March 4, 2023

2022 letter

(This piece is my year in review, this year a bit late; here's my letter from 2021)

Mountains offer the best hiding places from the state.

There were a lot of state controls to escape from in 2022. Two days before Shanghai locked down in April, I was on the final flight from the city to Yunnan, the province in China's farthest southwest. Yunnan's landmass—slightly smaller than that of California's—features greater geographic variation than most countries. Its north is historic Tibet, while the south feels much like Thailand. People visit the province for its spectacular nature views: rainforest, rice terraces, fast rivers, and snowy mountains. Otherwise tourists are drawn to its ethnic exoticism. As many as half of the country's officially-recognized ethnic groups have a substantial presence there, including many of those that have historically resisted Han rule.

As Shanghai's lockdown became protracted, a trip planned to last days grew into one that lasted months. Wandering through Yunnan gave me a chance to contemplate the culture of the mountains.

They are towering in the north. These are Tibetan areas home to a meaningful chunk of the Himalayas: Yunnan's highest peak is Kawarkapo, one of Tibetan Buddhism's most sacred mountains. This region is unbeatable for snowy beauty. The roads around them are strewn with fluttering prayer flags and studded with impassive yaks. Something in the thinness of the air produces more vivid light, which fires up white

peaks in brilliant red when the sun is low. I went on several hikes around Kawarkapo and Tiger Leaping Gorge, which offer gorgeous treks through tough terrain.[1]

Northern Yunnan is a site of improbable mixings. Missionaries made headway into these lands in the 19th century, establishing not just a Christian population but also vineyards that continue to produce wine grapes. In a remote valley, I passed by a vineyard owned by LVMH to produce Cabernet, which retail for US$300 per bottle.[2] The most stimulating parts of this region are not the cities of Lijiang or Shangri-La, but the more remote Tibetan areas. Tibetans have been subject to decades of forced assimilation to Han culture, but they still find room to practice small acts of subversion. One guide told me, for example, that monks have slipped a portrait of the Dalai Lama behind the portrait of the Panchen Lama in their monastery, allowing them to pray in good conscience. These rounds of control and evasion continue to grind on.

The mountains are gentler in the south. Tea hills are set amidst rainforest and rubber plantations in Xishuangbanna, the prefecture that sits above Laos and Burma. The weather there is sweltering. To cool down, one can take a dip in the Mekong River, which carries remarkably cold water that has flowed from the Tibetan highlands, or eat its tropical fruits: mango, papaya, durian, or so many melons. Xishuangbanna is one of China's most biodiverse regions, home to thousands of species of trees, as well as wild elephants, peafowl, bears, and birds galore.

In southern Yunnan, most of the people have Southeast Asian features. Xishuangbanna hosts around a dozen of China's official ethnic groups, some of which consist of only a few tens of thousands of people clustered around certain mountains. The most prominent group there is the Dai, while the smaller groups include the Aini, Bulang, and Hani peoples.[3] Most make their living off of mountain agriculture, which means planting cash crops like tea, rubber, or bananas (unless they've chosen to put on their ethnic dress to cater to tourists). That cultivation intermixes with the foraging of wild herbs, mushrooms, and flowers, along with occasional illicit hunting of game. A more perilous venture would be to traffic narcotics, since the area is right along the Golden Triangle.

I ended up spending most time in the north-central city of Dali. It is located in the most temperate part of Yunnan: cooler than Xishuangbanna and sunnier than Shangri-La, bounded by a mountain range to the west and a large lake to the east. The local people are the Bai, whose cultural practices are proximate to the Han's. My home was

a wooden farmhouse in a Bai village at the foot of the mountains. If I stayed closer to the lake, the houses would be made of attractive stone, ornamented with wooden carvings and ink paintings on white wall. The Bai have a long culture of craftmaking, producing marbleware or tie-dye linens for trade.

Up until the early 2000s, a different Bai product attracted foreign travelers: cannabis, which grew freely around Dali. Foreigners in Beijing or Shanghai would reminisce about the good old days in Dali, where one could be beckoned by a smiling lady into an alley to purchase a baggie. The cannabis trade has been stamped out.4 Nowadays, it is not foreigners who travel to Dali to toke a joint, but Chinese who visit for a harder drug: cryptocurrency, NFTs, and other web3 paraphernalia. A great deal of China's crypto community has relocated in recent years to Dali. It is not that the city has wanted to attract them; rather, its appeal is more general.

Dali has sunny weather, nice hikes, and a big lake. I reminisce about its open-air markets, where every morning one can go to pick up fresh vegetables, fruits, rice noodles, and all sorts of pickles. Dali offers fertile farmland, attracting China's burgeoning organic farmers, who are often youths. It has a significant foreign population that has set up sourdough bakeries, cafés with excellent croissant, and clubs playing techno. The first outdoor rave I came across in China was at an orchard in Dali. It attracts urban families as well: parents of young children would bring kids to nature-focused school programs over summers or full-time before starting primary school back in Shenzhen or Shanghai. Visitors enjoying the sun referred to the city as "Dalifornia."

Yunnan has many other interesting places besides. Kunming, its capital, is not one. That is a city like any other in the PRC, perhaps best analogized to Mexico City: an administrative center of many interesting people and places, but relatively boring compared to them. Tengchong, in Yunnan's furthest west, is made up of Dai peoples living among volcanic springs; history buffs might visit it for its centrality along the Burma Road. More interesting is Lugu Lake on Yunnan's northern border with Sichuan, a difficult-to-access place home to the Mosuo people, who form a matriarchal society. In the mountains one can find the Wa people, who are supposed to maintain a tradition of animal sacrifices and human headhunting.

Climbing out of civilization

Mountains have always beckoned to dissenters, rebels, and subversives. It is not only the air that thins out at higher elevations: the tendrils of the state do too. Small bands of people only need to hike a while to find a congenial refuge in the mountains; it's far harder for imperial administrators with their vast caravans to locate all the hideouts. Throughout history, therefore, people have climbed upwards to escape the state. It is not only to take leave of the irksome suction of the tax collector; it's also to break free of the problems that accompany dense populations—epidemics, conscription, and the threat of state-scale warfare. As a consequence, people who dwell in the mountains tend to be seen as unruly folks, be they Appalachian Americans or Highland Scots.

Yunnan has been a distinguished refuge for peoples tired of the state. It is the heart of a vast zone of highland Southeast Asia described by James C. Scott in The Art of Not Being Governed—the best book I read this year (and which I will be drawing on throughout this piece). Scott writes about the innumerable hill peoples who have repaired to these mountains over the last several millennia, escaping oppression from the Burmese state, the Tibetan state, or most often, the Han-Chinese state.

In Scott's telling, early states (of several millennia up to a few centuries ago) did not grow because people were drawn towards "civilization" or a luminous court center. They grew because the domineering temper of a rice- or wheat-addicted despot demanded ever greater populations to produce grain surpluses for the glory of his court. The process was dialectical, as wars made the state, and the state made war. Thus most of the people in a population core consisted of captives seized in a military victory or purchased from raiders. Scott goes so far to claim that where one can find an early state, there one will find a population core sustained by coerced labor.

His case is that the civilization that arose from sedentary farming made people worse—in terms of health, safety, and liberty—before they made society better. Before mass cultivation of grains, most people were foragers of some sort. And they have tended to be more robust and healthy than farmers tied to a single plot of land, who faced constant danger of state appropriation, epidemic diseases, and losing everything in an environmental disaster. It's easier to understand that there has been intense resistance by peoples everywhere to state efforts to make them sedentary, whether in Central Asia or North America—accepting that fate only after a military defeat.

In mountains they tend to be more safe.[5] And that, Yunnan has in abundance. The peoples who escape into the rugged highlands of Southeast Asia tend to have, in

Scott's telling, state-repellent practices. That includes cultivating diverse and shifting root crops, which are less assessable by the tax collector; adopting relatively egalitarian social structures; and practicing an oral culture, which helps to make histories and ethnic identities more malleable. These ethnic tribes have thus become "barbarians by design." Still today, Yunnan remains one of the poorest provinces in China. The mountainous geography makes its economy more ideal for agriculture and tourism than technologically-intensive industries.

It became a quietly thrilling experience to read about this highland zone while I wandered around in Yunnan. Scott writes that state administration learned to climb into the mountains by the end of the Second World War, after the deployment of railroads, telephone, helicopters, and later, information technology. But I certainly feel that the culture of Yunnan remains different from the imperial cores of Beijing and Shanghai.

Official initiatives often run out of breath before these rugged hills. These mountains protected various retreating armies, including Nationalist troops, which were not fully rooted out from the region until the early 1960s. They protected people during the Great Leap Forward, when people climbed up to forage for food. They protected villagers even during the Cultural Revolution: "When Red Guards climbed into the highlands, they found few people, no one obviously wealthy to direct their attacks upon, and little to eat. They would then just harangue the villagers for a while, stage a noisy demonstration, and then go back down the mountain, not very eager to return." [6]

Yunnan is a province that resists efficient administration even today. In general, rules in Yunnan are not consistently enforced. Is that because the officials are lazy or incompetent? Who cares, probably both. I saw how villagers circumvented regulations that threatened their way of life. The most important event to happen over the past decade was a visit from Xi Jinping in 2015, when the top leader admonished local officials to clean up the lake. Officials then jumped to implement the order. Among their measures was to direct all water from the mountains to flow into the lake. Villagers who were used to spring water from the mountains for their drinking and food production now had to drink treated water.

Locals spoke of that water diversion as one of the most upsetting things in village history. It was not that they objected to cleaning up the lake. It was that a word from the top leader prompted local officials to deny them the best water in China, while

making an at-best-minimal contribution to the cleanup. Their response was to climb further up the mountains and lay new pipes to send water to the village temple. They taught me to bring my own jugs to fill up there.

Local officials came to the village temple not with hammers to smash these pipes, but with their own jugs for filling up. Here, it is still possible to navigate around senseless directives from the central government. Dali's culture of open drug use may have dissipated, but the region retains an ineffectualness. Distance from the party center is one reason that Yunnan has drawn a growing number of emigrés tired of the city life. That emigration accelerated this year, as the oppressiveness in big cities grew intense.

Lockdowns

Throughout the three years of the pandemic, China developed a weightier state apparatus, one better able to impress itself against its subjects. The government at all levels, especially local, has gained new authorities to be more intrusive into people's lives.7 Shanghai experienced the brunt of these measures in the spring.

Anxiety levels grew steadily over March. Shanghai became hushed as entire residential compounds (some of which have thousands of people) were told that they were not allowed to exit from their homes for up to a fortnight due to their proximity to a positive case; as restaurants were told they must close; and as officials made multiple demands that everyone in certain districts must take a PCR test. By the end of March, it was apparent that these measures could not stop omicron. So Shanghai announced that the city would lock down, in two phases: the eastern half (Pudong) on March 27th for four days, and the western half (Puxi, where I lived) on April 1st for four days. What did lockdown mean? The ability to step foot outside one's doorway. A fortunate few might be permitted to venture outside their apartment building, but not the residential compound.

Shanghai's lockdown would last more than four days: it ended after eight weeks. 25 million people were unable to leave their home or residential compounds between April and May. (Some even longer, as their compounds started locking down in March.) The main exception was the ability to go out for rounds of PCR tests conducted daily or every few days.

The March 27th announcement came after city officials repeatedly denied that they would impose a full lockdown. That robbed a sense of urgency among most of my

friends to stockpile essential supplies. I didn't stockpile either, but I did decide to leave. Within an hour of the announcement, I had booked a plane ticket to Yunnan. Most people in Shanghai would suffer a bleak April.

Food became the overwhelming concern. Fresh vegetables and fruits ran out after a week or so. The government promised to deliver food, but that proved a logistical impossibility for a city of 25 million people: truck drivers couldn't deliver their freight into the city, and the produce either was not enough to go around or spoiled by ultimate delivery. Nearly all my friends told me that there were a few days in mid-April when they dealt with serious food insecurity. Some with children fasted to save food for the kids. Many friends spent most of their waking hours trying to procure food, often getting up at the crack of dawn to place orders. The situation took about three weeks to improve, as people managed to set up inefficient group-buying networks, or the government-run food logistics system worked out its issues.[8]

There were other problems. Anyone with a health condition was gripped by fear that their medications would run out. Everyone hoped that they wouldn't need to access hospital treatment. One friend broke an ankle shortly before the lockdown, spending two months bedbound as she awaited surgery. Another developed a hernia. A third friend's uncle died because he had diabetes and could not go for dialysis treatments.

The situation worsened if one tested positive. A trip to a centralized quarantine facility (often a bed in a convention center) would await. That was sometimes the least concern. The city's policy was to separate children from their parents if either tested positive; fear of separation drove parents mad with worry, until an outcry prompted the city to drop the policy.[9] Dog-owners who couldn't find another household willing to host their pet had to decide whether to leave it alone at home for the duration of their illness; or let it loose outside and hope for the best. (A viral video of a health worker beating a corgi to death with a shovel did not help to make the decision easier.)[10] A positive test would summon cleaning staff into one's home, who could soak everything—clothes, books, furniture—in disinfectant.

For some people, these two months were not too dreadful. The elderly would say that the lockdown wasn't the worst thing to happen to their lives, pointing to the Cultural Revolution. A feeble joke circulated that Shanghai achieved "common prosperity," one of Xi's signature initiatives, in China's most capitalist city a decade ahead of schedule because everyone had the same standard of living. Some people built camaraderie with neighbors that they otherwise would never have gotten to know, ties

which endured long after lockdown. Other people of privilege might find steadier access to food or were able to wrangle a permit to go outside.

But the situation grew desperate for a broader mass of folks. Banging pots and pans outside one's window became a common form of protest; occasionally someone would be caught on camera screaming denunciations of the regime.[11] For young people in particular, the lockdown came as an immense shock. They tried to speak up on social media.[12] And the state responded with staggering levels of censorship. Weibo censored the first line of the national anthem: "Arise, you who refuse to be slaves."[13] It stopped reposts of a National People's Congress spokesperson's remark that hard quarantines may be unlawful.[14] At one point, social media platforms blocked the word "Shanghai" from search results.

Psychologically, the most difficult thing was that no one knew how long the lockdown would last: a few days or a few weeks more. Every so often a video would circulate that purported to show someone who jumped from a balcony. Friends spoke about three types of shock. First, the raw novelty of extended physical confinement. Second, the wonder of feeling food insecure in this age and in this city. Third, a disenchantment with government pronouncements. Many people kicked themselves for trusting officials who said that Shanghai would impose no lockdown. They saw how positive cases in their own neighborhoods would be absent from the city's data releases. And they shared a recording of a health official who said that these controls were unscientific.[15]

Case numbers peaked in Shanghai by late-April. In June, the city lifted the lockdown. At that point, many foreigners had departed the country (after an arduous negotiation with neighborhood officials to be allowed to go to the airport), some for good. Many Shanghainese who didn't go abroad would come to Yunnan. China then enjoyed around three months of relative calm in terms of Covid controls.

By the time I went back to Shanghai in the summer, the city looked like it had substantially returned to normal. Two of my favorite restaurants had shut down, but otherwise the city was back to life. There was one substantial change to routine. The government demanded that every resident take a PCR test every 72 hours to enter any public venue. They enforced this requirement through contact-tracing apps: health workers would scan one's QR code before a test; and every store or restaurant would demand a scan of the site's QR code, both to establish location tracking and also to see evidence of a recent test. The process didn't end up being too cumbersome since

tests were free and sites were abundant. But one faced the risk of being unable to enter a space if it slipped one's mind to test in time.

The system kept caseloads low in Shanghai. But through the fall, other regions failed to tame omicron. The situation was bad in several areas: Chongqing, Xinjiang, Henan, and other regions were dealing with rising caseloads that would not drop after a lockdown. People had also grown weary of extraordinary controls. Two incidents had already drawn broad outrage: after a pregnant woman in Xi'an miscarried because the hospital would not admit her without a negative test[16]; and after a bus carrying people late at night to a quarantine facility derailed in Guizhou, killing 27.[17] These incidents made people say that measures to control the virus were hurting more people than the virus itself.

Cases started to rise after the party congress in mid-October, this time in the crucial city of Beijing. The capital had kept cases low throughout the year with tight social controls. By November, it looked like Beijing might lock down as Shanghai did.

Protests

The government announced measures in November to "optimize" controls, citing the need to reduce their economic impact. These measures gave several local governments the opportunity essentially to abandon restrictions. Beijing and Shanghai weren't ready to do that. They started to tighten restrictions. That's when protests began.

The protests were dispersed across several cities within a short span of time. Two attracted the most attention: those in Shanghai and those at Foxconn facilities in Henan. I was in Shanghai then. WeChat posts had started to circulate on a Saturday evening calling for people to attend a vigil on Urumqi Road in the old French Concession. They were commemorating victims of an apartment fire in Urumqi, Xinjiang, where ten people died the week before.[18] Details were hazy, but people speculated that pandemic controls blocked firefighters from reaching the site. By then, everyone had expressed fears of fire hazards after they saw how authorities would block people from leaving home.

I had gone to bed by the time the vigil started in earnest at midnight that Saturday. The next morning I saw the videos on social media: rows of police facing off against youths, who at some points started to chant "down with the Communist Party" and

“Xi Jinping step down.” I lived near Urumqi Road, which is a bar and café district containing a lot of the city’s foreign population. Of course I had to go and see. When I went to the intersection on Sunday afternoon, people and police milled around, but there wasn’t much by way of big demonstrations. They would start again later in the evening, by which time police made a more systematic effort to clear the zone. They put up barricades, made people disperse, arrested some, thus halting the protests. Afterwards I was surprised that the police moved so slowly, waiting only until the second night to erect barricades.

In area and duration, the Shanghai protests were small: a single city block over the course of two nights. But they stunned many of us in China who never expected to witness open demonstrations. Protests took place in a few other cities, but they were overwhelmingly around pandemic restrictions per se. I believe that it’s no accident that protests turned political in Shanghai, after the city’s trauma of an eight-week lockdown.

From Zero Covid to Total Covid

The state abandoned zero-Covid in December. Was that due to the protests? I expect that protests dealt the coup de grace, but they were not the main force. Local governments and the population had already been on the brink of exhaustion: severe lockdowns in various places could not bring down omicron after several weeks. Beijing looked at that situation and wondered whether the central government would be able to enforce a Shanghai-style lockdown on the population of the capital, which is meant to enjoy the greatest political pampering. On December 7, the central government abandoned most pandemic control measures. And so the virus came.

I caught Covid on December 23. Most people I knew in Beijing and Yunnan had fallen sick a week or two earlier, but Shanghai had managed to delay its wave. The city was on course to tighten controls before the central government let loose: Shanghai demanded that people have a 48 hour test result (shortened from 72) to enter public venues. Then, in what I think will be a footnote lost in history, it barred people who traveled to Shanghai from going to most public venues for five days.[19] The local government did not seem ready to abandon its fine-tuned system for stopping the spread of omicron.

No one else seemed prepared either. It certainly didn’t make sense to me that the state would drop all controls before the coldest month of the winter and before allowing

households to prepare. Doctors and nurses had no special warning, leaving them to face a surge in patients. The propaganda authorities had no special warning, as they shifted from declaring that the virus must be stomped out in one week to declaring that health outcomes are ultimately the responsibility of the individual in the next. 20 The Shanghai government did not appear to have special warning, since it was tightening its controls.

For me, the most astonishing part of the abrupt abandonment of zero-Covid has to do with fever medications (like ibuprofen and paracetamol). The government had over the last three years put up obstacles for people to purchase fever meds. Health authorities feared that people might self-medicate at home rather than submit to the quarantines. So pharmacies would be ordered to remove fever meds from their shelves during an outbreak, or they would demand customers to furnish their national ID for contact tracing. That deterred purchases, and, I suspect, greater production by manufacturers. Therefore much of the Chinese population met their Covid wave without much fever meds on hand. As best as I can tell, China is the only country that followed a twisted logic to deny people fever medications during a fever-producing pandemic.

As Covid descended, the government tried to assure everyone that the virus is not so deadly. But whom did the propaganda authorities wheel out to deliver that comforting message? The same experts who weeks ago were saying that it would be extraordinarily irresponsible to abandon controls. One person who stayed silent was top leader Xi Jinping. He has obliquely acknowledged the abandonment of zero-Covid, referencing hard times in generic terms. He did not explain the reversal of a policy he has personally insisted on, or give comfort to a people who would face a disease that propaganda authorities spent three years terrifying them about. Neither did anyone else in the central leadership.

The government's strategy to comfort the population was to suppress data on death. I can sympathize with the intent to prevent mass panic. But I feel it's unfair for Beijing to spend over two years mocking the west for high death counts and then improperly report its mortality data. (As of March 4th, the official number of Covid deaths in China was 87,468.) I suspect that China really did manage to avoid many millions dead: because omicron was really less severe, or Chinese vaccines work better than expected, or something else. But we'll likely never know for sure.

Already by mid-January, Shanghai would once more be hopping. Bars and restaurants were full with people excited to return to normal life. I'm glad that I've lived through the entire Covid pandemic in China, from February 2020 (when I was in Beijing) through its end by January 2023. Everyone is glad that the controls are at last over and that the death count felt relatively low rather than obviously high. But I believe that re-opening didn't need to be so abrupt.

I wonder how other Shanghainese are thinking. My local friends say that they were taken twice to the cleaners: first when they couldn't stockpile essentials in April, second when they couldn't stockpile medicine in December. They wonder why Beijing would impose such a hard lockdown in the spring if it was going to drop everything in the winter: was it only because the central government held pandemic controls hostage to a political event, namely the party congress in October? I suspect that there would be no obvious sign of Shanghainese discontent. But I think there will be a residue of resentment, manifesting unpredictably.

Revelry or growth?

How should we reflect on 2022 in China? The starting point must be the three most important events of the year. First, zero-Covid: extraordinarily tight controls that were all abandoned in December. Second, the greater centralization of political power under Xi Jinping after the 20th Party Congress. Third, a declaration of a "limitless friendship" with Russia that had "no forbidden zones" three weeks before its invasion of Ukraine.

In the short term, I expect that most of the suffering under three years of zero-Covid will be forgotten. People are already exuberant in the streets of Shanghai, happy to enjoy life in one of Asia's most splendid cities. And just as people in Europe and the US put the pandemic behind them, so I believe that Chinese will.[21] This is unlikely, but there's some chance that in a few years, we'll look back on zero-Covid in the same way that we look back today on China's 2015 stock market crash: a puzzling and painful event to live through—generating many headlines on the failures of the Chinese government—but in retrospect not really a defining crisis it seemed to be at the time.

Over the longer term, I believe that the events in 2022 confirm that the Chinese Communist Party, under Xi's leadership, would rather frolic in ideological revelry than focus on pursuing economic growth. Utopianism has seduced the party before.

Over the last seven decades, China has experienced lengthy periods of stability punctuated by government-triggered chaos. The Chinese state is usually levelheaded; but every so often it succumbs to a manic episode, in which it grips the population, not relenting until it has shaken them out of their pots for backyard steel furnaces, out of their schools for class struggle, or out of their minds for dynamic zero clearing. It then comes to its senses and sets down a battered people, as the rest of the world looks on aghast. The state is then sane and sober once more, though the people feel the occasional nervous tremor.

Sometimes commentators will launch a tendentious debate on whether China is capitalist or socialist, state-driven or market-driven. It is never one or the other, of course. Contradictory slogans like “socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics” allow the party wide scope for ideological maneuver. Beijing’s habit is to announce several mutually-incompatible policies to simultaneously pursue, tweaking priorities as it goes along. In my view, contesting China’s system in binary terms will always be vain. But we can describe its tendencies. And on balance I believe we should think of the Chinese state today as an autocratic regime that is occasionally capable of economic pragmatism rather than a technocratic regime that slips occasionally into Marxist faults.

Over the last five years, Xi stepped up admonitions for the party to remember its Marxist-Leninist roots and to adopt a comprehensive view of national security, thus elevating the importance of ideology. China’s pursuit of zero-Covid subsequently allowed the party’s worst impulses to run riot. The state’s commitment to releasing credible data, long the target of skepticism, weakened further as the government simply halted reporting inconvenient data.22 It expelled the bulk of American journalists in March 2020 (blaming the Wall Street Journal for carrying an insensitive headline on an editorial), while allowing little replenishment in their ranks. Its censorship of domestic voices and reproaches of foreign governments have gone into overdrive. And the pandemic has given it enormous practice in tracking individuals and detaining them.

The Chinese state remains enormously capable. But that statement demands refinements. First, it increasingly resembles a crew of firefighters who bring extraordinary skill to dousing fires that they themselves ignited. Like in 2020, after local authorities in Wuhan censored reports of a new viral infection, requiring a mammoth national effort to contain the spread of the virus later. Or as it tried to stamp out a financial crisis in the property sector this year by triggering a different

kind of crisis, as housing demand and construction collapsed. Second, China's problem is usually not too little state capacity, but too much. Beijing shows that it's utterly possible to fail when it succeeds, for example by bringing too much state capacity to bear on solutions like zero-Covid or a one-child policy.

2022 is thus the year that China's long-term growth prospects became more uncertain as its political risks grow more salient. It's not just the domestic trends of zero-Covid and greater centralization of power. Beijing decided to partner with Russia, an imperial aggressor, when it is the US and Europe that have markets and technology. Beijing views Russia as an ally that can help sustain legitimacy for authoritarian regimes.

These have led two groups of people to express changes of heart on China. First, much of the foreign business community. In public survey results, many more American and European companies are reporting that they're pausing investments in China. (See Bloomberg: "For the first time in about 25 years, China is not a top three investment priority for a majority of US firms."23) Over conversations, they tend to be more frank. Companies are no longer viewing China as the most reliable place to manufacture in the aftermath of the Shanghai lockdown; and European executives in particular find it difficult to advocate for greater investment after Beijing embraced Russia. The party's lectures on Marxism, common prosperity, and "great changes unseen in a century" are bewildering to businesses. Multinationals want the infrastructure, in other words, without the drama.

Executives may not be interested in Marxism-Leninism, but Marxists-Leninists are deeply interested in businesses. Companies are thus starting to think of China as a weird creature: one-third the China of old, which showers riches on the savvy; one-third Japan, an enormous market that won't deliver booming growth; and one third Russia, a country one must potentially depart from in a hurry. Several embassies are treating China as a hardship posting. Fine, those people are wimps. But capitalists too are hesitating. For executives, a posting to China used to pave the way to the highest corporate ranks. That's starting to feel less the case, since China is so different a market—given political complexities and data controls—that a posting there is now viewed as often as a quagmire as an essential rung on the corporate ladder. The strategy of multinationals has become to maintain production for the domestic market while moving export-bound production to other countries (chiefly Vietnam and India).

The second group of alienated individuals consists of young, educated Chinese. The November protests, brief though they were, consisted of Shanghai youths frequenting the bar district, workers in Henan assembling electronics, and folks in Beijing who lived around the embassy district. It wasn't the elderly who were in the streets. My friends despaired at two events in particular in 2022. First, when the government made it more difficult to obtain or renew passports in the spring, citing pandemic controls.24 That really made people feel stuck. Second, after the party congress, when they saw that the country was intensifying its tightening course. It is perhaps not surprising that there has been a stream of articles throughout the year reporting that many Chinese entrepreneurs decided to decamp to Singapore.

I've pointed out in each of my previous letters that Beijing strangles the country's cultural creativity. So I'm not going to stop now. Visual arts have done okay, but it's hard to name much else that was vibrant in 2022: most films released this year were either nationalist blockbusters or sappy romances; video games received few licenses; and book publishing slowed due to the party congress. Creative friends of mine knew that it was impossible to publish anything given the political calendar, so some of them went abroad as a kind of sabbatical this year.25

The censors came for me too: in February, I discovered that the Great Firewall blocked this site. I had to take a bit personally since my name makes up the URL. I haven't managed to find any censors to be able to explain why, and there's no reason for me to believe that I will ever be unblocked again. If I'm allowed to offer guesses, my preferred interpretation would be that the party is made up of Wagnerians upset at the strident partisanship for Italian comic opera in my 2021 letter. It fits the evidence, perhaps. The hard men who govern in Beijing have a sense of the grand, treating a party congress as a Wagner opera by other means—featuring less noise but greater downfalls.

Could the state win back broad confidence? That's certainly possible. By early 2023, Beijing had significantly changed its rhetoric. It dropped not just zero-Covid, but many restrictions on the property sector and hostility towards internet platforms companies. I'm skeptical however that the friendliness will last forever. The party-state is able to say the most tender words of encouragement for entrepreneurs—after it strangled their businesses—and the sweetest words on the importance of growth, after it has delivered a beating to the economy. If growth picks up once more, who can be sure that the party will not return to its ideological revelries?

The authoritarian impulse

It's time to level set. China's growth prospects are off track, but the country retains huge strengths. How do we balance everything? I think that a fair assessment should acknowledge these five propositions. First, business can still be exciting as China continues broad catch-up growth that creates flourishing in particular sectors, even if economic headwinds are stronger too. Second, China's cities continue to be nicer places to live in (especially Shanghai—Beijingers can ignore this part), offering better provision of parks, healthcare, and retail. Third, doomers have wrongly predicted the collapse of China for 30 years. Fourth, Xi has centralized considerable power, and over the past decade has tightened limits not just on freedom of speech, but increasingly on freedom of thought. And fifth, though cities are more pleasant, a small risk of catastrophe threatens to overturn one's life.

China still has room for economic growth. That's of course what we should expect given that China's per capita GDP is one-sixth the level of America's. I would discount the view that its demography guarantees calamity: a gently shrinking population will create a persistent drag to growth, yes, but it won't be immediately hefty. At the same time, there are more serious headwinds: the property sector (which has so much economic weight) is at a structural peak, the western world is trying to decouple from China, and Xi's re-prioritization of the state sector probably won't do miracles for productivity growth.

Tailwinds are obvious in particular sectors. In 2022, China became a slightly larger auto exporter than Germany. A lot of that growth came from Tesla's facility in Shanghai, but I still consider that a marker of Chinese prowess in manufacturing. I suspect that Chinese automakers won't capture a large share in western markets, but they are in pole position to supply the developing countries that are in the early stages of electrifying their fleets. Chinese firms continue to dominate renewables, especially solar and batteries, with a chance to repeat that success in green hydrogen. There's so much excitement among investors in biotech and life sciences (though I find these areas hard to judge).

China remains relatively weak in scientific research. But it is making up for that with a sound strategy, which I wrote about in the most recent issue of Foreign Affairs. Whereas the US has a track record of doing great science, China's technology competitiveness is grounded in manufacturing capabilities. And sometimes China's strategy beats America's. Consider the solar industry, for which the US laid the

scientific groundwork, only for Chinese firms to make all the photovoltaic cells. The US is undeniably more serious about manufacturing in the aftermath of the IRA and Chips Act. But I think that American policymakers are still not serious enough to pursue commoditized manufacturing for its own sake so that it can rebuild communities of engineering practice.

It's fair to call out my previous letter as mostly focused on China's strengths, especially the system's capacity for reform. And I'm still sympathetic to Beijing's effort to prioritize certain types of growth over others. Its animosity towards cryptocurrencies, for example, does not feel invalidated by the various blowups in that sector in 2022; and I share the government's hostility towards video games and social media. I continue to believe that Beijing has an easier time with reforming its institutions relative to the US. And that its pathologies produce a better class of problems than US tendencies: Chinese structural overcapacity due to its supply side focus, for example, is superior to American structural undercapacity due to an impotence to build.

What I did not sufficiently appreciate is that a state that would so casually decapitate a sector like online tutoring would also have the will to visit catastrophe upon whole cities. And fear of those moves is wearing on people. I perceive a fading sense of enthusiasm among businesspeople and youths. The residue of resentment won't wear on their faces; and I expect that the state will keep a lid on wide-scale protests. But there will be more foot-dragging and less self-initiative in response to Beijing's centralized campaigns of inspiration.

I acknowledge that my views may be too colored by the resentments of Shanghainese around me; and that I might be wrongfooted in my assessments. 2022 was an annus horribilis for China and a year in which the US gained self-confidence. But the reverse was true at the end of 2021, when the Biden Administration looked beset by crises and Beijing decided to smash its most profitable companies while undertaking structural reform. The tables had reversed and could again. China after all combines lengthy periods of stasis with episodes of extreme movement.

The picture I see for the next few years however is that growth will slow further. The economy won't return to the 2019 mid-single digit levels of growth, but something closer to US levels. I believe that China is likely to succeed on many technological endeavors, but these bright spots can't compensate for broad deceleration. The major

source of risk is that the political system is more likely to squash growth in the longer run.

Aging autocrats turn easily cranky. It's especially bad since factional struggle is built into the Leninist system: Xi will likely never stop feeling paranoid even if he has surrounded himself with sycophants. So I think the party-state will continue to make unforced errors. It has, after all, upset many countries with gratuitous insults. And it has managed to pull off the impossible: blowing away China's enormous stock of human capital. China has superb entrepreneurs and artists who could bring the national glory that Xi craves only if they were allowed to do their creative work. And even any high schooler could be a more persuasive propagandist than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs if they were allowed a platform to speak. But there is so much ruination among Marxist-Leninists, who cannot suffer that there are areas outside of the party's control. The party in recent years have sequentially alienated people inclined to be more friendly: foreign businesses, European governments, domestic artists and entrepreneurs. I bet these unforced errors will continue.

I find it astonishing that the Shanghai government succeeded in keeping the population indoors for two months without even having to truck the People's Armed Police out of their barracks. Given the enormous investment into tracking people over the last few years, I think that the leadership will give into its worst impulses as growth continues to fall. That means harsher tightening rather than permitting people a chance to be more free.

To the mountains

Is there room to maneuver in an era of political tightening? Perhaps so. It's time to follow the wisdom of the ancients and head into the mountains.

The mountains are still high, though the emperor may no longer be so far away. As Scott wrote, the state has mostly learned to climb the hills. Mostly. There are still some ways to avoid central directives once one is in the mountains. Otherwise, a more subtle form of escape is possible in population cores. One of Scott's earlier works, *Weapons of the Weak*, documents everyday forms of peasant resistance that falls short of collective rebellion: foot dragging, petty noncompliance, feigned ignorance, or the strategic use of rude nicknames for officers of the state. Chinese are already good at this stuff. We should be sympathetic to their larger "efforts to hold

one's own against overwhelming odds—a spirit and practice that prevents the worst and promises something better."

There is something about the Han-Chinese gaze that is transfixed by glories of the state, whether these take the form of big walls, big ships, or big numbers. China's intellectual tradition is to celebrate state power. It's perhaps not much of an exaggeration to say that imperial China monopolized the entirety of intellectuals, through its administration of the imperial examination system, which induced the country's most ambitious to spend their lives studying texts aimed at increasing the power of the state. Thus it's unsurprising that China failed to develop much of a liberal tradition: court philosophers tend not to be enthusiastic advocates for constraints on the court.

Meanwhile, it's not a hidden fact that imperial China had its most splendid cultural flourishing when the polity was most fragmented—during times that carry faintly apocalyptic names like the Warring States period, when Confucianism and Daoism came into shape—and that it experienced its worst political decay after continuous centralization, whether Ming or Qing. Perhaps these historical patterns will repeat again.

I'm uncomfortable with the Han-centric view that has so many gradations of barbarians, whether these are mountain folks, horse folks, or just foreign folks.[26] I wish we can celebrate the rebellious, marginal peoples that have practiced ways to stay at arms-length from the state. It might be a hard ask for the hard men in Beijing to admire unruly mountain people, many of whom have loose ethnic commitments and no written language. But life in Yunnan was much better than being in the big cities last year. "Far from being seen as a regrettable backsliding and privation," Scott writes: "becoming a barbarian may have produced a marked improvement in safety, nutrition, and social order."

I advocate for departing from the court center too. So it's time to say: it's a barbarian's life for me.

I thank a number of people for reading a draft of this section or discussing the core ideas with me.

***

It’s time to talk about books.

2022 was one of my worst reading years. Covid was the cause. No regrets, of course. Travel is usually a greater source of learning than the page.

James C. Scott wrote most of the books I took with me on my trips through Asian highlands. The least interesting of his works, in my view, is Seeing Like A State: like the ministries he describes, it uses a top-down perspective to view matters more interesting from the bottom-up. Far more engaging is **The Art of Not Being Governed**, which describes state-repellent practices among mountain folks in Asia. **Against the Grain** is superb in a similar way: the careful marshaling of extensive details, written as usual in his appealing prose, to arrive at conclusion with quixotic undertones—favoring something between the gradual elimination of grains in the human diet to the total expulsion of governments in human society. I also enjoyed one of Scott’s earlier works: **Weapons of the Weak**, an ethnographic account of his fieldwork in a Malaysian village.

My favorite magazine is the London Review of Books, and my favorite series there are the portraits of delightful animals by Katherine Rundell. (See, for example, Consider the Golden Mole.) Her new book, **Super-Infinite: The Transformations of John Donne**, works so well because she wrote Donne as a delightful animal. Just as some animals can be talented in many things, whether digging or hunting, so too Donne: an erotic poet turned Protestant preacher, a former Catholic turned anti-Jesuit propagandist. The book also works because Rundell adores her subject: “His poetry will not hold still. It tussles and shifts, the way desire does.” She is so earnest. After reading her on Donne, I picked up an earlier work: **Why You Should Read Children’s Books, Even Though You Are So Old and Wise**, writing there: “I believe in the wild and immeasurable value of pouring everything you think good or important into a text, that another might draw it out again.“

Virginia Postrel’s **The Fabric of Civilization: How Textiles Made the World** is a book on math, markets, female labor, science, and industrial production. Textiles stimulated many things: development of bills of exchange (started by clothiers in London), the creation of the global chemicals industry (the A in BASF stood for Anilin, a synthetic indigo dye), and the first rung on the ladder of industrialization (since so many countries have their manufacturing start by producing textiles). It is another book of fascinating details. I did not know, for example, that a Viking sail of

100 square meters would require 60 miles of yarn, such that it took less time to build a wooden ship than to spin its woolen sail.

China's Motor: A Thousand Years of Petty Capitalism by Hill Gates feels remarkably fresh and true for a book published in 1997. Her argument is that China has been locked between the "tributary" mode of production, or trade meant for the pleasure of the emperor, and the "petty capitalist" mode of production, which is the trade between cunning traders. Gates is a committed Marxist, and her book is weakened by this insistence to examine imperial China through an Marxist framework. But it makes up for that with several brilliant insights.

The most valuable is her view that there has always been duality in China: court and traders, self-professed Marxists and rough-and-tumble entrepreneurs. Somewhat opposing tendencies are often simultaneously true in China, and that dialectic can resolve unpredictably: "In individuals and collectivities, vigorous support of some grand moral program was abruptly succeeded by equally vigorous support of something entirely different." And: "A sophisticated bureaucracy in which poets were also expected to be engineers have been locked in an endless, cruel, but also fertile embrace with the world's best businesspeople." Some things really haven't changed from imperial times. "Officials, in the name of the emperor, had many times in the past entirely restructured the agrarian economy… and always claimed the right to determine the relationships between people and land."

Highly stimulating was **The Jesuits**, by Markus Friedrich. The Society of Jesus has been impressive for several reasons. First, its enormous capacity for feuding; it doesn't matter how powerful the opponent was—Jansenists, the Inquisition, the Propagation for the Faith—Jesuits were willing to fight anyone, over grounds doctrinal or jurisdictional. (Their enemies paid them back in 1773, when Clement XIV suppressed the order.) Second, its robust tradition of scholarship: the Society built a network for exchanging objects and scholarship across its research centers all over the world. Also: "The fact that books by Jesuits kept landing on the papal Index of Forbidden Books was extremely embarrassing to the order's superiors." Third, their focus on cultivating the political, commercial, and religious elites in cities. That strategy helped the order gain political access to the Qing court in Beijing, but from a missionary point of view it was unsuccessful: the orders that focused on the Chinese countryside, like the Lazarists, won far greater numbers of converts.

I had not known that Jesuit entertainment drew large crowds: “Burning props were as much a part of the repertoire of Jesuit drama as scenes of war and nature. In light of such sensational multimedia spectacles, it was no wonder that Jesuit plays were often extremely well attended.”

I couldn’t help, as I read about this Catholic order, to compare the Vatican with the Communist Party. It is not only that China is moving towards life terms for the top leader. Both the Holy See and the CCP must dedicate an immense amount of thought to make doctrine fit into a practical philosophy of governance. Sometimes they fail, producing cadres willing only to mouth Marxist or Christian pieties without believing in all the tenets of the faith. A tendency to invoke philosophy sometimes allow scholarly corners to become centers of reaction: just as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was viewed as holding back reform in recent decades, so too was the Theory Bureau of the Propaganda Department a thorn in Deng’s side during Reform and Opening. Meanwhile, every so often the leader must enforce a message for everyone to get in line, as the Jesuits did with their Thirteenth Rule: “We ought always to hold that the white which I see, I shall believe to be black, if the hierarchical church so stipulates.” That sounds quite in line with a party that would produce something like Two Establishes and Two Safeguards.27

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I wrote that Yunnan has greater geographic variation than most countries. Its cuisine does too.

“Yunnan cuisine” may be an unsound category as such. Sichuan, just north of Yunnan, has a cuisine that yields easier summary, given the centrality of peppercorn and spice in a set number of cooking styles. That standardization helps to explain why Sichuan restaurants have successfully expanded throughout the country and also overseas.

Yunnan resists any underlying unity in its cuisine. It’s a land of jungle food and mountain food, in which cooking methods that make sense for the northern snowlands don’t bear any resemblance to those in the southern rainforests. It’s not just that culinary trends tend to splinter when they enter the mountains. Border cities tend also to take inspiration from nearby regions: Tibetan, Burmese, Laotian, and Thai traditions in the west, and Sichuan, Guizhou, Guangxi and Vietnamese traditions in the east. There are many dishes particular to a mountain and its tribe. Consider the

Yi people of Chuxiong, who “occasionally host a grand banquet in which they cook an entire ram. The first set of dishes comprises of up to 30 cold cuts, prepared from the hooves, face, and head, dipped in soybeans with mint.”28

I can describe Yunnan cuisine only through dishes special to me. I think of pickled bamboo shoots, gently fried, lending their funky sourness to fish soups. I think of ham, sometimes steamed on its own, sometimes sautéd with some chili peppers, sometimes dropped in the pot to enliven a broth. I think of whole stems of flowers, tossed with vinegar in salad. I think of various types of rice noodles, in thick strings like Udon or as thumb-sized slices, which are more supple-bodied and offer greater chewiness than noodles made of wheat. I think of simple farm cheeses—a rare find in Chinese culinary traditions—steamed with slices of ham. I think of spicy pickles, indiscriminately sharpening the flavors of noodle soups or a vegetable dish, say a quick fry of lotus root. I think of yellow strips of pea pudding, tossed in chili oil, vinegar, and some bean sprouts. I think of a simple lunch of rice cakes fried with ham, eggs, and chives. I think of stewed beef garnished with handfuls of fresh mint, of mashed potatoes that do not drown in butter but are suffused with salty pickles, and of simple pans of soup that have up to a half-dozen types of dark, leafy greens.

I think most of all about mushrooms, which are the pride and glory of Yunnan. Mushrooms are still too smart for us to tame in greenhouses, so the best are foraged in the wild during the rainy months of the summer. The best types offer mesmerizing combinations of flavor and mouthfeel. Their flavors tend to be best with a light sauté, combined with chili peppers for a jaunty kick, and ham slices if need be. My favorite is the Ganba, found only under pine trees, which release so much gorgeous savoriness that it can suffuse a whole plate of rice with its musk when fried. Hot butter awakens the flavors of the matsutake, a delicate and savory mushroom. (Anna Tsing’s **The Mushroom at the End of the World** is a fascinating account of this commodity trade, especially how Yunnan satisfies a large portion of Japan’s appetite for the matsutake.) Various types of porcinos taste best when fried with chilis, releasing their rich and meaty taste into the spicy edge into the peppers. I remember an excellent meal of morels stewed in fresh cream served over a yak steak.

There are two ways that one can go wrong with mushrooms. The first is to eat them in hotpot, where their textures dissolve and flavors die over a boil. Unfortunately I have had to endure this waste before. The second is to be poisoned. Unfortunately that has happened to me too. The first time wasn’t too bad, only some vomiting. The second time was worse, involving hallucinations over the course of several days. That

has not put me off from putting on boots on my feet and a basket on my back to continue my foraging adventures. Of course one has to be more careful, since every year people die of such poisonings. But one also can't allows a fear of misfortune to develop into an impediment to culinary pleasure in the mushroom paradise of Yunnan.

For my money, the food of Yunnan's northern snowlands tend to be relatively less interesting. Tibetan dishes are simple and doughy affairs, enjoyable mostly because they offer warmth from the cold: a hotpot of yak meat accompanied by yak butter tea can be delightful. But it remains a treat only if it's enjoyed infrequently. The food of the Naxi people in Lijiang is mostly unremarkable, which is another reason to minimize time in the city. I found a lot more to eat in Dali. It has a liberal use of pickles to enhance its dishes, and the nearby lake also offers nice assortments of fish. I never however managed to find time however to enjoy one of the local Bai traditions, which is to eat the skin and raw meat of pork in the morning.

When I miss the food of Yunnan, it is the dishes from Xishuangbanna that make me most dreamy. The city's lifestyle is nocturnal since the people are dependent on rubber production: rubber trees are best tapped at night when temperatures are cool. Therefore the streets are fairly empty in the midday sun, coming alive in the evening. That is when people crack open beers and enjoy grilled meats before they enter the forests.

I've had meat skewers in night markets all over China. The best I've had is in Xishuangbanna. The Dai people tend to wrap meats with sweetgrass or banana leafs when they grill using charcoal: the result is that the meat is charred on the outside with the moisture still sealed in on the inside. They use a wide variety of meats: pork cheeks that offer wonderful chewiness, long lengths of spare ribs, and tilapia fish stuffed with herbs and chiles. These meats are garnished with piles of ginger, chilies, garlic, and lemongrass, or served more simply with a dip of chili powder.

Charcoal grilling is not the only way to cook meat in Xishuangbanna. The Dai would also throw certain meats like tripe and beef arteries into a fry, then lace the plate with ginger, chilies, garlic, and lemongrass—sharpening the fatty meat with a dazzling edge of flavor. Another way to cook, more common with the Jinuo people, is to wrap mushrooms or chicken in banana leaf with spice mixtures over a low flame. Chicken is common either over the grill or in a soup. Some of the best noodles I've had in

China are in Xishuangbanna: tangy rice noodles in chicken broth, garnished with a few pieces of liver and an assortment of pickles.

The rice is sometimes cooked inside bamboo tubes turned over a fire. A more photogenic dish is sticky rice baked inside a pineapple, in which chunks of the fruit would lend their tangy sweetness to the carbs. The vegetables in Xishuangbanna are special as well. Locals prepare salads made with young papaya or green mangoes, dressed in chilies and lime juice. Whenever I have grilled meats, I take care to order both a salad or a soup made up of bitter greens (like squash leafs and mustard greens) sometimes made more sour with tomato or pickled bamboo.

At one corner of northwest Yunnan, three rivers have their headwaters, at one stretch running parallel with each other at close distance: a raindrop in that area might be blown into the Mekong and be carried off towards Vietnam, into the Yangtze and go towards Shanghai, or into the Salween and end up in the Indian Ocean. I'm a fan of this nice little painting from painter Zhou Rui, depicting the course of the Mekong. Image credit to the Xishuangbanna International Art Exhibition. Elsewhere, there is something called the Yunnan School of Painting.

Open questions:

1. Why did the minority groups in the flat plains of China's north (be they Mongolians, Jurchens, or Manchus) tend to model themselves after the Han state, adopting its language and court customs, while the minority groups in the southwest have tended to focus on running away from Han civilizing efforts? The northern peoples were both able to quickly assume imperial rule when they conquered Han forces, but they also lost their distinctiveness after a few generations. Does geography explain this difference?
2. I wonder how other writers are integrating ChatGPT in their work. I still haven't quite found it to be a necessary tool. I want it to be a research assistant, but that's a non-starter given that it can't provide research citations. And I want to use it to brainstorm, but so far I'm not good enough at prompting it to be helpful yet.
3. What are other people's favorite things to read about mountains?

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1. A few mountain views here: https://twitter.com/danwwang/status/1575278139894374401↩

2. See Ao Yun Wines: https://www.lvmh.com/houses/wines-spirits/ao-yun/↩

3. Many of these ethnic groups of course have been subject to different names in the past or in nearby countries. I'll acknowledge that these names are only necessary categorizations.↩

4. This story from the LA Times has a funny quote from a foreigner saying that one can no more get rid of cannabis in Dali than one can eradicate eucalyptus from Australia: https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-nov-07-mn-40265-story.html↩

5. The Communist Party understands this principle well, having been saved by fading into the mountains several times when enemy assaults became too strong.↩

6. From Jim Goodman, who wrote a nice little book called Yunnan: South of the Clouds↩

7. See Yutian An and Taisu Zhang on the new powers of neighborhood communities https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4356026↩

8. See David Fishman on group buying on Odd Lots https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-29/transcript-this-is-how-a-locked-down-shanghai-apartment-gets-food↩

9. See: https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-shanghai-strict-covid-rules-separate-children-from-parents-11648961849↩

10. Here's the video https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/08/china/shanghai-corgi-death-china-covid-intl-hnk/index.html↩

11. https://twitter.com/serpentza/status/1511936214323982341?s=20&t=C0S22bqmVrkYr3QApqB81g↩

12. See the Voice of Shanghai: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pzwkFCAv44↩

13. Censoring the anthem: https://twitter.com/dong_mengyu/status/1515763771356192782↩

14. A legal discussion of the NPC https://npcobserver.com/2022/04/26/has-an-npc-spokesperson-declared-shanghais-hard-isolation-unlawful/↩

15. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-04/fears-persist-for-shanghai-doctor-who-blasted-political-virus↩

16. January in Xi'an: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/05/china-covid-xian-lockdown-miscarriage/↩

17. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Guizhou_bus_crash↩

18. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Ürümqi_fire↩

19. On November 23, the Shanghai government announced that anyone coming to Shanghai from anywhere in the country would be barred from going to malls, restaurants, bars, grocery stores, and other public spaces. It felt like there would be a domestic mini-quarantine if one traveled anywhere. Here's the announcement: 5

    https://www.shanghai.gov.cn/nw4411/20221123/c9805e173c694a9d92afca7f5e69046

20. State media reversals:
    https://twitter.com/MrSeanHaines/status/1604667262006398983
    https://twitter.com/wafarris/status/1609003944256368640
    https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-12-22/how-china-downgraded-covid-from-devil-virus-to-a-common-cold↩

21. In some ways, China may have fewer Covid hangovers than the west: it's dealing with fewer issues of trying to make everyone return from remote work, since that didn't happen in great intensity.↩

22. Data disappearance: see this compilation from the FT. "a trend towards statistical opacity as China shifts from sustained high growth to more modest numbers."
    https://www.ft.com/content/43bea201-ff6c-4d94-8506-e58ff787802c↩

23. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-01/us-firms-turn-more-negative-on-china-as-economy-tensions-bite↩

24. Passports restrictions: https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1010293/applying-for-a-chinese-passport%3F-you-may-need-a-fake-job-offer↩

25. The director Jia Zhangke every so often would issue an outburst of despair about how limited he is in filmmaking↩

26. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hua–Yi_distinction↩

27. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Two_Establishes_and_Two_Safeguards↩

28. From Jim Goodman's book on Yunnan↩

Maybe others would like this piece too:

406 Email

Posted in About me

6 thoughts on "2022 letter"

Dave C *March 5, 2023 at 1:30 am*

I like your writing style.

Reply

ayyyliens *March 5, 2023 at 1:48 am*

michael schuman's "super interrupted" (2020) is a simple and insightful read regarding open question 1.

Reply

Jonathan Mckay *March 5, 2023 at 3:35 am*

3. Mind of the Raven by Berndt Heinrich

Reply

Paul Chou *March 5, 2023 at 7:28 am*

Regarding your question #1, it's not so much about geography as it's about practicality. The difference b/w the first group and the 2nd group is that the first group conquered China, and in their attempt to rule, it's practical to

assume Han customs and language, while still maintain a hierarchy of races with theirs on top.

The southwest minorities HAD to run b/c as weaker groups, they would otherwise be “force assimilated”. As a matter of fact, that’s what the northern groups did as well (nomads), until they took over China.

Reply

Nick Shaffer *March 5, 2023 at 1:57 pm*

Frederick Mote in “Imperial China, 900-1800” argues that the steppe peoples of the North adopted the Han state as a means for those dynasty-founding chieftains (esp. Aguda and Abaoji) to consolidate their power and secure dynastic legitimacy for their offspring. He says that in the original chieftain system the chief could be challenged by other nobles and that their sons were by no means guaranteed to win the succession.

As for the southwest, maybe they didn’t have much need for a state at all?

Reply

Arran *March 5, 2023 at 5:51 pm*

On (a particular kind of) mountains: Gillen D’Arcy Wood’s 2014 book “Tambora: The Eruption That Changed the World,” (PUP) is excellent — contains a chapter on Yunnan too.
Sometimes veers towards climate determinism (author not a scientist), but writing full of colour.

Reply

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Comment

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