

# **Being Modern: Livelihood Reconstruction among Land-lost Peasants in Chenggong (Kunming)**

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## **Introduction**

Chenggong, a former farming county adjacent to Kunming, Yunnan Province, did not attract public attention outside of China until a 2012 British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) report that characterized it as one of China's 'ghost towns' (BBC, 2012) created in the course of rapid nationwide modernization. Photographs included with the BBC report show largely empty concrete high-rises, developed real estate devoid of inhabitants and Kunming's new CBD in the making. The newness of Chenggong can be smelled in the air, and is visually striking with construction sites, the vertical and horizontal expansion of modern high-rises, and wide new streets. The new urban cityscape's asphalt has uncompromisingly replaced the red earth of its former farming landscape.

The physical modernization of Chenggong began in 2003, when Yunnan Province initiated the urban expansion of Kunming. Its initial plan was to transform Chenggong into a new real estate development site and a university town for accommodating the growing urban population and alleviating the spatial pressure on the city. Both objectives were meant to speed up Kunming's modernization process. Like its counterparts, such as Dongguan in Guangdong Province and Yujiapu in Tianjin Province, the speed of Chenggong's physical modernization exceeded that of its projected incoming population. The city was thus largely empty except when college students were in session. In 2013, however, this 'ghost town' was slated to become a new transregional centre when President Xi Jinping announced China's 'One Belt One Road' global initiative. Following his subsequent visit to Chenggong in January 2015, he confirmed the global status of Chenggong, marking it as a transregional rail-aerial hub connecting China with Southeast Asia and South Asia. The construction of Chenggong's high-speed rail station is the epicentre of the city's economic boom and revitalization from its ghostly recent past. Jeff Wade of the Australian National University has suggested that Chenggong will be the de facto capital of Southeast Asia (*The Guardian*, 2014).



## Figure I      Urbanized Chenggong

This chapter concerns the land-lost peasants of Chenggong in the broader context of China's current global economic expansion and Yunnan's transregionally strategic role in materializing China's ambition for a geographical and geo-economic compression of its southwestern territory and the neighbouring countries and regions. It explores how the peasants have undergone a series of what James Scott calls the 'state effects' (Scott, 2009: 8, 24, 156), such as land-loss, the urban transformation of farmland, livelihood rebuilding, and an altered sense of home. The ethnographic content of this chapter is based on my fieldwork and faculty appointment on the new campus of Yunnan Minzu University in Chenggong since 2011.

On the theoretical front, I look upon the peasants' livelihood transformation as a multilayered issue of the urbanization, migration, and deterritorialization of farming populations in China. The experiences of Chenggong's peasants share some commonalities with China's migrant population across the board regarding their economic agency and social marginalization; however, unlike their counterparts in other parts of China, who are seen to have a unidirectional migration pattern from their rural villages to urban destinations (Zhang, 2001; Solinger, 1999), Chenggong's peasants rarely migrate out of Yunnan Province; their spatial mobility often does not go beyond the 50 to 90 kilometres radius in which their homes and livelihoods are being reconstructed. Based on my ethnographic work, I thus wish to argue that the peasants' spatial mobility is a short-distanced 'circular' and/or 'straddling' (Ellis, 2000: 19) livelihood reconstruction process due to the factors related to their affective attachment to their ancestral farmland, lived discomfort of being low-wage earners in urbanized Chenggong, social marginalization, reclaiming of their agricultural skills, and the risk-laden but potentially profitable cash crop farming in the neighbouring counties that have not been incorporated into this massive urbanization scheme.

### **New urban livelihoods on the estranged ancestral landscape**

In Southwest China studies, scholars often give ethnographic and analytical attention to ethnic minorities. It is a demographic fact that Yunnan hosts 26 ethno-linguistic groups including Han. This ethnographic gravitation is found in the works of Sandra Hyde (2007), Susan Blum (2001), Stevan Harrell (2013) and others. A common characteristic in their studies is that the dichotomy between the ethnic minorities and the Han majority is the assumed basis of their analyses of such bilateral ethnic relations such as Yi-Han (Harrell, 2001), Tibetan-Han (Kolas, 2007), Pumi-Han (Wellens, 2010), Dai-Han (Hansen, 1999), Yao-Han (Litzinger, 2000). At this point it is important to note that the ancestors of the Han peasants with whom I work settled in the area mostly during the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries when the Mongols expanded into Yunnan and Southeast Asia and when the Ming Dynasty subsequently reinforced such expansion by sending military personnel to the region. This historical settlement of Han people in Chenggong is retained in the county historical record and is revealed in the naming of villages, especially since the late fourteenth century when Zhu Yuanzhang, the first emperor of Ming Dynasty, dispatched 300,000 troops to Yunnan stabilizing the frontiers of his newly established dynasty. Many of those troops camped out in the Chenggong area and their legacy is permanently marked on the landscape. Many current farming areas are named after the head or the ethnic origin of each military unit, such as Wangjiaying (Wang Family

Camp), Hui-Hui Ying (Muslim Camp), and Wujiangying (Wu Family Camp). The topography of these historical military camps is also what the local Yi people called *dian* or the flat lands between the hills. Unlike recent migrants to Yunnan, this group of Han people has a longer history in the region and thus possesses deeper ancestral roots and emotional attachment to the land in the region where they were farmers. In my ethnographic work, I recognize that their relationship to the land and the pattern of how they are coping with their changing livelihoods are similar to other ethnic groups in the vicinity as they also claim themselves as natives of Yunnan.

For the last five years I have worked with the farmers whose villages and farmland have now been transformed into the new campus of my university. Currently they are janitors, gatekeepers, and security guards on campus. As low wage earners, they are undergoing a drastic livelihood change and emotional responses. However, many of them perceive themselves to be luckier than their counterparts in other parts of the country who were relocated to new environments far away from their home regions with fewer employment opportunities (Liu and Murphy, 2006; Wilmsen, 2011; McDonald, Webber and Duan, 2008). The new college town in Chenggong seems able to offer job opportunities to the land-lost peasants with little formal education, those these service-oriented jobs are at the bottom of the income scale.

Although they have been relocated from their farmland, they nevertheless continue to live in Chenggong except that they are urban residents now living in the apartment complexes that were provided by the city government as a form of compensation for their land-loss. These special complexes are the new dwelling places for the relocated farmers. The city of Kunming systematically assigns one complex to each village. The architectural structure of these complexes bears no difference from any other commercial housing complex; however, each of them has a *ketang* or a meeting hall. In a natural farming village, the *ketang* is a village commons for festivals, familial events, and administrative meetings. It is the place where one finds the materiality of the villagers' social relations, social status, kinship ties, and the flows of information via rumours and gossips. The retaining of this custom means that the social and kinship networks of the relocated farmers are intact except that they no longer have land to till. Many of my ethnographic interlocutors commute between these complexes and the university campus - mostly within walking distance. They continue walk on the same land but it is now covered by concrete buildings and asphalt streets. I sympathize with their affection, nostalgia, and sense of loss toward their ancestral farmland.

Their adjustment to the new urban style is a continuing process. Peasants have occupied the bottom strata of Chinese society since ancient times; however, they have been rooted in their ancestral lands for centuries. As many of my interlocutors express, they feel more powerless than ever because they no longer have recourse to their land as the source of basic needs, e.g. rice, wheat, vegetables, and meat. Everything is now acquired via cash, and there is unprecedented pressure to accumulate it. In addition to the low monthly income of 1,500-2,000 RMB, their menial jobs are also socially considered low and even stigmatized among the urbanites of Kunming. They are not migrants but feel like migrants in other Chinese cities. This dynamic, contributing to a sense of "uprootedness," turns them into a 'floating population' (Zhang, 2001; Solinger, 1999) on their own ancestral land.

What is worse is that many city officials and urbanites view them as a burden to the city and the institutions that have acquired their land but are who are legally obligated to provide them with new employment opportunities. In this regard, the land-lost peasants in Chenggong share the common experience with rural migrants

elsewhere in China, as they are regarded by city officials and many urbanites as a drain on already scarce public resources and are frequently blamed for increased crime and social instability' (Zhang, 2001: 182). When I ask them, 'What do you do for a living', they often reply, '*dagong*.' *Dagong* refers to menial, physical jobs that do not require skills. This type of social prejudice negatively contributes to their adjustment process to the urban lifestyle.

Contemporary China's governing system is referred to as late socialism – a combination of one party rule and a market economy (Zhang, 2001:2 ). Under this hybrid system, Chinese society is undergoing social and economic stratification. The benchmark of upward and downward mobility is centred on the growing middle class who require a stable income and/or opportunities for joining the *nouveau riche*. The changing income structure of China affects existing social relationships, with people's economic status oftentimes determining their social respectability. In this regard, one's education, occupation, and income contribute more and more to the social (dis-)respectability of a person. Thus, it is difficult to move up socially and economically from the *dagong* class because those in it are perceived as unskilled labourers.

Lifeng, one of my middle-aged female interlocutors, and her husband work on campus as a janitor and a security guard. Their low income can hardly make ends meet for themselves and their two children. In a few years they will face having to pay the college expenses of their children. Their anxiety is the primary motivation for keeping their low paid jobs whose social and emotional tolls are rather high. In her daily routines, Lifeng often feels that students and some faculty members intentionally avoid her when she sweeps the hallways in the instructional buildings. She also overhears students disrespectfully call her 'the garbage woman' or 'the cleaning old hag'. She and her husband have to accept this social reality as an integral part of their jobs for the sake of sustaining their family. Many of their peers quit their menial jobs due to the obvious social stigmatization and choose instead to live on the meagre cash compensation they receive from the city government. This indignation-driven decision does not get them too far. Eventually they have to reconsider returning to the same jobs or finding alternatives as Chenggong continues to become a slick, expensive district of Kunming due to the state's economic and infrastructural expansion projects that originate here but reach out to Southeast Asia and South Asia.

My conversations with Lifeng and many of her peers show that the social manifestations of their indignation are associated with the social stigmatization and their perception of the different policies aimed at Han as opposed to ethnic minority peasants. They often compare their situation with the neighbouring Hui community at Hui-Hui Ying (Muslim Camp). Lifeng and her friends complain that the Hui community has not been subject to the city's relocation policy and they point to the fact that all Han peasant communities in Chenggong have been relocated and urbanized except for Muslim Camp. The Hui community (comprised of Han Muslims) has resisted the advancing urban landscaping by not complying with the city's request for relocation. The resistance lasted until 2015, when the city of Kunming allegedly bought off the community with a large compensation package. According to Lifeng, in the past, the Hui people had demonstrations and blocked the roads, deterring the construction contractors and local government personnel. Han peasants in the vicinity allege that the city was afraid of the Hui as an ethnic minority due to the state's favourable policy toward ethnic minorities. In Lifeng's eyes, because the government gives more resources to and has policies favouring ethnic minorities, the Hui took

advantage of it by demanding more compensation than surrounding communities received.

Since the end of the 1990s when the city of Kunming initiated its urbanization project in Chenggong, and when most farmlands were being transformed into the new urban environment, Hui-Hui Ying Camp was no longer able to economically sustain itself by its traditional trade of making pickled vegetables after their neighbouring Han vegetable growers moved away. Hui-Hui Ying Camp soon began a lucrative but illegal tobacco processing and trading place that became well-known in the province. This illegal income stream contributed to the Hui residents' initial resistance to the relocation plan of the city and subsequently influenced their demand for a bigger compensation package due to the tobacco processing being their primary source of cash revenue. This is where Lifeng and her compatriots feel that the Hui could get away with not being relocated for many years and ultimately received a compensation package bigger than their Han counterparts.

To be noted, the ethnic issues in Yunnan are an integral part of the province's modernization process. The affirmative action of the state based on its ethnic identification project in the first three decades of the PRC has difficulty meeting the complex changes that ethnic minorities in Yunnan are facing, e.g. penetrating market economy, external investments, and the uniformly designed state development projects. These forces add economic and political marginalization to the ethnic minorities' geographical marginality. This situation puts survival pressures on the ethnic minorities in the province. The available recourse is the state's initially designed affirmative policies for ethnic minorities. Over-reliance on or exploitation of these policies has become a common exercise of the individual agencies and community actions. Being ethnic is synonymous with having social capital for self-protection and interest-advancing (Blum, 2001: 58). It is inevitable that Han people like Lifeng feel excluded from the ethnic minorities' alleged capitalization of the state policies. Bitterness and indignation thus grow among the land-lost Han peasants. Their recourse is not to any policy, as there is none to help them, but to their farming skills. Thus, the low income and the instability of their new urban livelihoods often compel them to wish to turn the clock back or to resume their farming livelihood.

### **Cash-cropping and circular livelihoods**

There is no ancestral land to return to for farming. It is all beneath the asphalt surface of the university town. However, opportunities for farming are available as a part of the regional modernization and economic growth process. This type of farming is a type of urban entrepreneurship, ironically speaking, catering to the urban consumption of vegetables. Therefore, it is a cash-cropping practice rather than the multiple cropping practice that Lifeng and other farmers are familiar with. The remaining farmlands of Chenggong are being converted to the fields for cash crops such as vegetables, fruits, and flowers. The buyers of these cash crops are not just from Kunming but also from many other parts of China and the world, e.g. Guangdong, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Macao, and Western Europe.

The provincial government is aware of the growing demand for these cash crops. In 2009, the District Government of Chenggong launched a policy that provides subsidization to those who wish to engage in this entrepreneurial-style farming. It says that with the size of the land ranging from five *mu* (1 *mu* = 0.16 acres) to ten *mu*

and with the tenure more than five years, each household is entitled to a cash subsidy of 500 RMB per *mu*, each year for five years (Chenggong District, 2011). It gives an incentive to those who rent more than ten *mu* by qualifying their farming effort as entrepreneurship. With this official package of incentives, the size of each cash crop plot exceeds 20 *mu*. To the peasants of Chenggong, this size is significantly larger than their former family-based farmland, almost ten times more. The District's 2011 statistics indicate that 12,173 land-lost peasants rent 99,496 *mu* for cash cropping (Chenggong District, 2014). Obviously resuming farming is becoming a profitable alternative livelihood.

The incentives are apparently attractive. The actual practice of cash-cropping takes the challenges of investment risks and seasonable migration to other counties as family members begin to live apart from each other within the radius of 50 to 90 kilometres. In some cases, it is the middle-aged parents who take the responsibility of the farming and move away from the family while the grandparents and extended relatives provide child care. This new farming practice can be conceived of as a 'circular livelihood' signifying the bifocal living-working pattern of the land-lost peasants in Chenggong. Resuming farming does not mean that they have the same sense of attachment to land as before when they were rooted in their ancestral villages; instead, it means that they are now tenants as well as investors of their own cash and labour into entrepreneurial farming. In this regard, the circular livelihood also includes a diversion of family earnings and savings toward the profitable venture of cash-cropping. Although the local government has cash subsidization available, the cash-croppers have to come up with starting capital of at least 200,000 RMB to cover the rent of the land and the preparatory work for monocropping.

Such a circular livelihood can be seen as a motion of 'straddling' home and the new farming site, inhabiting both the wish for stability and the aspiration for prosperity, and the risk and the social respect that the intended entrepreneurial farming is supposed to bring. In this set of circular motions, the land-lost peasants are rebuilding their farming livelihood with a clear orientation of cash-making. Farming takes place in the new rural landscape; however, it is inextricably part of the peasants' urbanized process of surviving and thriving.

Xingguo, one of Lifeng's relatives quit his university janitorial job and summoned the courage to do cash-cropping. I followed him and his wife to their new farming site in Songming, 76 kilometres away from Chenggong. Songming is one of the counties with abundant farmland available, making the land tenancy possible for land-lost peasants. The couple chose to do vegetable farming. For a higher yield, vegetable farmers in the area prefer greenhouse farming situated in a chain of production, acquisition, transportation, and distribution. In other words vegetable growing is now an industrial production that involves farmworkers, truck drivers, refrigerated storage facility owners, greenhouse builders, seedling suppliers, fertilizer providers, and pesticide sellers. The peasant cash croppers are one of the components in this industrial assemblage. All participants gear their specializations toward profit making.

Xingguo's aspiration comes from his desire to have a new livelihood without social stigmas, so that he will be able to support his two college-bound children for higher education and their future married lives. He and his wife rented 20 *mu* to start with for greenhouse vegetable growing. Cash cropping, as a tedious undertaking, requires the presence of the farmer. The couple spends much of their time giving meticulous care to their crops, e.g. fertilizing, watering, and pesticide spraying. They are bound to the farming site in Songming, however, they make a weekly one-night

trip back home to Chenggong. They spend six days a week in Songming but they don't rent an apartment; instead, for the sake of watching over the cash crops, they built a makeshift bungalow with three rooms serving as bedroom, kitchen, and storage just next to their greenhouses. They literally live next to their vegetables in the field. They cook their own food at times. As a frugal couple, they make full use of the margins of the 20 *mu* for growing vegetables for their own daily consumption. This saves them from spending money on buying vegetables from markets.

In their greenhouse farming, land is treated like a machine that makes products. Through the products, the land brings them profit. Therefore, the wellbeing of the land is essential for high productivity. They hire workers to do fertilization for the purpose of having as many harvest cycles as possible in a year. One cycle is usually forty-five days or so. Given the mild climate of Yunnan, the efficient use of the land can bring more harvest times to farmers in a year. Buyers mostly come from coastal areas like Guangzhou and Shenzhen, where restaurant businesses have high demand for vegetables. The shipping destination of the buyer often determines their buying price of the vegetables. This means that the selling price for the land-lost peasants can fluctuate dramatically contingent upon the season, climate and other possible factors of the consumptive destination. The unit price of per kilo can range from 30 cents to seven RMB. Therefore, the gross income for a harvest of 20 *mu* can vary from 9,000 RMB to 210,000 RMB. As suppliers, Xingguo and his wife see the conditions on their entrepreneurship, which limit their desired profit goals. For instance, the refrigerated storage owners could refuse the storage of their poorly grown vegetables or offer them higher price for good, marketable yields. The potential for successful cash cropping is there; however, it comes to realization with hard and meticulous work.



Figure II Land-lost peasants' greenhouse farming

Life on the new farm is physically demanding and monotonous. Xingguo and his wife spend their spare time with their neighbouring farmers. They benefit from the friendly relationship with them for information sharing and mutual help when it comes down to harvesting and looking for buyers. As they were farmers before, it did not take long to become used to the new farming rhythm. At the same time they keep up with social events taking place in the meeting hall of their apartment complex in Chenggong. To them, it is the place that retains their kinship network. So, whenever there are weddings and funerals, both of them, or at least one of them, travel back to Chenggong.

Xingguo's new livelihood reflects a common reality of land-lost peasants in

Chenggong. Being modern is equated with being mobile and flexible, and living in two or more locations. Modernity thus means a qualitative change of lifestyle and of modes of production. It demands the person's responsive adaptation to the demands of modernization, globalization, market economy, and the consumer market (Gaonkar, 1999: 15). In the case of the land-lost peasants, being modern means their adaptation to what I call the 'floating niche,' which can be understood as a 'site-specific "creative adaptation"' (Gaonkar in Turner et al, 2015: 8), through which people make themselves modern. The floating niche can be seen as a descriptive means of understanding the bilocal place-making and livelihood reconstruction processes of the land-lost peasants in Chenggong. I agree with Hutchinson that a niche reflects all dimensions of species-environment interrelations (Hutchinson in Broussard and Young, 1986: 268). The formation of a niche can also be seen as a complementary relationship between environmental affordances and the needs of the organism (Smyer Yü, 2015: 27). James Gibson states, "It is in the very process of attending and responding to these affordances, in the course of their engagements with them, that skilled practitioners – human or non-human get to know them" (Gibson in Ingold, 2011:11). I, therefore, think that a niche is the interrelationship between the environmental and social affordances and people's pursuance.

In this regard, the floating niche of Xingguo and other land-lost peasants in Chenggong is not isolated but is embodied in multiple systems, e.g. the social, the economic, the regulatory, and the natural. Niche is no longer merely a biological reality. It is best to understand it as a biosocial reality. Thus, it does not come into being as a natural process but often as an artificial process in the context of global modernity, one in which human agencies and social environment construct new niches of survival. Everything is nested together interdependently. A floating niche is multi-dimensional, e.g. international, national, and local. Local people may not fully understand all the relationships and progresses affecting them, but they know that their life and livelihood have been influenced by a bigger world "out there" (Kottak, 1999: 31). In my case study, the land-lost peasants experience these connections through the drastic changes to landscape on their homeland, from their sedentary to floating life style and from the fluctuation of the vegetable prices. They find their ways to reconstruct and update their local knowledge to respond to these connections.

### **Consequences of Transregional Modernity in Chenggong**

The discourse of modernity has generated a plethora of interpretations contextualized in varied lived experiences of being modern. Its trend favours the qualitative and plural understandings of modernity as 'universalizing' (Giddens, 1990: 175), 'singular' (Jameson, 2002), 'liquid' (Bauman, 2000), 'indigenizing' (Sahlins, 1999: ix-x) and 'other modernity' (Rofel, 1999:13), to name a few. These qualitative conceptualizations of modernity could all find their cases in contemporary China. Yunnan is, therefore, not an exception. However, I would like to emphasize that being modern on the ground level is more a lived experience of modernization in the physical-affect sense than it is a conceptualizing process. Yunnan, as part of China's Great Western Development Drive (*xibu dakaiifa*), is undergoing multiple physical and infrastructural transformations, e.g. from the remote to the integrated, from the rural to the urban, from the landed to the dispossessed, and from the subsistent to the commercial. All the physical transformations of Yunnan and elsewhere in China are the consequence of the state's re-emphasized modernization program propagated as

‘China Dream’ and its new global initiative – ‘One Belt One Road’ – promoted as China’s transregional-transnational development project. In the ideological sense, the new or renewed modernization projects are part and parcel of the state’s strenuous effort to build the nation as a socialist civilization in which ‘material civilization’ (*wuzhi wenming*) is antecedent to its fulfilment (Jin, 1992: 136-37).

Obviously, modernity in this China context is largely a state project to begin with, one which heavily relies on the physical modernization of the nation as prerequisite for the projected human flourishing. Under this condition, being modern, especially among those situated in lower socio-economic strata, is synonymous with being modernized. At the same time, the seeming passivity of being modern triggers the agentive responses of emotional expressions and rational choices for the sake of surviving that culminate, therefore, in repositioning one’s livelihood. In other words, being modern is a mode of being combined with the effect of state-implemented modernization and the exercise of individual agency. This is what is happening among many land-lost peasants with whom I work.

I would like to dwell on the state effect a bit more as both a socio-material reality and a conceptual term originating from Scott’s work. Relevant to the modern historical changes in Southwest China, especially Yunnan, Scott’s discussion of state effect refers to Zomia as a consequence of state-making and state expansion (Scott, 2009: 326-27). The modern ethno-linguistic geography of Yunnan fits Scott’s idea of Zomia as a ‘shatter zone,’ which, for those who prefer to retain their traditional livelihoods, is a place of refuge. Since the mid twentieth century, the shatter zone as a state effect disappeared from within the Chinese border, though not from Southeast Asia. Ethnic minority areas and regions in Yunnan have been incorporated into eight ethnic autonomous prefectures and twenty-nine autonomous counties (Cao, 2008: 14). I am not saying that the state-building process has stopped; instead, the process continues with a different magnitude and orientation. In the case of the land-lost peasants in Chenggong, they have no ‘shatter zones’ to which to retreat as a matter of recourse but they certainly feel shattered, having experienced modernization and the urbanization process as a shattering process regarding their relocation and new livelihood construction. In this context, the state effect that is an outcome of China’s modernization and transregional economic development in Yunnan compels me to reemphasize that being modern is not only a personal or a communal experience but is inseparably forged by a range of state modernization projects geared toward a physical, economic, livelihood, and landscape transformation of existing social-cultural communities.

As mentioned in the opening paragraphs, I refer to the land-lost peasants as a type of ‘floating population,’ a term borrowed from the studies of migrant workers in urban China. My use of it in this chapter differs from those of Zhang and Solinger, who emphasize the relatively long distance migration experiences of China’s rural populations to cities. ‘Floating’ in my case study does not mean ‘migrating’ but rather signifies uprootedness, relocation, dispossession, disintegration, deterritorialization, and repositioning, all of which take place on one’s ancestral land. While the rural migrant workers in other parts of China have their home villages to return to, the former peasants in Chenggong do not have their home villages anymore. In the case of Chenggong’s former peasants, their ancestral land is both familiar and strange. It is familiar because of the culturally, economically, and emotionally invested places of human settlement, which could be traced back to the Yuan and Ming dynasties or 600-700 years ago. It is strange because their villages and farmlands have been replaced by urban high-rises and developed with higher education complexes. They

continue to live on the land but do not belong to it or no longer build their livelihoods on it as farmers.

In every sense, for my peasant interlocuters, this type of floating mode of being is the raw experience of being modern. Their floating lifestyle is not merely a local happening but is a result of state-corporate transregional development. The external forces of change play an overwhelming role in transforming Chenggong's peasantry to low-wage earners as well as in prompting them to reinvent their farming livelihoods. In this sense, the causal forces of such a floating lifestyle could be understood as what van Schendel calls the 'flows' of capital, goods, and enterprises in the transregional sense (van Schendel, 2002: 661-2). Metaphorically speaking, many former peasants of Chenggong live just above the flood levels of modernization, urbanization, and transregional economic development in Southwest China. The vessels of their survival are their menial jobs or their recreated farming livelihoods.

This leads me to further push the earlier discussion of the floating niche and the circular livelihood. As mentioned, a niche is never a one-sided development of an ecologically-bound species but relies on the materialization of the affordances of a given place by its dwellers (Smyer Yü, 2015: 26). The ancestral land of the former peasants afforded them a habitat and a set of farming skills, both of which engendered a niche or an occupation as farmers. However, under the current state of affairs and due to policy changes, such a niche is no longer supported by their ancestral land and yet it in part continues to exist as the farming skills of the former peasants. In many instances, the farmers' current urban jobs fail to replace this set of traditional skills and overwrite the recent memory of their farming livelihoods. In addition to the low wages and low social respect they receive from their urban jobs, it is under these conditions that many former peasants choose to reactivate their farming skills but have to look for farmlands elsewhere. This is where I refer to their current farming activities as a floating niche simultaneously signifying their uprootedness from their ancestral land and desire to be farmers again but with a commercial orientation. This is their agentive response to the on-going state-corporate modernization programs in the region.

As this floating niche spans the distance between their living locations and farming sites, those who choose to resume their farming are displaced on a weekly or a monthly basis. They commute between the two locations. Their bilocal life style is undoubtedly a kind of straddling between their no-longer-cultivable ancestral land and their new farming sites. Because of the commutability between the living and working locations, I, therefore, call this floating niche a circular livelihood whose epicentre continues to be the ancestral land but that is sustained by the commercial farming activities within a commutable radius. This is undoubtedly a creative adaptation in response to the external forces of change.

To be noted again, the resumed farming livelihood of the former peasants, as their creative adaptation, is not subsistence-based but is a type of entrepreneurship whose productivity caters to the needs of urban consumptions in China and elsewhere. The transition from subsistence farming to commercial farming is a common phenomenon not only in Yunnan but also in neighbouring countries such as Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. As Turner, Bonnin and Michaud puts it, '...rural inhabitants undergo an agrarian transition toward wage work and large-scale cash-based agricultural systems designed to support increasingly urbanized and industrialized economies' (Turner et al, 2015: 4-5). Such transition/transformation appears, on the surface, to retain the farming skills of the former peasants; however, in substance, it pulls them into the overall urbanization process and also turns them into an integral part of the

state-corporate initiated urbanizing forces. Again, many of the renewed farm workers are not passive recipients of urbanization but are actively seeking ways and means to carve out a new niche with their existing farming skills in the growing understanding of market economy of China that is dependent upon transregional chains of investment, production, and consumption. Being modern in this sense is an exercise of one's agency to negotiate with the state-sanctioned institutional arrangements (Turner et al, 2015: 8) and to identify a greater habitat that could sustain their customary living skills in the transformed environment of their ancestral land. Thus, the qualitative aspect of modernity among the land-lost but niche-regained former peasants in Chenggong demonstrates their power to act and willingness to construct new forms of agency for survival and thriving.

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