evocative name: Empty Cloud, Jade Cloud, Requited Gratitude, Serene Light.

Fanguangsi, or Shining Light Monastery, was nestled 500 metres below the peak, looking straight up the cliff-face to the topmost temple but tucked away off the main path down a dirt track. Tao, the carpenter-philosopher, had introduced me to an old friend of his from Dali who was now a monk here. And the sisters at the self-cultivation courtyard had spent time at the nunnery just below it. So this was where I came that golden morning, hoping to find some of what they sought here.

As I arrived, it looked less a monastery, more a construction site. Past a row of portable cabins, there were heaps of timber and bricks under tarpaulin, next to muddy pick-up trucks and scattered construction tools. It turned out Shining Light was building a new prayer hall. The wooden frame was already in place, with three enormous golden Buddha statues inside, heads rising almost up to the third floor. Outside, a monk in crimson robes was operating a bulldozer to clear away rubble, contributing his efforts for merit alongside the construction team doing it for money. (The build was funded by donations from China's nouveau riche, for whom such gifts are often used as a form of purchased karma.)

Off to another side was the monastery's living complex, with a reception hall, kitchen and threadbare rooms for the monks connected by a high walkway. A score of monks lived here full-time, along with a handful of acolytes — dubbed *jushi*, or 'lay masters' — who came and went. At the foot of the complex was a deep pool surrounded by statues of arhats, which I thought was decorative but later discovered was for helicopters to dip their

buckets into in case of a fire on the mountain. Above it, a gateway to nowhere — ‘Deep Thought Arch’ read the inscription — pointed at the prayer hall.

Originally built in the Ming dynasty, Shining Light Monastery had been destroyed in the Cultural Revolution, looted by zealous Red Guards. In the early 1990s, a monk named Cifa (‘Benevolent Method’) had stumbled across its ruins and meditated there for seven years, living in a cave dwelling — its hard bed, bookshelf and solitary candle had been preserved, next to a shiny shrine to his accomplishment. It was Cifa who had first restored the monastery, gathering followers and funders, although he was currently based in Fiji, where he was about to open a new Buddhist centre.

I was met at the reception hall by Master Rucheng — ‘As Honest’ — who was Tao’s old friend and a senior monk at Shining Light. In his early fifties, he wore a long fawn robe and cloth slippers, and greeted me with a cheeky smile, making me guess if he was the one I was looking for. His small eyes were deep-set and bespoke an inner laugh, in the midst of a deeply lined face. As we drank tea, he told me his story in a thick Beijing accent, a drawling slur with long extended ‘r’s that made me miss my years in the capital.

Rucheng grew up in central Beijing, not far from where I had once lived. He was a dissolute youth, and had drunk his way through the 1990s, China’s go-go years. He ran a bar and lived in an artist community, running with painters and rock musicians. In 2005, he moved to Dali — back when it was still a small hippy town on the backpackers’ trail — and opened a live music bar in the Old Town called September, which was still legendary for its raucous late-night parties.

‘I was seeking happiness,’ he told me, ‘by fulfilling my desires — my desires for drinking alcohol, doing drugs, having sex and making music.’

In that era, he explained, you could do anything you wanted in Dali and get away with it, far from the centre of power in Beijing. He drank too much, smoked too much, stayed up until dawn every weekend. He married a younger woman who helped him run the bar; at their wedding, they gave

LSD to all the guests. It was everything he had wanted growing up — an adolescence that extended well into his thirties.

Then came the crash. Too much booze, too many late nights. Hitting forty. The malaise, the ennui. The realisation that, in his words, ‘I couldn’t escape suffering.’ He had spent his life chasing excitement and stimulation, creating an oasis of leisure in a desert of purposelessness. But it was never enough. That was the problem.

‘If you have money, you want more money,’ he said. ‘If you have power, you want more power. If you have a woman, you want more women. Whatever you have, you want more, even more.’ He remembered the morning, lying in bed, when he realised that, inside it all, his heart was empty.

A casual follower of Buddhism, he met the monk Cifa on a visit to Chicken Foot Mountain in 2012. The impression was instant and indelible: there was a clearness in Cifa’s eyes, and Rucheng knew that behind it lay the true freedom he sought.

‘I always thought freedom meant being able to do whatever I wanted, all the time,’ he said. ‘But I was a slave.’ He paused. ‘Real freedom is not needing anything.’

The change happened quickly and felt out of his control, like falling in love. Less than a year after meeting Cifa, he had ‘left home’ — the Chinese phrase for becoming a monk. He gave up his bar and possessions, renounced all earthly ties and took on a new Buddhist name. He had been at the monastery ever since, for the last seven years.

This change also meant he had to separate from his wife. I asked where she was now, and he pointed down the hillside. I thought he meant this figuratively, that she was living in the lay-world. But it turned out she was just a couple of hundred metres down the slope, at the nunnery immediately below us.

When I visited her later, at Eternal Sunshine Nunnery, Rucheng’s ex-wife told me her side of the story. I asked what her reaction was to his decision to abandon their marriage and their business to go and become a monk in the mountains.

‘Aaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiyaaaaa!!!!!’ she recreated for me. ‘How could you do that to me, you fucking turtle’s egg!!!’

Yet as time went by, she came to accept it. A week became a month. A month became a year. Then two. A brain worm was eating at her: what did her former lover get from being a monk that he had not found in their old life together? She had always respected Buddhism. She read books about it. She meditated. And two and a half years after her ex-husband ‘left home’, so did she. She ended up in the nunnery down the slope at his suggestion, and occasionally they pass each other on the mountain paths. But now they are ‘dharma siblings’, as she put it; they text sometimes, and talk about Buddhism, but one-on-one contact in person is forbidden. Her Buddhist name, Ruxin, was chosen to match with Rucheng’s. Together, they form the two characters for the word *chengxin*: an ‘honest heart’.

Rucheng’s routine, like Ruxin’s, is unvarying. He rises at 4.30 am with the morning gong. He washes his face, and meditates in his room. At 5.30 am he goes to Morning Class: an hour of chanting followed by thirty minutes of prostrations. Breakfast is millet gruel, with a potato or steamed bun. He helps with chores, sweeping and scrubbing and organising the affairs of the monastery. Lunch is simple and vegetarian: rice, soup, tofu, vegetables. In the afternoon he meets with guests and drinks tea, or gets busy with administrative work. There is no dinner. There is no meat or alcohol allowed. There are no leisure activities beyond strolling the grounds. Evening Class lasts from 6.30 to 8 pm. Lights go out at 9 pm sharp. Then he sleeps, and does it all over the next day, like the last one and the one before it and the one before that.

‘Sometimes I can’t believe this is my life,’ Rucheng commented over a fresh pot of tea. ‘If my twenty-year-old self knew that in my fifties I would be a monk and have a life like this, I would have thought it was *hell*. Two meals a day, no alcohol or cigarettes, no sex. I spend every day like this; every day is the same.’ He caught my eye for the punchline. ‘And every minute I’m so fucking happy.’

Over our third pot of tea, Rucheng turned the tables on the interview to ask why I had moved to Dali. I was normally more comfortable asking the

questions, but with his easy manner and smiling eyes it felt like he genuinely cared. I explained the circumstances in which I had come here, and said I was also trying to find some form of tranquillity after the old vision of what I wanted in life fell out from under me. I said I wanted to change, but I didn't know how. He talked a little about Buddhism — he was used to visitors coming to his monastery with similar problems — but didn't push it on me.

'First,' he said, 'you start by changing your attitude.'

He recited a quote he had come across, which he thought would help.

'Your Shakespeare said this,' he introduced: 'The mind can make heaven into hell, and hell into heaven.'

I didn't have the heart to tell him it was Milton.

'It doesn't matter where you are, or what you have,' he explained. 'If you change your attitude, you can be very, very happy anywhere you are.'

That was the freedom of not needing anything. The equanimity that Kongxuan had talked of: serenity in the face of impermanent emotions. Rucheng said he had all he needed now, having let go of the rest. He told me anything was possible with your mind alone. He told me that if they cultivated themselves enough, monks could learn to fly.

'Like a metaphor?' I asked.

'No, not a metaphor. They can fly, like Kasyapa flew to Chicken Foot Mountain.'

'Learning to fly seems difficult,' I suggested.

'Learning to fly is easy,' Rucheng smiled. 'More easy than other things.'

'What is more difficult than flying?'

'To change your heart.'



Small Fullness of Grain, eighth of the twenty-four solar terms of the year, fell a fortnight after the 'Standing of Summer'. The agricultural origins of these mini-seasonal markers — the next one was called Grain in Ear — felt

appropriate for Dali, where ripening crops were shooting up in the farmland near Silver Bridge: sweetcorn, Chinese asparagus, water caltrop, purple carrot, taro and toon. There was something satisfying in seeing these fruits of the soil grow taller as my time in Dali deepened.

As this Year of the Rat was a leap year, to keep the rural calendar in sync with the earth's orbit, the fourth lunar month that had just passed was now repeated as an intercalary *runyue*, or leap month. It almost felt like time had stopped and we had been granted another month of Sundays, before the monsoon would start.

As the sun of summer heated our soil, the new migrants of Dali were embracing the 'lying flat' lifestyle. Yet there was work to be done, too. Tao was busier than ever building his log cabin: he had added support beams, a plank floor and roof struts by now, working up a sweat to drink off in the evenings over a game of shuttlecock or a few verses of Zhuangzi. Nutshell was harvesting the peaches from his orchard behind the Mountain Inn, and with other parents was organising a new shared home school for their children, which would rotate classes between their courtyards. The Om Cave hippies were rebuilding their sauna, and the experimenters at the House of Science had opened their sourdough bakery.

I would bump into these new Dali people at outdoor markets that were organised every few weeks by and for the back-to-the-landers — bohemian-bourgeois rivals to the local farmers' markets. They were held on grassy fields by lake or mountain, generally at one of their own eco-farms, with stalls selling whatever the reverse migrants had been concocting in their back rooms. There were fermented pickles; cured meats; sharp kombuchas; liquor infusions; stone-kiln-baked bread loaves; rustic hemp clothes; home-crafted pottery; handmade jewellery; healing crystals; delicately painted fans; little decorative silver robots. Life-Is-Good-Oh! was there, selling his wooden spoons and bottle openers with a grin. Another city transplant was slinging home-made tofu, under the brand name 'Kungfu Tofu'. One had even made a variety of European-style cheeses — runny Brie, veined Gorgonzola, pungent Abbaye de Tamié — which cornered the market as the

original cheeses were banned from import into China for being too bacterially cultured.

These field markets were the one time when all the subgroups of Dali escapees convened: hippies, yuppies, parents, retirees, ravers, self-cultivators — the whole panoply of Dali life. There were pop-up coffee shops, preparing artisanal brews out of the back of a van — I met one long-haired nomad barista who lived in his van and planned to drive it to Tibet, serving single-origin drip coffee along the way. Others entrepreneurially draped a blanket over the grass and lined up booze bottles, with martini and highball and coupe glasses in front: an improvised cocktail station for the daytime drinkers.

I ran into Yaling, my old yardmate from Three Brush Village, at one of these markets in the leap month of late May. She was still torturing students with her yoga classes and had taken up the Kazakh instrument the *dombra*. Zhazha was there too, my photographer friend from Beijing who had first introduced me to the valley, recently back from a weekend work trip to the capital to earn some cash that would last him months out here. Every time I saw them, I would ask what was new, hoping to hear of some developments in their lives. But I soon learnt that in Dali, time blended together in the same routines of housekeeping, gardening and leisure. Nothing much happened. That was the point.

One stall at the market was offering tarot readings, another staple of Dali. It was run by Cloud, a Chinese woman in her early thirties clothed in a tattered hemp dress bound by a leather corset, with colourful patches sewn onto it all. I swallowed my scepticism and paid for a reading, drawing the Knight of Cups, symbolic of change and messages from the heart. We also drew I Ching cards, as she was keen to include Chinese divination as well as Western. Here I drew hexagram 52: *gen*, ‘Keeping Still’, two mountains on top of each other. ‘He keeps his back still / He doesn’t feel his body / He goes to his courtyard / He doesn’t see his people.’ Meditation, seclusion — the Dali dream.

Cloud had learnt tarot in California, she told me, where she had worked a few seasons picking marijuana at a farm near Eureka. She had travelled

all over India too, but now she didn't want to leave China anymore.

'China is the best country in the world,' she said, holding me in her mascaraed eyes with an intensity of nationalism I did not expect from a Dali hippy. 'We're the only country that defeated the coronavirus.' She listed the virtues of the Communist Party's governance, topped by the lack of crime and how safe it felt to be a woman here, as opposed to walking the streets in India or America. 'That is true freedom,' she concluded, 'to have a safe feeling.'

Her clients in Dali, she said, were mostly middle-class, middle-aged women new in the valley. Her tarot readings, I considered, were the perfect nexus of hippy and yuppy, migrant and tourist. She needed the latter to buy her services and fund her freedom; and they wanted some of her free spirit to rub off on them.

'They are looking for something different when they come here,' she said, stretching her syllables musically. 'They want to feel free, *ziyouuuu*' — she gestured the word up to the heavens with a wave of her hands. 'So it doesn't really matter what cards they draw. I know what to say to make them feel that in their life.'

A few days after the market was a local rice transplanting festival: a Bai ceremony in which rice seedlings were transplanted into the paddies where they would mature, waiting for autumn's harvest. I biked down to the lakeside for it, where a flooded field was being painstakingly laid with rice by a line of aunties, dressed in embroidered ceremonial blouses and headdresses, as well as wellies and waterproof trousers, moving slowly in a row like China's most colourful chain gang. Before starting, they had danced an invocation for a good yield. On the muddy ridge between paddies, a line of photographers balanced their tripods to capture it all, and another group sat next to three large boxes.

After the rice was transplanted, the boxes were unpacked, and three young men took out controllers as if they were going to play Xbox. The drones rose buzzing into the air, adjusted into formation, then hovered forwards in unison, releasing a light rain of organic pesticide and fertiliser. The group was from the Shenzhen drone company DJI, which had won a

contract from the local government to pilot new farming technologies to modernise the valley. The cameras clicked and blinked as the drones whirred and stuttered — this was all a big PR exercise, to promote techno-farming. The aunties squatted by the side of the paddy, sharing tea from a Thermos and watching it all with amused expressions.

I was getting used to these juxtapositions in Dali. Not only was it a place where the city met the country, but it felt like a Petri dish for social experimentation and personal reinvention. We were all transplants here. Transplanted into rural life. Transplanted into modernity. All trying to find the fullness of our grains, whatever the crop might be.



Meili liked natural colours best. Beetroot red. Spinach green. Lemon yellow. Primrose blue. All the colours of field and flower.

Beijing was only ever grey.

‘It was so dirty all of the time,’ she complained to me, ‘whether because of smog or traffic or sandstorms ... In Beijing you can’t see blue skies or rainbows, sometimes you can’t see the building next door ... You can’t even get something healthy to eat. Fruit in Beijing looks like something that isn’t really alive.’

Ten years ago, Meili — literally ‘Beauty’ — had quit her city job as a fashion designer and moved to Dali. She rented an expanse of farmland between the Old Town and the lake, and planted a kaleidoscope of organic crops: strawberry, quinoa, yam, wild primrose. She refused to use chemical fertiliser or pesticides. She kept one grassy field fallow for markets and events, with a wooden stage rigged up for parties and field raves. She knocked up a guesthouse and kitchen, and hosted home-grown meals for friends and customers. She came up with a name for her corner of Eden: Rainbow Farm.

With tanned skin, a waterfall of black hair and a summery smile, Meili told me her story over tea and sunflower seeds in her back garden, under the

shade of a tent by the brook that ran through her land. Her pet chicken, Joke, perched awkwardly on her shoulder.

‘My neighbours think I’m crazy,’ she said, ‘because I’m growing vegetables but not selling them. But if I sell them, I’m just a farmer. I can’t earn much money but I’m working all the time, like I did in Beijing. But if I grow my own vegetables to eat or cook [for others], I don’t need to spend a lot of money and I can live the life I want. Who wouldn’t want that?’

Organic farms such as Meili’s, opened by the new Dali migrants, were popping up all over the valley. Some were farm-to-table enterprises, matching a rural setting with the tastes of urban visitors. Firewood and Rice Farm, Seeking Light Farm, Red Bean Farm, Rainbow Farm, Heaven Farm, Cloud Farm — there were too many to count before the names blended together. They hosted field markets and beer festivals, bread bake-offs and pizza parties, featuring paddle-boat rides and ponies for the children to pet. At restaurants in the Old Town, they served up expensive platters of Yunnan ham and mushrooms, artfully arranged summer vegetables, or free-range chicken paired with sulphite-free natural wines. Everything on the menu was billed as ‘organic’, even if the definitions differed as to what that meant.

It was no surprise that the city transplants of Dali had a strong environmentalist streak. Almost everyone I met tended their own vegetable patch, and was passionate about organic crops or ecological protection in general. Several mentioned the 1962 book *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson to me, a tract against the use of pesticides. Others cited the Russian book *Anastasia*, a memoir about finding an alternative, natural way of life on the Siberian taiga, as their inspiration for moving to Dali. The British agrarian John Seymour’s *The Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency*, published in the 1970s, was also popular.

This was the backlash against modernity and urbanisation: a counterculture to the social and natural engineering of the Chinese state that had left its citizens out of touch with the agrarian way of life. Just as the post-industrial West had gone through its own back-to-the-land movements, so too was China at this point in its development.

Yet those actually born in the countryside didn't see the point. Often I would see Auntie Yang, my Bai neighbour, come back from their fields wearing a tin box on her back attached to a handheld hose, like she was in the cast of *Ghostbusters*. This kind of pesticide pump-sprayer was used across the valley, as were fertilisers that fed the enormous vegetables sold in the local farmers' markets. There were some new government incentives to go organic, such as one scheme a nearby blueberry farm bought into, which gave them a subsidy for new organic pesticide mix (and two DJI farming drones). But it was still most economical to rely on chemicals, which damaged the nutrient cycles of the soil.

Veggie Arc, one of Dali's earliest organic farms, had been established over a decade ago in protest at modern farming practices. Boxes of compost lined its fields and fruit trees, while cylinders of natural pesticide were stacked up in a shed. They held evening classes and week-long workshops on natural farming techniques. There was a horse in the back field, a sheep was tied to a post and rabbits hopped freely around, as if we were in a Beatrix Potter book. Every lunchtime they put on a vegetarian buffet, with home-grown fruit and vegetables, spicy tofu and rice noodles, a smorgasbord for all tastes.

Its founder, Xiaowu, a small wiry man from Hunan province, explained his farm's philosophy to me as we trod through his mulch.

'Everything here is natural,' he said. 'It's only in the last fifty years that humans started using so many chemicals to grow their food. But [pesticides] kill the natural flavour ... Tomatoes shouldn't be that big.'

Xiaowu felt a reckoning was coming. Indeed, it had come: he saw the coronavirus as modern human life reaping what it had sowed.

'The pandemic,' he said, 'started because humans were eating wild animals they shouldn't have, in that Wuhan market. So if a disease that harms humans comes from those actions that harm nature, I think that's karma.'

Nature had rebelled against the Anthropocene. Out here, he could rebuff the concrete drumbeat of China's development for the natural rhythms of the seasons. He leant down, picked something squishy from a flowering

vine, and handed me a small, bulbous, crimson fruit, supple to the touch and bursting with juice.

‘There,’ he said, as I bit into it. ‘That is what a tomato should look like.’

Vegetarianism and veganism were marginal trends in China, representing less than 5 per cent of the population. Yet in Dali, at places such as Veggie Arc, they were mainstream. There was even a Dali Vegan Society, which later launched with video endorsements from Joaquin Phoenix and Jane Goodall, along with a stark warning that ‘the desires of mankind have exceeded the realities of the planet.’ It was twinned with a hip vegan restaurant in a converted clock tower in the Old Town, called Bistro-to-Bowl, where a Dublin-trained Chinese chef served up veggie ravioli and miso-based meat-substitute burgers. Another migrant group periodically led ten-day fruit cleanses, and intermittent fasting was a new craze.

Various organic farms were focused on permaculture, the goal of a self-sufficient agricultural ecosystem. At Weidao, or Mini Island farm, a ‘natural community’ built on an island in a roaring ravine a short drive to the north, permaculture design courses were taught to anyone hoping to replicate their experiment. There were classes on carbon farming; nutrient cycles of nitrogen potassium and phosphates; how to build houses from natural materials; animal husbandry; and sociocratic communal decision-making. The intention was to create a ‘closed-loop system’, where the input of human needs were met entirely by the output of the farm — producing as much or more than it consumed.

As the British instructor, Sam, put it, they wanted to ‘take the model of an ecosystem and design a human system around it.’ He added: ‘The animals and the plants are easy, but the people are complicated as fuck.’

There was a survivalist streak to these experiments. Mini Island hoped to recreate in Dali a version of the Transition Movement in the UK — a network of preppers for when the world ran out of cheap energy and had to rely on the old ways.

‘China is a good place for permaculture,’ Sam told me, ‘because urbanisation has been so quick that there’s still living knowledge of how to live off the land.’ Zhou Lei, a dreadlocked Chinese rock-climber who had

founded Mini Island, was more forthright about the prospect of imminent societal collapse, declaring that post-apocalyptic self-sustaining communes like his were the ‘solution of humanity’s future’.

Another environmentalist venture in Dali, a courtyard community called Eco House, promoted ‘zero waste’ living, advocating natural alternatives for everyday objects. They sold tea-seed powder for scrubbing dishes; soapberries to boil instead of laundry liquid; coconut oil shampoo; hemp handwash; loofah kitchen brushes; bamboo toothbrushes; string bags-for-life. They recycled everything, composted their natural waste, fermented their own enzymes for use in cleaning and washing, and organised mountain hikes to pick up trash. Plastic was the enemy, and there was a cult-like air to the way they talked about recycling. The only exception permitted for discardable synthetic products, they noted, was condoms.

I had never been particularly environmentally conscious, beyond a vague agreement with the cause. Living in cities all my life, I couldn’t quite bring myself to do my bit to help — individual action felt like a fig leaf laid on top of a steaming pile of corporate garbage. Yet out here, closer to the ecosystems that humanity was damaging, I felt a keener awareness of our dwindling natural resources, and the need for a more sustainable tomorrow. Here it felt like I could actually live with a low carbon footprint, instead of creating a mountain of discarded plastic packaging every time I went to the supermarket. I bought locally grown vegetables, ate free-range chicken, drank mountain water, generated very little plastic waste. I composted organics for my own garden patch, putting back into the cycle what I got out of it. I started using tea-seed powder for detergent, and bought a bag for life. It didn’t make a dent in the Anthropocene, but it made a difference to me.

Sustainability was the core object of the Dali experiment. Not just larger environmental sustainability, but self-sufficiency in the micro-ecosystem of ourselves. Responsibility for self. A closed-loop system. No one should rely entirely on themselves, but to be self-sufficient felt like a laudable goal. What we put in, we get out.

‘Everything is a cycle,’ said Meili, the organic farmer. ‘If you eat well and live well, the cycle begins. What you choose to do gives you karma, and that enables what you can do next.’

On the day of the summer solstice, five months into my Dali year, I went back to Rainbow Farm. Meili and the other new Dali people were celebrating midsummer with an outdoor ecstatic dance event. A DJ booth had been set up, facing a grassy open field next to rows of brightly coloured flowers. The idea of ecstatic dance was (while completely sober) to move and shout with no inhibitions at all — forgetting as best we could that other people were there, jumping around and screaming like wild beasts. The effect looked similar to a psychotic break, but the intention was to let out anything trapped inside.

I had a lot inside. On my patch of grass, music thumping, given permission to feel, everything I had kept down rose up again. The pain of parting with the woman I loved, whom I had just talked to on the phone the night before, re-opening the wound. The fear and uncertainty in adjusting to my new life in Dali. The anger at others and myself that dragged me down like a ball and chain. The emotions rose up from my core; they pumped through my arteries, climbed my larynx and caught in my throat, then burst out before I could stop them. The primal scream. Flailing and stomping as grass turned to mud underfoot. Shirt off, mud-splattered with the other dancers. I fell to my hands and knees, defeated, and howled with the crowd, expelling the poison. To let it go, we must let it out.



After the solstice, the deluge began. Perched on the north-west ridge of South-East Asia, Dali was close enough to the Indian subcontinent to have a summer monsoon, as a low-pressure front rose cloudily over the hilly terroir and broke over the Cang mountains. This rainy season typically began around the time of Dragon Boat Festival — fifth day of the fifth lunar month, late June this year — and lasted until Mid-Autumn Festival three

months later. The cooling rains broke Dali's summer heat, and they could not come too soon.

Some days the rain fell in sheets from dawn to black night. Other days it was no more than an afternoon shower, or drizzles punctuated by spells of sunshine. There were days on end of downpour, weeks without seeing the sun. There were clear stretches when we forgot it was the monsoon at all, like a British summer. The forest paths became slick and overgrown with weeds. Frogs were a common sight in the village, and the occasional snake. Confined to my courtyard, I looked up at the mountainside — its peaks now obscured in rolling mists, its gorges split by peals of thunder.

Rainy season in Dali was a time of hibernation. A winter in the middle of our summer. A time to stay in. A time to sit under our eaves and watch the rain fall in its hissing static. A time to slow-ferment our kimchis and kombuchas. A time to perfect our tai chi routines or go deeper into meditation. A time to learn a new instrument, or dust off the easel and canvas. A time to finish reading, or writing, that novel. A time to take up poi or kendama or pottery or baking. A time to sleep. A time to lounge. A time to stop doing and just be still.

For me, the monsoon was an occasion to retreat into myself, and take stock. I spent long days without leaving my house, in reading, writing and contemplation. I worked on my piano repertoire, plodding through Chopin fingering and chord changes for jazz standards. I set up an archery target on one wall of my courtyard and bought a Mongolian-style bow and arrows for this new hobby. I cooked stews and baked banana bread. I cycled through qigong and tai chi poses — Standing Stump, Cloud Hands, Heaven and Earth, Gods Playing in the Clouds. I sat in zazen or vipassana meditation, trying to last longer each time before my mind rebelled. This was the lexicon of stillness in Dali.

I thought of Sister Kongxuan's words on the impermanence of emotion, and Monk Rucheng's line about making a heaven of mind's hell. I had found a new way of living out here, but not yet a new way of being. As the clouds darkened above, and I stayed at home, I found I was slipping back into disturbed moods and habits. My thoughts and feelings got stuck in

themselves: blocked sewage pipes of loneliness, anger, self-pity, fear. I drowned in a sea of regret. My mind swam against rip tides of counterfactuals: if this; if that; if this, then that. The past was a minefield, the future a wasteland. I had found physical reclusion, but mental quietude was harder won. I knew had to either exorcise my demons or learn to cohabit with them.

I talked it out in Zoom therapy. I worked the twelve-steps programme — learning to find a power beyond myself, and the vulnerability of honest human connection, that could fill the hole in me I had sated with screens and dopamine. I doubled down on digital detox, and came to understand that every time I reached for my phone, it was to distract me from facing something I didn't like in myself; to hide from a feeling, or to change my mental state by numbing it all. I had come to Dali to find refuge, but escaping from myself was the problem.

Needing less was the solution, Rucheng had said, not seeking more. Death of the ego. Internal not external sources of validation. We make our own happiness. I tried to apply the tools I was learning: observing a feeling, naming it like a scientist, then waiting for it pass. Thinking a thought once, then letting it go. I took Moon out for runs at dusk along the slick village paths, weeds and moss growing across them. I sat in my yard, let my mind go blank and stared up at the cloud-shrouded mountains, huge in their mystery.

I was not the only disaffected urbanite to come to Dali for a form of healing. I had met so many who had moved here after a break-up that the heartbroken recluse was a Dali cliché. Yaling, the yoga instructor I had stayed with when I first arrived in the valley, would roll her eyes anytime someone mentioned a separation. Her brother, Lemon, had finally stamped papers to end his marriage, and celebrated it with a divorce party. The valley was full of migrants trying to 'find themselves' in the wake of a life change.

There was a psychotherapy boom happening in Dali, as across China, to help them process it all. At the far north end of Silver Bridge Village, a therapist and life-coach from Shanghai called Feifei had just moved in.

Some of her clients were online, cooped up and stressed out in city lockdowns. ‘Anxiety is the real epidemic in China right now,’ she told me. Others had moved to Dali, to escape the pressures of a hyper-competitive society. ‘They’ve been moulded,’ she said, ‘into a set of social expectations of what success should look like ... But they’re all miserable.’

Other new Dali people sought a healthy mind through a healthy body. There were more yoga teachers in the valley than I could count, and classes were advertised for everything from capoeira to the Keto diet. Near my village, there was a weight-loss camp titled, in English, ‘Dalifornia’ — with the ‘D’ of the logo formed by a cartoon figure with an enormous belly. Some boutique hotels billed themselves explicitly as ‘healing centres’. One such sanatorium, under construction near Wuwei Temple, was an enormous complex lined by tea trees, punctuated by rock features and pools. The founder, a former PLA soldier called Bian Jiang, described it to me as ‘Dali’s Magic Mountain’, after the Thomas Mann novel. They would offer a litany of remedies to guests, he explained, from on-site yoga and spa treatments to psychological counselling and ‘cell therapy’ to reduce blood pressure, administered by a team of in-house ‘recovery scientists’.

Traditional Chinese medicine was also popular. There were several TCM doctors who had cloistered themselves in Dali, offering treatments to the escaping middle class with their bad backs and screen-necks. Plagued by the same posture troubles, I later signed up for a course with a practitioner who lived two villages north of me, whose own teacher had been doctor to China’s top leaders in Zhongnanhai. Over sixteen sessions I was inflicted with acupressure massage that was closer to torture, acupuncture needles in all the places I didn’t want them to be, electric-shock massage pads, chiropractic back and neck-snapping, and scalding-hot moxibustion: less TCM, more TCSM.

Above all, the new Dali people treated taking it easy as a form of self-care. Rainy season exacerbated an existing tendency among us to stay in our courtyards a lot, to become *zhai* — homebodies. This was the apex of the lying-flat lifestyle.

Nutshell, the inn owner, stayed inside and painted all day long. Tao, the carpenter-philosopher, had put a tarpaulin over his cabin to protect the wood from water-rot, and smoked the hours away. The retirees Doctor Chen and Teacher Zhou were tending to their gardens and counting their roses. The self-cultivation Buddhists, such as Kongxuan in Seeking Serenity courtyard, were meditating in longer stretches of seclusion. Even the psytrance zombies were taking a break from their raves.

The monsoon was well suited to us Dali recluses, to the hermits who wanted to get away from the rest of society. It was a season for reflection, a season for healing and personal work. Something in the cascades of precipitation outside felt fitting — they sheeted us off from the rest of the world, as we had wanted, so that we could better get to know ourselves. The waters that sanctified, the rains that washed clean. There were days when I stood outside in my yard, and just let it fall on me.



Rainy days were also good for sleeping, another favourite hobby of the Dali migrants. At the Om Cave, the hippy courtyard at the far end of Silver Bridge, its denizens could and did spend all day warm in bed while the deluge drummed on the courtyard stones outside. Two of the Chinese women who lived there had left — one was motorbiking to Tibet; the other had moved into a more modern building just across the path — but turnover was quick in the shared household, and they were swiftly replaced.

One of the new members was a young aspiring artist from Hangzhou, who had read a viral blog post about the Om Cave that briefly made the courtyard home famous online. She had come to Silver Bridge to find it, asking everyone she met in the village if they knew where it was, then showed up unannounced to ask if she could live there. Nobody was home when she knocked, so she waited for over an hour in the rain to be let in. But there was a spare room and they let her move in. Now she was part of

the family, and spent her days painting and learning to be a tattoo artist. For her Dali name, she simply chose ‘Dali’.

Lili, the oldest member of the original Om Cave cohort, could sleep for fourteen hours a day in the summer. This was not as laziness, she insisted, but a form of *xiuxing*, or self-cultivation. For one, it was good for her health. It calmed her mind and lowered her cortisol. But more than that, it was not unconscious wasted time. Because when she slept, she was practising the art of lucid dreaming.

To lucid dream is to become aware that you are dreaming. Then, still asleep but fully or partially conscious, you can control what happens in your dream with limitless possibility. A number of new migrants in Dali were dedicated to the practice: oneironauts for whom it combined their interests in trippy experiences and a love of sleeping in. Lucid dreaming was intended to expand the mind, to offer new perspectives and to connect the conscious mind to the subconscious brain. It took their quest for escape in Dali a step further — not only in waking life, but in the dreamscape.

I had dreamt lucidly a few times before in my life, all by accident rather than intent. The first time was when I was a teenager, after watching the Richard Linklater film *Waking Life*. Realising that I could make anything happen in the dream, I promptly materialised a beautiful woman to have sex with. After that, whenever I lucid dreamt I liked best to fly — at first falteringly, freaking out and waking up, but later soaring through the skies. As I listened to Lili talk about her dreaming exploits (mostly travelling the world to exotic locations on her bucket list) I remembered that feeling: pure and unadulterated freedom, of a kind I had yet to recapture in the waking world.

Another oneironaut in the valley, an Englishman who had skipped bail on an assault charge back home to flee to China, brewed special teas to help him dream: a combination of blue lotus, lucid asparagus and ginseng root that he said worked wonders. He was a body-modification practitioner, and his skin was carpeted in tattoos: an ankh over one eye; a tetragrammaton and Metatron’s cube across his chest; sacred numbers down one arm; Lichtenberg-figure scarring up the other; and an evil eye self-tattooed on his

penis. He was also missing his little finger on his left hand, having cut it off with pliers after a voice told him to in a dream in which he was commanding a Mongol horde.

Opening our minds was, after all, at the heart of the Dali experiment. So when Lili mentioned she was studying with a lucid dreaming teacher called 'Dream Hermit' who lived on the other side of the mountains, I couldn't resist going to meet him.

The township of Yangbi — most famous for its Autumn Walnut Festival — was due west from Dali Old Town, twenty kilometres across the Cang mountains as the crow flies. It was possible to walk there from my village, up and down again in a strenuous day hike. But I didn't feel ready to climb up to the ridge just yet, and it was dangerous to do so in rainy season when the paths were slippery. So instead I went the long way around: driving south to the lower pass of Xiaguan, then west along the snaking Er River that connected the two valleys, before following a tributary up north again.

From Yangbi, Dream Hermit's home was another hour's drive west, up into the hills on a steep dirt switchback. From this vantage point, one valley across from Dali, I could see a panoramic view of the Cang massif's more gentle western slopes, whereas from my village I had only looked up at their steep eastern face. As Thoreau wrote: 'It is an important epoch when a man who has always lived on the east side of a mountain, and seen it in the west, travels round and sees it in the east.'

The Dream School was at the very top of the hill. The site of a former farmhouse, it was surrounded by an expansive orchard: twenty-two acres of peach, cherry, apple, walnut, lime, loquat, apricot, pear and sour papaya trees, and various berry bushes. The school itself was no more than a row of concrete rooms: spartan dorms crammed with bunk beds, with a kitchen off to one side, a pigsty converted into a teaching room, and an outhouse down the slope, next to a chicken coop and beehives. The main feature was the beds, an eruption of sheets and duvets and pillows. There was little else to do here except sleep.

The man who called himself Dream Hermit was waiting for me at the gate. He stood under an archway draped with a passionfruit vine, the

Borgesian name of the school inscribed above it: *Qimenggu*, Valley of Forking Dreams. As I saw him, I realised that I had been expecting some sort of white-bearded sage, perhaps with long eyebrows, sitting cross-legged on top of the mountain. Instead, I was greeted by a pudgy-faced man in his early forties with round spectacles and fuzzy bed-hair, dressed in a pair of blue felt pyjamas in the late afternoon. He yawned, and explained he had just woken up.

Dream Hermit's birth name was Li Yufeng. Born in Luoyang, China's ancient capital in the central plains of the Yellow River, he had ensconced himself in the hills of Yangbi seven years ago, explaining: 'I don't need anything except a roof to sleep under and food to sustain my body.' He lived alone, though he did have a wife and a child who stayed in the comparative comfort of Xiaguan. A revolving door of students and disciples passed through, staying for a few days or a few months at a time, and their fees and volunteer labour helped him to maintain both the school and the fruit orchard around it.

When he was a child, Dream Hermit was too frightened to sleep. He would wake suddenly in the night, gasping for air. Diagnosed with obstructive sleep apnoea, nights became a source of terror, and not just from waking breathlessly. He was plagued by nightmares, and by sleep paralysis — in Chinese, literally 'ghost pressing on your bed' — where one is caught between dreaming and waking: aware of your body but unable to move it, trying to open your eyes with every inch of your helpless mind, while a sense grows that there is a presence in the room with you, or pressing on your chest, a malevolent being that in the nebulousness of your half-awake psyche could easily be seen as demonic.

That was Dream Hermit's fate every night — trapped in the dark gap between sleep and awakening. Only one thing helped: instead of willing himself to wake up, if he relaxed and ignored the demonic presence in the room, he could fade back into a normal dreaming state. He also found that his waking consciousness would then carry over into these dreams. He was still self-aware, except now instead of being paralysed in bed he was alive

in the dreamscape, conscious of its artifice. And that meant that he could control it.

In his sleeping life, Dream Hermit is essentially a superhero. He has walked through walls. He has been invisible and telekinetic. He has frozen time, breathed fire, become as large as a planet, as small as an atom. He has transformed into bird and beast, living in the skies and the forests, forgetting his humanity. He has built entire worlds, like a god, returning to them each night, picking up the work as if waking was the interruption. In one dream, he lived in a cave for 300 years as a Taoist eternal, looking down into a pool of water through which he could watch the mortal world. All of these dreams were lucid: he was aware of being asleep and, being fully conscious, he could control what happened in them with his imagination, or simply enjoy the ride. His nightmares, apnoea and sleep paralysis disappeared. And in the process, his whole perspective on life changed.

We were talking over a simple dinner of fried vegetables: some from his garden, others brought up by friends and students. I mentioned Zhuangzi's famous line about not knowing if he was a man dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming it was a man. Dream Hermit dismissed this as nonsense: he knew exactly who he was, when he was dreaming and when he was awake — more than most, who do not know when they dream. But the separation between the two states now meant little to him. Both were his life: two sides of the same consciousness. Both were equally untrustworthy, or equally real.

'How good is your maths?' he asked me in a sudden non sequitur.

I admitted it was terrible.

'Do you know what an equal sign means?' he persisted.

I did know that much.

'How do you know your existence is real?' he asked next, switching tracks.

Reflecting on this, I said it was a mix of my sense perceptions and my memory of past sense perceptions.

‘Correct,’ he said. I felt a warm glow at the teacher’s approval. ‘Our reality is made up of experience plus memory. And how do you know your dreams are real?’

I conceded it was also my experience at the time and my memory of them after.

‘So if your so-called reality is experience plus memory, and your dreams are experience plus memory, then $y = x$ and $z = x$. So $y = z \dots$ your dreams are also reality.’

I suspected a logical fallacy, recalling something about swans and birds and whiteness, but I followed his point. His dream state had the same qualia as his waking life, and for him the two had blended together so as to be functionally equivalent. The distinction between lucid dreams and ‘so-called reality’ — one of Dream Hermit’s favourite phrases — was now meaningless to him. He smiled at me, sitting on a tiny wooden chair in his fuzzy pyjamas, drinking home-brewed cherry beer from his orchard’s spring harvest.

‘People think dreams tell them things about their waking lives,’ he said softly. ‘But the main thing they should learn is not to be so sure that anything is real.’

I asked how I could know if I was dreaming or not right now, and he said it was easy: just bend your middle finger back to see how far it goes. I tried, and it barely bent past the knuckle. It had been a long drive, and we had been talking for three hours. I said I was turning in, and he pointed to one of the dorm rooms. As soon as I was enveloped in a cloud of duvets, I fell into the sleep of the dead.

I woke in the night, and rose from the bunk bed to stand in the unfamiliar concrete room. Outside the dirty windowpane, the moon had risen over the mountainside. I could feel my waking body and perceptions: the floor cool beneath my bare feet, the sensation of breath inside my lungs, the tug of my T-shirt pulling at my skin. I could also remember my conversation with Dream Hermit, all of his wild stories. Just to humour him, I pulled my middle finger back — and it flopped all the way to the wrist, like jelly.

I was outside now, standing on a wooden platform that jutted out over the slope, facing the Cang mountains from the west. So this was a dream. I could do anything. I thought of flying, but the expanse of night beyond was so dark it seemed to suck me into its oblivion. I baulked. The blackness terrified me, and I thought of something else to do: I could make it day. Lifting my hands in a gesture of invocation, I pulled the sun from its slumber. In one slow movement, I raised its fiery ball from behind the mountains, until its golden sphere broke the ridgeline, bathing the valley in radiance, and its heat warmed my skin, and its luminance dazzled my eyes, and my darkness was made as dawn.



As the rains of summer fertilised the forest floor, mushroom season began. Fat boletuses sprang from the undershrub — called ‘ox liver fungi’ in Chinese for their meaty texture. A termite mushroom dubbed ‘chicken fir’ was thinner and sweeter, dried out and eaten with seasonal greens. Black and silver ‘tree ear’ fungus sprouted from trunks. Most prized of all was matsutake, eaten raw with wasabi and soy sauce, which could sell for as much as 1,000 yuan (140 dollars) per pound. The mountain trails were full of locals rooting for fungal gold, as well as new migrants foraging for their next porcini stir-fry.

Of course, you had to be careful what you picked. Yunnan province had over 800 known edible mushrooms, and many others that were poisonous. Every year, people died from eating the wrong shroom. Two decades back there had been a spate of deaths in Dali, alarmingly dubbed ‘Yunnan Sudden Death Syndrome’ before it was linked to a toxic fungus. Farmers’ markets still sold a blue mushroom that you had to boil for at least five minutes to kill the toxins. Another variety was called ‘ghost touches green’, as its yellow gills turned green when rubbed with your fingertip. Signs went up around the Old Town, warning against poisonous varieties that could be mistaken for delicacies. In some mushroom hotpot restaurants, a sample of

the soup was taken and stored after the correct boiling time, to avoid liability lest a customer fall ill.

It was no surprise that some of the hippies of Dali had also tracked down the psychedelic kind of shroom. One Venezuelan former resident of the Om Cave, whose Jesus-like hair and sarcastic vibe gave him an air of sardonic enlightenment, had found a potent variety of *Psilocybe cubensis* in his mountain wanderings. He dried and ground them into powder, tested it diligently, and shared it with friends. They would take the ‘hero dose’ of five grams, then walk up the mountain trails: going up when going up, coming down when coming down. The mountains were high, and so were they.

Psychedelics were big in Dali, where China’s counterculture had been squeezed out to the hills. An American who used to live in the House of Science had cultivated a row of psychoactive San Pedro cacti, growing them from imported seeds up to high sentinels of hallucination. Back in April, I had passed a red-eyed Chinese couple at the foot of the cable car who were celebrating Bicycle Day — the anniversary of the first recorded LSD trip in 1943 — by taking 250 micrograms and riding up. Another psychonaut in my village showed me her well-thumbed copy of *Psychedelic Shamanism*, a bible of psychotropic entheogens that she had ticked off one by one.

As with the spiritual seekers and lucid dreamers, the trippers had come to this valley to water the flower of their minds. Their goal wasn’t hedonism, but self-discovery: to open their consciousness, and see past ordinary perception. They called the psychedelics ‘medicine’, not ‘drugs’ (which translates literally as ‘poison’ in Chinese). Various were the ways in which the new Dali people found their fresh perspective. Some climbed the granite slope of meditation, as did the Buddhists, who abstained from any form of drug-taking. Others took brain-altering shortcuts to temporary insight, as another avenue to change their minds. The intention was the same: to glimpse what lay underneath.

The ultimate psychedelic treatment in Dali was a self-prescribed ‘course’ of the big four: LSD, psilocybin, DMT, mescaline. Venezuelan

Jesus had taken them all, going to a special glade in the mountain forest, where he performed ritual ablutions in a waterfall to cleanse himself first. On DMT, the wind through the trees became droning voices, the spirit of the forest. On magic mushrooms, the soil underfoot came alive with buried hyphae that connected everything and everyone, mycelium of the mind. On acid, clouds whorled and warped, disappearing into the ether as our souls to the universe when we die. This was its own form of transcendental, religious experience.

One damp summer day when the rains had paused, one of my neighbours made a soup out of half a San Pedro cactus from his garden. We plucked its prickles, stripped its skin, then cut out the dark-green meat where the mescaline lives, blending and boiling it down into a sticky viscous liquid. Next I walked to Wuwei ('No Action') Temple, a few kilometres south of my village, above which a trail led up into the forest primeval.

The Azhali Buddhist statues of Dali were trippy in and of themselves, verging on terrifying. The entrance to Wuwei Temple was guarded by two huge wooden deities, painted in fierce reds and black in the Tibetan style. Inside, statues of bodhisattvas lined the walls, each with their own distinctive object or attribute, from golden vajra thunderbolts to five-metre-long arms that reached for the sun. At the back was a huge effigy to Mahakala, god of the dead: 'Beyond Time' in Sanskrit, 'Great Black One' in Tibetan, a manifestation of Shiva the destroyer. A chain of skulls was around his neck, and snakes twisted around his thighs, coming alive. His eyes popped out of the statue in fiery rage. They watched me lidlessly, threatening, judging, scornful of my smallness. But Mahakala let me pass.

Behind the temple, a steep path up into the mountains was lined with more statues of Buddhist arhats. Some carried swords, or sat on lotus leaves, or had animal familiars. Left and right, their long faces leered down at me, carved from stone that seemed to shift and move. I had the sense of a presence travelling with me. Perspective and time were distorting. The path seemed endless as arhats stretched up above me. I felt I had always been

here. Mahakala's gaze was an aeon ago. Sitting at the foot of the guardians of the way, there was no before or after or other or me.

When I cleared the statues, I turned back to discover the path was not that long at all — the temple roof still showed past it — and I was back in myself. I knew where I was again, and began the long, slow traverse across White Stone Stream and back to my village. In a dissociative state, I had touched loss of self. Self-absorption had been the core of my malaise all this time: ego and its discontents. If I was to find lasting change, now I knew the solution was not to get out of the city but to get out of my head. Getting out of my mind was a start.

Overhead, the canopy was alive with the murmurings of nature. I still had a strong sensation that a presence was travelling with me. In the forest, damp from the last rains, I felt a dark force around me, deep in the undergrowth, the under-earth. With it rose all my regrets, all my failures, my fear and anger and self-pity. The time wasted, the harm caused, the crushing sadness of a lost love. At its empty core was an abiding loneliness, an existential dread at being alone and unloved, called to by oblivion. It swallowed me in its malevolence, as dark as Mahakala, too strong for me to fight on my own, sucking me down below.

Looking up, the sun was shining through a hole in the curtain of cloud. And rising inside me, just as unexpectedly, was a piercing love. I thought of my family; of my friends; of past girlfriends; of her. There was no hatred, only love for all. And if I felt love and forgiveness and gratitude to others in my life, I thought, maybe I could give it to myself too. I started to cry, there on the forest floor. I couldn't feel the darkness anymore. Once I had seen the light, felt its warmth touch me, it was a force more powerful than any other.

They are not equal, if a single candle can dispel the dark.



Halfway through my first year in Dali, cleaved by the solar term of Greater Heat, the rainclouds parted, and a week of brilliant sunshine blessed the valley. I had bought a second-hand mountain bike at one of the new migrants' leaving parties, lime green and fat-wheeled, and took advantage of the sunny spell to complete a Dali rite of passage: circumnavigating the lake.

Rolling down from Silver Bridge Village in the first light of morning, through blueberry fields and stretching ears of sweetcorn, at the bottom of the slope I hit a narrow stone bridge, where White Stone Stream bled out into Lake Er. The lakeside was bordered by a tarmac path, still being laid in sections, that cut through marshy rolling greens. Following this track north, clockwise, I cycled past weeping willows that clung to the shoreline; past village temples and statues to Guanyin Buddha; past brides in flowing white gowns having wedding photos taken against the backdrop of the glistening waters. The lake stretched in front of me, reflecting sun rays that shot through wispy clouds. It was 130 kilometres to go all the way around.

This had been my valley of escape and discovery. A mouse-hole from the rat race, a getaway from city living, from the pressures and conformities of a life that needed change. Seclusion, or at least distraction, from a frazzled mind and a scarred heart. In fleeing to the hills, I had changed my environment — and I was working on changing my mind. But at times, I still wondered if it was just a form of glorified hiding, rather than true transformation. We escape ourselves so as not to face ourselves, after all. In our experiments with alternative ways of living, how deep did the metamorphosis really go?

Twenty kilometres further north I passed the town of Xizhou, zipping across the 'sea-tongue' peninsula. Past here the settlements thinned, and the tarmac path sputtered out into a dirt track, then fused with the main road that headed north to Lijiang, Shangri-la and eventually Tibet. I hit Shangguan, the upper pass of the valley, then cut east to hug the winding line of the lake's northern bank — reclaimed swampland famous for its summer flowers that lit up kaleidoscopic fields in a painter's dream.

After six months here, I had met many city transplants on the same quest, but I was yet to form any meaningful relationships. I had preferred to keep myself at a distance, to nurse my hurt in silence. All of my hikes, and this bike ride, were done alone. Nobody in my village, or among my new friends in the valley, knew exactly why I was here. There was an undercurrent to the counterculture of Dali, whether in the parties or the drugs, the lucid dreamers or the livestreamers, that could take you away from reality, not connect you to it. Maybe that was what we sought.

The eastern bank of Lake Er was more sparsely populated, with a narrow road that clung to the shore, occasionally cutting through a strip of houses. Shuanglang, where I stopped for lunch, was an old fishing village that had been rebuilt five years ago as a second tourist destination to rival Dali's Old Town. There were shops selling bubble tea and tie-dye scarfs, and a ferry taking visitors across to Nanzhao Love Island, where ruins of an ancient Nanzhao Kingdom fort had been touristified and turnstiled. Further south was Wase, facing the picturesque Little Buddha Island, no more than a dot on the waters with a pagoda housing a shrine to the laughing Buddha. I was now halfway around the lake, and gazed across its waters to spot my village in the distance, the Cang mountains looming over it.

Something was shifting in me. I could not tell what it was yet. But my breathing was easier here in the valley — doubly so when I got out into nature. That was when my anxieties disappeared, my regret and melancholy and over-thinking. The healing power of the trees, the soil, the waters, the wind. These were the elements humans had evolved in tandem with for millennia, only to forgo them for concrete and steel in the last centuries, and for digital bits and bytes in the last decades. We had lost something in our progress, and so had I. Out here, the wind behind me as I cycled, it felt like all I had needed was to be back in the green.

I chugged up inclines and rolled down hills, all the way to the Heavenly Mirror Pagoda, a high structure built on the site of a former Nanzhao-era watchtower. It overlooked a peninsula across from the Old Town, at the narrowest point of the lake. Down the slope was Haidong, literally 'east of the lake', the largest township on this side of the waters. Golden Shuttle

Island, curved in the shape of a loom shuttle, sat snug in the bay, a thin isthmus connecting its two halves. The eastern hills here were gentler than the Cang massif to the west, but also less protected from resource extraction — torn up into jigsaw segments by mining, with great quarries for coal and copper.

We were digging too, we Dali transplants. Some dug with meditation; some with lucid dreaming or psychedelics; others with gardening and the natural life. Ploughing the earth of our souls, turning it up and over, fertilising the loam. Planting a seed in the hole inside us — tending to it, watering it, however we could. Then there was nothing left to do but keep faith that it would grow, and await whatever crop it yielded.

The lake sputtered out to the south, and the high buildings of Xiaguan, the dusty town at Dali's lower pass, reared their ugly heads. The winds had turned now: I was biking straight into a headwind, uphill, ninety kilometres into the ride and the afternoon was getting old already. Here came the slog, the hump, where early enthusiasm had faded and perspiration took over. I thought about giving up — how easy it would be to call for a van, to load my bike in and be home by dinner.

But to challenge ourselves was part of the point of being here. By many measures, living in Dali was an easy existence, far from the responsibility of career or family and the burden of social expectation or high city costs. In other respects, it was difficult to uproot our lives from what we were used to. Real change, after all, only comes through pain.

I sweated through the gauntlet, and my effort was rewarded. I traced the southern shore, cutting through the grid of Xiaguan, then turned north again for the home stretch. The wind that had tormented me was now at my back.

The first blush of dusk was in the sky. Soft reds and pinks painted themselves on the underside of clouds that clung to the mountainside. I hastened back up the lakeside path, towards and past Dali Old Town, trying to beat the darkness. Eventually I reached the bridge at White Stone Stream, where I had started. I had come full circle. In the gloaming, I cycled back up to Silver Bridge — to the village which I now called home.

New winds had blown. Fresh flowers had bloomed. Summer had broken, and the seeds of spring were maturing. It was time to collect the harvest.

AUTUMN: Harvest Season

The crops of Dali were ripe for the reaping. Chinese asparagus, Sichuan peppercorn, water caltrop, taro and sweetcorn — the fields brimmed with the fullness of autumn, even as the evergreen conifer forest showed no sign of fall. With its temperate southern climate, harvests in Dali came early. By early August, the ‘Standing of Autumn’ in the rural calendar, the growth that the year had nurtured was tall enough to cut down.

The most important harvest festival for the Bai people of Dali fell near the end of the sixth lunar month. *Huobaĵie*, or Torch Festival, was the biggest day in the valley after Chinese New Year, and was also celebrated by the Yi people in neighbouring regions all the way up into Sichuan province. In this part of Yunnan, its fires lit up every village and town. But Dali was its flaming heart.

The festival commemorates the history of Piluoge — Yi founder of the Nanzhao Kingdom in 738 CE — who on this day invited the kings of the other five regional tribes to a feast in Dali, building a wooden tower just for the occasion. During the meal, after Piluoge had conveniently stepped outside, the doors were bolted and the tower caught fire. One of the widows made that day, Lady Baijie, found an iron bracelet in the ashes that she had gifted to her husband, the lord of the Bai people. Struck by her beauty, Piluoge demanded that she marry him. Refusing, she threw herself into the waters of Lake Er and became a martyr. In their memory, every summer a symbolic tower is burnt — by the Bai to mark the slaughter, by the Yi to commemorate the kingdom’s unification — although other origin stories also abound, and many revellers have no idea it is anything more than a bit of fun.

The tower of Torch Festival — a different one in each village — is made from pine logs, up to ten metres high. At dusk, rain or shine, it is set alight from the top, and there is dancing and singing as it burns down. In larger town squares this is a raucous affair, with an MC playing disco tracks on a

boombox, while a crowd risks the falling embers to circle the fiery tower with smaller log torches that are sold across the valley. Uncles in indigo-dyed waistcoats play folk music, and aunties in white headdresses dance with tasselled sticks, as the onlookers gaze transfixed at the fire. Overall, the vibe is something between May Day and Guy Fawkes Night.

In Silver Bridge Village, where I spent Torch Festival, it was an altogether quieter affair. Our tower of pine logs was erected on the grassy verge outside the Buddhist temple at the mountain trailhead, propped up with ropes and struts. Five metres tall, it was hollow in the middle, stuffed with fragrant pine needles and strings of firecrackers, with apples hung around the circumference and a paper banner poking up out of one side. Framed by the low crimson temple and a kindling of sunset over the mountain, it was a curious crop indeed.

A few score of villagers had gathered around, drinking sweet cereal tea next to the simmering temple brazier. A gang of grannies — led by my neighbour Granny Yang, their *capo dei capi* — were chanting and tinkling bells to bless the festivities. Li Guanyu, the octogenarian whose cousin had passed in the spring, was there too. I asked him what greater significance Torch Festival held for him and the Bai people. He paused thoughtfully to consider this, as was his manner, and sucked on his tin pipe.

‘It’s a very big fire,’ he replied carefully, picking out each word. Li Guanyu was nothing if not succinct.

At the first hint of dusk, three villagers — all new fathers that year — lit the top of the tower using a burning rag atop a long bamboo pole. As the wood flamed and its fragrant smoke wafted over the scene, their wives who had recently given birth circled underneath, carrying their babies in cloth slings on their backs — braving the risk of falling branches for the reward of good fortune for their offspring. The tower burnt down like a smoking candle, and as its wick got lower, the surprises laid inside were released. The strip of buried firecrackers went off; a heap of yellow paper money burst out like confetti; apples and other fruit fell to the ground with a thud. When the paper banner stuck halfway into the tower fell, a rush of young men competed to grab it first, a sign of prowess.

This banner, often seen in Dali festivities, comprised three colourful paper boxes stacked on top of each other, like the storeys of a pagoda. Four-character phrases were written across the sides: 'Abundant harvest and long life'; 'Favourable winds and rain'; 'Bumper crop of all grains'; 'Thriving livestock and fowl'. I asked Li Guanyu about this, and he elucidated further.

'Big fire, big harvest,' he grinned.

The agricultural roots of Torch Festival ran deeper still than its historical origin myth. Some said that fire had been used to scare off pests and birds from the crops. Others that it was symbolic of the swiddening, a slash-and-burn agricultural practice common in South-East Asia. At heart, it was a harvest festival: a seeking of auspices before the crops were taken in. If the banner was intact when it fell, as it was this year, it was a good sign.

When the tower had burnt down to its foot, each of us took our smaller handheld pine branches, bound with rope like a tiki torch, and dipped the tips of them into the fire. As in a pagan ceremony, we held aloft our burning logs and marched home with them. I followed my neighbour Auntie Yang as she carried her torch back to her courtyard, blessing the yard and each room in turn by wafting the burning branch around it. I did the same for my courtyard, across the bamboo fence, before leaving the torch propped up outside the entrance, as every other household had, to smoulder for protection.

As the embers of our private fires cooled into black night, these guardian lights that dotted the village went out one by one. Before long, everyone was in bed, and the only trace left of Torch Festival was a steaming pile of ash at the foot of the mountain.

Other villages had other customs. Horse races were held in Fengyangyi, the cobbled village along the old Tea Horse Road. In Green Peach Village, where the carpenter-philosopher Tao lived, they threw pastry buns, some with money or sweets stuffed inside, to lines of screaming kids. Young children were given burning torches too, which they waved around in the middle of packed crowds, inches from onlookers' noses. Others brought bags of sawdust, and threw handfuls across the flames to create fireballs.

None of the revelry would have passed a health and safety inspection back home.

Street-side shops and eateries propped up their own smaller torches outside, to bless their business. The festival was a major draw for tourists, and along the cobbled road leading up from the Old Town, so many fires were ignited that the surface was blackened with ash. Students on summer break, in Dali to cut loose, had started a new tradition of picking up this damp ash once it had cooled, smearing it on their faces (and those of anyone they passed) in blissfully oblivious blackface, then dancing the night away at outdoor electronic parties.

To each of us, Torch Festival held a different meaning. For some it was a millennia-old celebration of fire; for others an excuse to get lit. At the first breath of autumn, it marked the middle of the calendar, and the start of the harvest. From its cleansing flames — the burning of the towers we built — came the promise of renewal. A replenishing of the earth from their ashes; a swiddening of the soul. Out of it, new crops grew.



There was no harvest where Shonkar was from — only endless fields of sheep. In the far west of Inner Mongolia, little grew on the hard earth that stretched beyond the horizon. His family kept 200 sheep, who grazed the grasslands around their brick farmhouse in Alashan: north of Tibet, south of the Altai mountains, a mile from the closest residence, and about as far from China's big cities as one can get.

Shonkar did not have an easy childhood. His father died when he was nine, in an accident he described with only the word 'fire' before beginning to tear up. His mother had a number of abusive and drunken boyfriends; he remembered hiding in the long grass at night from one who was chasing after them with a knife. Theirs was a large holding of livestock, and they were not poor. Shonkar went to middle and high school in the town of Alxa, a day's drive away. He was accepted into university in Hohhot, Inner

Mongolia's provincial capital, to study art. But he didn't like the city any more than the steppe: one smelt of grass and sheep droppings; the other of gasoline and cigarettes. Wherever he went, he felt he didn't belong.

One factor in this was that Shonkar was gay. Mongolia is a macho culture, where ideals of manliness are aggressively heterosexual. This culture taught him that to be good at archery, wrestling and horse riding, and above all to marry a woman, is what makes you a man. Shonkar liked none of those things. His build was slight and boyish, with an artful mop of hair falling over soft brown eyes. He dressed differently to his peers and was nicknamed 'strange boy' in school. He stayed in the closet, and learnt to fit in with the crowd. But his dissatisfaction only grew stronger, as did an impulse to escape the expectations of a society that didn't accept him as he was.

'Mongolia is full of basic bitches,' Shonkar summarised, as we talked after meeting at a naked sauna gathering in the Om Cave. He spoke good English, inflected with the valley-girl mannerisms of his favourite films that he had learnt the language from. Watching those American movies, and TV shows such as *Will and Grace*, were the first time that he had felt it was okay to be gay.

In the summer after his first year at college, in 2014, at the age of nineteen, Shonkar visited Dali. He was travelling around Yunnan, backpacking aimlessly, and stumbled into the valley as if, like others before him, he had discovered Peach Blossom Spring.

'I knew this was, like, the place I was *looking* for,' he told me, with his habit of stressing words for effect. After a few weeks, he moved into the Om Cave and met the Venezuelan magic-mushroom picker, who became his long-term boyfriend. One month turned to two, then four, then a year. Shonkar never did go back to university, and six years later he was still in Dali. Here, finally, he could be his true self, among others who didn't judge him for it, and live out of the closet up in the hills.

Those were the halcyon days, the years of summer. At the Om Cave, they would sleep until late, cook meals together, gather wild herbs on the mountain. They would fire up the sauna, get naked and sweat while

chanting ‘Om’ and throat singing, before jumping into the stone pool outside to cool off. They would gather around the fire at night, play the didgeridoo and flute and drums as the stars came out, drinking and dancing as the moon passed overhead, before climbing up the mountainside to watch the sun rise over the lake, then sleep until late in the afternoon and do it all over again.

‘In Dali I could just be, like, *myself*,’ Shonkar said. ‘I didn’t need to hide who I was and all that fucking bullshit. I was so fucking young and fucking *free*,’ he added. ‘I didn’t think anywhere in China could be like this.’

Yet no enclave is an island. Shonkar had hidden away from, but not changed, the conservative society he was born into. And he was not free of the pressures of the outside world. The main expectation for young men in China, regardless of their sexuality or gender identity, was to get married to someone of the opposite sex. Shonkar’s mother had accepted his decision to drop out of college and live in Dali, but was piling on the pressure for him to marry and settle down, threatening to cut him off from the family money if he didn’t. As with his other friends and extended family back home, she was questioning what he was doing with his time. She wanted him to find a spouse and a stable job. If he did get married, Shonkar figured, his family would get off his back and let him be.

Fake marriage was not an uncommon choice for gay men and women in China. Same-sex marriage was illegal, and openly homosexual partnerships were still frowned upon, outside of coastal cities, at least. But *xinghun*, a ‘marriage of appearances’, was a convenient illusion for some. A gay man could marry a gay woman — or a straight one who wanted to remain single — and both sets of parents would be mollified, often paying for an apartment they could live in. Sometimes two gay men would marry two gay women, moving into a shared apartment to cohabit with their real partners, switching bedrooms whenever the parents visited.

In the spring of 2020, Shonkar’s Venezuelan boyfriend introduced him to Melanie — a Dutch woman with dreadlocks, piercings and a dragon tattooed across her back, who was new to the valley. They clicked instantly, went out for drinks, then dropped acid together at a field rave that night.

When she complained about her unstable visa situation in China, Shonkar half-joked-not-joking that they should get married. But it made sense to both of them: besides giving Shonkar the veil of respectability he wanted, as well as the option to travel or move abroad, it helped Melanie with her right to remain. At dawn the next day, when they were clearer headed, Shonkar suggested more seriously that they have a marriage of convenience. She said yes. They had known each other for sixteen hours.

That was Dali: a valley where anything was possible, and one could hide from reality. Where the rest of the world, with its prejudice and discontent and abuse, would not find him. Where, with one big lie, he could live in the truth.

In August, Shonkar travelled back to Inner Mongolia with his new fiancée, to be wed. With vibrant dyed red hair, nose and lip studs and tattoos all over, Melanie was not quite the bride his mother had envisaged. But a foreign daughter-in-law brought a certain cachet, and she warmed to Melanie's bright personality. Above all, she was relieved that her son was conforming. Shonkar insisted his mother didn't know that the relationship was a sham — but he did wonder if, deep down, she knew he was gay. Perhaps, he thought out loud, his bringing a woman home meant 'she thought I, like, changed my *mind* or something'. Melanie told me that the first night back home, Shonkar got drunk and started crying out of nowhere.

In the days leading up to the wedding, they travelled into the sands of the Gobi Desert and posed for bridal photos in traditional Mongolian garb, riding camels and frolicking in the dunes. The ceremony itself was held in the town Shonkar had gone to school in, Alxa, in a hotel banquet hall designed to resemble a giant yurt. They circled a fake samovar, toasting every table with rice liquor, smiling so much it hurt, while Melanie wore a headpiece so heavy it pushed her eyebrows down. Shonkar's uncle gifted him two camels, which he considered taking back to Dali to live at the Om Cave, but eventually elected to leave with the rest of the herd. On his wedding night, his childhood friends ribbed and baited him around the red sheets of his marital bed, and he had flashbacks to the heterosexual hazings of school. But he was so drunk he just collapsed onto crimson oblivion.

The morning after, Shonkar and Melanie drove eight hours to Baotou, the largest city in Inner Mongolia. This was the nearest government office in which they could stamp their marriage registration papers, in an enormous administrative building with all the character of a Borg sphere. ('Lots of photocopying,' as Shonkar put it.) The following afternoon they set off again, driving two days all the way back to the pastures where Shonkar had spent his early childhood. Here was the brick farmhouse, their livestock, the well for drinking water, the endless expanse of the steppe. They stayed for a week — a honeymoon of friends — helping to milk the goats and herd the sheep. They slept side by side under the stars, and Shonkar wondered at how far he had travelled from home.

Back in Dali, a married man, he realised that he had recreated here a refracted image of his own origins. The courtyard he lived in here was also a simple farmhouse with an outhouse; he slept under the same vivid constellations, looking across at an expanse of mountainside instead of the steppe. His escape from a difficult childhood and years of self-repression had turned into a new hiding hole, at another extreme of China's geography. He could cut loose here and live openly, hedonistically. But for all the partying he did on his return, it didn't feel the same in his late twenties, a married man, as it had at nineteen. He had uprooted from Inner Mongolia, but he didn't feel fully rooted in Dali either.

'Sometimes,' he said offhand, 'I feel I have, like, *too much* freedom.'

Shonkar and Melanie parted ways, husband and wife going off to live their own lives. He was fighting with his Venezuelan boyfriend. He drank too much, and couldn't control the habit. He got angry and nasty when drunk. He smoked weed and popped pills and it just felt like more escape without fulfilment.

'I came to Dali to escape all those fucking bitches in Mongolia,' Shonkar said as we sat naked in the darkness of the Om Cave sauna. 'I didn't want to be fake like them. But I can't escape it.' He played with the floppy fringe of his hair, as if trying to fix it, and laughed. 'I can't escape me.'



Nor could I. For all its freedoms, I too still felt unrooted in Dali. I had fallen into the same trap of thinking that internal transformation would follow swift on the heels of external change. Yet my own emotional turbulences weren't clearing as quickly as I wanted. Hearing about other people's relationships only made me feel more lonely in the empty evenings. I was still buffeted by the weather of my moods. The last downpours of rainy season were falling hard, and I spent gloomy days inside, trapped in the pathetic fallacy.

Yet there was an inner harvest too, grown from seeds I had planted in spring. My digital detox was paying off, with no social media to make me feel worse about the world and myself. My long mountain walks left me feeling calm, connected to something bigger. The faithful company of Moon assuaged my isolation. Above all, the passing months had seasoned the rawness of my heartbreak. Summer rains eroded its rough edges; autumn buried it in leaf-fall. My heart learnt what to value, and for what to give thanks.

At breakfast, I wrote down one thing I was grateful for, from life and health to bacon and eggs — including (especially) those who I thought had wronged me, but who had helped me grow. At my therapist's suggestion, I drafted a list of core values, from humility to forgiveness, integrity to openness, and tried to remind myself of them when I fell short. I attempted, as best I could, to break down the narratives I was telling myself: the identification with the mind that becomes ego, the false self which only gets in the way. I set intentions in the morning, then looked at myself in the mirror while brushing my teeth at night, and asked if I had lived up to them. Dental hygiene, mental hygiene.

Pulling on the thread of my life and relationship patterns, I began to see a larger story that I was only a part of, not the protagonist as I had so ardently wished. How my insecurities and comfort behaviours went all the

way back to childhood. How fantasy and false beliefs drove so many of my decisions. How I had suppressed my demons, and so let them drive me from the back seat. I surveyed the penumbra of my soul, and tried to integrate that shadow self. I prised open the space between stimulus and response, where I was no longer slave to the unconscious action-and-reaction cycle that slid down the grooves of my mind like molten metal into a mould.

My ten minutes of daily meditation helped slow the flow, calming my mind so I could observe its instinctive responses without following them blindly. To let a thought go, to let a feeling be. That was all we needed, maybe, when we felt the imperious urge: to sit, to calm down, to resist drama and do nothing at all.

Music helped express what I couldn't in words. When I sat to play a Chopin nocturne or a Bach variation, the feelings flowed through me like an intravenous injection. I was also woodshedding jazz tunes, and discovered the joy of playing with other musicians. A small group of us got together in my studio now and then, and started playing small gigs around the valley, calling ourselves 'The Melting Clocks' for the Dalí pun and our liberties with timing. What I had once thought of as a solitary pursuit showed me that creativity comes in company.

Running helped brush away the cobwebs of stress, substituting endorphins for dopamine. Tai chi helped clear the channels, like meditation in motion. Microdosing was another trick popular in the valley: a few millilitres of special brew every other day to jog the neural networks, and help form new grooves. I tended my garden, cooked healthy meals, showed up for weekly therapy sessions, and pursued new hobbies, such as thwacking arrows into the target at the other end of my courtyard. And for what I couldn't accomplish on my own, in asking for help with it I was freed from the weight of my pride.

The twelve-steps programme I had joined to curb my digital and screentime addiction was challenging me to clean every part of me from the inside out. With a sponsor, the process drudged up all the inner dreck and dross in what they called a 'fearless and searching moral inventory'. This covered the main bases of a soul's disturbance: resentment, fear, harm I had

caused, and character defects in general. It was a novel concept to me that I could simply write a list of everyone I was angry at, everything I was frightened of, everyone I had hurt, and everything ‘wrong’ with me — then look at it in the light of day and see that I wasn’t as big or small, as bad or good, as I liked to think. I was, like everyone else, just another complicated mess.

The first name on my anger list was easy: my ex. Even though she didn’t deserve it, the righteousness of my resentment after a failed relationship filled me like warm soup. But next I had to consider what this feeling came from and effected in me — my wounded pride, my insecurity in attaching self-worth to another, my desire to feel like a victim, my fear of being alone or unloved or undeserving of love — and what my part in it all was. As the list of names and grudges lengthened, through other broken relationships all the way back to childhood rivals, I was confronted unavoidably with myself. At the heart of it, I had to face the inescapable fact that all of this repressed anger was really directed at myself.

The first item on the fears list came just as easily: snakes! I have had a phobia of snakes since childhood, to the point that I check the drawers of hotel rooms for them (just in case) and am tormented by recurring nightmares of serpents coiling around and biting my limbs. There were snakes in Dali, mostly harmless rat snakes but some venomous varieties including pit vipers. Of course, a fear of poisonous snakes is entirely rational: they are objectively fucking terrifying. Yet my phobia was, by definition, irrational. As with all the fears I had listed, I learnt that something deeper was behind it. Peeling back the onion, I uncovered the atavistic fears that lurked below the surface: fear of uncertainty; fear of the unknown; fear of pain; fear of death; fear of existential oblivion; fear that there is no God or meaning to it all. At the soft heart of the artichoke, I just needed to be held and loved.

Confronting the insecurity underneath all this fear and anger, and the way it led me to hurt others, I discovered how self-absorbed I had been in my pain. It was these human traits, these ‘defects’ of pride, envy, self-seeking, lust, greed — with a long tail all the way down to tardiness and

procrastination — that had kept me trapped unhappily in myself. That drove me to unhealthy behaviours, then plagued me with shame and self-hate. The self-centeredness and solipsism that, boiled down to its core, comes out as ego: the misery of self.

Inventorying these characteristics, as I would a shopping list, was liberating. In the end, looking at it all on the page, I saw that I was nothing special or overly different from anyone else. Just another human chimp with a three-pound brain and a pawful of neuroses.

If self-absorption was the problem, then the solution was to believe in something bigger than just me. To let go and give it over to a higher power that could take the pain away — whether miraculously, or as a psychological by-product of no longer clinging so tightly to my own will. This part I was struggling with. My atheism ran deep, and I was used to thinking of myself as the centre of the universe. To change that, and diminish my importance in the face of something greater, felt too formidable a task.

I remembered an essay I had written in college, about *King Lear* and the ‘soul-making theodicy’: a vindication of divine goodness in the face of human suffering. That the pain we go through is justified because it is suffering that tempers our soul, and brings us closer to whatever God we might believe in. Each of us suffers in our own way — none to be compared with another’s, often greater, degree, but not to be scoffed at either. Without the wounded pride and self-questioning that I was in the throes of, I knew I would not have found these discoveries of looking inwards. And if I had known so little of myself, then maybe I couldn’t be so sure of what was beyond me either.

To clean out the gunk in the system that blocked me from a wider consciousness, I kept up this practice of emotional hygiene, mental flossing. When a thought or feeling arose, I tried to recognise it as a passing visitor, not my essential self. As best I could, I let it pass — until it came back again. This game of whack-a-mole was endless. Yet as my mind cried out for attention like a babbling baby, I could watch it dispassionately, just as I could look up at the mountainside above my yard, hidden in autumn mists

and rolling rainclouds. The weather of my moods was a veil of fog too. It obscured what was intrinsic to me, what lay behind it all. I thought of a Chinese saying one of my neighbours had taught me:

‘The white clouds come and go, but the green mountain is unmoving.’



In the shadow of the mountain, opposite the folk god temple in the middle of Silver Bridge Village, was a bee farm. It was hard to miss: a giant papier-mâché statue of a golden bee sat propped up on stilts at its entrance, guarding the path up. Dotted around its terraced fields were a hundred or so wooden beehives, with swarms of honeybees flying hither and thither. Scores of chicken and geese ran and squawked fearlessly in between. Past them, rows of tea fields faded into the forest that rose vertiginously behind.

In the middle of the farm, Li Xianmi moved from box to box, lifting up the trays of honey to inspect his viscous crop. A middle-aged man with dark skin and an expressively lined face, he wore no protective gear and ignored the buzzing bees, although when I first met him, his nose was red and swollen from one of their kisses. He scraped a sticky trail of honey off one tray with a chopstick, and gave it to me to taste. Bitter. This honey was from the nectar of a flower used in Chinese medicine, Li explained. Other flavours included blueberry, coffee plant and a vaguer ‘hundred flowers’ honey — all from the mountain flowers of the forest where his bees fed. I bought a pot of uncrystallised honey, and opened it to find a dead bee drowned inside the runny mix.

Li Xianmi was a different breed of Dali migrant. He had moved here not from a middle-class city background, but from a small industrial town in Guizhou province, where he had worked in a furniture factory all his life. Ten years ago, in his thirties and divorced, he quit his job and got on a train to Dali with a single duffel bag of possessions, after hearing there was cheap farmland to rent here. He worked odd jobs, fell in love with a local woman, and married into the village. He rented two fields next to the

temple, just up the slope from their courtyard home, and opened a bee and fowl farm — selling not just honey but hives, as well as free-range chicken, goose and turkey (though you had to slaughter it yourself). In his hometown he had been stuck inside the factory all day, choked by sawdust. Now he spent his days outside, looking up at the mountainside and its hidden nectars.

‘I have a good life here,’ he said simply. ‘I thank God.’

The word he used, *shangdi*, was not the term for native Chinese gods, *shen*. Literally meaning ‘emperor above’, instead it referred to the Christian God. Li’s daughter, from his previous marriage, had converted to Christianity at university a year ago. At first, he and his wife had dismissed this as a phase. But she brought up their salvation time and time again, and frequently sent her father links to Bible verses on WeChat. He liked that Jesus was a carpenter, as he used to be, working with his hands.

‘In fact, it’s all very sensible,’ Li remarked. He had long held a vague feeling that there was some sort of God, and this monotheistic teaching made the most sense to him. Educated as an atheist, like all schoolchildren in China, he had dismissed religion out of habit, but had felt a spiritual vacuum at the core of his heart. So earlier in the autumn, just a few weeks before I met him at the bee farm, he had converted.

Li still had the air of trying faith on for size. When he said *shangdi*, it was as if he was practising the syllables to see how they felt in his mouth. His wife, who was Bai, worshipped the local folk religion in the temple opposite his farm — she had no interest in Western gods, just as Li’s daughter dismissed her belief as idol worship and had given up on converting her. Li was more inclusive.

‘Maybe it’s all the same God,’ he suggested.

China has an estimated one hundred million Christians — more even than Communist Party members. Most of them are Protestants, but in Yunnan there is a particular relationship to Catholicism, after French missionaries pushed north from colonial Indochina in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Yunnan villages as far north-west as the border with Tibet still bear the traces of this history, with ornate Catholic churches, vibrant

Christian communities and even vineyards founded by the French over a century ago.

Dali itself was a Catholic diocese. Its church was built in 1927, under the direction of three French missionaries posted here. The building still stands proud in the heart of the Old Town: a striking construction of Bai wooden beams with a pagoda roof and curved tiles, and a cross affixed to the top. Inside, the high ceiling is painted blue with stars. Above the golden altar, the characters for 'GOD IS LOVE' are writ large. On a wall outside, a ten-metre-wide mural depicts scenes including the temptation of Eve, an angelic visitation to Dali, and the (possibly apocryphal) sight of Jesus being crucified by the banks of Lake Er.

The head priest, who had trained in Switzerland, had a ruddy complexion and bulbous nose that gave the unfortunate impression of his being perpetually drunk. He held mass every Sunday, with all the bells and smells of Catholic ritual, and had an active congregation. There was also a smaller Protestant church at the north end of the Old Town. Yet these public services, while widely attended, were only allowed to preach an officially sanctioned religious message. Jesus, for example, was not permitted to be described as the only source of personal salvation — that privilege was reserved for the Party.

For a more unadulterated gospel, Li Xianmi's daughter had invited him to a 'house church': one of many underground gatherings held across China, in private residences among trusted networks. This house church was held near to a student noodle joint called Jireh (from *Jehovah-jireh*, 'The Lord will provide'). The atmosphere was muted, with cushions, tea, a bowl of peanuts and sunflower seeds to crunch on. There were Bible readings, prayers, group singing. One member, the daughter of the restaurant owner, wept with the power of God. Li told me afterwards that he felt a sense of belonging there he had never even known he wanted so deeply.

It felt like we were all looking for that in Dali: a community to belong to; a seed of faith; nectar for the soul. Li had found Christianity, while his wife paid obeisance to the local gods. Other new migrants were Buddhist or

Hindu or Taoist or animistic. There were Baha'i Wednesdays in the Old Town, the self-cultivation sisters at Seeking Serenity courtyard, the monks up Chicken Foot Mountain, and many more hiding in the woodwork of their private practice. As Tao, the carpenter-philosopher of Green Peach Village, put it to me once: 'Everyone who moves to Dali is looking for something to believe in.'

As a child, I had felt an instinctive drive towards what I then called God. I recall gazing out of my bedroom window at the tinkling rains of Oxford, and feeling the waters flow inside me. In my teens, I cut that belief out of me like an embarrassing wart, and didn't look back. Rationality became my religion, and scepticism the badge of my pride. Now, twenty years later, I gazed up at the mountains of Dali and felt that same childlike feeling again. I kept it sheltered this time. I watered it daily. And as the rains of summer gave way to the soft sunsets of autumn, I looked at what had grown in me, and harvested my faith.

This was not the God of Abraham I believed in — yet I was happy to call it that word, for want of a better one. I felt it strongest in nature: a spirit behind all things, flowing through me and everything around me; a unity of material and immaterial, a monad of space and time. 'A motion and a spirit,' in William Wordsworth's line, 'that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things.' It could be pantheism, or panentheism, or monism — or any other word that cannot capture the spiritual any more than a human mind can comprehend it. Definitionally, my newfound faith was in something unprovable, unfathomable. But in the fading sunlight that cast its rays through clouds high above, it felt irrefutable. I heard its voice call inside me: I have always been here.

When I let go of the need to rationalise this, faith washed clean my pain like dirt in the rain. Whatever I was feeling, I could stop and realise that, underneath it all, everything was okay — and whatever might happen, it still would be. It could be no other way. There were moments, sitting in the wicker chair in my yard, when I would look up at the mountains, at the sun dappling the forest canopy, and be filled with a joy that pressed into my ribs as if trying to burst from between them.

As Li Xianmi weaved in between his bees and chickens, we talked about both of our fledgling beliefs. I asked him what he meant by *shangdi*, by God. He pointed, not up but around him, and just said, 'This.'

Scratching at his swollen nose, he invited me to pull out a tray of honey from a buzzing hive with my bare hands. I lifted the tray up, wincing. But it was fine. He smeared his finger across the sticky harvest, then sucked it clean.

'The bees go all over to find flowers,' he said. 'A different flower and the flavour is different. But it's all honey. When we taste it, it is sweet.'



Autumn in Dali ripened. The last mists of rainy season clung to the hills, and the sun set a little earlier each night. September showers would continue for another month, but it had not been a heavy monsoon this year. In the farmland plots dotted around Silver Bridge, various tubers were now ready to be plucked out of the fertile earth. The tobacco crop of the fields down the slope also came in, with bushels of yellow-tinted leaves tied to overloaded trikes, heading to the processing factories. The sweetcorn had been shucked: its casings left out to dry, its golden ears blanketing courtyards or hanging from wooden rafters. The fields that had grown tall with it were now bare and melancholy.

My days settled into the same rhythm: cooking, writing, hillside walks, editing and teaching poetry online. As always, I was sharing my courtyard with the wildlife of the valley. A pair of auburn-crested hoopoes had nested in a crack of my stone outer wall, where I watched them flitter to and fro. Wasp spiders strung their webs across the corners of my yard. The extended family of rats scuttled in my eaves, and our war of attrition continued with kitchen blockades, and campaigns of dropping-bombing and booby-trapping. Moon slept upstairs, over the eaves, then scampered excitedly down to meet me every morning.

From my hermitage, I felt ever more disconnected to life outside of the valley. The rest of the world seemed caught in a cycle of entropy. Pandemic lockdowns were now a global norm. Protests at racial injustice burnt through America. Summer wildfires and heatwaves were the new climate we lived in. Cross-Pacific tensions drew China and the US further apart in a new cold war. Urban life was a theatre of code-scanning and surveillance. Lives and relationships were played out on screens. Out in Dali, refuge from a ‘world too much with us’, as Wordsworth put it, I was fine being far away from it all. At times, when I didn’t check the news, it felt as if this valley was all there was.

The seventh month of the lunar calendar — from mid-August to mid-September this year — was a special time for retreat and seclusion. Known as ‘ghost month’, this was when the gates to the underworld opened, and the spirits of the deceased could visit. It was a month to stay in and curtail social events, lest wandering ghosts interfere with the affairs of the living. In Silver Bridge Village there were no house-opening or baby-naming parties as usual, no weddings and no funerals, although the Dali migrants carried on as usual.

The apex of ghost month was in the middle, its fifteenth day, the full moon. This was known as *Zhongyuanjie*: Ghost Festival, or sometimes Hungry Ghost Festival. A hungry ghost is one starved of ritual worship from their family, fated to wander between the *yinjian* realm of spirits and the *renjian* human world. This night, and over the days leading up to it, joss paper was burnt for the departed — spirit money to tide them over in the other realm, and to placate the hungry ghosts until the spirits left and the gates closed once more.

It was a Han custom, rooted in ancestor worship, but was marked by the Bai people of Dali as well, in a blurring of faiths and stories. Folk religion talked of the King of Hell who let the ghosts out that night. Taoists celebrated the Official of Earth, who used the occasion to absolve worldly sin. Buddhists commemorated the Buddha’s disciple Maudgalyayana, who rescued his mother from the land of hungry ghosts, and chanted scripture to boost the karma of dead spirits so they could be reborn into a higher realm

of samsara. At Chicken Foot Mountain, the monks went out with bowls this day, to receive food gifts from lay-folk who hoped to get some of that karma for loved ones who had passed.

In Silver Bridge, ritual plates of chicken, egg and pork were laid along the village alleys, for the ghosts to devour. At dusk on Ghost Festival, small fires were lit by each household on the paving outside their home, inside neatly drawn chalk circles. By night, these lights dotted the village like fireflies. Families gathered around them in covens, to burn spirit money for their departed to use in the next world. At one fire, an auntie burnt a paper mock-up of an iPhone instead, so that her dead grandfather could enjoy the latest technology.

At the top of the village, the old western gate sat squat and still. A thick arch of stone, it looked up dispassionately at the mountain. The walls past which it once granted access had long since fallen; a telecommunications tower now rose to one side instead, watchtower for the new era. Through its mouth, a straight cobbled path led up into the forest, where the graves of the village's ancestors lined the sloping foothills. This path was known locally as *shengsizhilu* — the Road of Life and Death.

I had jogged past here many times with Moon, on my evening loop, without knowing its name. Now, in the twilight of Ghost Festival, I walked up from the middle of the village, through the arch of the West Gate to the foot of the mountain path. A plume of smoke was rising from further up the way, wafting downwind in a pine-scented miasma. A group of villagers were gathered there, and greeted me with a dull hiss. It turned out that I had walked through the archway reserved for spirits returning to their realm, walking west as I had this night, in the direction of the setting sun. It was not for the likes of me.

Along the mountain path, spirit fires had been lit to guide their way. (The forest was damp from the rains, so Dali's fire restrictions had been lifted for all of rainy season.) Plastic bags of fruit and cooked eggs were left by the sides of the track, like takeout for hungry ghosts as they went home.

The air was thick with smoke. Fading dusk had given way to black of night. The last of the villagers left, back to their own homes to shut their

doors until dawn. I walked a short way up the path, through the swirling smoke-trails of dying embers.

The hair rose on the back of my neck. I wasn't sure whether I should be here at all. In the quiet and the unbelonging, in the fallow field of passed lives, their harvest taken in, I could not escape a sense of limbo for us who were left.

The path stretched up into the darkness, consumed by the mountain heights.

I turned. I went home. I switched on all the lights.



A week later, at the tail end of ghost month, I drove up to Chicken Foot Mountain to see the Buddhist monks at Shining Light Monastery again. This time, I had been invited to stay for two nights to live on a monk's schedule, bunking in the portable cabin dormitories next to the construction site of the new prayer hall, which was now almost complete.

This was the time of year for 'temporary leaving home' — a three-month trial period for prospective monks to try the life out, then decide whether to take the vows of monkhood or not. I was sharing a bunk bed with an acolyte called Shutong, a metrosexual from Xi'an in his early thirties with long hair in a ponytail and fashionable sneakers. He had worked as a graphic designer for the advertising industry, before quitting two years ago.

'I realised I was tricking people,' he explained, 'by making adverts that lied to them. It wasn't moral.'

Disaffected by the rat race, Shutong travelled for over a year. Long interested in Buddhism, he described his journey as 'looking for utopia' in a variety of spiritual retreats, from Pharping in Nepal to McLeod Ganj in India. He studied Buddhist scripture at Labrang Monastery in Tibet, and read up on other religions too, from Sufism to the teachings of Mother Teresa. Prevented from further travel outside China by the pandemic, he

gave up on his search, and took a vow of refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Now he was choosing which monastery to become a monk in.

‘I didn’t need to find a utopia,’ Shutong concluded, ‘only to be peaceful inside my own heart.’

We had been talking until late, sitting on facing bunk beds in the spartan portable cabin quarters, surprisingly cold up at the cloudy altitudes of Chicken Foot Mountain. Outside, the monastery was eerily quiet and perfectly dark; ours was the last light on. We turned it off. As I lay in bed, unable to sleep, I thought of the words of the monk Rucheng, the former Dali bar owner who had renounced earthly pleasures and moved to Shining Light seven years ago: that to change our hearts was even harder than flying.

The next morning, we rose with the 4.30 am gong, washed the sleep from our eyes, then sat cross-legged through two hours of chanting before breakfast at dawn. We swept the kitchen and helped wash vegetables for lunch with the other acolytes, then sat through a Zoom class on Buddhist detachment with Master Cifa, the founder of the monastery who was now based in Fiji. Before eating lunch, we had to sit through another ten minutes of chanting while our bowls of veggies, rice noodles and tofu grew cold. I was only seven hours into my first day of the monastic life, and already I had figured out it was not for me.

In the afternoon, Rucheng and I drank tea and talked again. When I saw his eyes crinkle in a smile of greeting, the idea of being a monk didn’t seem so bad after all. He asked how the day had gone, and laughed at my complaints. He refilled my tiny teacup at the first sign of it not being full, and I asked him what he had meant last time by ‘changing your heart’.

‘Before,’ he began, ‘my heart was on automatic drive. No matter what happened, my reactions were passive ... But true freedom means we have the power to be active, whatever the circumstances. If we’re in prison and our body has no freedom, our heart can still be free ... What you have on the outside doesn’t determine your heart’s happiness. Your attitude is most

important.’ He sipped from his cup, and immediately refilled it. ‘You can choose your own meaning in life, or to have none at all. That is freedom.’

We were joined by a monk in his mid-thirties, Xin’ne (‘Newly Deliberate’), who had formerly been a professor of English at a university in western China — he had heard an Englishman was visiting, and wanted to practise his language skills. A skinny man with round wire spectacles and protruding molars, dressed in long black robes, Xin’ne had the air of a professor of Charms at Hogwarts. As we talked about Buddhism, he peppered his explanations with movie references. *The Matrix* showed how the world of our senses was a veil of illusion; *Fight Club* explicated the moral of not clinging to possessions, although he admitted it didn’t quite live up to the precept of non-violence.

Rucheng and Xin’ne shared a love for music, and they had written a devotional song together. They consulted me on the English translation, then performed it, with Rucheng clapping the beat and rasping in his Beijing lilt:

*A peaceful and equal heart
Break illusion, manifest truth.
See through the fantasy world
To reach the origin of all.
Merely a dream that’s in our mind
Buddha nature in everyone.*

This was their key to a peaceful heart, delivered in rhyming verse. That the world we perceive is formed in our mind. And if all mental and physical experience is illusory, then piercing through it means we can all become Buddha — or find a degree of equanimity, if not enlightenment.

It was a long road, with many vehicles to get to the destination. Shining Light Monastery was in Mahayana’s southern lineage tradition of Pure Land Buddhism. This school followed the Amitabha Buddha (*Amitufo* in Chinese) and held that rebirth is possible inside Amitabha’s Western Paradise: a pure realm with no suffering or evil. This was not nirvana but, as Xin’ne explained it, ‘a big university’ from which one graduated out of the wheel of samsara. He described it as a garden with flowers sprouting

from all surfaces, clear streams running in gravity-defying directions, mythical birds and abundant peach trees. To my ears it sounded like Peach Blossom Spring, the Shangri-la-esque myth of a hidden utopia. But this was no fable, he stressed — the Pure Land literally existed, after death and behind the veil of illusion, as did asuras, demons, hell and other realms.

One of the tenets of Pure Land Buddhism is that chanting the name of Amitabha in this life is a way to accumulate merit so as to be reborn into his paradise realm in the next. This was not a simple matter of parroting the phonemes, but an exercise in keeping a Buddha mind at all times — a peaceful and equal heart. The result was that the monks of Shining Light Monastery were constantly saying *Amitufo*, while meditating in private but also whenever greeting each other. Instead of hello in the morning: *Amitoufo*. Instead of thanks when a door was held open: *Amitufo*. Instead of goodbye: *Amitufo*. In place of goodnight: *Amitoufo*. Whenever someone said *Amitufo* to you, you said it back to them. Once a monk stepped on my toe in a hurry to get to morning chants, and swiftly apologised: *Amitufo!* *Amitufo!* Within a day I had picked up the habit myself, and the phrase became as unconscious a conversation-filler as a British comment on the weather.

Another practice particular to Shining Light Monastery was a form of a walking meditation in solitary confinement known as *biguan*, or ‘closing off’. Above the prayer hall, up a path into the forest, a number of wooden cabins had been built for this purpose: spartan rectangular shacks, seven metres long, with padded floors, no windows and a jug of water on a table. The only other furnishing was a line of string hung taut from one far wall to the other, at waist height.

For twenty-four or forty-eight hours at a time, a monk would pace up and down one of these chambers, following the string, reciting *Amitufo* tens of thousands of times while trying to maintain a concentrated state of walking trance. There was no food, only water. Breaks were only permitted to use the outhouse. It was a required rite of passage for all new monks at the monastery, and occasionally an older monk would disappear into one of

the cabins for a refresher. Xin'ne told me it was the hardest thing he had ever done.

It struck me that the monks' isolation on Chicken Foot Mountain, coming here from all over the nation to hide away from the world, was an extreme form of what had brought the other pilgrims to Dali. A quest to calm the heart, to change the mind. To find another way of living, and new values to follow. Where some sought it in farming or raving or the simple life, the pilgrims of Shining Light had cut off all external distractions entirely, and sought new horizons exclusively within the four walls of their mind.

The path was not easy. Xin'ne told me he still struggled with the monastic code and early rises. He showed me his threadbare room, including where he hid some novels in a corner. I was surprised to find that, like many of the monks, he still had a smartphone. Lately, had been staying up late to binge-watch the anime series *Attack on Titan*. During the day he kept sane with devotional hobbies, including the crafting of papier-mâché statuettes of bodhisattvas. He had learnt the art of flower arrangement through online videos, and created luscious displays out of flowers gifted to the monastery on special days of worship. Later, he developed a toothache that needed a crown, and said it was the most helpful practice of all to meditate in the midst of excruciating pain.

There were institutional headaches too, mostly related to the monastery's relationship with local government in the form of the religious bureau. In recent years, part of a nationwide trend, they had become more controlling of religious activity on Chicken Foot Mountain. Now pandemic policy was used as an excuse for even tighter supervision. Shining Light had to submit applications for special devotional events; new monks and acolytes were all logged into the system. The atheism and fear of organisation that were both ingrained in China's politics had begun to interfere in their devotional practices.

'There's only one Party,' the monk-in-training Shutong said, 'so they think it's a threat to their power if too many people are together. Communism doesn't like religion.'

To Rucheng, this was all water off Buddha's back. When I mentioned the government issue, he just chuckled, smiling down at nothing in particular below the tea table, and didn't reply. This was precisely the kind of external condition, akin to toothache, that a peaceful heart cast off without letting circumstance affect serenity.

I was jealous of his equanimity. As for me, whatever modicum of tranquillity I won in my mind was still fragile as a Fabergé egg, and broke as soon as a new stimulus arrived to knock it off balance. Like the Hydra's heads, I would cut off one emotional disturbance only to find that two had grown in its place. Sitting in such long periods of meditation with the monks only showed me how difficult I found it to calm the storm. Maybe I would benefit from monkhood after all. But I knew that it wasn't for me, and so did Rucheng. If I had learnt anything from coming here, it was that I wanted to be part of the world, after all.

As I was preparing to leave, a summer squall blew into the mountainside. This was the last death rattle of the monsoon, and it enveloped us in a sudden and thunderous torrent. The rain fell down in sheets, encasing the monastery in a tomb of water and mist. Nothing was visible beyond what was right in front of our eyes.

'Remember what I said,' Rucheng said in parting as we stood under the eaves, gazing out. 'Your heart can be paradise or it can be hell ... Nothing else matters.'

We stood in silence as the deluge fell. After a pause he added in afterthought, quietly, more to himself than to me: 'Because we are living in a dream.'



As a child, Dream Hermit loved to fly in his spaceship. The design was a small glass dome over a rocket-powered frame, straight out of *The Jetsons*. He would slingshot around planets, shoot between solar systems, explore

galaxies and surf nebulas. He talked with aliens and shot laser beams at enemies and had wild adventures.

In his twenties, he took his old spaceship — a little cramped, but still serviceable — out for another spin. Warping to the far edges of the universe, he explored star systems that nobody had ever known about before: wastelands of gas giants, black holes and lonely exoplanets. Floating in the infinite expanse between stars, he met a space whale. It was the largest being he could ever imagine — its eye the size of a moon. And when that eye turned on him, on his little spaceship and human body, Dream Hermit felt its cosmic disdain. He felt the coldness of the universe, an infinite disregard for his puny exploits, an uncaring vastness that would swallow his mind in the vacuum, the insanity of his insignificance.

The explorer didn't go out in his spaceship after that. In the decade that followed, his lucid dreams became less and less adventurous. He had done it all by now, from flying like Superman to walking through walls. He no longer felt the need to seek out new abilities or go on crazy escapades. By his mid-thirties, once he had moved to Dali and founded his dream school, Li Yufeng's sleeping and waking life were much the same — simple, unambitious. In his waking days, he walked the hills and tended to his fruit orchard and performed chores around the farmhouse. In his sleeping nights, he walked the hills and tended to his fruit orchard and performed chores around the farmhouse. There was no urge to jump off a mountaintop and become an eagle mid-fall. He was happy with where, and who, he was.

I visited Dream Hermit again during the autumn walnut harvest. Yangbi, the town on the western slope of the Cang mountains, was holding its celebrated walnut festival. They were sold by the bushel in thick sacks, and spread on tabletops to sample, in hues from light chestnut to dark mahogany — a sea of cracked-open brains to nosh. At the top of the hill behind Yangbi, Dream Hermit carried a long wooden pole as he walked his orchard, and whacked the trees with it to make the nuts fall, then gathered them up in a cloth sack. There were more than he could ever possibly eat. He sold some and pressed the rest into juice. His dog Xingxing ('Wake Up')

guarded the oldest walnut tree of them all, a hulking twist of branches at the entrance to the Valley of Forking Dreams.

A disciple was there too now, staying for a month to study with the master. Hongchen ('Red Dust', a Buddhist phrase conveying hermetic escape from society) was a wiry young man in his late twenties, with close-cropped hair and a quietly intense energy, as if he was reflecting on a paradox. After quitting his job at a telecommunications giant, he had dropped off the grid entirely, ceremonially throwing his smartphone into the western lake of Hangzhou. Now he was living up a mountain, learning to lucid dream and sleeping for twelve hours a day. It was the ultimate wage-slave's dream of *tangping*, lying flat.

The Valley of Forking Dreams attracted all sorts of students like him. Some were seeking a mind-expanding hobby; others wanted to maximise their conscious experience of life. Many of the classes were taught online at 68m.com: a buzzing website run by volunteers that had taken on a life of its own, with articles and videos on lucid dreaming, as well as online courses and merch, such as T-shirts proclaiming 'I'm dreaming right now'.

For Dream Hermit, lucid dreaming was his business as well as his passion. One of his private clients was a stock trader in Shanghai, who flew him out to the city for training sessions, in the hope of gaining a fresh perspective on the market during his horizontal hours. Another client was a middle-aged woman with breast cancer who wanted to travel the world in her dreams, holidaying in Paris and Rome at night while her days were filled with chemotherapy. He even offered a couples therapy course, where partners learnt to express their mutual antipathy and suppressed rage in their sleep, instead of fighting in person.

'It's like training your emotions,' Dream Hermit explained. 'You can try everything to fix a problem in your life, but in the end you have to change your attitude and the problem will go away ... In a dream you can hit your boss if you're angry with him, and see how it feels. Then your mood will change, and you don't need to actually hit him at work the next day.' His disciple Red Dust repeated the same example about hitting his boss to me

later. Apparently, this was a common desire among overworked young Chinese.

The way Dream Hermit talked reminded me of Rucheng on Chicken Foot Mountain. Both saw sensory perception as illusory; both taught emotional control as a path to serenity. In Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, lucid dreaming was even practised as a tool to pierce illusion on the diamond path to enlightenment. And while Rucheng had talked of life as a dream in figurative terms, for Dream Hermit it was literal.

‘How much of your dreams do you remember?’ he asked me, as we strolled through his walnut groves in the softening light of evening.

I estimated 1 per cent.

‘How much of your life do you remember?’ he followed up.

More than 1 per cent, I said, surely.

‘Okay. What did you have for dinner this day last week?’

I couldn’t tell him. When I looked back into my memories to find specific details, I was only able to recall glimpses and impressions. The further back I went, the more the picture faded, except for moments that stood out like obelisks in the memory desert.

‘And those memories are probably not accurate either,’ he added. ‘The idea that our life is a continuous story we remember is a lie ... I know I’m here now, walking with you, but next week this memory will be like the memory of a dream.’

That night, Dream Hermit led Red Dust and I to the cowshed down the slope from his farmhouse, which he had converted into a threadbare cinema. Movies, he said, were one of the best ways to become aware of the illusory nature of reality. Logging onto his account on iQiyi, China’s Netflix, he scrolled through his favourites and pulled up *Inception* for us to watch on the big screen. (Films screened on a later visit included a double bill of *Vanilla Sky* and *The Thirteenth Floor*.) Sitting in primary school table-chairs, each given a pad of paper and pencil, we were expected to take notes and discussed the film afterwards. The main lesson was that the protagonist could not be sure if his reality was a dream or not, including in those sections we assumed were ‘real’.

Before we turned in, Dream Hermit told us to question our reality if we ever found ourselves in a curious or strange situation. There were various tricks to test if we were dreaming or not, from bending the middle finger back to holding our noses and checking if we were still breathing. The art of lucid dreaming was then to ride the line between freaking out at being in a dream (which generally led to waking up) and getting so used to it that you slipped back into unconscious dreaming too quickly. It wasn't hard, he maintained. It just took regular practice, like any other skill. Keeping a dream journal helped too, anything to keep aware of the dreamworld in our waking lives.

After a full day of attacking walnut trees, I was asleep within minutes. During the night, I found myself in an elevator surrounded by assassins plotting to kill me. It occurred to me that this was indeed an odd situation to be in. I pinched my nose, only to find I was still breathing. The assassins disappeared. I kept riding the lift up. At the top floor, I thought: why stop here? The elevator was now made of glass, and I shot up into the sky, punching through the atmosphere, propelled into the cosmos, shooting past Saturn's rings to explore a vortex of a trillion stars. It was my first time in space.

At daybreak, awake again, I stood on the creaking wooden platform of the dream farm that overlooked the mountains from the west. The dawn clouds had settled in the valley below — *yunhai*, the 'sea of clouds' that classical Chinese poems talked of, spread below me in the pink light of morning. Dream Hermit was already up, a heat gun in hand, laying a water pipe from his kitchen down to the cowshed. I told him about my dream, and asked about his. He said that in his dream he did just what he was doing now: laying water pipes, feeling the morning breeze on his skin, talking to me.



Autumnal equinox was another cleaver in the year: a turning of the tide, when days and nights were briefly equal once more. Now it was night's turn to lengthen, and the waxing moon would rival the setting sun for its hours in the sky.

Ghost month and rainy season were both over, and it was time for a fresh crop of local festivals to brighten the year. On the eighth day of the eighth lunar month was Lake Festival: a celebration of the Dragon King who was said to rule over the waters, marked by boat races. Yellow Dragon Festival fell five days later, in another village, commemorating the local legend of a benevolent yellow wyrm who had defeated the malicious black dragon who once flooded the valley. Next came Mid-Autumn Festival, a Han Chinese harvest celebration, also marked by the Bai, at full moon on the fifteenth of the month.

The main event of Mid-Autumn Festival is a special evening meal — generally fish — followed by a dessert of mooncakes, a dense pastry filled with seed paste and egg yolk that is so difficult to swallow they are more likely to be regifted than actually eaten. Lanterns are lit, and it is a time to be with family.

As I walked my dog, Moon, through Silver Bridge that evening, every neighbour's door was open. I had brought a bag of mooncakes with me, and dropped into several courtyards to say hello. Auntie Yang, over the bamboo fence, received my gift gratefully, put it aside, then gave me more mooncakes that other visiting neighbours had given them. They invited me to join them for dinner, and I picked at bony fish in between Granny Yang and Little Liu while we talked about local gossip. For the first time in the nine months I had lived here, it felt like I was part of the village.

Next, I dropped in on the household by the Buddhist temple at the mountain trailhead. This was where the funeral of Grandfather Li had been held, half a year ago. The thirty-something granddaughter who had rushed back for it, Sister Li, was sitting inside the courtyard. I asked how she had got the time off from her factory job on the east coast. She raised her left hand, which was bandaged and crumpled unnaturally. She had injured it badly in an accident on the assembly line, she said, receiving compensation

and time off to recuperate. That meant she could be back with her infant daughter, who was being raised in the village. She wasn't sure if she wanted to go back at all. The family was sitting down to their own Mid-Autumn feast on the porch, and they also invited me to join.

This year, Mid-Autumn Festival fell on 1 October, and coincided with the public holiday of National Day, which commemorated the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Today, Communist China turned seventy-one — older than the Soviet Union, founded in 1922, had been at its demise, and just over the mean average of how long each imperial Chinese dynasty had lasted. In the front room of their house, the evening news was replaying jingoistic scenes of the flag-raising ceremony in Beijing that morning, while a large portrait of Xi Jinping — ever popular in the Chinese countryside — hung on one wall. I asked Sister Li which festival meant more to her.

'National Day,' she replied without hesitation. I asked why.

'The nation is big, we are small.'

Now stuffed with two meals, I made my excuses and continued my mooncake gift-giving rounds. Along with the food, several small glasses of pungent sweetcorn liquor had been foisted on me, and I was feeling very merry. The libations continued in other courtyards, both local Bai families and also the new Dali migrants, with bottles of home-brewed fruit liqueur in the House of Science and Om Cave at opposite ends of the village. By midnight, I could swear there were two full moons in the sky.

Yet the night was far from over. Flushed through with the hard stuff, I stumbled three kilometres north across fallow fields in between villages, to an outdoor psytrance party that had been set up by friends of Andy, the government-official-turned-psychedelic-activist (himself now stuck in South-East Asia due to lockdown measures). There was a DJ booth facing a grassy field, a strip of fluorescent lights above it, and an abandoned van off to one side that had been converted into a help-yourself bar. At the back of the field was a table covered with votive offerings to the moon, from apples to shots of liquor. Now and then, a resting raver would get on their knees in

front of it, praying to the lunar goddess, Chang'e, who was said to live on the moon with a jade rabbit, grinding immortality pills with a pestle.

Zhazha was there, and Shonkar the Mongolian, and Cloud the tarot reader, and Cloud Dragon the Sanskrit-tattooed flautist. These migrants to the valley were my community now and I was one of them. I bathed in a sense of belonging that had hitherto eluded me. It felt good to just be in this moment, outside in the fresh air instead of online in my room.

The next morning, we could all sleep in. The seven days after National Day were a public holiday in China, dubbed 'Golden Week'. Most city dwellers used this time off for a vacation, and with internal travel restrictions lifted (but international travel impossible) they came in droves to Dali: the yearly invasion of tourists. They rented shiny cars to circle the lake; they rode the cable car up the mountain; they took photos in the selfie farms. Dali's Old Town became an elbow-sharpening battlefield once more. People mountain, people sea.

Some of the visitors came for a full-on trial experience of living off the grid. Over Golden Week, a special course was offered for them — titled 'Hermit Life in Dali' — held in a rotation of courtyards around the valley, including at the Om Cave. It was organised by Blue Womb, a women's group set up by a Dali migrant called Anxi: a young woman with braided hair and a yin-yang tattoo on her back, who did massage and health consultations for the yuppies who sought some of her hippy vibe. For several thousand yuan, these city arrivals could sample an all-inclusive week advertised as the key to 'finding a more natural way of living'.

The first night's session was a crystal healing and meditation circle. Upstairs in Anxi's courtyard, in Lovers' Cave Village, eight middle-aged women dressed in flowing robes sat on wooden floorboards around a candle, itself encircled by Anxi's collection of crystals, which pointed jaggedly outwards at them. Bathed in moonlight, as I arrived it felt like a witches' coven about to lay a curse. One by one, the participants introduced themselves. They came from Beijing, Shanghai, Kunming, Chengdu. Some talked of divorces, or were empty-nesters, or just wanted to get out of the city. All had come to Dali looking for some kind of life change. In the deep

silence of the night, they sat with eyes closed as Anxi led a meditation, inviting them to visualise the power of the crystals.

Over the next four days, the group sampled a smorgasbord of what were billed in the pamphlet as ‘Dali activities’. At the Om Cave, Lili led a tailoring class where they designed, cut and sewed their own clutch bags. They gathered vegetables from the garden and wild herbs from the mountain, then cooked together in the courtyard’s stone kitchen. Anxi’s boyfriend, a Frenchman who was the spitting image of Van Gogh, led a Nepalese singing bowl session. Boomi, a silver-locked Dutchman who had been part of the Rajneesh commune in the 1980s, held a tea meditation ceremony in his own mountainside home. They made incense; they chanted with the Chinese Sufi priest of Silver Bridge; they joined an ecstatic dance party; and they hiked up the mountain paths, making crowns of ferns and feathers, then posing in them while Van Gogh took photos for their social media feeds.

On the final night of the retreat, back in Anxi’s courtyard after the closing barbecue, I talked with one participant, Cathy. In her late forties, from Kunming, she had a shy air and a defiant mournfulness in her eyes. I asked why she had signed up for the course, and she replied simply: ‘Heart pain.’

Cathy had been married twenty-five years, and her son was at university now. She complained of traffic, noise and pollution in the city — the familiar litany — but as the moon rose higher, she spoke of deeper problems, going a layer down as each complaint was heard. A cough that wouldn’t go away. Grinding her teeth at night. Issues with anxiety, ‘problems in my thinking’. An empty nest. A troubled heart. Married to a man she no longer loved.

‘I don’t think he ever really understood me,’ she admitted quietly. ‘We were young when we married. I don’t think he knows what a woman needs.’ Three years ago, she had fallen in love with another man, but he didn’t love her back and she decided not to leave her husband. All she needed was to be seen. Instead, she was stuck in a life where she felt

trapped. ‘I’m confined in a gold cage on the twenty-first floor of a high building. And by this,’ she added — tapping her wedding band.

In the morning the Blue Womb group left, back to their lives in the city.

‘I can’t escape forever,’ Cathy said in parting. She would go back to her cage, her job, her loveless marriage. This had just been a temporary hideout. For those who came and went, Dali was an escape they could not follow through on. A glimpse of a different life, and a photo to remember it by. True retreat was an unfeasible luxury when there were bills to pay and responsibilities to hold down: the ties that bind us.

The visitors had tasted their Golden Week of Dali freedom. Then the city welcomed them back into its bosom, and its cogs ground their hours in the mill of gross domestic productivity. The individual’s dream was small, the nation’s dream was large.



There was a final harvest to be collected in Dali. This crop was taken in not by the farmers of the valley, but by its hippies. Up into the hills they went, hunting for wild marijuana plants — or to patches they had cultivated themselves, keeping the location a closely guarded secret. Buds collected, they dried them out or rubbed them into hash. This harvest could last for the rest of the year, or a few months, or a few days, depending on who was smoking it.

I was invited on one such weed-picking excursion by Pigeon, a wiry stoner whom I had met at the New Year’s Eve party in my old courtyard in Three Brush Village. With a resting half-grin, dreadlocks and wispy stubble, Pigeon (a pseudonym) had a Rastafarian air to him — indeed, he was in one of the many amateur bands in Dali that played reggae tunes fused with Yunnan ethnic beats.

With two of his bandmates, we drove up a dirt switchback behind a village temple, winding higher to a spot where Pigeon insisted there were ripe pickings. We unloaded by the banks of one of the mountain streams,

and Pigeon started to root around in the undergrowth to find the patch he had remembered was here from last year. Suddenly, his friend made an unholy squeal and pointed above us. We looked up. There was a walled facility about a hundred metres up the hill. On top of the rampart, a soldier was standing with a rifle slung over his shoulder, looking straight at us.

The People's Liberation Army had various military bases in Dali, where they used the mountainside for artillery testing. It was not uncommon to see soldiers goose-stepping out of their barracks at the south of the Old Town, or a row of tanks carried on trucks rolling up the road by the student district. The sight of an armed soldier, however, was not exactly what Pigeon wanted to see when out foraging for wild drugs. As casual as could be, he backed out of the thicket as if he had simply got lost while trying to urinate. As we drove back down, he apologised, half laughing, and said he must have misremembered the spot.

Later that day, Pigeon and his friends reaped their harvest in an abandoned quarry above the three pagodas: a thicket of female plants, 'very voluptuous', as Pigeon described them. They spent the whole afternoon collecting buds, and rubbed the twinkling crystals in their hands until the resin congealed into blocks of hash. Back at their courtyard in Three Brush Village, they laid their treasure out to dry in the burning sunshine.

'Society thinks we're losers if we smoke grass,' Pigeon said, lighting up a joint he had made earlier. 'But it's very relaxing and can open your thinking. In fact, the best musicians and artists in the West all used it, and in some countries it's legal ... [so] we're actually at the front of Chinese society, not the back.'

The authorities didn't see it that way. China has a hard-line policy on drugs and can prosecute for marijuana as if it were heroin. For decades, Dali had been a haven where this policy was ignored, with grannies selling ganja on the street and backpackers openly smoking joints, while the police either didn't know or didn't care about it. Locals used the plant to make hemp, and sold its seeds as a crunchy snack, but rarely smoked the stuff. Yet as Dali developed and policing standards tightened, local officials

twigged that some of the new arrivals had moved to the valley specifically to sample its herbs.

In an attempt to nip this in the bud, troupes of junior officers now roamed the streets every late autumn, tearing out marijuana plants where they grew wild by the roadside. Pigeon called them the *kanmadui*, the ‘chopping weed gangs’. There were periodic campaigns of pee and hair tests, and early morning house-calls on dealers whose customers had tattled after being caught themselves. One soft-spoken stoner in my village, a tattooed Chinese kid nicknamed Old Whitey, was later busted and sentenced to prison for a year (it was his second offence). His foreign girlfriend was deported. Dali’s hippy halcyon days were over, and Pigeon’s quest for good vibes was hitting the brick wall of the Chinese state.

Dali had long been a hidey-hole for those on the lamb from the law. In 2009 an American named Justin Solondz (then going by Isaac Cox, with a fake Canadian passport) was caught here, picked up by the police with thirty-three pounds of marijuana buried in his courtyard. They then discovered he was on the FBI’s most-wanted list, for his role in the 2001 arson attacks on the University of Washington’s horticulture centre by the Earth Liberation Front — an extreme environmental organisation that the FBI deemed a domestic terrorist cell. After years of hiding in Dali, Solondz was deported and imprisoned in America. At his trial, he apologised to the Chinese people and declared: ‘Dali is a paradise.’

Tao, the carpenter-philosopher building a log cabin in his back garden, recollected the golden days of the early 2000s.

‘You could smoke weed on the street,’ he told me, ‘and nobody knew what it was ... Even now nobody really cares. If the police ask,’ he said, pointing to the five-pronged leaves that grew out of the cracks of his courtyard stones, ‘I just say I can’t control what wild grasses grow in my garden.’

For Pigeon, there was nowhere further he could fly without leaving the nation, but Dali still felt far enough away. He did all he could to stay off the government’s radar, including using cash for payments instead of his phone, and not using his Chinese ID card to buy train tickets, driving around

instead. He had dropped off the grid, content to harvest his crops and live cheaply. The long arm of the state had reached into his mountain paradise, and the grasping hand of gentrification had priced him out of the Old Town. Yet in his village courtyard, he still found a private mouse-hole from the state.

‘As long as I stay here and I’m not hurting anyone,’ he said, ‘I do what I want and I hope they’ll just leave me alone. This government is so fucking nosy.’ He lit up, and added a final thought: ‘I want to be a person, not a citizen.’



The paradox of Dali was that we were trying to find freedom in an unfree state. Yet that was one of the quirks of living in China: despite all of the nation’s political controls, unless you were on the wrong side of the red line, life could still feel more free at street level than in the West. Nobody cared if you jaywalked or ran a red light, or set up a business without a licence, asking forgiveness later not permission first. In Yunnan, far from the nexus of power, it had been possible to get away with more. Oversight from Beijing was rare. The mountains were high, the emperor far away.

Then the emperor visited.

Since his ascension in 2012, Xi Jinping had launched a series of campaigns to exert central Party control over the fringes of the nation. Some of these measures were welcomed in the countryside; for example, a crackdown on corruption among local officials (though his own rivals at the top were also conveniently purged) and new environmental protection measures. But it also tightened the vice generally, and over-regulated private enterprise, in an attempt to standardise the regional differences that had made a far-flung province like Yunnan special. As a professor of ethnic studies at Kunming University told me: ‘Before, if Beijing said something on Monday, Yunnan would hear it on Sunday. Now, Beijing speaks at 7 am and Yunnan gets the message at 9 am.’

In January 2015, Xi visited Dali. He toured the waterfront, looked out over Lake Er from one of the villages on its shores, and said a single sentence to the cadres accompanying him that would change the valley forever:

‘You must protect Erhai well.’

He was talking about water pollution, specifically an algal outbreak on the lake — one of his agendas for the visit, and a good initiative in theory. Sewage from all the new inns built for Dali’s tourist boom was being run off into the lake. Already in Yunnan’s capital of Kunming, Dianchi Lake was covered by a fetid, eutrophic film of green. Xi wanted to avoid the same fate for Lake Er, and was pushing stricter environmental regulations under a new slogan: ‘Clear waters and green mountains are mountains of gold and silver.’ (Meanwhile, river damming and coal factory openings continued elsewhere.)

On hearing the emperor’s words, local officials sprang into over-action. All inns and businesses by the lake, and along the streams that fed into it, were ordered to close. Homes within twenty metres of the waterfront were demolished, displacing 1,000 families. Villages were visited by what one resident described as the ‘sewage police’. Fishing and water sports on the lake were banned. For five years they cleared land by the shore and construction began on an ‘ecological corridor’ that would wrap around it, with restored marshland, a bicycle path, walkways and scientific stations to analyse algae levels.

When I first biked around this path, it was still being terraformed. With a reported billion yuan of central funding, the landscape was being engineered to create rolling mounds and shallow ponds, dug up by fleets of excavators. The finished sections were lined with grassy lawns and cut through by winding paths, giving an effect closer to Tolkien’s Shire than the original wetlands they were recreating. Yet, five years after Xi’s visit, the waters of Lake Er were cleansed. The algae receded. The herons and egrets returned. And next to picturesque walkways that hugged the shore, new bed-and-breakfasts and coffee shops sprang up where locals had once lived.

The market forces of gentrification had joined with those of environmental protection. Animal spirits won again.

As a finishing touch, at the lakeside village of Gusheng ('Old Life') that Xi Jinping had visited, a statue of him had been erected by the shore, next to a photograph showing him pointing beatifically at the waters, while a plaque enshrined his immortal exhortation to protect Lake Er. As one state media outlet reported: 'Residents of the village hope that the Chairman will visit Erhai again so that they can show him the clean, rippling waters and tell him about their happy lives.' Despite yearly rumours of a second coming, He has yet to return.

In other ways — little and large, good and bad — the long arm of the state had reached into our hilly enclave. The mountainside was protected from over-mining, but also increasingly zealously regulated, with local officials sometimes preventing hikers from climbing it. An American friend's gin distillery was seized by eminent domain and turned into a parking lot for a cadre training school. Red character banners appeared in my village, with the same messages from the nanny state that were ubiquitous across the nation:

'STAY TRUE TO THE MISSION, DON'T FORGET OUR ORIGINAL INTENT.'

'SWEEP AWAY BLACK ELEMENTS, GET RID OF EVIL.'

'DON'T FORGET THE LOVING-KINDNESS OF THE PARTY.'

Older political slogans were also still visible, stencilled onto the same walls:

'HAVE FEWER CHILDREN, PLANT MORE TREES.'

'KNOW GENEROSITY, OBEY RITUALS, BE HONEST, PURSUE HARMONY.'

'BUILD A CIVILISED DALI.'

Most were pabulum, designed only to remind the people who was in charge. The Twelve Socialist Core Values, a pet project of the Xi administration, were painted in bright red on the walls of Silver Bridge's recently refurbished government offices, ranging from 'prosperity' and

‘patriotism’ to ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’. My favourite slogan was a fading message half-visible behind the carpark:

‘IT’S NO GOOD TO WAIT; YOUR ONLY HOPE IS TO DO SOMETHING.’

The intrusions into private life were commercial as much as political, and this was most obvious in Dali’s Old Town. Gone were many of the private homes and courtyard dive bars, priced out over the last decade. The brawls at Bad Monkey, the hippies at Bird Bar, the quiet stoners at Lizard — these old watering holes were now closed or commercialised, replaced by tourist shops selling jewellery, djembes, snacks or ethnic shawls. According to a new government edict, all store signs were carved in the same kitsch gold font onto black wood, emulating the touristified old towns of Lijiang and Shangri-la. The Old Town’s charm had been homogenised, its businesses regulated.

At the local level, there was pushback against some policies. In my village, one point of contention between residents and officials was water. For as long as my neighbours could remember, Silver Bridge’s pipes had tapped straight into mountain spring water. It was plentiful, free and easy to disinfect by boiling or with a UV light. Then, two years ago, the supply had been switched to treated water piped in from outside: full of chloramines, less tasty, and yielding a white residue when boiled down. The villagers complained, filling their bottles instead from the wells by the big green tree, or at the pipe gushing mountain water next to the temple. Eventually, the local government capitulated and switched the pipes back.

Managing the earth was even trickier. As ancestral land in an ethnic autonomous zone, Dali’s Bai villages were one of the few corners of Communist China where land could be owned outright — yet restrictions on sales to outsiders meant that it was perpetually rented, and locals couldn’t capitalise on its worth. Farmland was leased from the state for ten or fifteen years, but with fewer farmers left in the village to maintain it, the government rented many plots to Big Agro instead (the blueberry industry in particular). Locals didn’t appreciate this shift from communal to corporate, feeling that the soil should belong to the people. Yet the push of

socialist bureaucracy and pull of capitalist interests left them stuck in the middle.

Mayor Li, trying to negotiate all this, was not popular in Silver Bridge. A former PLA soldier posted in Tibet, on taking up his position he had thrown himself into the Dali markets. He owned real estate and businesses including a garage in Xiaguan, sold medicinal alcohol in a group chat for new migrants, and allegedly got a 5 per cent commission for connecting renters with courtyards in the village. Ever since Maskgate — where he had sold face masks at inflated prices during the early pandemic — his reputation had taken a hit. Once, when I brought him a bottle of spirits and pack of cigarettes in order to ask a favour, he looked around nervously and told me to put the bottle away before anyone saw him accepting gifts.

The tripod balance between government, local residents and migrants to the valley was delicate. Especially for foreigners such as myself, there were regular registration checks, including pandemic inspections and later a campaign of urine tests for drug use. Yet the various officials who dropped in — by turns the mayor, the Party Secretary, county officials and police — were just ticking boxes, keen to move on and leave us alone. Out in the spokes of the nation, the hub of central policies still made us turn. But for the most part, it was possible to ignore it all as little more than bureaucratic bother.

Still, there were moments after another round of checks, or when the megaphone above the local administrative offices blared a fresh policy, when I doubted the concept of finding any form of personal freedom in such a control-obsessed state. Having lived in China a decade, I was inured to it. To remind myself of its ridiculousness, I imagined living in a village in England and stumbling across a banner declaring ‘DON’T FORGET THE LOVING-KINDNESS OF THE LABOUR PARTY.’ In China, parody was reality.

The emperor was not far away anymore. The mountains not high enough to keep the eye of Sauron from the Shire. Yet, compared to elsewhere in the nation, Dali was still an enclave of relative liberty with a looser application

of the rules. We found our freedoms in the cracks between the concrete, and appreciated them all the more for it.



For a few migrants to Dali, their escape was overtly political. After the killings near Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989, some student demonstrators fled to far-flung locations to find their private boltholes from the state. Liao Yiwu, the dissident poet jailed in the 1990s for a poem he wrote about the Tiananmen massacre, lived in Dali in the mid-2000s, and spoke fondly of it as a hideout where there were lots of bars and foreigners and ‘the marijuana was free’. Dali would still be a viable escape, he said, ‘if the surveillance capabilities of China hadn’t upgraded, and the intensity of control hadn’t increased.’

Old Zhao (a pseudonym) was on the square that fateful day. He was a minor student leader at the protests, although he escaped imprisonment after. Born in Yunnan in 1968, in a small town on the banks of the Red River that runs into Vietnam, he couldn’t wait to get out. When he tested into a vocational university near Beijing, his horizons were blown open. Even though he was studying textiles, he read books about politics, philosophy and history. He learnt about the American democratic system, its counterculture and free love movements, and the 68ers in France. His teachers showed them Western films that used to be banned; his friends introduced him to The Rolling Stones and The Doors.

‘That was the best time in China,’ he reminisced. ‘What you could say and do was freer, not like today. You could do whatever you liked.’

The protests started quietly. There were smaller student demonstrations in the mid-eighties, kerfuffles on campus. Then, when the reformist politician Hu Yaobang died in April 1989, Zhao — then twenty-one years old — joined the crowds who went to Tiananmen Square, to protest against state corruption and demand liberalisation.

‘We didn’t want to overthrow the government,’ he told me over coffee in Dali, ‘just to make it better.’

Back then Zhao was young, idealistic, drunk on possibility. He became a student leader for his college, and met pivotal figures like Wang Dan and Wu’erkaixi. The crowd swelled and he camped out on the square with them, chanting and singing and playing the guitar. Taking out his phone, he showed me a digitised photograph of him back then — the same buzzcut and sparkling eyes, and just a whisper of a moustache — standing below the Goddess of Democracy statue that faced off against Chairman Mao’s portrait at the Gate of Heavenly Peace.

‘Everyone was full of optimism,’ he reminisced. ‘We never thought the government would intervene.’

At dusk on 3 June, Zhao noticed that something was different. The soldiers posted around the edge of the square — who had hitherto been unarmed and left them alone — were now carrying guns. Warnings blared over the loudspeakers that the crowd must disperse, that they were going to clear the square. Many brushed it off, deciding to stay. There was a general air of confusion and complacency. Zhao lingered with his friends, who had just broken a half-hearted hunger strike.

In the early hours of the morning, Zhao was urinating in a portable cabin toilet at the east side of the square. CRRRR. A crack of gunfire. Zhao jumped mid-stream. CRR-RRRR. Bursting outside while zipping his fly, he saw a river of people running down the wide boulevard north of the square, the Street of Eternal Peace. CRRR-RR-RRRR. Shots were being fired further off. He couldn’t tell from where. He pushed against the stream, to try to find his friends. Tanks were crawling up the street from that direction. He turned back. Smoke was thick in the air. One tank on fire. What? No time to think. To understand what was happening. Somebody sprawled in a pedal-cart. Some body. His chest riddled with bullet holes. Soldiers ahead. Ran back. Up street. Ahead. Screaming. A man with pancake legs. A student leaking from belly. Took off T-shirt. Pressed to gushing tap. Blood. Kept moving. Had to. Half-naked. Running. North. Stop. Where was he?

Zhao knew this street. His mind was returning to him. A man was selling hot breakfast food out of a cart. A few bicycles were out. The air was getting muggy in the pre-dawn heat. It looked ordinary. The man gave him two fried crullers and a top to wear. No charge.

‘Don’t worry,’ the man said. ‘It will be okay.’

The bus stop was right there. One was leaving to the student district in the north-west of Beijing, like any other Sunday. He got on it. He sat. There was time to think again. On the back row of the bus were three other students. One was sleeping, the other two holding him up. No. Not sleeping. He was dead.

That night, hiding in his friend’s sister’s flat in the university district, without having slept for forty hours, Zhao wrote his will.

‘That night,’ he smiled at me, ‘I became Old Zhao.’

We were sitting in a garden café on the edge of Dali Old Town. As he related these events to me, Old Zhao was swinging gently in a white wicker love seat, facing a perfectly manicured lawn, across which a sleek cat was stalking between latte-dotted tables. It could not have felt more incongruous. His cropped black hair was now flecked with white, like cappuccino foam, and in place of his youthful stubble was a scraggly goatee. The narrative he gave was straightforward, staccato; muddled at times, but punctuated with clear details. He didn’t even bother to lower his voice to tell it.

After the massacre, Zhao laid low with his friends in the north of Beijing. Student leaders were being rounded up, and he was afraid that he was on the list. For seven days they played mahjong and smoked and talked, crammed into a dark room in the basement flat. State TV said that counter-revolutionaries had been cleared from the square, that several soldiers had been killed and military property was destroyed by foreign-backed forces. After a week had passed, Zhao ventured out to buy a train ticket back to his hometown in Yunnan, not even risking going to pick up his possessions. At the station he saw soldiers with guns, and kept his face hidden under a low-brimmed hat and sunglasses.

‘At that time, I couldn’t believe it happened,’ he told me. ‘But afterwards, I wasn’t surprised ... It’s a function of the system, it’s totalitarianism. They were just frightened for themselves. If there was a revolution, they thought they might die, so they killed students instead. Deng Xiaoping said it was for “stability”, but it was for their stability, the stability of their ruling clique.’ He laughed, awkwardly. ‘China developed economically in the 1990s, so they got arrogant and rich, and they thought they made the right decision.’

After a summer lying low back home, Zhao returned to his university in the autumn of 1989. He finished his last year. He wasn’t arrested. But when he applied for further study, he was rejected, and the university leadership told him he should move on. The message was clear: he had a black mark against his name. He applied for a passport, but was refused. He took a job back in Yunnan, in a factory making military uniforms (the irony was not lost on him). He quit, jumped between construction gigs, started a few abortive businesses, hustled goods across the Vietnamese border. He lost all his savings in a scam real-estate deal. He fell into a state of what he called ‘political depression’. In 2005, he hammered the final nail in the coffin of his ambition — he moved to Dali.

‘I just wanted to escape the system,’ Old Zhao reflected, rocking in his love seat. ‘I can’t talk with people in the cities. They think their life is great because they’re getting rich. But they don’t know what kind of country they live in. Ninety per cent of them don’t know. Unless they are hit over the head, they will never know ... They painted themselves a circle that the government lets them live inside, and they’re happy because they don’t know what’s outside.’

There were two types of people in China, Old Zhao told me: Ah Qs and Andys. Ah Qs were the mainstream, he explained — named for a character in a celebrated Lu Xun story about a weak-minded, servile everyman under illusions about his own importance. Andys were the exceptions, like the protagonist of *The Shawshank Redemption*, one of Zhao’s favourite films — people who weren’t physically free, but who sought freedom in their souls.

‘All the Andys escaped,’ he said. ‘People like that came to Dali.’

I thought about the government-bureaucrat turned psytrance-promoter who had chosen the pseudonym Andy. Maybe there was something to it.

‘Xi Jinping is a dictator,’ Old Zhao said suddenly. ‘The Party is like a big elephant with cancer. Someday soon it will die, but you can’t cure the cancer. There is no immune system like in the West, where something goes wrong and you can correct it. Here it’s a terminal disease.’ He predicted a war was coming, or a military coup, and that would be the end of the Chinese Communist Party. He had come to Dali to wait for it. He was waiting still. It struck me as wishful thinking.

‘Before 4 June,’ he went on, ‘we had a lot of inner desire to be free, to listen to whatever music we wanted, to write poetry, that kind of thing. Then in the 1990s we forgot those desires. We only wanted material things, money. I also blindly followed that, and I forgot about inner freedom ... It’s not just in China, it’s the same everywhere. Everywhere people aren’t happy. If you only want material progress, then only material things will satisfy you. I had enough of that; I want to be free in my spirit again, like I was when I was twenty.’

In Dali, Old Zhao set up a tea shop and became an expert in half-fermented oolongs. He brewed his own pipe tobacco, and took up carpentry to craft wooden pipes. He started a whisky bar with a pipe-making workshop in the back. He sold tropical plants out of a greenhouse. He was friends with other dissidents who lived in Dali for stretches, including Liao Yiwu, Murong Xuecun and Ye Fu. He downloaded a VPN and clambered over the Great Firewall to read reports about China in foreign media. He talked about politics with friends in private, but didn’t aspire to do so in public again.

He gave up trying to change his nation. Old Zhao was under no illusion that he could cure China; he was here only to escape a system that disgusted him. Liao Yiwu put it more bluntly: ‘In Dali everyone drinks all the time, what will they change? Are booze-fiends going to change the nation, bring in democracy? Democratic meetings can’t be held in bars.’

Some of his friends from the Tiananmen movement still posted critical articles on social media, Old Zhao said — but it didn’t make any difference.

The posts were taken down immediately, or their accounts were deleted, and they were risking arrest. All he wanted now was to smoke his pipe in peace and find a different flavour of freedom.

‘All you can change is yourself,’ he concluded. ‘And if you can’t change yourself, how are you going to change the world?’

Old Zhao took out his pocket pipe — a small bowl he had carved out of ash — and stuffed it full of his new tobacco mix: vanilla and rose.

‘I haven’t given up,’ he said as he lit the bloom. ‘I’m changing myself, and changing the nation begins from there.’



To change oneself. Some days, when the sunlight caught me just right in the morning, it seemed it was happening — that I was finding the change I sought in Dali, that we all did in our different ways. Other times, I felt I was just the same person as before. I recalled a T-shirt I had spotted in a Berlin train station years ago, a woman’s back that read: ‘PEOPLE NEVER CHANGE.’ The phrase stuck in my head, because I could not decide if I agreed with it or not.

I had put concerted effort into changing my life this year. I had changed location, habits, even some perspectives and beliefs. Nine months after moving to Dali, the seeds I had planted in spring had grown into autumn harvests. When I first came here, I was running away from the old; now I felt I was finding something new. There were days when I looked back at the person I had been even five years ago, and didn’t recognise him. At those times, it felt to me that we were all changing constantly, faster than we wished, and whether we liked it or not. Yet a kernel inside us remains inviolate, at the core.

The mountain didn’t change. Its shifts were marked in aeons. Ever it loomed above me, rising sharply at the back of the village, like a challenge. Many a time I looked at it, from my wicker chair in the courtyard or at my writing desk, and daydreamt about climbing to the top. Several friends had

done so; like circling the lake, it was a Dali rite of passage. It was a 2,000-metre ascent to the peak, which they said took six to eight hours, then half that coming down. I had put it off in the spring, then during rainy season the paths had been too slick and dangerous to attempt the climb. Now the once-misted forest was dry again, and I decided to accept the challenge. I would summit before winter set in.

It was possible to go up and down in a long day hike, but I wanted to linger at the top. So I packed my tent and sleeping bag, along with a down jacket, gas stove and dinner, intending to camp overnight at one of the tarns near the peak, then hike the ridge another ten kilometres south the following day, before descending to the valley once more.

I set off after breakfast, lugging almost twenty kilos of kit. At the Buddhist temple just up from my house, its brazier smouldering with incense, I turned onto the trail. The mountains rose in folds above me. I began to climb.

At the terraced tea fields just above the village, a crossroads was guarded by a row of tombstones. I had been here before, on traverse runs with Moon. Now, instead of turning left or right, I plunged straight ahead, hiking above the grave-line into the thickness of the forest. The path was good — a donkey trail cut deep into the mountain, maintained by villagers going up to collect marble or rhododendrons or bamboo or grass for feed or thatch. The incline was tough, but I was energised by the sunshine, and a light breeze kept me cool.

I stopped for a sandwich at one of the streams that cut across the path, and refilled my water bottle. Water wasn't an issue on this hike, and I had a disinfecting UV light to be safe. Through the afternoon I slogged up forking paths in the dense pine forest, following my progress on a GPS app, although I took one wrong turn and lost an hour scrabbling through thistles to get back on track. I was regretting my packing decisions by now — in a fit of indulgence I had taken half a chicken and a bottle of red to enjoy at the top — but trudged on.

By teatime I cleared the first false horizon of the mountain, 3,200 metres high. Here the pine trees thinned out, and I had clear sight of Three Suns

Peak, the summit directly above my village, where I was headed. I dipped down across another stream, then up again through an abandoned marble quarry, its cascades of white stone lining the slope. I came across a Chinese tourist couple, the only other humans I had seen on the trail, who were taking photos of the valley spread below them. They didn't have time to summit and down-climb before dark, and so turned back as I pressed on.

The final stretch was tough going through a bamboo forest that grew dense around the narrow path, more of a scramble than a hike. My legs were starting to give out, and I cursed myself for bringing so much weight. After two hours, I was despairing of ever reaching the top and worried about the first signs of fading light. Then, out of nowhere, the path levelled off and a large pool of water stretched before me, lined by silver-fir trees like a secret I had stumbled upon. I had reached my destination.

The mountain ridge was still 200 metres higher, but I was spending the night at a series of alpine lakes in its shadow. Black Dragon Pool, where I had arrived, was the lowest of them. Twin Dragon Pool was just past it — two connected lakes with a shaded isthmus between them, where I set up camp. Yellow Dragon Pool was higher still, above the tree-line. According to legend, these tarns were the dens of dragons that had once terrorised or protected the valley (depending on whom you asked). Their water was clear and crisp, and flowed out into the mountain stream that we drank from in Silver Bridge Village, far below.

By the time I had pitched my tent and fired up my stove, it was getting dark. I reheated my chicken dinner and opened the bottle of wine: a feast for one. The stars lit up above me, one by one until they were a multitude, more than I had ever seen. It was getting cold, but the wine warmed me, and I felt the calm embrace of exhaustion.

It was a restless night. The top of the mountain had an entirely different climate to the valley. Temperatures dropped dramatically in the altitude, and with wind chill it got down to minus 10 degrees Celsius that night. I crawled into my sleeping bag in all my clothes and a padded jacket, and I was still cold. I recalled the warning of the villagers I had met in the spring: how hikers froze to death up here every year, inadequately prepared for the

night. There were no sounds around me besides the whistling wind, and no animals this high up. The air bit into my bones. I slept fitfully and rose before dawn, after what felt like one of the longest nights of my life.

As I heated a can of baked beans and a cup of coffee for breakfast, dawn broke on the cliff-face of the mountain peak behind me, bathing it in orange warmth. I had never been more grateful for the sun. Packing up my tent, I scrambled up to the ridge of the mountains I had gazed at for so long. I was above the treeline now, the last conifers below me, only scrub vegetation. I skirted Yellow Dragon Pool, and summited Three Suns Peak to stand 4,034 metres above sea level.

Below me was the valley of Dali, revealed in panorama for the first time. I saw the full forty-kilometre length of Lake Er, from the lower pass at Xiaguan to its upper end at Shangguan, with the Old Town and all its villages and farmland dotted in between. Across the water, the eastern hills rose more shyly, with Chicken Foot Mountain poking its head out past them. In the far distance to the north, just visible above a miasma of cloud, was Jade Dragon Snow Mountain next to Lijiang, almost 200 kilometres away. In the exultance of my altitude, I considered how long I had wanted to stand here. But having finally climbed this mountain, there was a bathos to it. I found no revelation up here, only the exact vista that I expected. My first thought was: time to get moving and go back down.

From Three Suns Peak, a rocky path traversed to its neighbour, Orchid Peak. I followed the ridgeline south, past Snow Spirit Peak and Exultant Echo Peak to Middle Harmony Peak. There was a TV tower here, built in the 1980s, and past it the southern end of the range came into sight: Jade Peak and the Horse-Washing Pool, another high tarn where Kublai Khan had allegedly led his army up to water their horses. Beyond it was Horse and Dragon Peak, the highest summit of the range, albeit too craggy to reach by foot. Past that, the Cang massif descended to the lower end of the valley.

The rocky scrubland around me, technically dubbed alpine meadow, was sparse and windswept. There were blue orchid flowers I hadn't seen before, and thistles that scratched at my shins. The path was easy walking — it had

been cut into the ridge decades ago, then closed to visitors after a few accidental deaths. While the traverse was not tough, I was suffering from altitude sickness, with a headache, faintness and nausea. (Drinking wine the night before may not have helped either.) I couldn't swallow more than a few bites of leftover chicken for lunch, then took one of the paths down the mountain. As soon as I was back in the shade of the conifer forest again, my symptoms cleared.

The down-climb was gentler, if not on my knees. For the upper stretch I was walking through a misted bamboo forest, as if in an elven kingdom. There was scant sign of animal life, besides chirping birds and scarpering squirrels. Friends who had been in Dali for longer had seen boars and red pandas and, in nearby hills, muntjacs and black bears. Down at 2,600 metres, crossing the Jade Belt Path, I came across a solitary birder piping birdsong out of her backpack, telescopic camera around her neck. We exchanged a few hushed words, and she showed me a photo of a Lady Amherst's pheasant she had spotted. Then she winced at all the noise we were making, and suggested I move along.

Further down the path, I was walking on automatic mode when a large yellow fowl flew across the path to rest hidden in the trees past me. I caught only a glimpse of bright-golden plumage, red underbelly and a long tail, at least a metre long. The first thought that crossed my mind was 'phoenix': portent of transformation, of resurrection. Later I identified it as the Chinese golden pheasant, a rare sighting.

Dusk was falling on the second night when I reached home. My legs and back were not thanking me, but my soul was full. I had made it to the top and back. Now, when I sat in my courtyard and looked up at the mountains, I saw them in a new light. It was their mystery that had first drawn me to Dali, and long had I dreamed of standing on that ridgeline, imagining myself transformed. But now that I had done so, I had no desire to chase idylls anymore.

The moon rose, drawing an arc in the night sky as I reflected on the journey I had been on since I moved to this valley. My gaze followed it

over the dark forest and silhouetted peaks. Yet the answers I had searched for weren't up there in the clouds. Whatever I needed, it was down here.

WINTER: Moon Season

The moon ascended, winter descended. In October, the names of the Chinese solar terms — Cold Dew, Descending Frost — had belied the warm sunshine that still bathed our southern valley. Now the first nip of cold infiltrated the evenings, though it was still T-shirt weather at noon. Later in winter, the first snows would fall, and the cycle of the elements would continue. Wind, flower, snow, moon.

On the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, the village celebrated Double Nines Festival, also known as Elders' Day, with a feast held inside the Buddhist temple to honour the elderly and pay respect to ancestors. Only the grandmas and grandpas of the village, in the winter of their life, were invited — but I was sneakily served a plate when I dropped by for a gander. Besides Mayor Li, I was the only person there under sixty.

Lidong, the 'Standing of Winter', fell in early November. This was one of the best months to be in Dali. The rains had ended, and nature was lush and overgrown from its watering. The harvest had been taken in, and the weather was not too hot or too cold. The reverse migrants to the valley went on bike rides and played Frisbee by the lake. We went rock climbing in the mountains and swam in waterfall pools, and at night we held barbecues and field parties under the moonlight.

I was now almost too comfortable in my Shangri-la. I cooked, meditated, did tai chi, practised piano. I taught Shakespeare sonnets to pupils in Beijing, thousands of kilometres away. I played jazz gigs with my band, The Melting Clocks, and joined an improv-comedy troupe of expats. After months of struggling with isolation, I had found my community here. It was these connections that made me happier, not the disconnection from society I had first sought. We are not solitary cats, after all, but social monkeys.

Whole days went by now without me thinking of my ex-fiancée. We were miles apart, and for all the pain of the break, at least it had been a clean cut. My digital detox included a rule not to check her social media, so

I had gone through withdrawal and come out the other side — ready, maybe, for the clamshell of my heart to be prised open again.

It had felt like a surprise — almost like I was a spectator of it — when Lili and I started a relationship. She lived in the Om Cave, and what began as a friendship had morphed into something more at the end of rainy season, when we would visit each other's courtyards at opposite ends of the village to spend the nights together. We joked that it was *zouhun*, a 'walking marriage', after the matrilineal Mosuo custom at Lugu Lake, further north in Yunnan, where a woman admitted or refused suitors to her chambers at night.

Lili had a slight frame and a fiery temper, with deep eyes that rested below a bob cut. She was passionate, mercurial, self-contained. A talented chef, she and I cooked meals together: she made me a bullfrog stir-fry; I attempted toad-in-the-hole. She saw through the fronts I presented, and broke down some of my ideas of what a relationship should or could be. Lying in my bed as moonlight shone onto our intertwined bodies, I felt a flow of energy run between us, like two batteries. For all the isolation I had felt with my phone for company, this was real connection at last. In the end, we are each other's homes.

One morning, Lili suggested an ayahuasca trip. She still had a little tucked away, left over from a previous ceremony — enough for two doses. This was the last of the four major psychedelics (along with mushrooms, cactus and acid) that some of the migrant hippies in Dali self-prescribed, not for hedonistic purposes but as medicine for inner healing. After boiling it down for several hours, it came out as dark concoction to drink with Syrian rue tea. There was much vomiting. Then we set off into the foothills, taking the Road of Life and Death above the west gate of the village, each the other's spirit guide.

The clouds changed first. Shifted significance and form as a pulsing energy buzzed through blood and brain. One cloud was eating another. Consuming it. The turquoise blue of the eucalyptus trees popped out of the forest greens. The sound of trickling water called out in spirit voice. We lay on the ground listening, communing, then staggered up to a clearing next to

a tea field and a stone shrine to the gods of nature. The mountain seemed alive, as if it had bent a knee to rest in this spot. The force of its greatness loomed above me. I had never felt smaller.

A wave of introspection struck me: a terror of awareness, surgery on the soul. All I had failed in. All I had left behind. All I had lost. It pulled me to my knees in this crook of the mountain, and the tears flowed out of me like water. Lili was hunched over on all fours, crying too, softly intoning *buyao*, *buyao* — don't want, don't want. It was not a bad trip; it was healing. To heal is to hurt. To hurt is to heal. Yet in the throes it was all I could do to breathe. Self-insight rose like fire in my throat, to be quenched sobbingly.

I looked up, and the late afternoon sun hit me in the eyes. The sky was a brilliance of light. Its warming illumination dispelled all else. The power of it, this flaming gaseous ball ninety million miles away, the sheer power. No wonder the first humans had worshipped the sun. Heat-giving, life-giving, immutable. Destroyer and creator. All my petty anxieties and hurts were bleached white by its incandescence. I talked with God. All that was left was faith, and joy to be alive.

Lili and I stumbled back down to the village as the sun set, casting its rays of ochre up into the sky. Rational thought returned haltingly, disappointingly. I knew the epiphany wouldn't last. But for a moment, I had stopped thinking enough to just let the is-ness of being wash over me. To be a brook that fed into the ocean; just another leaf on the tree. Part of the whole instead of trapped inside my brain. And as Lili and I held each other, sitting in my yard listening to chanting Icaro music to calm ourselves, I felt that connection to another life was the most precious thing of all.

It was dark out, with only a crescent moon to illuminate us. I felt sad that the sun had gone. But behind the earth, as behind a cloud, it was still there. Lili said that I could still see its light, reflected onto us by the moon. That the stars above us were other suns, only visible because of the absence of our own. I looked up at the moon, then at the twinkling suns past it. Darkness helped us see further.



Shuoru wanted to live the *jianghu* lifestyle when he grew up — to be a wandering kungfu fighter, unencumbered by responsibilities, moving from town to town with nothing but a rucksack of clothes and a staff, like the heroes of the Jin Yong novels he loved to read as a child. The podunk town in Hubei province where he grew up was nothing like that. When he left it, the only poetic wandering he did was from one industrial township to the next, taking car mechanic jobs and returning to cramped dorm bedrooms with axle grease on his T-shirt. He pivoted to e-commerce and found he had a flair for it, flipping electrical tools on Taobao and making a six-figure revenue: *jianghu* adventures for the digital era.

By his mid-twenties, Shuoru had forgotten all about his childhood dream.

‘Everything I did was about making money,’ he told me. ‘I didn’t want to be free, only to be rich.’ He put all his energy into work, hunched over his screen as it generated profits and fed his ambitions. He took out loans, bought stock on credit and lived beyond his means. His debts piled up until he was on the hook for millions of yuan. Then his business collapsed. One of his customers sued him. At twenty-eight, having been at the top and fallen all the way down, he declared bankruptcy, ran out on his debts and moved to Dali, which he had heard was a good place to hide out.

Over the next years, Shuoru began to cultivate the air of a wandering sage. He took to wearing long cloth robes with sneakers underneath. He shaved his head. He adopted his new Dali name, which literally meant ‘As If Master’. He collected disciples, and told them to call him *shifu* – master. He described the philosophy that he taught as ‘vagabond wisdom’. He had founded the school of thought himself. It was called *buzaihuizhuyi*: Don’t Care-ism.

‘If you don’t care about anything,’ the Master explained to me with a cavernous smile in a Dali café, ‘then nothing can hurt you, no one can hurt

you.’ He meant this literally and comprehensively: don’t care about money; don’t care about success; don’t care about family; don’t care about friends; don’t care about responsibilities; don’t care about consequences. If you want to do something, just do it. ‘To not care,’ he summed up, ‘is to be free.’

With a toothy grin and boundless energy, always ready to spring up and sniff out some new pleasure, Shuoru had the air of a honey badger. Having crashed and burnt in the pitfalls of enterprise, he was nothing but dismissive of that world.

‘It’s meaningless, it’s endless,’ he said. ‘You only want more this, more that.’

Now, if he wanted something, he just asked for it; if he didn’t get it, he didn’t care. He demonstrated this by asking the woman sitting next to me if she wanted to sleep with him.

Shuoru was against committed relationships, arguing that it was more natural for humans to have multiple partners than to shackle ourselves to one. ‘To say “you’re mine” is a form of slavery,’ he put it. The night before, he boasted, he had made love for four hours without orgasming, in a tantric technique to preserve his vital energy.

As he described his life philosophy, at times it felt like little more than a cop-out. Shuoru had two children from a previous marriage, but they were with their mother and he ‘didn’t care’ about their progress. He meant this in the sense of emotional detachment rather than a total abrogation of responsibility. But for all his carefree smiles, it came across as cold.

‘To be alone is the most free and easy life,’ he stressed. ‘Human ties are what make us suffer.’

In these teachings, the Master had found his *jianghu* lifestyle after all. If he wanted to do something, he didn’t think twice or consider others’ reactions. He followed his instincts, living as his unfettered self. He eked out a living by selling home-made soy sauce, rice wine and fermented tofu. Mostly, he sat on his rooftop drinking tea and chain-smoking cigarettes. He taught Don’t Care-ism out of a yoga studio near the Old Town, in a series of workshops entitled ‘The Awakening of Life’.

‘Throw out your brain,’ Shuoru exhorted a motley audience in one of these classes, as he sat cross-legged on the padded matting, surrounded by exercise balls. ‘Get rid of memory, get rid of face.’ He slapped his face, to drive the point home. ‘Live like a three-year-old baby, starting fresh every minute. Plans are stupid. We’re just ants, tiny, tiny, tiny. To not care is to be free. To not care is to be a sage.’

Audiences in Dali were used to self-proclaimed gurus, and the Master split the crowd. Half of them were eating up his every word in the front row. At the back, a middle-aged man stood up and left after a half-hour, muttering, ‘I’ve heard enough.’

Yet for all of Shuoru’s airs, it was hard not to like him while he grinned and jumped around the room in his faux monk robes, wiggling his bum in a demonstration of how we can let go of embarrassment. I was trying to let go of judgment, and he did make some sense, at least. There were elements of Buddhist non-attachment in his worldview, as well as the Taoist happy-go-lucky attitude — even the Epicurean pursuit of simple pleasures, and the Stoic quest for mental freedom from cares.

The new Dali people were all seeking that freedom, in their different ways. From the city, from career, from society, from their own minds. Freedom for them was the ability to choose: to quit a job; to leave a partner; to move; to stay; to run away.

Yet too much freedom, it occurred to me, could be a bad thing. For some, this escape to Dali was no more than fleeing the responsibilities and ambitions that drive us to become better. Shuoru had left behind his debts and dependents to live the *jianghu* life. Other reverse migrants had dropped so far off the grid that reintegration would be challenging, or were just pursuing their own pleasures without restraint. But self-control can be freedom too, lest we become slaves to our desires.

There was a dark side to Dali that I was beginning to taste. The valley was full of people running from their past. Here was a comfortable stagnation, hidden from a larger world and all the relationships and duties that made it meaningful. But the ties that bind us can also make us stronger. Restraints can set us free; too much liberty can be a chain.



On the last day of November, in the middle of the tenth month by the lunar calendar, Silver Bridge Village held elections. While China's top leaders were appointed by a rubber-stamp legislature, its decision made long ago in a closed room, at the village level there was nominal, limited democracy, with Chinese characteristics.

Dali was technically an ethnic autonomous zone within the nation, a 'self-ruled area' since 1955. All this meant in practice was that cadres in the Communist hierarchy were ethnically Bai instead of Han. Silver Bridge had multiple levels of local government, including a mayor of the village as a whole (the position now up for grabs), administrative heads of its four bureaucratic subdivisions at the village committee level, and a Party Secretary who oversaw them and wielded the most actual power. There was also a figurehead 'reputation mayor' — a ceremonial position given to a rich outsider developing a hotel in the middle of the village, who helped to bring in investment — as well as a crinkled grandad who was referred to as the village 'chief' as a throwback to previous power structures, but who had no actual duties.

Mayor Li, the former PLA soldier who had been disciplined for mask-profiteering during the pandemic, was not running again this year. He was cagey about why, but he did say that the Party Secretary of the village took all the major decisions anyway; his own duties were minimal, like mediating in conflicts and maintaining communal spaces.

Elections were held every five years. Later, I learnt that an edict this year had called for the mayor and the Party Secretary positions to be filled by the same individual. This was common practice across China but, with the tightening of Party control under Xi Jinping, it had now become doctrine. Local Party Secretaries were appointed by the township government, who also vetted the list of candidates for mayor and approved their selection,

although the secret ballot was legitimate and every adult with a local *hukou*, or residence document, could vote.

On the morning of the election, a large metal box was set up in the village exercise square, marked with the characters 'VOTING BOX'. Two committee officials guarded it, and a score of villagers lined up to drop pink ballot papers inside. There were a number of positions to be filled, including three 'representatives of the people' at township level. (When I enquired as to their duties, I was simply told they 'represented the people'.) This was just the ballot for my section of the village, the fourth administrative zone, and it was a small, anticlimactic affair, without fanfare. I asked one voter if he felt having elections like this made China a democratic country.

'They are asking ordinary farmers what they want,' he grunted in dismissal of the question. 'Of course it is democracy. Actually, our government is very good.'

I could understand this impulse to defend China to a foreign questioner. In Silver Bridge, as in rural China more widely, there was broad support for the government, along with a knee-jerk equivalence of Party and state. In many of the living rooms I had been served tea in, there were posters of Xi Jinping on the wall. One had even been holographic, with lenticular printing that changed which member of the Politburo Standing Committee you saw depending on your viewing angle. These were not just greengrocer's signs to display conformity: Xi was genuinely popular in the countryside, thanks to his anti-corruption and poverty-alleviation campaigns, plus a cult of personality that cast him as a man of the people on state TV. By and large, central government was seen as being behind the people's interests and local government was blamed when anything went wrong.

Some of the new migrants to Dali saw it differently. Old Zhao, the Tiananmen student leader, said the village elections were 'fake'. He was not suggesting that they were rigged, but called them a showcase to 'make [the people] think they are free when they are not'. Other city arrivals admired the local elections — were jealous, even, as they could not vote themselves

and had no such equivalent in urban China. But most didn't give it a second thought; they had come here to get away from politics, not seek it out.

I didn't find out the results of the election until later, when the new mayor knocked on my door to re-register me as a foreigner living in the village. Liu Fuchen was a slight man in his early forties, with a widow's peak and a shy smile. He had lived in Silver Bridge all his life, working in construction before joining the local government. In fact, he told me, he had grown up in my courtyard. His was one of the five families that had shared it, back when it was all one large yard with a communal kitchen and toilet.

'I can't recognise it now,' he said, pointing to the new building across the bamboo fence where he had spent his childhood. 'Our village is always changing, always changing.'

With a soft-spoken manner and quiet expression, he reminisced about his childhood years, playing with a family of kittens in the yard. I wasn't sure what I had expected, but Mayor Liu was a pleasant man, with a kinder manner than Mayor Li. Before he left, I asked if the results had been close. He smiled, and informed me of a key detail I had missed: as the incoming Party Secretary, he had run for mayor unopposed. In this year's elections, the village had chosen him from a candidate list of one.

The so-called election was a stark reminder that for all the personal freedoms we were seeking in Dali, there was no meaningful political freedom in China to accompany them. I was observing this from a position of privilege, and it was easy to dismiss the affair. But to those in the village, suffrage was one of the least important freedoms they valued. Far more valuable were financial freedom and personal security, which allowed them the luxury of having any choice at all in how they lived. So long as they had the opportunity to earn and prosper, and saw government as aiding rather than hampering that progress, they backed the Party. The older generation among them remembered the bad times. These times were good.

'I hope,' said Mayor Liu in parting, 'that our village can get better and better.'



Progress was all around us. Silver Bridge Village continued to develop, as the nation got richer and the reverse migrants and tourists flooded the valley — those who, in escaping the city, were making Dali more closely resemble it.

A second location of the Tree & Field boutique hotel was built, past rose fields at the edge of the next village north. The township government had erected a wooden walkway through the farmland connecting the two villages, with a platform in the middle commanding a view of the lake. At one end of the walkway, a Bai family struggled to make ends meet at a rundown corn liquor brewery. At the other end, a hotel employee dressed in a waistcoat and flat cap stood next to a Dutch thoroughbred horse and Victorian-style carriage, like a character in a Dickens novel, waiting to carry guests the last hundred metres to their room.

For some locals, these changes were a good thing, bringing money into the valley. Ever more old stone farmhouses were being knocked down to build modern brick homes — and who were we to demand the village stayed locked in the past? Yet for others, such as the octogenarian Li Guanyu, who still chopped wood for the stove of his ramshackle home next to the three-storey concrete box his son had built, it was too much progress, and not evenly distributed. Li was thrilled at China's development over the last decades of his life; now he could eat meat every day, and fill his pipe with tobacco. But he didn't see why the character of his childhood village needed to be torn up in the process.

More of the paths of the village were being concreted over, and while this made it less picturesque, it did allow for easier vehicle access. The topmost track of the village, which hugged the mountains above the west gate, was also being dug up and re-laid, but this time with artful cobbles for tourist horse-rides as part of what the new mayor liked to call the 'Extended

Old Tea Horse Road'. A shiny public toilet was erected in the middle, then locked so that locals couldn't use it until the tourists arrived.

These changes, or this progress, was happening across the nation's countryside. One of Xi's major campaigns was 'rural revitalisation', to even out the spoils of development from city to country. Just last month, state media had announced that China had 'won the war on poverty', with the last rural county lifted above the poverty line (set as fewer than 2 per cent of its population living on less than 4,000 yuan a year). A parallel campaign was dubbed the 'toilet revolution', which called for a certain number and quality of public lavatories per village. It seemed the toilet revolution had made it to Silver Bridge.

For those of us who had moved to the country from the cities — reversing the regular flow — this gospel of development was, to an extent, exactly what we were fleeing. Yet, in resisting it, we were swimming against the current. We wanted a postcard-perfect countryside to live in, but were providing the very stream of revenue that morphed it into something else. We came here to find change for ourselves, but baulked when the valley did. The truth was, in China everything was changing all the time, and nobody could resist it.

At a national level, some of those changes were grim. Politics was tightening further, and the air had been sucked out of civil society. Writers, artists and rights activists, even entrepreneurs and entertainers, were being cracked down on. Zero-Covid policy turned China's cities into cages, like it was a closed nation again, as it had been in the Mao era. There had always been cycles of tightening and loosening over the eras of Communist China. But when I compared the exciting, slowly opening society I had first moved to in 2008 to this shuttered, nationalistic China of today, it felt like watching a tragedy in slow motion.

At times, the world beyond China seemed like it was doing even worse. The coronavirus was running rampant in its winter second wave. A contested election in America was calling the very foundations of its democracy into question. Conservative Party scandals and hypocrisy in Britain were depressing. There were wildfires in Australia, floods in India, a

planet protesting at its abuse. Sometimes I wondered if, from a distance, I was imagining things at their exaggerated worst, fed by the media. My desire to stay hidden away from it all in the mountains only deepened.

Even the stars carried portents. It was a busy year, astronomically: there had just been a lunar eclipse, and not long ago a meteor shower had lit up the night sky with shooting stars. At the upcoming winter solstice, Saturn and Jupiter would overlap in the night sky, visible in Asia as a single bright star. The astrologically inclined among the new Dali people talked of this confluence as a harbinger of trouble and transformation. It was another omen of this ill-fated *gengzi* year, by the Chinese zodiac, that every sixty years brought calamity with it — along with the metamorphosis that disaster can engender.

Ultimately, for all the changes happening around us, the only part that we could control was our own actions; the only space that mattered was inside our skulls. I thought of Old Zhao's words: that to change anything else, we must first change ourselves. For me that process continued, torturously slowly but not without progress. My monkey mind had been tamed enough to jump through hoops. New habits formed; old ones were at least partially broken. And in my private faith I found a quietude I could draw upon in the cacophony. If my mind was at peace, it didn't matter so much if the world was at war.

As mid-winter approached, I was onto the stage of the twelve-steps programme after the moral inventory and letting go of character defects: the making of amends. By now I felt that even without any screen addiction to fix, this was a self-help course that everyone could benefit from. I made a list of everyone I had wronged in some way, little or large, and a plan for an imperfect restitution, provided it didn't harm them further. Sometimes this was a simple apology or acknowledgment of injury, short and sweet. Or it was the repayment of a debt, or offer of action to make things right. Often it was no more than a silent intention to not repeat the harm, to be better to them in future. The prospect of facing up to it all was unappealing — and that was the point of it, to puncture my pride.

A week before Christmas, in a frenzy of hopeful self-forgiveness, I burnt through the list. I made phone calls, sent messages, paid back money, expressed silent or spoken regret. It felt like a chore, like scrubbing my courtyard when I had first moved in: unpleasant and smelly and something I wanted to be over quickly. Yet I was thorough, and by the end my house was clean. The gunk in the pipes was gone. I had swept my side of the yard. As to anyone else's reactions and emotions, that was not my affair; their mess was their own. But I did find that in thinking of others, of their hurt, I became not only more empathetic but happier too. I moved past regret into acceptance. When it was over, I felt free.

On the night of the winter solstice, I made a mutton stew and took it over to the Om Cave, where we lit the wood-fired samovar in their back room and I huddled up with Lili against the cold. Later in the night, I looked up to see a new light in the sky: the overlapping of Jupiter and Saturn, a bright star in the south-west. Some said this convergence of planets had been the Bethlehem star that guided the magi to Jesus' stable two millennia ago. It rivalled the waxing moon for its luminance, and guided me home to my own crib.

The motion of the heavens had given me my milestones for this first year in Dali: the months of the moon, the solstices of the sun. It also offered cosmic context for my own little self. To think that I existed for a fraction of a millisecond relative to the waltz of the spheres felt oddly liberating. Their constancy put all the changes around me in perspective. Maybe nothing I thought was so important really was. There was a freedom in that, too. And on the darkest day of the year, my nights began to shorten.



Winters in Dali are deceptively mild. At the same latitude as Qatar, in December the daytime temperature is still gentle. But our high altitude meant that by now, the eleventh lunar month, our nights were biting cold.

There was no central heating in the valley, so we made our own warmth. We lined beds with electric blankets, and the winter stove was the centre of every home. At the House of Science, it was a home-built rocket-mass heater: inner and outer steel drums piping heat through a bum-warming bench. The Om Cave had a Tibetan-style stove, with a kettle or pot of soup simmering on top. Many of us lit fires in our courtyards to gather around at night. I found an enormous pig-iron wok, charred and discarded, and propped it up on rocks to make a fire pit of my own, chopping logs from the woodshed next door to feed it.

Having followed the Chinese calendar and its festivals to mark the progress of the seasons, I was excited to return to Western habits and celebrate Christmas. In normal years, I would have gone home to Oxford to spend this time with family: the familiar decorations, the turkey and mince pies, the obligatory game of Monopoly. With the pandemic raging, flights grounded and China closed, that was impossible. Instead, along with other foreigners among the new Dali people, we recreated the holiday in the middle of rural Yunnan.

For all the novelty of Dali, it was easy to get homesick. I had made new friends, but besides Zhazha there was nobody here who had known me for longer than a year. Technology meant I could see old friends and family at the tap of a button, but when the screen went dark I felt further away than ever. And for all my newfound intimacy with Lili, there were still nights when I thought of my ex, of our shared experiences in Beijing and abroad, including last year's Christmas back home.

On the morning of Christmas Eve, I had agreed to dress up as Santa at one of the alternative schools, where they wanted a white person for the role. I had bought a cheap Santa outfit on Taobao, and the second I entered the grounds with a 'HO-HO-HO' I was mobbed by a murder of children. They immediately knocked me to the ground and started pulling the cushions out from under my belly, in shrill glee at exposing me as a fake. I threw a fistful of sweets at them like chaff to distract their attack. After some carols and a quick English lesson, the vanquished Santa retreated.

That night I was hosting dinner: the first time I had opened my courtyard for a party since moving in. My mother is Polish, and the *Wigilia*, or vigil, of Christmas Eve was a family tradition: a meal of fish with *barszcz* soup, eaten when the first star was visible in the night sky. For Christmas lunch the next day, I was going to a friend's yard and had also promised to bring a roast. That meant that from noon until dusk, I had my work cut out.

The first order of business — in pleasingly Dickensian fashion — was to kill a goose. Li Xianmi, the Christian beekeeper in my village, had a few running around on his farm. Still in the knock-off Santa costume, I ran around trying to catch one then carried it squawking back to my yard. It was the first time I had slaughtered fowl, and I Googled methods extensively before settling on a swift chop of my sharpened wood axe. After blanching and plucking its feathers, my courtyard painted a shade of festive crimson, I had a prize goose to brine overnight.

Thanks to online shopping and global delivery infrastructure — less Dickensian — I had Norwegian smoked salmon all ready in the fridge for my *Wigilia* buffet. But for the *barszcz* I needed a key fresh ingredient: beetroot. Luckily, one of the migrant-owned farms near Silver Bridge (named 'Following Heaven') had planted a crop of it, and I went to pick some along with organic baby potatoes and wrinkled earthy carrots. Once I had peeled the beetroots and shredded them into a soup pot, Santa resembled a murder suspect more than ever, with bloody axe to incriminate him. With veggies roasting in the oven, *barszcz* on the boil and salmon spread on my courtyard's stone tea table, I was just about ready when the score of friends I had invited began to trickle in.

Before the feast, the final Polish custom I felt I had to honour was the breaking of *opłatek*, Catholic wafer bread. Having failed to source this, I was using cheap almond crackers from the village convenience store instead. Breaking bread with each other, we attempted to pronounce the Polish for merry Christmas, *wesołych Świąt*, which my mother had coached me on. We looked up at the twilight sky and saw the first star glimmering: it was time to eat. Popping the Prosecco, we ate and talked until late, warming ourselves and toasting marshmallows at the courtyard wok fire, by whose

flickering light I toed a string of goose intestines out of sight before anyone could notice.

On Christmas morning, I went to a traditional mass at Dali's Catholic church, passing the mural of Jesus being crucified by the banks of Lake Er. The red-faced priest presided, and the service featured Bible readings and a Mandarin rendition of 'Silent Night'. There was even wafer bread for Communion, and I kicked myself for not thinking of the church for last night's supplies. Sitting in the pews next to a nativity set, I could almost suspend my disbelief and imagine myself back home — although this Mary and Joseph looked distinctly Chinese. Among the local congregants, I was the only foreign face.

Rushing home, I took the brined goose out of the fridge, rubbed it down with herbs from my garden, and popped it in the oven. Lili had come over to help with the cooking, and we prepared a feast on a tray. In the mid-afternoon, back in my Santa outfit (goose blood rubbed off), we carried the roast to the courtyard of our friend Emily, a Bostonian who ran an imported food store in Dali. With a dozen assorted friends, we sat at a long outdoor table in the Yunnan sun, laid with my goose, a turkey, three varieties of mash and platefuls of seasonal vegetables. It was a feast for all senses. By nightfall, Santa had to lie down upstairs in a food coma.

We had staved off homesickness, and saved the holidays. There was always something pleasing about making Christmas a success when living abroad. Unlike in the cities, some of the villagers of Silver Bridge had no idea what this Western festival was, including Granny Yang next door, who had looked on bemusedly as I ran around in a furry red suit. But attempts to recreate home customs while 7,000 kilometres away also reminded me that this was anything but home. It had been a long year since I had last hugged my family.

The liminal week between Christmas and New Year's is a no man's land where time stops. The year hits pause, and examines itself before resetting. The last trip around the sun had brought so much change. If I had asked myself a year ago what I would be doing now, the last thing I would have guessed would be decapitating geese while wearing a Santa costume in a

Yunnan village. But that just showed how little I knew — how pointless it was to try to guess or manage the future, when it followed its own unfathomable flow.

On the night of the occidental new year, the Dali migrants threw a field rave. Some of the old organisers had left, and a fresh crew from Chengdu had come to take their place in the rotating door of Dali. There was a fire pit, a mosh pit and an astronaut suit propped up in the middle of the field like a trippy scarecrow. Someone had arranged for the words ‘MARRY ME’ to light up in fire during the party (she said yes). The moon was full, and the mood was high when the countdown to midnight began.

I wasn’t there for it. I had had enough partying this year, and left early. I went back to the quiet of the village. I knocked on Lili’s door at the Om Cave, and she let me in. Above us, the night sky turned slowly, flecked by thin clouds, and moonlight bathed the courtyard. It was the same moon as back home, after all.



2020 had ended, but the lunar year still had one and a half turns of the moon left. By mid-January, we began the last month of the rural calendar: *layue*, named for an ancient sacrificial rite. The first character was also used in the word for cured meats, *larou*, and it was customary in this month to salt pork cuts to eat when Chinese New Year fell at its end. These legs of ham hung from the rafters of every local restaurant, and were a Yunnan speciality. I tried my own hand at salting a shoulder cut, hanging it on a string from a beam in my courtyard, slowly dripping juices while Moon salivated below.

Later, the first winter snows fell on the mountainside. They carpeted its peaks in great drifts but did not reach the valley, where only mists descended. The Cang mountains used to be frosted for half the year, said Li Guanyu, the pipe-chugging grandpa. Now the snows came later and later, and melted earlier in the spring, or some years did not fall at all. In a picture book that compared images taken by the explorer Joseph Rock a century

ago and photos taken today, the receding snowlines were dramatic. I hiked up to the snowline in gaiters to trudge through the knee-deep powder, enjoying it while I could.

The new Dali people were hibernating once more. I noticed that the longer they had been here, the less often they left their courtyards. One woman called Shuning ('Book Tranquillity'), who had arrived a decade ago, lived alone and rarely emerged, busy concocting essential oils and soaps in her back room.

'I like it best when I can do my own things,' she put it. At this time of year, she cleaned out her phone's contact list, deleting anyone whom she hadn't seen or heard from in the last year. She had seventy-nine contacts in her WeChat; I had 2,936, but had no idea who most of them were. 'There are too many people in the world,' Shuning said. 'Sometimes the further away I feel from them, the better.'

Each of the new Dali people whom I had got to know over the last year had found their own discoveries, their new ways to live. Each came for their own reasons and sought their own private escapes. Refugees from the modernity of the cities, lying flat on their patch of grass under the Yunnan sun.

Zhazha, the photographer who had first introduced me to Dali, was still living in Three Brush Village. He had rented a small space next to the shrine to the god of literacy and opened a coffee and cocktail bar, slinging Dali Sours for friends as we sat on the bench outside, looking up at the three pagodas built by monk kings of old. He still went back to Beijing for work, and returned with horror tales of bi-daily Covid tests — a theatre of code-scanning and face-masking despite minimal cases — and a diminished city with less of the culture and nightlife that first drew him there when he was younger.

Nutshell, the inn owner who had sold his city flat and possessions to move to Dali, had no intention of ever returning.

'That chapter of my life is over,' he told me. 'My daughter is happy here; she can play outside every day.' With other parents, he had started his own off-the-grid alternative school as planned, converting farmland into an

outdoor cabin classroom with sandpit, trampoline, climbing wall and chicken coop, with activities from music jams to eurythmy dance. Nutshell spent his own days painting, tending to his orchard and tinkering with the palace of quietude he had built by the banks of Spirit Source Stream.

The retirees Teacher Zhou and Doctor Chen tended their gardens, watered their roses and harvested their crops, getting ready for the long slow winter of life. Elsewhere, new life was beginning. One of the former residents of the Om Cave, Jolie, had split off to start her own hippy courtyard in Silver Bridge, hosting paid retreats for city visitors including shamanic drum-circles and tantric classes. One of the courses she offered was for pregnant mothers to come to her courtyard to deliver a natural birth — with no medicine or painkillers — as I discovered from the screams I heard when walking nearby.

Yiyi, the vlogger who had wanted to emulate Li Ziqi's viral success in Dali, was posting photos and videos from her own organic farm-school. Meili, at Rainbow Farm, had seen these ventures come and go, content to watch her own winter beans come up. Li Xianmi harvested his honey, and Pigeon burnt through his weed. Cloud, the tarot reader, had set up shop in the streets of the Old Town, while Cloud Dragon, the tattooed Buddhist youth, wanted nothing more than to blow his didgeridoo up the mountains in peace.

Old Zhao, the Tiananmen student leader, started to distribute banned books from Taiwan and Hong Kong, building a free library in his whisky parlour. Shuoru, the self-proclaimed Master of Don't Care-ism, held new workshops promoting his philosophy. Kongxuan, the Buddhist self-cultivation sister, stayed indoors and meditated all day long, while the zombies followed the psychedelic sutra at full-moon raves.

For each of these new migrants I had met, the last month of the Chinese year was a time to look at the past, and to think of the future. It was an occasion to take stock of the changes their lives had gone through, in the new homes that they had built.

Tao's house, however, had blown down. It happened right at the end of January, when the first winds of late winter blew a gusting torrent during

the night. The Taoist carpenter-philosopher had worked on his log cabin for almost a year now, and it had nearly been ready to occupy. The roof and walls were in place, the raised platform on stilts felt secure enough to walk on — but underneath, the moisture of summer rains had rotted the old wooden beams that the floor rested on. One gale from the mouth of hell and the whole structure gave out, collapsing in on itself, unsalvageable.

When Tao woke from fitful sleep to see the scene of destruction, he did not feel anything in particular. It had fallen down; he would build it again. I visited him soon after, and he was already collecting the scraps, planning to rebuild it better.

‘In fact,’ he said, ‘I didn’t really care so much about having this room ... It was just something to do.’ He took a sip of tea. ‘If it didn’t blow down,’ he joked, ‘maybe I would have torn it down anyway so I could start over again.’ It wasn’t the goal he cared about, but the joy of the process — that was the Tao of Tao.

When I dropped by a week later, though, he wasn’t home. Tao had left for Chicken Foot Mountain to live as a *jushi*, a Buddhist acolyte. He was old friends with the monk Rucheng, from their bar days together in old Dali, and was camping in the forest next to Shining Light Monastery, sampling the monastic life but not ready to take vows. Rucheng said over text that he knew Tao would never leave the lay life (‘he likes drinking alcohol too, too much’). But all Tao wanted was the space to reset, to find a peaceful heart. Sometimes, we all need to get away from our getaway.



As the Year of the Rat scarpered into its final weeks, various of the new Dali migrants were talking about leaving. Some left Dali for a season or two, then returned: these were called *houniao*, or ‘migrating birds’. A few talked of leaving for good, but never did. Others gave up on the Dali dream entirely and returned to the cities, tail between their legs.

At first it surprised me when those who had spoken so passionately of escaping the city suddenly announced they were going back. But I came to understand that this was part of the natural cycle of Dali. On first moving to the valley, in the flush of excited idealism, it felt as if this would be our forever home — a corner of paradise to put down roots in. But the human mind is wired for novelty, not stasis. The sheen fades; the familiar loses its magic. Disillusionment sets in, fuelled by whatever doesn't match the fantasy. Or the hard wall of reality hits, often relating to finances and the difficulty of earning money in the countryside. Often it was the very restlessness that first brought the reverse migrants to Dali which drove them out in the end. The longer I stayed, the more leaving parties I attended.

One of those leaving was Shonkar, the gay Mongolian who had recently got fake-married. With his nuptials behind him and his family off his back, he was only feeling more restless. He had split with his boyfriend, Venezuelan Jesus, and was living at a shared courtyard dubbed 'Daliwood', just down from Wuwei Temple. It was a party house, with a skateboard ramp, makeshift swimming pool, jujitsu dojo, trippy wall murals featuring sci-fi dragons, and a fire pit around which they drank and smoked and played music until the early hours each night. Over the last years Shonkar had cycled between similar courtyards, but by now it felt aimless. He was drinking every day, and his early excitement about Dali's freedoms had faded.

'Dali feels like a firework that exploded,' Shonkar told me, 'and now it's dying off.' He had just turned twenty-seven, and suddenly felt his existence here was childish. He looked at his life, and found it just as empty as the steppe where he had grown up. He filled his time with drinking and drugs and partying and sex, but his mind was still running circles around him. He was reaping what he had sown. It was time to find new fields.

'Dali is like a black hole,' he said. 'It sucks you in, it's hard to leave. You don't even know you're stagnating when you're here ... It's like a bubble,' he continued, switching metaphors, 'and a bubble makes you weak.'

He had been here long enough to see several rounds of arrivals and departures: the swift turnover of the reverse migrants. ‘Dali dies a thousand deaths,’ as he put it. But this time the urge to move was too strong for him to resist.

Shonkar planned to go back to Alxa in Inner Mongolia, where the two camels his uncle had given him for his wedding were waiting. He wanted to ride them. He wanted to go drinking with his school friends. He wanted to get a job, and earn money. All this would mean going back into the closet. He already had a line prepared about how his wife, Melanie, had returned to the Netherlands. Eventually, he wanted to get out of China entirely and move to Europe too. Mostly he just wanted something new, all over again.

‘Dali has been like a dream,’ he concluded. ‘But you have to wake up sometime.’

These cycles of coming and going were familiar to the valley, ever since it had become a destination for the escaping middle class. Back in 2013, a Beijing couple who quit their corporate jobs to move to Dali wrote a viral blog about the decision.

‘We want to live in a small town by the mountains and the water,’ Shi Xuxia wrote, ‘to have a peaceful life, a breath of fresh air, a pot of tea made with snow water and a meal with natural ingredients. Many people back home admire us or are jealous. I just say: you can do it too.’

Two years later, their book *Leaving Beijing for Dali: Do What You Like With Whomever You Like* was published in China. But by then, they had already left. A job opportunity had come up in Beijing, and they moved back after just over twelve months in Dali.

‘The dream has been achieved,’ Shi wrote in the closing post of her blog to over 100,000 confused followers, ‘so it’s time to pursue the next dream. I think that’s just life. We are going to start a new life. In fact, every day is a new life ... Goodbye, dear Dali! Someday I will return to see you again.’

Of those who left, many went back to the cities, but some fled deeper into the hills. As Dali commercialised, the hippies who had first come to get off the beaten track found even more remote hideaways. They went to live in Shaxi (‘Sandy Brook’), whose gentler hills and rolling streams had been

the next pit stop north on the old Tea Horse Road. Or they rented courtyards in villages near Lijiang, in the shadow of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, where the botanist Joseph Rock's dispatches had first inspired the myth of Shangri-la. One former Om Cave resident, Alok, had built her own mountain hideout near the first bend of the upper Yangtze: a wooden shack up a high hill past all paved roads and mobile reception, where she could meditate in peace without a sound around her, but for the rustling wind and the creaking beams.

There were some who wanted to leave but couldn't. Lili was among them. She was used to being a migratory bird, with Dali as her base. She longed to be back on the road, backpacking through India and Nepal again, or maybe the Maghreb or Latin America. But the authorities, in their infinite wisdom, were confiscating Chinese passports due for renewal to prevent travellers from bringing the coronavirus back with them. They had taken her passport at the local government office. She complained it was her bad luck to be born a citizen of 'this fucking country'. Some days Dali felt like a beautiful cage, the mountains hemming her in. Other days she didn't wish to be anywhere else.

When my neighbours at the House of Science said they were moving out next year, it felt like the end of an era. Rio and Locky, the Chinese Australian couple who had rented me my courtyard before opening their sourdough bakery, had got married the year before and wanted a place of their own. So they gave up the ramshackle farmhouse and overgrown yard that had housed so many people and memories over the years. But they didn't go far, renovating a cowshed in a nearby village instead, installing a floor-to-ceiling window with a view of the mountains.

Later I met the yuppie-turned-hippy Chinese family who would be taking over the House of Science. A Zhong was from the megacity of Chongqing, and used to work as a day trader and broker. He had just turned forty, but his ruddy face was full of childish enthusiasm, framed by a bandana to keep back his long hair. His twenties and thirties were spent chasing the ups and downs of China's notoriously fickle stock market. He went bankrupt three times. He got married. He got divorced.

‘I realised I wanted to totally rethink my life,’ he told me in English, ‘and what is important to me.’

Travelling in Thailand the year before, A Zhong had met a Chinese woman and fallen in love. Now they were moving to Dali with his six-year-old daughter from his first marriage, Yoyo. Giving up stock graphs for a wooden work bench, he took up aromatherapy, collecting wild herbs and tree branches in the mountains, then hanging them out to dry, boiling and distilling them into essential oils: cypress, cedar, wormwood, eucalyptus, fennel, rosemary, jasmine, sandalwood, lilac, lemongrass. The expensive scents could be dripped onto a silk napkin draped on your pillow, or rubbed into your skin, or vaporised in your room or vehicle to ‘bring the forest into your car’.

A Zhong exemplified the new kind of Dali migrant — not twenty-something backpackers who had stumbled into Shangri-la, but forty-something bourgeois-bohemians with families and a business plan.

‘Freedom without responsibility isn’t true freedom,’ he told me. ‘The hippy life of just partying and being free like that is no good. Real freedom is nourishing yourself and your family.’

The gentrification of Dali was all part of the cycle, too. Trendy coffee shops and restaurants were springing up all over the valley, to serve the reverse migrants. There was a growing community of digital nomads who had started a co-working space called DaliHub, with its own podcast about working remote. Those interested in cryptocurrency also seemed to gravitate towards the valley, and held regular meet-ups. There was even an aborted attempt to host a Web3 conference that — appropriately — ended up being decentralised into split-off locations. The hippies who had once been the Dali cliché were now being replaced by baristas and crypto bros.

It felt reassuring that, even as some of us were leaving, others arrived to take their place. The valley was in higher demand than ever. Every time a city lockdown ended, more reverse migrants flowed into Dali, driven out by the pandemic and its policies.

This cycle of departures and arrivals matched the turning of the seasons. Dali was the final destination for some, and just another stop for others. The

old left, the new took their place. Winter would turn once more into spring.



Spring Festival, the Chinese or lunar new year, fell on 12 February — a jump forwards from the previous year, due to the intercalary leap month that brought the moon's and sun's rotations in line with each other. Thirteen new moons had passed since I had moved to Dali. Now the wheel had come full circle.

Time distorts. My first months here, wrapped in heartache like a hair shirt, went by as if they were years. Then, distracted by new discoveries in the valley, weeks disappeared like days. I had read that time perception dilates and contracts according to the novelty of the memories being formed, and some of the hours of these past four seasons felt like they would live in my memories as aeons.

Yet before I knew it, the last day dawned on the Year of the Rat. The cursed *gengzi* year had lived up to its reputation, with pandemic and political upheaval. At midnight it would pass the baton to the ox, on whose back the rat had hitched a ride in the race that determined the order of the zodiac animals.

The ox was my birth year, the *benmingnian*, or 'year of one's name': a year associated with personal challenge, opportunity and growth. With a dozen animals in the zodiac, this special year usually fell when one was twelve, twenty-four, thirty-six, and so on, to complete the traditional cycle. Yet I was born in January 1986, right at the end of the ox year (in the 'ox's tail'), so this birth year fell shortly after I turned thirty-five. The last Year of the Ox, back in 2009, had been my first lunar new year in China, a fresh-faced graduate studying Mandarin at Peking University.

That Spring Festival, twelve years ago, I had spent the winter holiday in Qinghai province, at the Tibetan mountain village where I had taught two summers before, on my first ever trip to China. Looking out over its craggy peaks, my then girlfriend — a Ukrainian also studying Chinese in Beijing

— had given me a red belt that she had embroidered herself, as a New Year's gift. It was customary to wear something red in your birth year, she explained, for protection and as a good-luck charm. We climbed the high ridge behind the village and kissed in the wind, our long hair swept around us, intermingling. It was the first time I was in love.

Twelve years later, I thought of her as I dug that red belt out of my closet and strapped it around my waist in preparation for another Year of the Ox. I thought of her dirty-blond hair blowing in my face; of the blush in her cheeks, the defiant fire in her eyes, the pitch of her voice. The relationship had lasted three more years until, in London on the leap day of 2012, we came to the last rites of first love. By the end of that year, I was back in China. It took many seasons to move on emotionally, but as I thought back on it now, fixing the belt in place, I felt only joy at having shared that time of our lives together.

Now the zodiac had cycled around to another birth year. I had fallen in love again between the two: a second woman, a second heartbreak. As I recalled my ex-fiancée's face — her smile, her laugh, her curiosity and spark — I relived the loss all over again. Yet the rawness of those emotions had scarred over into acceptance. And I felt the glimmer of hope that I would be whole, and love, again. In another decade, maybe I would think of my years with her as I did of those with that first love now. Time distorts; time also heals.

For now, there were chores to clear. I swept my yard, took out the trash, cut my hair. This was a time to get one's household in order, and as I surveyed my courtyard farmhouse, the Mountain Studio, a warm glow passed through me: I realised that after a year of tweaks and refurbishment, my home was just as I wanted it.

On this last day of the last month, it was also customary to strip down the faded calligraphy couplets from yesteryear and hang fresh ones on either side of one's front door. My neighbours already had theirs up, handwritten in gold ink with beautiful brushstrokes. It turned out there was a calligrapher in the village, who made his own ink. I walked up to his house, and he was in: a white-bearded Bai grandad who wrote the couplets

for most of Silver Bridge. I wanted to try writing them myself, so he gave me strips of red paper and a paper cup full of gold ink, diluted with gasoline to make it stretch further.

In my studio, dipping my brush in the ink, I set the strokes down, trying to use the twists and pressure differentials to bring them to life. With the help of a Chinese friend, I had settled on two short phrases of five characters each:

高山升灵气

沉水下静心

In the high mountains your spirit soars

In the deep waters your heart settles

Once the characters dried, I glued the two vertical hangings to either side of my gate. With an upside-down 福 for fortune pasted in between them, my yard was ready for the next four seasons.

It was time to go out. Next door, the House of Science was hosting a New Year's party that doubled as their farewell to the courtyard. Their hanging couplets were more ironically direct: '*Richer and richer every day; Get whatever you want.*' Their pizza kiln was fired up, and they were already slinging pies. Lili and the Om Cave dwellers were there too, in a confluence of shared courtyards. I collapsed on their ratty sofa and watched the sunshine play on the stones of their yard, as the crippled dog, Lucky, dragged himself excitedly between us. It felt good to lie flat and do nothing at all, to be with friends.

When night fell, I went to Three Brush Village, under the shadow of the three pagodas: to the yard where I had lived when I first moved to Dali. Yaling the yoga teacher was there, and her brother, Lemon, and Zhazha too. We wrapped dumplings together: folding and pinching the edges over pork-and-chive stuffing; lining them up in rows of crescents like miniature moons; then dumping them in the pot to boil until tender.

With a gaggle of their friends, we ate and drank to bursting point: stewed meats, steamed fish, juicy dumplings, succulent vegetables, strong booze. Preparing for midnight, we set down an enormous case of fireworks in the middle of the courtyard, then lit the fuse and ran upstairs to the roof. A

cacophony of rockets shot up past our noses, exploding above the skyline of the three ancient pagodas. Past them, the lake twinkled in the moonless night, reflecting the light of a thousand other fireworks set off in a thousand other homes. Behind it all, the silhouette of the mountains watched these fleeting sparks of humanity dispassionately, unmoved.

I thought back to the fireworks of a year before, last winter. I had needed a detonation in my life, then. A year is a small circle, and I had come again to its end, to its beginning. Suddenly I felt like all the years of my life were blending together in this one moment: past and present and future coexisting. All points equidistant in the circle from the centre where I stood, in the unity of time and space that bound it together.

This too would be a memory. This moment, this year. All of Dali would be, one day. It was as if I was being hit by a wave of nostalgia for where I was right now — like my future self was watching me feel this. All we ever did was make memories for the future, anyway, for new moons to come.

CODA: Spring, Again

The mountainside was alive once more, with shades of lime and olive and chartreuse. The young greens of new shoots speckled the deeper verdant of the pine forest. The mountain did not care what month it was, what day, what year. Its buds and shrubs and leaves only cared about the rising temperature, the cycle of nature as the earth turned closer to the sun. The forest only cared that it was spring.

I felt the same. It was my second year in Dali, and on Earth Day I was hiking the Jade Belt traverse that cut through the mountain gorges: twenty-five kilometres up, across and down. In front of me, Lake Er glittered. Behind, the Cang massif rose up to the cragged ridgeline I had walked on the autumn before. Below, the Old Town and villages were sprinkled among farmland from the lower pass to the upper marshlands. The mountains were frosted with veins of snow like a melting ice-cone, their air crisp and forgiving.

This was where the new Dali migrants had come, the city transplants, to find a new way of being. Some found what they were looking for. Others never would. Some stayed. Some left. All changed, whether they wanted to or not — time alone does that.

Dali had changed me too, even if only by offering a new perspective. A more self-sufficient mode, from growing my own vegetables to tending the garden of my mind. Filling the chasm inside with something bigger than me to believe in. To hurt. To heal. To know our scars and outgrow them. To let go of what we cling to, and make our own serenity.

I knew I would not stay in Dali forever. I knew it was a false utopia. The loftier goal was to be in the middle of honking traffic or a major crisis, and still be able to access inner calm. Already I missed some of the noise and buzz of the city. Even in the myths of Shangri-la and Peach Blossom Spring, the protagonist chooses to leave. I did not need to be here. But for now, as the spring wind tickled my face and the sunlight pierced the canopy

and the smell of pine needles and petrichor rose from the earth, I could not think of anywhere I would rather be.

At the halfway point of the traverse was Phoenix Eye Cave. Set into the cliff-face past brush and bracken, the two slits of its entrance opened into a deep cave, like the eyes of a great bird watching out. Following an accident, it had been closed off, and was guarded by a fire rangers' outpost. But it was possible to sneak past them at a crouch, hidden from view. A stone archway led into an abandoned picnic area, overgrown and mossy like a secret garden.

The wall of metamorphic rock towered above me, sculpted by tectonic collision over millions of years. The power and age of it was immense. Its stone ran deep into the earth, part of the mountain, connected to the root of things. Its face guided my eye up to the sky — where there was nothing but light.

Maybe all I had needed, in trying to escape the world, was to find that I was a part of it. Inseparable from the stream. A river, ever flowing, out to rejoin the sea. To find connection out of isolation. To be capable of loving again, and of accepting love. To embrace change and accept it. The human heart needs not the ideal, but to be part of the real.

I crept down from the hidden enclave and rejoined the trodden path. More would have to change now, all over again — the movement of the waters that keeps stagnation at bay. But in this moment, I felt sunshine on my shoulders, an explosion of spring, the cycle renewing, the way unsure. I put one foot in front of the other, and kept moving.

Author's Note

This book has changed so much since its first germ in my mind, and I have tried to roll with those changes. It wasn't what I expected to write. While my first book, *Wish Lanterns*, did not include the word 'I' until the end note, this work turned out to be much more personal — a mode of writing I was not used to. I hope it holds different meanings to different readers, whether as reportage about a particular aspect of China, or as a memoir on more universal themes. In the end it has meaning for me, and that's enough for this author.

It is worth remembering that memoir takes the ordinary fabric of life — the quotidian passage of time, day after day of it — then weave those threads together into a structure that, while factually correct, is artificially selective. Here are the best bits, memoir says, woven neatly into a narrative for your consumption. But the experience of living it is not narrative, only linear. What of the rest, all the boring bits? The days when nothing happened, the nights of indigestion, the work deadlines, the roads that went nowhere? Were my discoveries and insights of that first year in Dali as clear as when presented in prose on these pages? No, they were not. Yet still, we write, to make sense afterwards of what in the moment we were still processing. That is what words are for.

I lived in Dali for three years in total. In that period, which coincided with the coronavirus pandemic, I did not leave Yunnan province, I did not board a single airplane or train, and I only rarely left the valley itself. The events of this book are from my first year in Dali, but some of the information and interview material was gleaned in later years, while I was writing it up. In the case of subsequent details, they are marked with the word 'later'. This is an imperfect solution to a seasonal structure focused on one year out of three, but it enables me to include them without breaking the flow of the text.

Some of the names in this book have been changed, or biographical details obfuscated, to protect those individuals for political or legal reasons. I have also left some personal information intentionally vague, to preserve privacy. All interviewees knew I was writing about them, and gave permission. I use first names or nicknames throughout, so as not to overwhelm the reader, and where someone's nickname has a particular meaning, I give it in English — otherwise in Chinese. The same rule applies to place names. All quotes are my translations from Chinese, unless otherwise specified.

I have endeavoured to fact-check key information, and this book has been scrutinised by a Chinese reader, but any errors that slipped through are entirely my fault. In the end I am only reporting what I saw, and what I was told. The full nuanced truth of the lives I write about, including my own, is more than what can fit inside two covers.

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Family is the constant among change, the fixed mark for my wandering bark. My father, Timothy, has taught me so much about life and writing, and is the best role model and mentor I could ever have hoped for. My

brother, Tom, has been there for me through it all, with patience and empathy. My mother, Danuta, gave me life and love — the only two things I truly need. This book is for you.

‘Going up the mountain?’ Li Guanyu asked, as I passed the temple brazier at the foot of the upward path. ‘Don’t forget to come back down.’