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**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Stafford, Charles (2004) Two stories of learning and economic agency in Yunnan. [\*Taiwan journal of anthropology\*](#), 2 (1). pp. 171-194.

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# Two Stories of Learning and Economic Agency in Yunnan

**Charles Stafford**

*Department of Anthropology  
London School of Economics and Political Science*

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This essay takes up the question of learning and economic agency, drawing extensively on fieldwork material from Yunnan in southwest China. It focuses primarily on two men who are very different from one another—in terms of age, temperament, bearing, experience and outlook. An outline account of the life experiences of these two very different persons is used to illustrate the complex relationship between knowledge acquisition and economic practice. The essay draws on Gell's discussion of human technical systems as a way of expanding our notion of what counts as "economics-relevant learning." Briefly, it is argued that a huge range of techniques is potentially relevant to economic agency, and that an adequate account of the acquisition of such techniques may require us to adopt a very long historical perspective.

**Keywords:** economy, learning, knowledge, life histories, China

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Man, much as he may therefore be a *particular* individual [and it is precisely his particularity which makes him an individual, and a real *individual* social being], is just as much the *totality*—the ideal totality—the subjective existence of thought and experienced society present for itself.

—Karl Marx 1961:105<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In this essay, I discuss two people who live in the same village in Yunnan: Teacher Ho and Little Yang. Little Yang, a wonderfully friendly and energetic man, runs a small shop (*puzi* 鋪子) at the edge of the village of Protected Mountain. It would be hard to imagine anyone *less* like him than Teacher Ho. Teacher Ho is old (in his sixties), whereas Little Yang is young (in his twenties). Teacher Ho is tall, whereas Little Yang is short. Teacher Ho speaks with quiet erudition, whereas Little Yang is simply a “talker.” Teacher Ho neither smokes nor drinks nor gambles, whereas Little Yang smokes quite a lot and also sometimes drinks and gambles. Everyone would describe Teacher Ho as someone “with culture” (*you wenhua de ren* 有文化的人), whereas Little Yang once self-deprecatingly described himself to me as someone “without culture” (*meiyou wenhua de ren* 沒有文化的人). Teacher Ho abhors the money-grubbing ethos of contemporary China, whereas Little Yang is, again by his own estimation, the very epitome of it. And yet there are, as I hope to show, some intriguing points of convergence between the stories of these two men.

My focus in making this comparison is on questions related to learning and economic agency. How do people turn out to be the kinds of economic agents they are? How do they acquire the necessary skills and dispositions to become, say, teachers or merchants?

In fact, in the Chinese and Taiwanese villages where I have been conducting fieldwork,<sup>2</sup> many of the skills possessed by local people seem, at least to *them*, to be rather inconsequential and easily learned (*haoxue* 好學). I have

<sup>1</sup> Marx (1961:105), cited in Sahlins (1976:126), note 1.

<sup>2</sup> This fieldwork (carried out in 2000–2001) was part of a research project on numeracy and economics-relevant learning in China and Taiwan, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (U.K.), grant number 000239088. At different stages of my research I received invaluable support from colleagues at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica (Taiwan); the Department of Anthropology, National Tsing Hua University (Taiwan); the Department of Anthropology, Yunnan University; and from the Yunnan Nationalities Institute. In order to protect the privacy of informants, I have changed all place and personal names, and also modified, in some instances, personal details.

talked to pig farmers about pig farming, and to shopkeepers about how they keep their accounts. Not surprisingly, they say certain occupations such as aquaculture and jade carving are complicated in various ways. However I was told that, for the most part, what one needs to master to get by in the countryside is relatively simple. It is either common sense or can be quickly learned from the advice of others.

This view no doubt partly reflects the naturalization of skill, i.e., the tendency to take skills for granted once they have been acquired. It may also reflect an implicit distinction between skills for which the act of acquisition is itself clearly framed and straightforward, and those for which it is not. If your grandmother teaches you how to feed chickens, and you try it yourself once or twice, you will probably get it right. Yet everyone knows there are other skills which are *not* quickly or easily learned. These include the ability to negotiate effectively over price (something many grandmothers also excel at), or the ability to maintain good relations with significant others, including local officials or buyers who may need seducing in various ways. Here economic life seemingly becomes, in the words of Little Yang, downright mysterious (*aomiao* 奥妙). Competence develops only slowly, if at all. Unlike the information contained in a set of instructions, what you need to know to be skilful is mostly implicit and seldom articulated in formal models or speech (cf. Bloch 1991). Learning takes place through a long and diffuse process of everyday engagement with the world (cf. Palsson 1994; Ingold 2000).

Of course, one's engagement with the world, as will be obvious in the cases of Teacher Ho and Little Yang, is not a random thing. It is constrained by the historically specific circumstances in which one lives, including the good or bad luck of one's ancestry. As a result, processes of economic learning, whether short-term (and clearly bracketed off) or long-term (and diffuse), are best analyzed, as Bourdieu has led us to expect, with reference to the long socio-historical trajectories which make them possible in the first place.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The point Bourdieu makes in *Distinction* (1984) is that long-term trajectories of "economic capital" and "cultural capital" within families significantly determine the aesthetic preferences of individuals—who themselves may see their own aesthetic preferences as wholly undetermined. More generally, his theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977) suggests that the "habitus" of individuals—something which is undoubtedly highly relevant to their economic prospects—is the product of an ongoing immersion in a symbolically-structured learning environment (ibid.). A specific class position, including the habitus that comes with it, significantly determines access to knowledge and (economic) opportunities. For a Chinese illustration, see the article by Michelson and Parish (2000) in which they discuss, among other things, the influence of "social capital" on economic prospects in modern China.

### Three Technical Systems

Before looking at the trajectories relevant to my two case studies, however, I want first to discuss the categorization of economic learning itself in a bit more detail. Here I draw briefly on Alfred Gell's model of human technical systems, using it primarily as a heuristic device without making too many grand theoretical claims for it (Gell 1988, cf. Gell 1999). Briefly, Gell defines *techniques* (which we associate primarily with production processes such as weaving) as "roundabout means of securing some desired result." In other words:

What distinguishes "technique" from non-technique is a certain degree of circuitousness in the achievement of a given objective. . . . The technique has to be ingenuous. Techniques form a bridge, sometimes only a simple one, sometimes a very complicated one, between a set of "given" elements [the body, some raw materials, some environmental features] and a goal-state which is to be realized making use of these givens. [1988:6]

So, for example, a good butchering technique might involve knowing how to minimize wastage through skilful use of the knife. A good commodity-buying technique might involve knowing how to act as if you are not really *that* interested in buying anything on sale at the market today. Techniques of these kinds obviously relate directly to economic life.

Gell argues, however, that the techniques used by humans to achieve their goals are much more diverse than is normally assumed in discussions of human technology, and he proposes that we should classify them into three general technical systems. First, and most obviously, we use *technologies of production* to secure the food, housing, clothing, and so forth which we need (or at least think we need). Second, and more controversially, Gell suggests that we use *technologies of reproduction*, by which he basically means kinship, to secure a desired social order:

The patterns of social arrangements which we identify as "kinship systems" are a set of [by definition ingenuous] technical strategies for managing our reproductive destiny via an elaborate sequence of purposes. [1988:7]

By this logic, Chinese patrilineal kinship can be seen as a technical system comprised of a whole complex range of ingenuous techniques for reproduction. So far so good.

Gell observes, however, that getting people to actually agree to the (sometimes incredibly onerous) demands of these first two technical systems, those

of production and of reproduction, is not always a simple thing. As a result, we have little choice but to deploy a third system, namely, the *technologies of enchantment* to ensnare other people in our purposes. Gell draws an analogy with the ways in which humans manipulate domesticated animals:

Human beings entrap animals in the mesh of human [productive] purposes using an array of psychological techniques [including “the artful use of whips, sugar-lumps, smacks, etc.”] but these are primitive by comparison with the psychological weapons which human beings use to exert control over the thoughts and actions of other human beings. The technology of enchantment is the most sophisticated that we possess. Under this heading I place all those technical strategies, especially art, music, dances, rhetoric, gifts, etc., which human beings employ in order to *secure the acquiescence of other people in their intentions or projects*.<sup>4</sup>

Now, Gell’s model may well strike some readers as an over-extension of the concept of technique, and questions could obviously be raised about its utilitarian premises (i.e., its assumption that a goal-oriented logic drives social action).<sup>5</sup> However I would suggest that from the perspective of learning and economic agency, it can provide a useful and thought-provoking framework. In terms of my own research, the implications of it are as follows. As I have said, I am interested in the abilities and dispositions which people must possess to become competent economic agents. One obvious difficulty, however, is that the abilities and dispositions which are *potentially* relevant to economic life are of *many* kinds, and they are highly diffuse. Do any patterns emerge? Gell claims that in order to achieve desired goal-states, humans make use of a range of techniques, which together form the general technical systems of production, reproduction, and enchantment. Is it not obvious that *each* of these technical systems can have a very large role to play in our individual and collective economic histories? Is it not also obvious that the techniques of Gell’s technical systems, even the ones which, like elements in a kinship

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<sup>4</sup> Gell (1988:7), emphasis added. It may help to think of two different, and potentially overlapping, senses in which “technologies of enchantment” could be intended by Gell. On the one hand, there are relatively explicit and direct techniques of persuasion, e.g., sales pitches. On the other hand, there are rather more implicit and convoluted techniques, e.g., ideological systems for ensnaring people, with their “willing consent,” in exploitative cycles of reciprocity. Note that techniques of either kind may involve enchantment in the Weberian sense, i.e., enchantment as a form of pervasive, and potentially seductive, magicality.

<sup>5</sup> Supporting evidence for Gell’s extension of technique into symbolic realms (kinship, language, myth, etc.) can be drawn, albeit rather circuitously, from Ulric Neisser’s essay on the psychology of skills (1983). Neisser discusses the complex relationship between the mastery of “action skills” (things like playing tennis) and the mastery of “symbolic skills” (things like doing mental calculation). He makes the general point that many human skills, including seemingly “action” ones, possess a substantial symbolic component.

system, appear to be the collective possession of a culture, are things which must, somehow, be *learned* by individuals in order to have an impact in the real world?<sup>6</sup>

In the instances which I will now start to describe—those of Teacher Ho and Little Yang—three things should become clear. First, the economic agency of Ho and Yang is premised on the mastery of techniques from each of Gell's technical systems. Second, the learning of these techniques has, in both cases, been a life-long task. And third, the process of technique-learning for both men has been heavily constrained by the circumstances—or more accurately the flow of changing circumstances—into which they were born.

### **Teacher Ho**

The back lanes of Protected Mountain provide the setting for many old and rather beautiful, albeit mostly decrepit, wooden houses. Teacher Ho lives in one of these, surrounded on all sides by farmers. He is a scholarly gentleman, and his talk often turns to explicitly Confucian or literati (*kongjiao* 孔教, *rujia* 儒家) sentiments and references. Visitors are treated with impeccable courtesy as they sit in a darkened side room where they are offered tea, candies, fruit and seeds. Their host pulls out yellowing scraps of his father's calligraphy for them to admire, pointing out that his own is clearly no match for it. When visitors leave, he normally accompanies them along the village paths for some considerable distance in the classic Chinese routine for sending off guests (Stafford 2000:55-69).

Retired and now in his sixties, Teacher Ho spends much of his time raising vegetables on a plot of land between his house and the steep hill behind the village. In this activity he makes use of skills acquired during the Maoist era, when he and his students worked in the fields—and indeed did almost anything *other* than study Confucius. During those years, the members of his family, along with other locals of “bad birth” (*chushen buhao* 出身不好), were effectively turned into farmers, or at least quasi-farmers. However they did *not*, or so it seems, lose their distinctly scholarly bearing; and they appear to have merely submerged from view for a while their ongoing attachment to literati ideals. In any case, in order to understand Teacher Ho's partial *scholar-to-farmer transformation*—and in order to comprehend his stance on the China of today—a longer historical framework is required. This will allow us to see where the scholarly bearing came from in the first place.

<sup>6</sup> My point is that something like Chinese kinship is only reproduced, as a technical system, to the extent that its premises are mastered anew by new generations of humans (cf. Sperber 1996).

### *The Local “Sojourning” Tradition*

The glory years for the village of Protected Mountain, which was originally settled in the Ming dynasty by demobilized soldiers from elsewhere in China, came during the mid-to-late 1800s and the early 1900s. For much of this period, the British controlled various sections of nearby Burma (now Myanmar), and young men from the village were expected to cross the border on foot and by horseback in search of wealth. In theory they were meant to “bring glory to their family and ancestors” (*rongzong yaozu* 榮宗耀祖), but there were significant risks for the Chinese sojourners (*huaqiao* 華僑) along the way, including tropical illnesses and localized violence. Many migrants worked as low-paid laborers and were referred to as *kuqiao* 苦僑 (bitter sojourners), while others eventually found wealth, mostly through trading activities.

Successful or not, it was common for local men to spend most of their adult lives working in Burma. They were expected, however, to return periodically to China, and most would eventually move back to Protected Mountain on a permanent basis. At some point in their lives, most of the relatively affluent *guiqiao* 歸僑 (returning sojourners) built houses of the kind in which Teacher Ho now lives. These wooden structures, often with elaborate decorative flourishes, were designed for the needs of gentlemen, not farmers—to the grief of their pig-farming descendants.

Wealthy returnees were also encouraged to perform good works, especially in the domain of education and learning (*xuewen* 學問). As one man put it, it was hoped that “those with wealth could help to raise the general cultural standard” (*you caifu de keyi ba zheige wenhua gaoqilai* 有財富的可以把這個文化搞起來). What is clear is that many families, regardless of their public spiritedness, did invest heavily in the education of their own sons (and sometimes daughters). As a result, what might be called *merchant-to-scholar transformations* of the kind expressed in the idiom *you shang er ru* 由商而儒: “To reach Confucianism by way of trading”—were not uncommon.<sup>7</sup> In a verse written to memorialize the skills of local merchants, a Republican era poet highlighted transformations precisely of this kind. He asserted that “the comprehension of ceremony and etiquette,” and by extension the appreciation of the whole Confucian way of life, “is made more likely by prosperity.” Or, to put it less poetically, it is expensive to educate your children.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gates’s suggestion that Chinese families have often tried, almost always without success, to achieve upward mobility—i.e., a shift into the class of officials—through the route of scholarly activity (1996:37).



In any case, I was told that for the people of Protected Mountain there has never been any contradiction between engaging in business and adhering to “the ideals of the literati” (*rujia sixiang* 儒家思想).<sup>8</sup> But which came first? The merchants of Protected Mountain’s glory years are often referred to by the composite term *rushang* 儒商, Confucian-merchants, and it is sometimes said that they had learning before they had wealth. As a result, their way of doing business was premised, it is now claimed, on trust (*xinyu* 信譽), and their behavior was guided by traditional moral ideals.<sup>9</sup> However, one man I spoke with was very clear that his own great-great-grandfather was *not* well educated when he went to Burma in the nineteenth century. He worked there as an ordinary laborer. Largely as a result of his ignorance, he and other young men from Protected Mountain found that they were swindled—and precisely by those overseas Chinese who had some schooling. In short, the people with “learning” were making money, whereas those without were not. Later, having prospered through hard graft, this man’s great-great-grandfather came back to Protected Mountain. He built a special room off the main courtyard of his grand wooden house, where his grandsons could study at the feet of a private tutor.

But I should stress that Confucian traditionalism was not the only influential set of ideas during this era. In the course of their travels and their time away from home, many of the *huaqiao* came into contact with the modernist and even revolutionary ideas spreading throughout East Asia during the late Qing and early Republican eras. This seems to have had a significant impact on local social life in the early twentieth century, e.g., in relation to ideas about the status of women. One group of young men from Protected Mountain, living in Burma, even published a radical magazine for the edification of their hometown compatriots. According to a later commentator, their intention was:

<sup>8</sup> Another expression puts it rather bluntly: “It’s vulgar to have wealth without culture; but it’s ‘sour’ to have culture without wealth” (*ruguo you qian, meiyou wenhua, jiao su; you wenhua meiyou qian, jiao suan* 如果有錢，沒有文化，叫俗；有文化沒有錢，叫酸). Of course, the stereotype has it that in classical Chinese thought it was, generally speaking, a fine thing to be a scholar, whereas it was a very bad thing—the lowest of occupations—to be a merchant. However, the historian Susan Mann has recently pointed out some interesting facts in this regard. She notes that even the texts of high Confucianism held scholars incapable of working in contempt; while the official stigmatization of merchants has, over the centuries, been much weaker than is often assumed (Mann 2000). Hill Gates has meanwhile shown the extent to which popular evaluations of merchant activity—and of “petty capitalism” more generally—have deviated significantly, over the centuries, from the official line (Gates 1996).

<sup>9</sup> One local man, relating Protected Mountain’s glorious history, cited the expression: “a true gentleman appreciates wealth, but his manner of acquiring it has ‘dao 道’” (*junzi hao cai, quzhi you dao* 君子好財，取之有道).

... to change the community's backwardness ... to attack the rotten feudal customs and ills of the time ... to drive out opium smoking, gambling, and other hateful vices ... to promote the liberation of women and to help develop the cultural and educational level [of the community].

This agenda stood rather awkwardly alongside the respect for tradition, indeed the hyper-traditionalism, which is often said to be characteristic of Protected Mountain *and* of its sojourners.<sup>10</sup> The community prides itself to this day on a tradition of scholarship and expertise in calligraphic arts, in proper memorialization of the ancestors, and so on. Such “feudal” activities have largely been funded by the proceeds of overseas business activities. How could one be both radical and archetypically Chinese at the same time? As will be seen, this tension is highly relevant to the unfolding of Teacher Ho's own story.

### ***The Ho Family as Merchants and Scholars***

One of those who left Protected Mountain for Burma, and had considerable success there as a trader, was Teacher Ho's paternal great-grandfather. He and his second (Burmese) wife were later joined in Burma by a son his first wife had given birth to back in China. This son, Teacher Ho's grandfather, was only 12 years old when he set off. According to Teacher Ho, both his great-grandfather and grandfather were “people of culture” (*you wenhua de ren*). They had attended a traditional school (*sishu* 私塾) for two or three years, and therefore possessed at least basic literacy and some grasp of the classical literature. So far as their descendants are concerned, this made them *rushang*—Confucian-merchants.

A few years after Ho's grandfather arrived in Burma, his father died. In accordance with local law, the estate passed to the Burmese wife rather than to the Chinese son. Having to support himself without an inheritance, Ho's grandfather then began to work as an apprentice, later engaging in small business, and finally working for one of the larger trading firms established by overseas Chinese. When he was about 20 years old, he returned briefly to

<sup>10</sup> This hyper-traditionalism may have two sources. One is the fact that the initial Han Chinese settlers of Protected Mountain, migrants from elsewhere, often took local (non-Han) wives, and they were in any case surrounded by many non-Han communities. In other words, local ethnic identities and ethnic relations are rather complex and this may have led some people to elaborate their “Chineseness.” The second fact is precisely that of out-migration. As Tien Ju-k'ang (1953) noted long ago, migrants often turn out to be more traditionalist—and idealistic about their home culture—than those they have left behind. Certainly Protected Mountain's traditionalism has been financed primarily by its overseas Chinese.

Protected Mountain to build a house and marry a local woman. He then went back to Burma where he took a second, Burmese, wife. Finally, when he was about 40 years old, he returned permanently to China, bringing with him his Burmese family. His two families thereafter lived in separate houses in the same village, and he began making his expected contribution to local life. Among other things, he helped fund the repair of village roads, paths, and bridges, and he provided the poor with medical expenses. He also invested in the education of his descendants.

In 1898, when he was about 60 years old, he and his Chinese wife had their last child, Teacher Ho's father. Ten years later the elder Ho died, and Ho's father—still a child—inherited a small amount of land with which he was meant to support himself. (After the revolution, this small inheritance proved highly problematic.) From the outset this youngest son was a good student, especially in literary subjects such as poetry and calligraphy. He did a tremendous amount of memorization of classical texts. As Teacher Ho now puts it, his father truly walked “the road of Confucius and Mencius” (*Kong-Meng zhidao* 孔孟之道) and seemed destined to become a scholar. In 1920 he started a small school in the family barn, upstairs over the trough for watering horses, in which he primarily taught the Chinese classics. Over the next few years his school grew and was based in a succession of relatives' houses. In the 1930s, when a Ho ancestral hall (*Hozu citang* 何族祠堂) was built in the middle of Protected Mountain Village, the school found a “permanent” home.

According to Teacher Ho, the ancestral-hall school was, in a very real sense, his father's personal “work of art” (*zuopin* 作品). He decorated the walls, gates, and doorframes of the complex with his own calligraphy; he designed and maintained the gardens and buildings; and, most importantly, he taught, apparently with intense dedication, several generations of students. The grounds and the buildings were a literal manifestation of Confucian ideals. The main hall was periodically the setting for commemorative rituals for the Ho family ancestors, along with rites for Confucius and Mencius. But on a day-to-day basis the buildings were filled with children and young people hard at work on their studies. In a local gazetteer, the contribution of Teacher Ho's father to education in Protected Mountain is summarized as follows:

He explained everything conscientiously with words and furthermore taught by his own example. He emphasized personal character [*pinde* 品德], as well as fundamental reading and writing skills. He always taught based on the ability and level of his students. He started at the surface of things and then moved onto a more profound level [*you qian ru shen* 由淺入深]. He did not tolerate disrespect. His school took care of the poor and the orphaned; the fees were low. It remained open for thirty years, and nurtured six hundred students.

### ***Teacher Ho and the Revolutionary Years***

Teacher Ho was himself born in 1940. His early childhood, up until the age of 9, revolved around the family home (where he lives to this day) and the nearby ancestral hall where his father ran the school. He watched his father tending the ancestral-hall gardens, and helped in maintaining the school grounds. He learned from his father how to write simple characters with a brush, and gradually began to master the art of calligraphy. During those early years, he was also drilled by his father in the memorization and recitation of classical texts. Like his father, he seemed destined to become a teacher and scholar.

But the era of Protected Mountain's prosperity was swiftly coming to an end. The Japanese occupation of Burma and then parts of southwestern China in the early 1940s had a hugely disruptive effect on economic life. Many overseas Chinese fleeing the occupiers returned to Protected Mountain thus putting intolerable pressure on local resources. The war of resistance against Japan, combined with China's own civil war, made life increasingly difficult. In 1949 the Communist victory and the collapse of the Republican regime presented new challenges to a local economy built on international migration. The border with Burma was closed, and it became difficult, and eventually almost impossible, for *huaqiao* relatives to send remittances to their Chinese kin. The whole basis for local prosperity had been taken away. Meanwhile, the mere fact of association with overseas business activity came to be seen as problematic. Many local families possessed fields, bought with income earned by themselves and by relatives in Burma, which they rented to tenant farmers (*diannong* 佃農). As a result, they were officially labeled "Chinese-sojourner-landlords" (*huaqiao dizhu* 華僑地主), and their fields were redistributed amongst the non-landholding classes.

As he told me of the Maoist era, Teacher Ho wept. His father owned only a relatively small amount of land—inherited, as I have said, upon his father's death when he was a 10-year-old child. But it was just enough for him to be classified as a Chinese-sojourner-landlord. After 1949 he was allowed to teach for one more year. Then it was determined that, as a defender of "feudal thinking" (*fengjian sixiang* 封建思想), he should not be entrusted with students. He would become a farmer and was subsequently allocated what Teacher Ho now describes as a tiny plot of bad land, far from the village on a steep incline. The life of his family then became bitter in the extreme; they often went without food. Having always been a teacher, not a worker, his father was far from strong. His suffering was especially intolerable during the Great Leap Forward (*dayajin* 大躍進), when he sometimes slept on the cold ground after working all day. His health never recovered.

In the 1960s, many of the “feudal” relics of Protected Mountain’s glorious past were either destroyed or hidden from view. Temples and ancestral halls were vandalized, and references to China’s classical culture were systematically defaced. Many old wooden *bian* 匾 (horizontal plaques with carved calligraphic inscriptions) were taken down and used to build carts or to provide firewood. The remaining inscriptions and decorative carvings—including those produced by Teacher Ho’s father for the ancestral hall school—were hidden behind fake walls of dried mud in the hope, sometimes futile, that they might survive the destruction. Finally in 1967, not long after the start of the Cultural Revolution, Teacher Ho’s father died—deeply saddened, of course, by what he saw around him. He was, according to his son, performing a public duty he performed every day: sweeping the dusty path that went from his home up to a larger main path at the front of the village. He suddenly had a seizure and shouted out. On the next day he died.

As for Teacher Ho himself, in spite of his “bad birth” he was allowed to study and eventually graduated from high school. His early teaching experiences came during the height of Maoism, around the time of his father’s death. During the Cultural Revolution he was repeatedly criticized and even lost teaching jobs, although he says that he had never committed a serious error (*cuowu* 錯誤) of any kind. He notes, with some pleasure, that he became skilled at organizing the labor activities of his students (a key element of education at that time). It was as if he could, through an effort of the will, become the good farmer his father had never been. During the era of production brigades (*shengchandu* 生產隊), his elementary school students were, he says, more productive than high school students. This was because he mapped out their time efficiently, so that they achieved good results from less effort, thus freeing up time for study. He always strove, like his father, to be a good example to his students: he never drank, he never smoked, he never played majiang or other trivial games. He simply focused his energy on the “cultivation” (*peiyang* 培養) of students. During the difficult years, he decided that his single ambition in life was to be an “ordinary commoner” (*putong de lao-baixing* 普通的老百姓); it would be enough glory for him to be a teacher in the countryside.

### ***What Techniques Did Teacher Ho Learn?***

Looking back at this incredibly complex personal and collective history, what can be said about learning, as such? Obviously the evidence presented above will tell us virtually nothing about Teacher Ho’s cognitive development, for example about how he became numerate or how he learned to differentiate between various kinds of plants in the countryside or how he learned to

explain poetry to the uninitiated. It would be an enormous task to provide a psychologically plausible account of the acquisition of even one of these skills. But my aim here is a much more modest one. I have been providing evidence of the historical context of Ho's learning, and have described part of the evolving learning environment in which he was immersed. Drawing on Gell, I have also wanted to stress the *diversity* of the learning experiences which, in retrospect, can be said to be relevant to Teacher Ho's economic agency.

One obvious point is that from Teacher Ho's earliest childhood, when he worked and played on the grounds of the ancestral-hall school and sat with his father at home, he was in a position to learn a great deal about the job of teacher. A key element in this was his gradual mastery of the spoken and written Chinese language (he has always worked as a teacher of language and literature). This is his most obvious form of technical accomplishment—let me call it a technology of production<sup>11</sup>—and it is something which clearly took him a very long time to achieve. Teacher Ho was also able to observe at very close range his father's manner of being a person (*zuoren* 做人) and, as it happens, his manner of acting like a teacher (*dang jiaoshi* 當教師): his dignified bearing, his demeanor, his way of dealing with students and their parents, and so on. According to Teacher Ho, his father's example has always provided the model (*mofan* 模範) for his own behavior, and for his deeply conscientious attitude towards his vocation. Needless to say, there are many other skills, not least those derived from years of practical experience in the classroom, which have contributed to Ho's mastery of the teaching profession.

While learning to be teacher, Teacher Ho was also learning how to be a kinsman. In Gell's terms, he was mastering aspects of the Chinese technologies of reproduction. Given the relatively high status of his family in local terms, it is hardly surprising that part of what Teacher Ho learned, and to this day can reproduce, are ideals, behaviors and dispositions associated with Chinese patriliney. His almost stylized respect for his father, his unyielding loyalty to his brothers, his constant reference to the honorableness, even in poverty, of his family's past are all consistent with the classic patrilineal outlook. I would suggest that Teacher Ho's way of speaking about and enacting kin relations is highly relevant to his economic agency. This is true partly because he comes from an esteemed family of teachers (other kin, including his brother and his

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<sup>11</sup> I accept that the two careers I am discussing here, teaching and trading, may fit rather awkwardly with the concept of "techniques of production." Although this issue is beyond the scope of the current paper, I think there is no great difficulty in arguing that both teachers and traders are engaged in productive activities, in much the same way that workers produce commodities.

son, are teachers as well) and this confers a kind of natural legitimacy on his activities. It is also true because his highly moral stance towards kinship and family life reflects back more generally on his own moral stature. In the eyes of the community he has moral integrity (*you daode* 有道德). Teacher Ho's moral worthiness, in turn, is explicitly part of his job—one of his necessary skills—because in China, even to the present day, teachers are assumed to be moral exemplars *par excellence* (Stafford 1995).

If we can say that Teacher Ho has mastered certain interlinked techniques of production and of reproduction, what of Gell's third category, that of enchantment? Here let me cite one example, returning to the theme of language. I have noted that from earliest childhood Teacher Ho became a dedicated student of his father's calligraphy (*shufa* 書法). As Yen Yueh-ping has pointed out in her work (which also draws on the writings of Alfred Gell), Chinese writing comprises a realm of art in which enchantment plays an integral role (Yen 2000). The skills of writing themselves are learned through an arduous process of imitation and repetition until mastery is achieved. This requires long and sometimes incredibly tedious training, and the whole business is accompanied by an extensive, and, as Yen suggests, an "enchancing" expert and popular commentary. The point is that people often *believe* in the mysteriousness (and sometimes magical power) of the calligraphic art, and it therefore serves various legitimizing functions. In Teacher Ho's economic agency—in his life as a teacher—the enchanting techniques of the calligraphic art, and of language use more generally, have played no small role.

### Little Yang

Now let me turn to the case of Little Yang. As I have already pointed out, he runs a small shop at the edge of the village. He was born in the late 1970s, soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution, and at the beginning, significantly, of Deng Xiaoping's era of economic reforms. He is also focused, unlike Teacher Ho, very much on the present and the future. Whereas Teacher Ho's family has direct links to Protected Mountain's "glorious past," the same cannot be said of Little Yang's. He has no *huaqiao* relatives, past or present. More generally, in terms of lineage ideologies, which carry a considerable weight in this traditionalist community, Yang's ancestry is far from ideal. His paternal grandfather was sent off into an uxori-local marriage, while his maternal grandfather started life as a foster son (*yangzi* 養子). Yang's own father, born around the time of the founding of the PRC in the late 1940s, was a worker in a factory for much of his life. During the revolutionary era he was promoted to a managerial post, but later when better-qualified managers were being

sought, he lost his position and reverted to being a farmer.

Little Yang himself was never a brilliant student, a fact he blames on his generally unruly (*tiaopi* 調皮) personality. But early on he showed some capacity for business. As a child of seven, he started selling vegetables at the market in the village. He collected parsley, peppers, and aubergines from his family's vegetable plot, and wild greens from the hills, and sold them for small amounts of cash. Later, when he was about 10 years old, he progressed to selling a wider range of vegetables, and more expensive commodities (including pork and jade), on the streets of the nearby market town. The competition there was often fierce, the buyers more likely to be strangers. He began to learn the skills associated with haggling and more generally how to handle trading relations of various kinds.

By the time he was 16, Little Yang already possessed considerable commercial experience and his relatives invested a large amount of money to set up a chicken-raising enterprise (*yangjichang* 養雞場) which he was meant to run. The year was 1994. For several months, he trained informally in a similar enterprise, and then he hired three young girls from the remote countryside (at 150 yuan per month) as assistants. The enterprise opened, and for the first two years things went swimmingly: Yang made a substantial annual profit of around 40,000 yuan. For a village boy it was a fortune, and as he now admits, he did not quite know how to handle it. He estimates that about half of his annual profits went on gambling and drinking, and he increasingly left the day-to-day running of the factory to his youthful assistants. He wistfully observes that he did not know enough "science" at the time. Disaster, perhaps inevitably, struck. A disease spread through/decimated his stock and he was put out of business overnight. At 18, he was a "bankrupt boss" (*pochan laoban* 破產老闆), despised by his father and relatives for the shame he had brought on their family. His immediate reaction was to go on an extended spree with friends; he drank for seven days and nights.

### ***The Kinship Side of Financial Disaster***

For Little Yang, this tale of economic woe is intimately tied up with what happened next. When his chicken enterprise collapsed and his spree commenced, one of the country girls working for him responded with mercy. Herself now out of a job, she fed Yang and tolerated his drunken state. She was only 17, but he had already admired her because she could do the work normally done by *two* local girls (this is high praise in rural China). It struck him that she actually cared about him. She was too young for marriage according to Chinese law and came from what Yang describes as a remote and impoverished area up in the mountains. Her home was a four-hour bus ride away, fol-



lowed by a very steep three-hour walk. But Little Yang went there to discuss marriage with his potential father-in-law. He claims to have told him: "I've just gone bankrupt. I don't have any money now, so I can't marry your daughter. But I can promise you that with me she'll never miss any meals and eventually we'll have wealth."

It was agreed that they could marry in the future.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the young couple started living together and engaged in several small businesses in the market town, none of which went terribly well. Eventually they started their current business, the small shop in the village, which has proved the most viable so far.

Having lived together for some time, Yang and his girlfriend were eventually given permission to marry. Taking their restricted finances (and the limited resources of Yang's family) into account, his prospective father-in-law agreed that he could make a marriage payment of a mere 3,000 yuan, instead of the average 20,000 yuan expected these days in this part of China. However Little Yang's prospective *grandfather*-in-law was extremely unhappy about this arrangement. Things came to a head when the newly married couple "returned to the door" (*huimen* 回門), i.e., went back to the bride's natal community on the second day of their marriage. Upon his arrival there Little Yang agreed to bow ceremonially, as was expected, in front of his new parents-in-law and grandparents-in-law. But he balked at bowing before *all* his assembled in-laws as he was asked to do. A row ensued, in which the issue of the low marriage payment was raised. Reflecting back on this altercation, Little Yang expressed the view that it had been a good thing, because he stood up to his grandfather-in-law, accusing him of being more interested in money than in his granddaughter's happiness. He had earned some "face" (*mianzi* 面子) by saying these things publicly.

In the end, however, Little Yang did in fact bow before his assembled relatives. His explanation for the act of submission is telling. He said that he did so because he loved his wife, and did not want to lose her over a matter of face, so he took on a bit of humiliation/pollution (*wuru* 侮辱). He explained to me the honorableness of this act with reference to a traditional story, "Han Xin's disgrace." Little Yang's version went as follows:

Han Xin [a famous general who helped found the Western Han dynasty] arrived—near starvation—in a village, where an old woman, taking mercy, started to

<sup>12</sup> It is striking that in our discussions of his marriage arrangements, Little Yang made no mention whatever of his parents having been involved. If it is true that he negotiated things entirely on his own, this would of course be highly unusual.

give him a mouthful of rice gruel. Suddenly, a 12-year-old boy came out onto the path and said, "In order to eat this gruel you'll have to either knock me over or crawl between my legs." Han Xin, knowing his own weakness, crawled between the boy's legs [a polluting act], and ate the mouthful of gruel. As far as everyone viewing this scene was concerned, he had been thoroughly humiliated.

Later Han Xin, having become a great general, had occasion to pass by the same village. Everyone assumed that he would reward the old lady and severely punish the boy [now a young man]. He did indeed reward the old lady handsomely. To the young man he unexpectedly gave a respectful bow. He explained that had it not been for the boastful boy he would never have appreciated his own limits.

Little Yang says he does not mind so much the wedding-party embarrassment—or indeed the factory bankruptcy embarrassment—because they helped him grasp his strengths and weaknesses.

### ***A Trader-to-Scholar Transformation?***

Part of what is of interest is that Little Yang bothered to tell me a story which is part of the classical Chinese tradition. In fact, these days he is engaging in a considerable amount of "self-education" (*zixue* 自學). He reads, among other things, popular versions of the Chinese classics, which is where he learned the stories of Han Xin and others. Perhaps against expectations, he is, if anything, even *more* likely than Teacher Ho to pepper his speech with Confucian sentiments and classical idioms. Little Yang is also studying calligraphy. Several times I came upon him in his shop, holding a calligraphy brush, and surrounded by old newspapers on which he was tracing characters. By his own estimation his calligraphy is not very good, but he is trying. One reason he studies and engages in self-reflection, he says, is in order to correct his past mistakes. He has learned to control his drinking and gambling, and he is more skilled at not being taken advantage of by others. He knows how to deal with customers, and how to "make them want to buy my things" (*rang tamen yuanyi mai wode dongxi* 讓他們願意買我的東西). He wants to be even more "scientific" in his approach to business. He has read several books about Jewish merchants, whom he greatly admires (one of his ambitions is to visit Israel).

Little Yang occasionally voices regret about his unruliness as a school-boy, and he now hopes to make up for lost time. He will not let his son make the same mistake. It is interesting to note, however, that by local historical standards he has already had a very substantial education. He undoubtedly suffers from the remarkable inflation in minimal academic qualifications in post-Qing China. In order to be counted as "having culture" in the nineteenth century, local men—including Teacher Ho's great-grandfather and grand-

father—had merely to attend a traditional school for a couple of years, develop basic literacy, and learn something about the classics. Little Yang, by contrast, has completed, albeit with low marks, the nine mandatory years of elementary and lower middle schooling and has a reasonably good level of literacy and numeracy. And yet now he would like to be “more scholarly.”

Explicitly following in the tradition of men like Teacher Ho's grandfather, Little Yang claims that if he makes money in the future he will do something useful for his hometown. One dream he harbors is to help improve the quality of local agriculture: it should be collectivized and industrialized, he thinks. He also believes it would be useful to provide schooling for local people of all ages, including the older people in the community who remain illiterate or semi-literate (including his father). In short, Little Yang is explicitly positioning himself within the local tradition of *you shang er ru*, “coming to Confucianism by way of trading.” One makes money in order to study and perform good works in the tradition of literati-gentlemen, including providing support for learning.

Nevertheless, Little Yang is equally clear that the requirements of commercial life and the expectations of Confucian morality are sometimes hard to reconcile. Nowadays, as he notes, people say that businessmen are simply out for profit: they will happily deceive (*pian* 騙) anyone in order to achieve this goal. He himself is not immune to criticism, as he cheekily acknowledges. He sometimes has no choice but to display his cleverness (*biaoshi wode congming* 表示我的聰明) by taking advantage of others because business, after all, is a competition (*bisai* 比賽). You have to win somehow. Businessmen in modern China are sometimes referred to with the expression *jianshang* 奸商, roughly meaning “unethical merchants.” By way of contrast, as I have noted, the ancestral *huaqiao* of Protected Mountain are referred to respectfully as *ru-shang*, Confucian-merchants. As for Little Yang, he once told me that he was a *jianshang jia rushang* 奸商加儒商, an unethical merchant and a Confucian-merchant—all rolled into one.

### ***What Techniques Did Little Yang Learn?***

In spite of his relatively young age, Yang's life history is very rich, and the skills he developed along the way—at haggling, at managing etc.—are obviously highly complex in cognitive terms. But what can we say at a very general level? Just as Teacher Ho was prepared from childhood to be a teacher, Little Yang was seemingly prepared from childhood to be a merchant. Yang gradually learned a number of economics-relevant techniques: how to harvest fresh greens from the hillsides of Protected Mountain for sale at the village market, how to keep these greens fresh, how to set prices. He learned how to

raise pigs and chickens. He claims that one of the most important things he learned as a child was how to “eat bitterness” (*chiku* 吃苦), specifically how to work to exhaustion in order to make money. For instance, as a child he would spend hours up to his neck in muddy water to net a handful of minnows, which he could then sell. From an early age, he learned the techniques of negotiating over price. By the time he was 16 he possessed very substantial experience of business techniques—not that this spared him a humiliating bankruptcy.

The techniques of reproduction to which Little Yang were exposed are undoubtedly different in some respects from the classic patrilineal ones which must have come naturally to Teacher Ho. Of course, everyone in Protected Mountain is familiar with patrilineal imperatives. But both of Yang’s parents are the product, in Chinese terms, of unorthodox and low-status marriage arrangements, and he cannot situate himself in a glorious family line. In short, Little Yang came from a family of kinship improvisers. Following in this tradition, he embarked on a marriage which is nominally low prestige: he negotiated to marry, at a knockdown price, a girl from a remote community whose father was not wealthy. And yet this marriage has worked strongly to his own advantage. The success of his chicken enterprise, while it lasted, depended in no small measure on the hard work of this young woman, and she nurtured him back to health and sanity after the bankruptcy.

Finally, what techniques of enchantment has Little Yang learned? In fact, his whole attitude towards trading is strikingly enchantment-oriented. I say this because he sees activities such as negotiating over price, anticipating market fluctuations, and so on, as intrinsically mysterious (*aomiao*). Perhaps the clearest example can be seen in his manner of enticing customers, of “getting them to want to buy my things.” Here he has a range of what are effectively seduction routines, some of them mastered as a child on the streets of Protected Mountain. His aim, both then and now, has been to entice his good customers into parting with their money, in some cases simply because they become intrigued with Little Yang’s rather chatty and funny manner. These skills have come to him over the very long term, as he himself clearly sees. I once asked Little Yang how he had developed all the knowledge and wisdom (*zhihui* 智慧) which he made use of in his work and daily life. Without pausing for a moment, he replied “*Rensheng jiushi bu duande sikao* 人生就是不断的思考”—life is unending reflection.

## Conclusion

Let me briefly sum up what I have been saying. Economic agency, for Teacher Ho and Little Yang, is undoubtedly premised on their mastery, over time, of

certain types of knowledge. Following Gell, I have drawn attention to the fact that both men have mastered a range of techniques over the course of their lives. Some of these are obviously economic, because they relate in a very direct sense to their occupations (being a teacher, being a merchant). Other kinds of techniques they have mastered—knowing how to skilfully reach a marriage arrangement, or knowing how to use the enchanting language of calligraphic expertise—are perhaps not so explicitly directed towards economic ends. In other words, they are not techniques of production. And yet they clearly are, in the end, highly relevant to the experiences of Ho and Yang as participants in the flow of economic life.

In a sense, some of what Ho and Yang have learned seems relatively straightforward, for example, in a mere three months Little Yang could garner enough experience to contemplate opening a chicken factory. But other aspects of what they have learned—how to behave like a respect-inducing teacher, how to competently seduce potential customers, how to *really* run a business that does not fail—have not come to them easily or overnight. These things have been learned over the long term, and in most cases nobody ever went so far as to spell them out.

But my point is not simply that economic learning is highly varied and that it sometimes takes place over the very long-term, nor that it often transpires at an implicit rather than explicit level. A key element in the stories of both men is the extent to which their economic learning relates to long historical trajectories—individual, familial and communal.

A few hundred years ago, Protected Mountain was an agricultural community, made up of farmers who were the descendents of demobilized soldiers, migrants from other parts of China. Then, about a hundred and fifty years ago, the historical circumstances of Burma (including British adventures there) set the stage for new economic opportunities for the descendants of these soldiers-turned-farmers. For a relatively brief period of time, prosperity came to at least some local families via labor migration to Burma and then through trade. In effect, such families had, over the long term, gone from being soldiers, to being farmers, to being migrant workers, to being merchants. Some of them then began to invest their wealth in scholarship, and that is where the story of Teacher Ho's father begins. Meanwhile, other families, including that of Little Yang, appear to have remained relatively poor and continued to produce illiterate sons "without culture." In some ways, this was to their good fortune. For in the mid-twentieth century to be wealthy—and to be a landed person with connections outside China—was a kind of curse. It was possible to go from being a merchant and a scholar to being a peasant.

Now that era has passed. Someone like Little Yang, the son of a farmer/

worker, can grow up knowing only the money-obsessed era of Deng Xiaoping thought. He can grow up in a village where trading and haggling is once again the order of the day. He can be happy to do business, perhaps because, as Little Yang told me, “Only when a place has traders can it become really interesting.” His aspirations for the present and future, however, may be tinged with classical echoes. Chinese categories of the long term—e.g., what it means to be a farmer (*nong* 農), a teacher (*shi* 士), or a trader (*shang* 商)—may still heavily inform his thought and life choices (cf. Sahlin 1996). He may only be engaged in a small business (*xiao shengyi* 小生意), but Little Yang sees himself as possessing a kind of honor-with-humility, just like the great Chinese general Han Xin. He is reading. He is learning calligraphy. Perhaps his son will become a teacher.

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Charles Stafford

Department of Anthropology

London School of Economics and Political Science

Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK

c.stafford@lse.ac.uk

# 雲南兩個有關學習與經濟能動性的故事

Charles Stafford

英國倫敦政治經濟學院人類學系

本文以雲南一個村落的兩個男人為對象，旨在探討學習與經濟能動性（economic agency）之間的關係。何老師是一位退休的教師，追隨他父親的腳步以教職為業，在毛澤東時代吃足了苦頭。小楊是位小店老闆，出生在中國經濟改革的初期。筆者想要探討的問題是：何老師和小楊是如何成為各自不同類別的經濟能動性之代理者（economic agent）？

這答案很複雜，至少有兩個原因。首先，與經濟能動性相關的各種技術，其範圍是相當的廣泛，包括了行事能力或採取某些特殊、甚或非常精微的舉止表現之能力。然而，「與經濟相關的知識」範圍究竟在哪？因此本文中，筆者援用 Gell 對人類「技術系統」（technical systems）的討論來組織大異其趣的各項民族誌材料。研究學習與經濟能動性所面臨的第二個複雜性則與歷史有關。成就某一身分所要學習的特殊本事——例如，學習教書而非務農——乃個人的、家族的或社群的歷史之總和運作，而其中有些作用是非常長遠的。那麼，什麼樣的歷史架構適合拿來分析學習與經濟生活？我們又要溯及過往至什麼程度？

何老師是位有「儒家」學者風範的士紳，不過這種風範是和他所生活的村落之歷史有直接的關連。從十八世紀下半葉至十九世紀初期，鄰近緬甸的區域是在英國的管轄中，村裡的年輕人都到那邊尋求財富。何老師的內曾祖父就是前往發展而成功致富的一例。他自認為是位「儒商」，後來鼓勵他的幼子朝讀書人的方向發展。這個兒子——何老師的父親——年輕時就開學堂，在何氏宗祠建成後，學堂就順理成章地有個「永久」的家。這座學堂是何老師童年時期學習環境中的主要部分，對他的影響力難以衡量。可以想見，1949年共產黨勝利後對學堂及他的父親所產生的毀滅性後果。何老師努力地使自己成為一名教師，時至今天他仍是抱持著一種強烈的感覺，認為教書是極尊榮體面的職業——而這是他從童年就認知到的。

在這個複雜的生活故事中，與何老師的經濟能動性有關的學習成果是什麼？是以他的父親為榜樣，讓他當個稱職老師的能力？或是他對中國人牢不可破之親屬關係（kinship）的瞭解？還是他所擅長的書法？何老師的「經濟學習」（economic learning）的過程極為分散，這樣的過程與包含他的家族及保留山區的整個社群在內的長期性歷史軌道有直接的關連。

同樣地說到有關小楊的故事。小楊出生在鄧小平經濟改革初期的年代，年紀尚幼的他已展現出做生意的能力。七歲時，他就從家裡的菜園採些香菜、胡椒及茄子拿到市場上去零賣，賺些小錢。後來他販賣更多種類的蔬菜以及較貴的貨物如豬肉



和玉。十六歲那年，小楊開始一番大事業——卻慘遭失敗。不過，這次挫敗的經驗帶給他始料未及的收穫：他和一位幫他工作的女孩結婚，兩人一起創造了更好的生活。目前小楊在村邊經營一家小店。

再次，我們看到小楊「經濟學習」故事的錯綜複雜：從他年幼時採菜在市場零售的經驗開始，經歷當個年輕工廠老闆的災難性階段，再到現在的小店老闆。小楊所擁有的親屬關係及道德的形塑與風格，在某些方面是相當不同於何老師的，但同樣地也與其經濟生活有關。

總之，從何老師和小楊的故事可以看到經濟學習過程中的兩項基本要務。首先，經濟學習過程的變異是很大的，且可能涉及了精通各種不同的技能、技術以及習性的漫長進展。其次，我們應將這樣的過程視為可能與長遠歷史軌跡是互相對立的——包括個人的、家族的以及社群的——而這些造就了特定形式的學習。

**關鍵詞：**經濟，學習，知識，生命史，中國

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