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# Communities of complicity:

## Notes on state formation and local sociality in rural China

**A B S T R A C T**
In this article, I deal with the tension in rural China between vernacular practice in local sociality and official representations related to processes of state formation and with the ways in which this tension is revealed and concealed through gestures of embarrassment, irony, and cynicism. Such gestures point toward a space of intimate self-knowledge that I call a "community of complicity," a concept derived from Michael Herzfeld's outline of "cultural intimacy." I illustrate how such communities are constituted with examples involving Chinese geomancy *(fengshui)*, funerary rituals, and corruption. I contrast this approach with arguments made about "state involution" in China. [*rural China, state formation, state involution, cultural intimacy, fengshui, corruption*]

People do not fight for abstract perfection but for the intimacies that lie behind it.

—Michael Herzfeld

The inauguration of a newly built house is a rather important event in rural China. In the past, it was celebrated as *shang liang*: the raising of the ridge pole. Where I did fieldwork in 2006–07 in Zhongba village in the Enshi region of Hubei province,[1] a lot of construction activity and, hence, a lot of these celebrations were taking place. The roofs of new houses are no longer built of lumber but of bricks and concrete, so the celebration is no longer called "raising the ridge pole" but "pouring the concrete" (E. *dao ban'r*[2]). But, just as in former times, relatives, neighbors, and friends are invited for the event, where they are supposed to eat a meal and give small gifts of cash to the homeowner.

The celebration for the pouring of the concrete roof of Pan Dejun's new house was set for early August 2006. Over time, I had become a regular visitor at the Pan household, which was just a five-minute walk from the village administration building where I was living. Pan Dong, the family's 14-year-old son, had informed me well before the event that I should come to the new house on day so and so for the inauguration. At the celebration, I rarely saw his father, Pan Dejun, and when I did see him, he looked rather grim and nervous. His arm was bandaged: He had broken it when he fell from the scaffolding at the construction site. After dinner, the guests went to the side rooms of the house to play mahjong, and I was dragged along as well to sit down and play. We played until late in the night; only then did I realize that the concrete for the roof would not be poured until midnight. Pan Dejun had hired a contractor to do it, and he arrived with a team of ten workers at 11 p.m. They prepared their machines and started to carry the concrete in buckets on shoulder poles up onto the formwork for the second floor. I found it incomprehensible that they would start this work under the light of their headlamps at midnight, the most inconvenient time one could think of. When I asked Pan Dejun to explain, he told me that the workers

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had had another job during the day. But later, his son and an uncle told me in passing that the time was chosen because the geomancer they had consulted had told them they should do it at exactly this hour. It is still general practice in the village to have a geomancer determine the exact hour for starting this work, to ensure astrological consonance and future prosperity.

The accident in which Pan Dejun had broken his arm was, in this context, extremely significant. Pan was worried that it could have been an ominous sign, and this had made him even more anxious to take ritual precaution. The day after the inauguration, Pan Dong told me that the geomancer *(fengshui xiansheng)* and a Daoist priest *(daoshi)* had performed several incantations and rituals in the new house, of which Pan Dong did not understand much. He just remembered that the Daoist priest had killed a rooster and then sprayed its blood around the new house. Pan Dong understood that this was meant to protect the new house against evil influences and ghosts. He added, "The people here believe quite a lot of superstitions *(mixin)*."

Pan Dong is a very bright boy and had just started higher middle school when I left Zhongba in 2007. In December 2006, I had gone with him to the New Year show staged by the middle school of Bashan township. He had been given the main part in a comedy sketch, of which he was very proud. The sketch that followed his was about a sick old man who believes that a healer–geomancer *(yinyang xiansheng)* can cure his illness. Against the advice of his children, who know that the healer is really a charlatan, the old man entrusts himself to the healer's treatment. In the end, the old man dies from the treatment. Performed by teenagers, the whole piece was supposed to be comical, and, in fact, the audience burst into laughter throughout it. Its obvious intent was to mock the credulity of people who hire healers and geomancers. One teacher explained to me that the moral was to warn children and their parents against the dangers of "feudal superstition" *(fengjian mixin)*, of which such charlatans and geomancers are prime representatives.

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This article is about what it means to live a local sociality if a good part of this sociality is continuously devalued in official discourse. In it, I attempt to explain why someone would admit that "people here believe in superstition" and why such statements are often uttered as asides, stealthily, sometimes with overtones of embarrassment, cynicism, or irony.

The differences between official and vernacular, center and periphery, and public and private are crucially important in any social space and, so, are not unique to contemporary rural China. I start with my impression that the contradictions between official representation and vernacular practice sometimes assume extreme proportions, as exemplified in the story of Pan Dong. What one hears in the news, what one is taught in school, and what is said in government announcements are generally quite different from, and sometimes diametrically opposed to, what people say and do at home. This is perhaps most apparent in connection with those things that fall in the category of "superstition," such as the rituals of Daoist priests or the activities of Chinese popular geomancy *(fengshui)*. Similar ambiguities characterize family celebrations such as funerals and weddings and the relationships between officials and ordinary people.

These ambiguities appear particularly salient when people are confronted with an outsider who wants to inquire about just such things. Covertness, embarrassment, cynicism, and irony are communicative strategies that make it possible for them to acknowledge both sides of the contradiction, to avoid confrontation, and to maintain communication. They are ways of doing "face-work," as described by Erving Goffman (1955): actions that help one avoid inconsistencies between the face one presents—the positively attributed representation of a social person—and what one actually does. Doing ethnography implies learning how to do face-work, that is, learning the conventional ways of concealing and revealing such inconsistencies. In my fieldwork, this meant, for instance, my learning how to talk about such issues as geomancy, family celebrations, and corruption. Countless awkward situations produced by my foolish questions and clumsy behavior assisted this learning process.

Yet the communicative strategies people employed to deal with the ambiguities in outside representations of local sociality point toward something beyond the awkwardness of doing ethnography, something that I describe by reference to Michael Herzfeld's concept of "cultural intimacy." Herzfeld defines "cultural intimacy" as "the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality" (2005:3).

A "coded tension" exists between official representations, generally linked to nation and state, and vernacular forms in face-to-face communities; this tension expresses itself locally in embarrassment, cynicism, or irony. Such are the reactions when "cultural intimacy" is exposed, and they can both confirm the official representation and satirize it. Inasmuch as these expressions are shared and common, they bind people together in intimate spaces of self-knowledge.

The distinction between official and vernacular does not coincide with social or political inequality: The powerful as well as those without power have a sense of cultural intimacy. Ethnographic and anecdotal accounts show how shared metaphors of "the state" and "the people" are strategically used by both bureaucrats and ordinary citizens.

These "practical essentialisms" employed in social interaction exemplify what Herzfeld means by "social poetics," people's creative deployment of allegedly stereotypical cultural attributes to achieve specific effects.

With this concept, Herzfeld draws heavily on the study of rhetoric and semiotics, and so one might wonder whether the social poetics based on cultural intimacy are not "merely" symbolic. At least one reviewer of Herzfeld's construct submits this predictable criticism: It focuses on cultural and symbolic representation of state and nation, but "is that enough? Are there no 'objective-correlatives'? If there are, how on earth do we find them? Where nation and state coincide, the answer may be, 'in the objective power of the state'" (Cohen 1998:8). In other words, the gap between official representations and local sociality that is characteristic of cultural intimacy might be a consequence of processes of state formation that increase the "objective power of the state."

Now, power is rather difficult to measure "objectively." Political scientists have attempted to do so by focusing on the efficiency of state power and assessing "good" and "bad" governance. In the case of the modern Chinese state, various observers have phrased the problems of state power and government efficiency in terms of "state involution" (Duara 1987; Lü 2000; Murphy 2007; Siu 1989a, 1989b; Wang 1991). These observers deal with different periods of state making in modern Chinese history and reach slightly different conclusions. But they all share a basic line of argument: Efforts toward the formation of a modern state from the republican era onward have not resulted in an efficient, formal bureaucracy and a transparent state machine but, rather, have reproduced and reinforced traditional modes of operation and patrimonialism. Although, on the outside, a shiny façade of formal rationality is constructed, inside a personalistic cancer is growing. In all of these accounts, the state or society is somewhere it actually should not be. To argue in this vein necessitates a vantage point from which one actually knows where each should be, and this vantage point is usually a Eurocentric concept of the nation-state.

Most of these approaches are inspired by Clifford Geertz's (1963) description of "agricultural involution" in Indonesia. The concept of "involution" has also been widely used in the economic history of China (Elvin 1973; Huang 1990). In her outline of an alternative history of the "rice economies" of East Asia, the historian Francesca Bray calls for approaches that go beyond the "language of failure" implicit in concepts such as "involution" or "growth without development" (Elvin 1973). Both notions imply either an attribution of essential Otherness or a negative account of Chinese history, measured in terms of what was not achieved when compared with European history (Bray 1994:xiv). I take as a point of caution that concepts of "involution," when applied to the state, might lead to the analytical pitfalls of Eurocentrism and orientalism.

In fact, the condemnation of traditionalist and personalistic ties is not only characteristic of state-involution approaches but it is also the most common public representation of corruption in the People's Republic. Toward the end of this article, I argue that the ways in which this involutionary cancer is officially denigrated and locally recognized are just as productive of shared commonality as are practices related to "superstition" and fengshui. Those who share a sense of the same intimacies form what might be aptly called a "community of complicity."

These communities of complicity cut across the boundaries of state and society. The involution approaches all emphasize that state and society are deeply entangled; I go one step further and envision an intimate state, one that is "a constitutive force at the heart of the social world," in Eric Mueggler's words (2001:5). Instead of correlating this sense of intimacy with the "objective power of the state," I try to relate it to a history of state formation in everyday lives. My examples are stories told about fengshui, about a Confucian discourse of "manners and etiquette" *(li)* at a funeral, and about putatively corrupt local officials.

## Fengshui

Fengshui is the traditional Chinese practice of geomancy, a popular cosmology that connects astrological signs and cosmological elements with the shape of the lived landscape. Interpreting the particular fengshui of a place aims to take advantage of and to adjust its positive "energy." Most laypeople hire an expert geomancer (fengshui xiansheng or yinyang xiansheng) for this work. Although the practice has long been suppressed by Chinese governments as "feudal superstition" (fengjian mixin), it has remained immensely popular, especially in the countryside. In Zhongba, as of 2007, almost everyone who prepared to build a new house or a tomb consulted a geomancer, who helped to situate the house or grave according to the fengshui of its site.

Fengshui is closely linked to the fate *(mingyun)* of a family and a household, but sometimes it is extended and linked to a lineage, a hamlet, or even an entire township. One of the main aims in Chinese geomancy and divination is to influence and manipulate, to some extent, the cosmological forces at work in people's lives. The knowledge of fengshui can, thus, be instrumentalized by the powerful to impinge on the aspirations of others. In what follows, I recount three stories about powerful representatives of the state who used fengshui. These stories take place right at the interface of official and vernacular discourses and exemplify the ambiguities of the state and its representatives in local society.

The first story is about the fengshui of a small valley that opens into the northwestern side of the triangular Bashan plain. Over the centuries, the stream in this valley has formed a deep meandering channel between rugged

hills and rocks. Where one enters the valley, coming from the plain, one passes the Chicken Branch hill on the left side. People say that, long ago, this hill was much higher, that it had rocks on top, and that it provided the valley below it with very good fengshui. The Gong family lived in several hamlets in the valley and was said to prosper because of its good fengshui. Talent and ability *(rencai)* abounded in the valley, the sons of the Gong family became high officials, and the Gong family altogether was very wealthy. At the time of the Qianlong emperor, the prosperity and success of the family aroused the envy of a mandarin in the capital of the prefecture, Shinan (now Enshi). Hence, he had his henchmen demolish the rocks on top of Chicken Branch and dig a hole *(quekou)* into the summit of the hill. Thereafter, no member of the Gong family succeeded in the imperial exams, and the family declined.

The story of the Gong family might have been told in almost the same way in imperial China. In fact, many stories of this kind have been documented in southeastern China and Taiwan. They generally speak of the ambiguous relationship between center and periphery, as an outside power destroys the cosmological order of a locality. Yet, at the same time, local levels of "civilization" and ancestral wealth are presented in terms of the center, that is, success in the imperial examinations.

Like other stories about the distant past, the story of the Gong family was told to me with a certain folkloristic flavor: It did not really matter how truthful this story was, and I could not sense that it had much connection with the current state of the Gong family. Because such stories were situated in the distant past, no one found them embarrassing in any sense.

The style and tone of narration change very much when a story comes closer to the concerns of the present. An apparently true story about the same valley is somewhat similar to the legend of the Gong family. In the past, after strong rainfalls, the stream in this valley often flooded the fields that bordered it. During one campaign of the Cultural Revolution,[3] the cadres of two production brigades had the idea of opening several tunnels into the area's rock formations, so that the stream would flow in a straight line and the fields would remain dry. With the help of dynamite detonations, three long tunnels were opened through the rocks, and the river left its old bed and flowed through them. Locals initially opposed the tunnel project, arguing that it was not worth the effort. But the most serious disadvantage, in their view, was that it would destroy the fengshui of the valley.[4] Yet no one ever directly admitted this to me. During the spring festival period in 2006, I accompanied a family from Zhongba on a visit to relatives in the Gong family. We spent all afternoon in conversation, and one man related in much detail the story of the three tunnels. Everyone agreed that their excavation had been a waste of manpower and resources, but no one spoke about the negative influence the project might have had on the fengshui of the valley. Only one elderly uncle quietly mentioned that "in the past they said that it might have destroyed the fengshui." I asked further and got the answer that "back in those days, they obviously could not have said that." Later on, the friend I was with confirmed to me that many old people in the valley are convinced that their bad luck comes from the bad fengshui of the valley. A minor official in his thirties, he talked about these beliefs in a rather disapproving way, half condemning such "superstition," half mocking it.

The ambiguities of fengshui have a long history. In fact, local governments in imperial times were often suspicious of popular cosmologies, potential heterodoxies, and heresies (Bruun 2003:ch. 2). Yet the imperial state almost never went so far as to directly intervene in local practices; instead, it favored gentle guidance by "correction" and "exemplar" (Hamilton 1989). Since the beginning of the 20th century, practices like fengshui have been broadly devalued by educated elites, but they have remained common among ordinary people. In the Maoist era, local "superstition" was fervently denounced and systematically attacked.

The legend about the malicious mandarin who destroyed the fengshui of the Gong family hamlets exemplifies the common assumption that the powerful and wealthy tried to manipulate fengshui and the belief that they actually must have done so rather successfully—"if not, how could they have become powerful and wealthy in the first place?" This kind of circular argument sometimes assumed ironic or even grotesque proportions: Repeatedly, older peasants told me that the power and success of Mao Zedong and other leaders was really due to their intimate knowledge and versatile manipulation of fengshui. One famous story relates that during the civil war between Nationalists and Communists, Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Nationalist Party, tried to find the tomb of Mao Zedong's father so that he could dig out the remains and demolish the tomb. In this way, he could destroy the fengshui of the Mao family and ensure the future misfortune of Mao Zedong in particular. But when the neighbors of the Mao family heard about the plan, they removed the name badges from the tombs in the village so that Chiang Kai-shek's soldiers could not find the tomb. In anger, the soldiers wildly destroyed several tombs in the village, a most outrageous and horrible action, as devastating a family tomb equals destroying the integrity and prosperity of a family line altogether. The fengshui surrounding the tombs of the Mao family, however, was preserved and continued to provide excellent fortune for the family. By contrast, the infamy of digging out the graves of innocent families led to misfortune for, and the eventual defeat of, Chiang and the Nationalists.

In recent years, fengshui has become a respected object of study for architects, historians, and even designers in mainland China. Many books and experts have tried to prove that fengshui is really "scientific" *(kexue)* and,

therefore, does not contradict the scientistic worldview promulgated by party and state. Yet, in the countryside, people never publicly make references to fengshui and related practices like astrology and divination. They speak about them only in private and almost always with a somewhat ironic undertone. In the Maoist era, exposing the fengshui practices of others would have amounted to serious denouncement, and many people still relate to them in secretive, partly embarrassed, ways.

Another practice that was severely controlled and partly forbidden under Maoism was staging huge banquets for family celebrations, in particular, weddings and funerals. These events are closely linked to geomantic practices. At a wedding, the bowing of a couple in front of the ancestral tablets in the main room of the bridegroom's house confirmed and reenacted the central axis of the house, which, ideally, was adjusted to the fengshui of its surroundings. At a funeral, the coffin was placed along this central axis, and the tomb was also located according to fengshui. Everything people did on these ritual occasions, from eating at the banquet tables to offering presents of goods and cash to the hosts, was supposed to conform to the rules of propriety and etiquette, which Confucian texts call "li." The propriety of li, however, is nowadays sometimes just as embarrassing as fengshui.

## The embarrassment of li

One of the first terms that I learned in the local dialect was *chijiu,* pronounced "qi jiu," which literally means "to eat wine," that is, to attend a banquet. More specifically, it means to attend another's family celebration, like a wedding, a funeral, a housewarming party, the birth of a child, a birthday, or a celebration for passing the entry examinations to the university or the army. Of these, the most important life-cycle events are weddings and funerals, called "red and white celebrations" *(hongbai xishi),* according to the symbolic colors for happiness (red) and mourning (white). Such celebrations are held at the house of the host family or, for families in the market town of Bashan or in the city of Enshi, in a restaurant. Attending a banquet implies not only sharing an abundant meal but also offering the host a present, which nowadays is usually cash. The family that is "hosting the wine" (E. *zhengjiu*) has to prepare well in advance. Generally, the day of the celebration is chosen with the help of a diviner, who calculates the most propitious date and hour, according to the "eight characters" *(ba zi)* of the year, month, day, and hour of the births of the main participants. Before the celebration, the host invites neighbors and friends to "help" *(bang mang)* in hosting the event.

All these actions necessitate proper behavior and formality. The established rules *(guiju)* and etiquette (*liyi* or *lijie*) at such occasions are particular forms of li, or ritual. Similar to the difficulty of defining *ritual, li* eludes easy definition. In contemporary Chinese, *li* can mean many things. It is part of the expressions for politeness *(limao),* etiquette and custom (liyi, lijie, or *lisu*), worship *(libai),* and gift *(liwu).* In the popular expression "courtesy demands reciprocity" *(lishang wanglai), li* means also the propriety inherent in reciprocal relationships. Just like the practices of fengshui, the expressions of li are characterized by ambiguities. Here I give an example related to the funeral of the father of a high official.

Sun Jundong was one of the most successful officials in Bashan township. After three years as the party secretary of the township, he was elevated to vice party secretary in a neighboring county, the next higher rank in the hierarchy of party and government. In the spring of 2007, I had the opportunity to attend the funeral of his father. Two neighbors in Zhongba told me that they would play the shawm *(suona)* and drums in a funeral band and asked me if I wanted to join them.

The home of the Sun family is in one of the most remote villages of Bashan township, about two-hours drive by car into the mountains from the market of Bashan. On the dirt road, we saw numerous sport utility vehicles and the black Audis and Volkswagens that are used by government officials and businessmen. We attended the last night of the funeral, and from the moment we arrived at 5 p.m. until late in the evening, the popping noise of firecrackers did not cease for a single moment. According to local custom, about three-dozen neighbors and relatives help prepare the food and host the guests at a funeral. At this funeral, however, there were about one hundred helpers, who all had their names listed on a beautiful painted poster on one wall of the house. On another wall, a program was posted detailing the performances and rituals for the evening, all written in fine calligraphy. According to local tradition, the coffin is laid out in the central room of the house, which is called the "hall of filial piety" *(xiaotang)* during the funerary period. The hall in this case was richly ornamented with carved bamboo sticks and colored paper, various paintings, and several huge tablets that described the life of the deceased in poems. All this was the work of teacher Lei, a well-known "man of culture" *(wenren)* and former head of the "office for culture" in a neighboring township. He also led the performances and rituals in the evening, which included speeches in classical Chinese; a mourning ceremony, during which 24 music bands marched and played; songs and couplets sung to all close relatives and important guests; mourning songs for the deceased and his family; mourning dances around the coffin; and lion dances.

This was by far the biggest and most lavish funeral that I had seen during my time in Bashan. It was also a huge show of power and money. Normally at a Chinese funeral, the guests give presents and money to the host, and these gifts are listed in a red book. People always stress the importance of reciprocity in these exchanges: When donors host

their own future family celebrations, they expect to receive equivalent amounts from those to whom they have previously given. At the funeral of Sun Jundong's father, around 70 thousand yuan was given,[5] according to the red book. That amount is immense compared with the conventional sums that ordinary farmers deal with: Ten thousand yuan is an above-average annual income for a family in the region, and it is also the average sum of money received at a wedding or a funeral.

Such celebrations were the targets of Maoist policies against "feudal superstition" throughout the revolutionary era, and their suppression has only slowly loosened since the 1980s. Since then, there have been huge increases in the sums of money and presents given at funerals and weddings. Intermittently, the government wages campaigns against the "waste" of the practice of giving monetary presents. In the spring of 2007, for instance, the city government of Enshi engaged in an intensive campaign to curb the "waste" of money and the "immorality" of such "backward" customs. Local television programs disparaged excessive gift giving, and all party members had to participate in education sessions about the "backwardness" of this practice.

My attendance at the Sun family funeral surely produced some uncertainties and awkwardness. On the one hand, I was a foreign guest, and everyone in the local government and most ordinary people in the surrounding villages knew about my presence in the area and that I walked around the villages, observing, talking to, and asking odd questions of local residents. On the other hand, I was not invited to this celebration, and at some points during the evening it was not clear to me whether I was welcome. My neighbors who were playing music had said that I should go and pay my respects to the former secretary of Bashan. But Sun Jundong himself did not say a single word to me during the night, even after I had given a short funeral oration at the invitation of the ceremonial coordinator. Some relatives of the Sun family, businessmen in Enshi and Wuhan, were extremely friendly to me and told me I should film the event. A cameraman among the helpers was already filming it. When I asked him if it would be possible for me to get a copy of his film, he said that, unfortunately, it was reserved for the members of the Sun family.

Clearly, Sun Jundong faced several dilemmas here. On the one hand, he had to present himself as the impeccable leader, representative of the high morals of the party and the government. In this case, he had to present this image not only to locals but also to a foreigner. On the other hand, he was expected to live up to the demands of filial piety *(xiao)*, and he and his family were expected to engage in what was considered proper (li) and virtuous *(daode)* behavior after the death of his father. He obviously tried to do both and to represent his family in both respects. In addition, the funeral gave him the opportunity to receive huge amounts of money from officials trying to establish relationships of patronage with him. After all, he was the highest official in the township and is now a powerful cadre at the county level—a most important man for all in the lower government offices to know. Last, but not least, the funeral was the occasion for many officials, friends, relatives, and business partners to reciprocate for the gifts that he had given them in the past.

When the funeral went through Bashan's gossip mills, the accusation that, by holding such a massive funeral, Sun Jundong was really engaging in "feudal" and "corrupt" practices frequently came up. A week after the funeral, the topic was mentioned among the officials of Zhongba village, and Tan Tao, the then party secretary of the village, asked me in front of some other officials if I had gone to the funeral. Later, when we were having a cigarette together, Tan Tao asked again, "How was it at the funeral? Don't you think that it was really luxurious and decadent *(haochi)*?" Not waiting for my answer, he switched into dialect and said to the village accountant that "people of Sun's rank should not engage in these kind of activities." My impression was that Tan Tao could not hide some Schadenfreude about Sun having exposed himself to my prying presence.

A couple of days later, I met teacher Song and had a long conversation with him about the funeral. Teacher Song is retired and works now as the janitor of the primary school. Most of the day he sits in a little lodge next to the gate of the school and reads classical novels or books about the heroes of the revolution. This afternoon, I told him about my impressions of the funeral and also about my insecurity regarding the reaction of the Sun family to my presence. He said that everyone in Bashan knew that the Sun funeral was surely the biggest one that Bashan had seen in its history—"since the beginning of the world" [*pangu kai tian yilai*], he said, smiling. He was not referring to the pomp that I had seen, the banquet and the musicians, which I thought was the measurement. He knew of other funerals at which about forty bands of musicians had played, compared with only 24 at Sun Jundong's house. The bands are only sent by the daughters and sons-in-law of the deceased's family and, hence, show how many affines someone has. What people in Bashan were really talking about these days, teacher Song said, was the amount of money given. Most of the secretaries and higher-level officials in Bashan had given presents; and most of them surely had not appeared at the funeral itself, but only those closest to the family, teacher Song estimated. Accordingly, much more money must have been given than the roughly 70 thousand yuan recorded in the red book of presents. Song said that, in the past, "the thunder was big and the rain was little," but now "the thunder is little, and the rain is big" [*lei xiang xiao, yu lai da*], meaning that now there is less noise and pomp but more of the rain of money. Song confirmed that Sun Jundong would have been worried about my coming and

watching all that money flow, fearing that I could report it. And then he told me about several cases of officials in similar situations who had been convicted of corruption.

The funeral of Sun Jundong's father illustrates that cultural intimacy is something quite different from the cultural resistance of the subaltern. The one who was embarrassed in this case was one of the most powerful local leaders. Both local villagers and government officials shared a common discourse about propriety and a common understanding that one's representation to outsiders and the local practice of holding family celebrations stand in a tense relationship. What is crucial is how the contradictions are negotiated. In their demeanor and speech at the funeral, Sun Jundong and his guests enacted local ideals of proper behavior: in this case, the ritual of a funeral, which is one of the most important services children provide to their parents, expressing their filial piety (xiao). Hosts and guests are supposed to behave according to rules and etiquette that can be summarized under the header of Confucian "propriety" (li). But in the privacy of everyday talk, both villagers and fellow cadres would point out how corrupt this behavior is.

In the conclusion to her book *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets,* Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (1994:317–320) tells a very similar story of a rural cadre named Zhao. After the huge funerary celebration for Zhao's father, a rival official accuses Zhao of "corrupt and feudal" activities. Zhao is arrested and subjected to party discipline. But the locals all support him and plead his case in front of higher government officials. For Yang, this is an example of ritual being "a self-organizing Vehicle of the Minjian" (1994:317). In her interpretation, the *minjian,* or the popular realm of *renqing* (human feeling) ethics and *guanxi* (relationship) production, is an emerging independent social realm opposed to the anonymous exertion of state power. Let me quote at length from her interpretation of the events following the funeral of Zhao's father:

> From the people's point of view, the funeral was not a "backward" or "feudal" institution, nor was Zhao using his position to extort money and gifts from them, but it provided an important social occasion for repaying debts owed or initiated a new round of debt relationship with Zhao and his family. The local people sought to transform their relationship with Cadre Zhao from an impersonal, administrative, ruler-to-governed top-down relationship into a personal renqing relationship of giving and repaying. It is noteworthy that, counter to the official policy of de-emphasizing and sometimes banning rituals, the local people attach much social significance to funerary rituals and feasts. The ritual provides a staging ground for the practice of renqing with an official, . . . so that there is a clear association between ritual or feast and renqing, and between ritual, renqing, and good government. Zhao himself is a cadre whose attitude toward his job is tinged with a heavy renqing perspective and who allows himself to enter into debt relationships with the people. That is why when he got in trouble with his superiors, so many people organized themselves to support him. In this action the people were not just defending Zhao's personal integrity, but also a certain approach to government and the importance of ritual in their social life. In rural Wenzhou, minjian forces have begun to organize themselves and even to prevail against the state, and these forces include the discourse and practice of renqing and ritual. [Yang 1994:319–320]

Note how Yang makes use of the category of "the people" to denote a unified body who fight for a "certain approach to government and the importance of ritual in social life." This approach is characterized by personalized relationships of renqing and guanxi, and it is diametrically opposed to the impersonal administrative relationships of the state. In my example, the people did not have such a uniform judgment of the high official who staged a huge funeral. Both the popular realm (which Yang calls by its Chinese name, "minjian") and the state discourse are much more fragmented. Both ordinary people and government officials use elements of vernacular and state discourses. I also subscribe to a binary opposition, but it is not that between "the local people" and "the state" but that between an official, outside representation and a vernacular, inside practice. At the funeral of Sun Jundong, local villagers and officials were partaking in both discourses: Some locals were admiring the pomp of the funeral, whereas others were criticizing it and denouncing the corruption of local officials. Similarly, officials were divided on the ways in which the funeral should be interpreted; whereas many had to offer monetary presents, some were also quite cynical about Sun, especially when talking in private.

Most of the practices identified as "Confucian propriety" (li) had been thoroughly condemned during the Maoist era. The "Confucian doctrine" *(lijiao)* was an instrument of landlords and capitalists to oppress the peasants. Hence, all of these practices were tightly controlled until the 1980s. Although political control is much looser now, a considerable propaganda effort still attempts to curb such "waste" *(puzhang langfei)* linked to "backward" *(luohou)* practices. The condemnation of this waste ties in well with heightened concerns about cadre corruption.

## Communities of complicity

The era of "reform and opening" that started in the 1980s has been characterized by growing concerns about corruption. The corruption of local officials was a favorite topic of villagers in their conversations with me, second only to the weather. Taxes and fees levied on private enterprises,

several government enterprises, and, recently, land expropriations close to the township where a "development district" *(kaifa qu)* is being built provide high revenue for the local government. Locals frequently alleged that the responsible officials have pocketed part of this revenue.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the general agricultural tax and the countless fees collected from farmers had led to many conflicts and, in some regions, to collective protests (Lü 1997; Perry 1999). In recent years, these taxes and fees have been widely reduced, and in 2003 the general agricultural tax was completely abolished. National policies have turned now toward paying subsidies to farmers. In Bashan, one particular support payment is given to tea farmers via the "turn farmland into forest" *(tuigeng huanlin)* program. Tea plantations conveniently count as "productive forest," so farmers who have dried out their paddy fields and planted tea shrubs receive a subsidy for a certain period. That is but one minor part of all the support payments that local governments in recognized "poor districts" *(pinkun diqu)* receive from the provincial and national levels. All this is well known among local farmers, and the most common local commentary about it is that the government hierarchy, from the central government downward, works like a funnel with several sieves. At every level, officials enrich themselves from the lump sums that the central government is investing, and, therefore, almost nothing reaches the farmers.

Connected to this way of seeing the governmental hierarchy is the idea that the higher up one looks on the governmental ladder, the better the officials are. Frequently, local villagers pointed out to me that the central government, represented by Chairman Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, does actually care about the peasants and promotes good policies. Yet further down the government ladder, officials get increasingly worse. In many people's view, the worst ones are the cadres of the township level—the officials that are in closest everyday contact with ordinary people. Everyday interactions with township officials are tied to economic and social interests, whereas the relationship of farmers with the central state is more symbolic and moral and is mediated at various levels. Guo Xiaolin (2001:436ff.) has described this as a "bifurcated state," in which people keep placing hope and confidence in the central government, even when local government becomes increasingly predatory.

Even though people often complain about local officials and have very pointed opinions about them, they need to approach them about identification cards, marriage certificates, permits to build houses, family planning issues, land conflicts, and so on. When complicated issues are at stake, locals prefer a personal relationship and contact with an official. My neighbor Liu Dawei, for instance, often lectured me on the "art of relationship making" *(guanxi xue)*. When he was planning to build a new house in the summer of 2007, the village officials initially opposed his plan. He then invited the vice secretary of the township government for several meals at the best restaurant in Bashan and offered him several boxes of expensive cigarettes. Liu Dawei also pointed out to me that he had chosen to cultivate a relationship with this secretary because he shares the same surname with him, even though he is not a direct relative. The village government eventually granted Liu Dawei permission to build his new house.

Contrary to such personal ties with officials, government propaganda continuously emphasizes impartiality and formal equality. Concomitantly, party education programs focus on raising the "quality" *(suzhi)* of cadres and their behavior (Murphy 2007). At the same time, locals like Liu Dawei, or the neighbors and officials offering cash to Sun Jundong, are clearly aware that it is important to have a personal bond with officials, in which human feeling (renqing) is properly expressed through gifts. From the perspective of some academic observers, such phenomena are aspects of "state involution" in contemporary China (Lü 2000; Siu 1989a 1989b; Wang 1991). Lü Xiaobo, for instance, points out an "organizational involution" within the Chinese party state. He defines this involution as

> a process whereby a revolutionary party, while adopting and expanding many "modern" (i.e., rational, formal, impersonal) structures, . . . fails to adapt itself to, and be transformed by, the routinization and bureaucratization that characterize modern bureaucracy; at the same time, it is unable to maintain its original distinctive competence and identity. Its members make adjustments and adaptations neither through revolutionary ideologies nor modern institutions and practices, but through reinforced and elaborated traditional modes of operation. [2000:22]

Lü adds that such "neotraditionalism" produces "disillusioned, status-conscious, and undisciplined cadres, who in the manner of pre-revolutionary . . . local officials, put the interests of more intimate secondary and primary groups above those of the regime" (2000:23). Rachel Murphy has recently used Lü's framework to analyze how party education campaigns work to maintain this "organizational involution": The campaigns deflect systemic critique and, instead, blame the problems of corruption on the ethical misbehavior of individuals. She concludes that the "ritualization" of the education campaigns reproduces the top-down party hierarchy and the personalistic networks within this hierarchy (Murphy 2007).

It is not only academic observers who see personalistic networks and informal dealings fulfilling systemic functions in a supposedly impersonal bureaucracy. Both villagers and cadres are well aware that one's personal relations with officials are the most important and reliable ones. But they do not pronounce that in public. People share a

knowledge of the "involutionary cancer" of personalistic and informal relations; if cadres admit that these relations exist, they do so rather ruefully. The embarrassed or ironic ways in which they make such admissions indicate shared understandings of local mechanisms of power. Such local knowledge (e.g., of li) is transfigured into stereotypes and essentialisms both by ordinary people and by academics. Yet social actors make strategic use of these essentialisms and sometimes reject them forthrightly.

What emerges behind this symbolic struggle is an intimate space of common knowledge, or a "community of complicity." Belonging to such a community depends on the skill with which a social actor can make use of practical essentialisms. Only the most unskilled actor straightforwardly and earnestly admits that "we believe in superstition." The moral, capable social actor, however, uses gestures of embarrassment, of irony, and of cynicism to prove his or her belonging to those who know.

I do not mean the notion of "communities of complicity" to imply that the object of this intimate knowledge and complicity is a true neotraditionalism, more "true" than the official representation of a rationalized political system and a modern citizenry. Indeed, the logical consequence of the involution argument is that the modern and rational is only a false mask, barely concealing the neotraditionalist "truth." In my argument, both the modernist representation and traditionalist self-knowledge are true. Communities of complicity are formed by those who share an intimate knowledge of the boundaries—the faces—of modernism and traditionalism.

## Conclusion

I started with the apparent contradiction between official representation and vernacular practice in the case of Pan Dong, whose father invited a geomancer for the inauguration of the family's new house and who laughed together with his classmates about a healer–geomancer at the school show. This tension between the official and the vernacular leads to a rueful recognition of local sociality that I call, with Herzfeld, "cultural intimacy." The stories told about fengshui illustrate a certain ambiguity between peripheral locality and center characteristic of both late-imperial and contemporary China. But the sense of cultural intimacy linked to fengshui and other superstitions was hugely intensified by the state formation processes of the 20th century, in particular during the Maoist era. In the embarrassment of li, or ritual, are the remnants of a Maoist discourse that violently denigrated Confucianism. Cultural intimacy is not something limited to the little people or the subaltern—it is also felt by officials, like the county secretary, Sun Jundong. Just like ordinary villagers, the powerful also engage in social poetics, that is, in the practical and strategic use of essentialisms. My examples have shown how people used essentialisms of fengshui, of li, and of corruption. I have pointed out that, in fact, a knowledge of and familiarity with practices that others might call "corruption" or "involution" is common among officials and villagers and that this shared knowledge defines communities of complicity.

The valuation and control of much everyday action is now characterized by a tension between powerful outside representations, promulgated in schools and government offices and by modern media (in particular, newspapers and the Internet but also the "Maoist modern" of wall posters, scrolls, and loudspeaker announcements) and an intimate space of local sociality that more or less contradicts what is written and announced in those representations. Because of this tension, local socialities are felt to be "intimate" spaces. If the lived contradictions are pointed out, or made visible, a local's first reaction can be an awkward smile. With a fellow insider, it is just as possible to become ironic: The existence of such lived contradictions is actually quite clear to most participants and to the initiated. However, embarrassment, irony, and "un-plain" speech and expression are not understood by everyone and so reproduce the boundaries of an intimate space. Yet, sometimes, awkwardness and irony can turn into utter frustration. This occurs when the tension between outward representation and intimate practice becomes unbearable. What, more than anything else, characterizes the attitudes and positions toward practices like geomancy, ritual, and corruption is a discursive uncertainty. And this is perhaps the biggest difference from earlier times: I imagine that, up to the 1930s, it was close to impossible in the villages of Bashan for someone to crack a joke about fengshui or about the principle of li. Now these topics have to be treated with irony.

My interpretation of spaces of intimacy produced by the relationship between local sociality and the state is also based on many embarrassing experiences I had in China. Just like any outsider trying to adapt to an unfamiliar social environment, I often felt that I had to be careful and cautious to avoid awkwardness arising out of a conflict of perceptions. The moments of potential embarrassment and felt intimacy were acute—at least in my experience—when I broached issues related to so-called superstition, participation in family celebrations, and dealing with local cadres, not to mention the topics of human rights, democracy, and corruption. In all these instances, I very much felt the necessity to be sensitive and cautious in my actions.

Of course, the arrival of a foreigner often leads to situations of awkwardness, embarrassment, and irony. Ethnography is, after all, an intrusion into the intimate spaces of others, and not only of individuals but also of nation-states.

Yet I believe that such anxieties were not merely relevant to my own interactions with people in Zhongba. Villagers who consult diviners and geomancers but laugh at their portrayal in comedy sketches; leaders who are torn between local notions of propriety and a modernist state discourse; and lower-level officials who extol impartiality and formal rules but recognize the importance of personal relationships, which political scientists describe as "involutionary cancer"—for all these people, the boundaries between state and society are made by exposing and hiding spaces of cultural intimacy; and this everyday practice reproduces both local sociality and the state itself. It creates communities of complicity, communities of those who share an awareness of intimate spaces that are marked by embarrassment, irony, and cynicism at their boundaries.

## Notes

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1. All names of persons and of places below the prefectural level are pseudonyms.

2. Throughout the text, I italicize Chinese words in the standard pinyin form. Words in the Enshi dialect that differ markedly in pronunciation and meaning from standard Mandarin Chinese are marked with an *E*. All other Chinese words in italics are part of the vocabulary of standard Mandarin.

3. People in Bashan remembered it as part of the national "Learn from Dazhai in agriculture" *(nongye xue dazhai)* campaign. In 1963, Mao Zedong issued this slogan to encourage all rural communes in the People's Republic to emulate the achievements of the Dazhai commune in Shanxi province, in particular, in land reclamation through hard manual work. On this campaign and agrarian radicalism during the 1960s and 1970s, see Zweig 1989.

4. According to fengshui beliefs, a stream is a dragon *(long),* and, in general, a meandering stream is more auspicious than a straight one.

5. The exchange rate in 2006–07 was approximately eight yuan to $1, so this would have been an equivalent of $8,750.

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