

Continental Drift 2011

Argentina / China

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In the spring of 2011, Claire Pentecost and I were lucky enough to participate in exploratory trips with two different groups of people. The first was with a group in Rosario, Argentina, who invited us to make a journey across the Pampa to the city of Bahía Blanca. We saw it as a chance to pursue our explorations of the global agricultural economy in the context of a Latin American country engaged for many years in a prodigious political experiment: resisting the destinies of neoliberalism. The second was a plan concocted with Compass group members Dan S. Wang and Sarah Lewison, to go to China with an American expatriate named Jay Brown. This idea grew through a series of chaotic branchings to include an extremely welcoming space called HomeShop, which hosted our activities in Beijing and organized a meeting at the Womenjia Autonomous Lab in the city of Wuhan. The following two stories are excerpted from a series of live chronicles which sought to interpret the journeys as they were unfolding. Thanks to everyone who made these dreams real!

CONTINENTAL DRIFT THROUGH THE PAMPA (BAHÍA BLANCA, ARGENTINA, APRIL 2011)

Claire and I are in the midst of something fantastic: a Continental Drift from Chicago to the Argentine city of Rosario, then on through the Pampa to the city of Bahía Blanca, an industrial port hundreds of miles south of Buenos Aires. We're here to compare experiences with hi-tech agriculture, because the Pampa, like the Midwest, is a blue-sky experiment in genetically modified food production. In the area around Rosario, GMO soy has been booming since the early 1990s, interrupted for only a few years by the

economic collapse of 2001. Nowadays prices are rocketing upwards and the big landowners are pushing the expansion of the soy frontier. All of this is both foreign and weirdly familiar. In the past Rosario was known as “the Argentine Chicago” because its grain production was key to the formation of global prices. So we tell everyone we’re from Chicago, “the American Rosario.”

We were invited here by the El Levante group, including Mauro Machado, Lorena Cardona, and Graciela Carnevale, whom Claire and I met on a previous trip (in 2005). Among the many other things she’s done, Graciela was part of the Tucumán Arde project in the late 1960s—an attempt by artists, sociologists, film-makers, and photographers to investigate the transformation of the sugar industry in a distant province that was portrayed as a tourist paradise, while really becoming a living hell. At that time Argentina was under the Onganía dictatorship, a prelude to the later military junta. But the country was also hooked directly into the latest developments in contemporary art, giving rise to fascinating experiments. Graciela says that this artistic work became an investigation to understand a context that was completely incomprehensible. The aim was to find a language that would allow the artists to intervene in a real political struggle—in this case by engaging in stealth research, then holding a public exhibition in a union hall, using media, information, testimony, and gestures of resistance. When I first learned about the project it seemed to have everything to do with the counter-globalization protests of the early 2000s.¹ But it also inspired our own project.

What we’re doing is an experiment in the collective perception of territories: first around Rosario, then on the trip through the Pampa, and now in Bahía Blanca. This involves visiting all kinds of places: the river port near Rosario from which most of Argentina’s exports leave; a number of gardening and home-building projects around the city; the Bolsa de Comercio, which is something like the neoliberal brain of the region’s grain trade; various farms and homes along the old French rail line that leads through the Pampa to Bahía Blanca; and the port of Ingeniero White, where friends from the Museo del Puerto are taking us out to the huge grain-exporting installations and petrochemical plants. Each day on this trip brings us into contact with the scales of contemporary existence, from the intimate and territorial to the national, the continental, and the global.

Among the most interesting things in Rosario were two evening discussions where we brought together people from different professions and cultural backgrounds to talk about the current social and political questions, which are intense in Argentina these days. One gets the impression that history is happening right now. But it happens beneath an ever-present threat. Just last night I spoke with Sergio Raimondi of the Museo del Puerto, who said they are experiencing a strange kind of time that increases the quantity

of the past: because the present changes so brusquely that it's immediately cut off from all that went before. For example, a huge petro-chemical plant was installed in Ingeniero White in the 1990s, the ports were privatized, the national grain board was dissolved, and every aspect of exportation was taken over by multinationals, which then made a bid to replace the public sphere by selectively funding schools, cultural programs etc. That culminated in the economic crisis and the insurrection which brought the country to a standstill. When I first came in 2004, people were enthusiastic and passionate, but also shaken, highly uncertain about the future. Since then something has changed. Folks now seem convinced they must rebuild a national-popular state that can stand against the neoliberal forces within and outside the country. The 1990s are considered to have been a time of resistance. Now is understood to be a time of construction.

The geopolitical analysis of the Continental Drift project was founded on the study and direct perception of Karl Polanyi's "double movement," a historical sequence from the early twentieth century that seems to be repeating itself today. Then as now, global capitalism expanded at a dizzying pace, but it also destroyed its own foundations. Its expansion was ultimately checked by a self-protective movement that took the form of fascist governments, racism, and brutal aggression.² After 9/11 we saw a similar wave of protectionism and fear in the US, accompanied by the horrors of war and then followed by financial collapse. But our geopolitical vision was encouraged by the emergence of strong leftist politics in Latin America, and by moves toward the formation of a unified continental project. We wanted to understand these changes, we wanted to grasp how they were affecting us; but we also wanted to begin changing ourselves by developing a practice of perception and expression, a new way of inhabiting territories and forming solidarities. All that came together in 2008, with the Continental Drift through the Midwest Radical Culture Corridor: a territorial practice of "cartography with your feet," developed by a bunch of friends who have taken the name of The Compass.

Today, a decade after the high points of the counter-globalization movement, it's quite amazing to see the transformation of the political debate in Argentina. The Keynesian measures of the two Kirchner governments have made a positive impact on a majority of the Left. Strong policy moves include the imposition of a special tax on windfall profits from soy exports, allowing the country to climb out of its debt; the expropriation of private retirement funds in order to develop an egalitarian economic policy; and most importantly, the trial and conviction of a large number of assassins from the murderous Videla dictatorship, who had been granted immunity by earlier governments and left to continue poisoning Argentine society. Neoliberalism is now recognized as a colossal failure by most of the people

in this country. It is as though an epochal corner has been turned, revealing a new landscape with very different challenges.

During our excursions and our meetings, on our lunch breaks and car rides with the group, and in chance encounters all across the country, these political and cultural issues keep coming back to the fore—to the point where your head spins and nothing seems the same as it did just minutes ago. Yesterday in the provincial town of Colonel Suarez we visited a shoe factory that now employs 4,200 persons, after closing its doors in 2002 and leaving the area almost destitute. Shoe making is cultural labor at its most basic level, producing the classic commodity of the present: branded sneakers, high-fashion items that are made on the cheap. Never before did I understand how much a factory job can mean to otherwise unemployed people. Just the day before, we had met the caretaker of a 5,000-acre farm, whose absentee owners held 100,000 acres—typical of the old Argentine oligarchy, which gained its rural wealth by exterminating the natives. Later that afternoon we were talking with a wonderfully friendly and generous couple who supplemented the income from their 350-acre farm by running harvesting machinery for other small producers. We heard the father of our traveling companion Leandro Beier playing the polka on his accordion as we ate flame-roasted beef in a village of Volga River Germans—people who had left Bavaria in the eighteenth century to live in Russia, then migrated again in the nineteenth century to Argentina. And today we walked along an industrial corridor that leads from the old national grain board (now operated by the multinational group Bunge, headquartered in St. Louis) to the massive silos and quays of the working-class town of Ingeniero White, on the outskirts of Bahía Blanca. We were accompanied by people from the neighborhood, listening to their stories of yesterday and today. Crossing the bridge into the port city constructed with English capital and immigrant labor at the turn of the last century, we saw a bunch of strange cast-off stuff: old iron stays from some forgotten dock, a beautiful wooden fishing boat, a pathway made of railroad ties, an old building of corrugated iron built on short stilts and painted in bright fresh colors. It took a while to realize that we had reached the mythical Museo del Puerto.

Mythical because this small and extremely friendly archive of local material culture has a reputation for exploring the role of ordinary people in constructing the Americas, and for bringing the struggles of the past directly into the complexity of the present. You enter through the dining room, which already says a lot. Later on there will be food and welcoming words. Outside, where the exhibition already begins, there is a bright yellow sign next to an old rusty anchor. The lettering reads:

The AIR you are breathing is not natural. It has a history that dates back to the industrial revolution. Inhale: there is the dust of grain, the emanations of the petrochemical plants, a million volatile particles of production.

Stop, look, listen, breath it in. Your mind reels, your head spins. Even the seasons are upside down here. The sense is common, but it's also very different: neoliberalism in reverse. Something has changed, maybe even for the better. Welcome to the worlds of Continental Drift.

PATHWAYS THROUGH THE MODERN WORLD-SYSTEM (YUNNAN PROVINCE, CHINA, JUNE 2011)

“China has one big advantage over the United States,” launched our friend and collaborator Dan S. Wang, as a closing provocation to the audience of sociology students at Wuhan University. “That advantage is, Chinese people don’t believe in God.”

It might have sounded out of the blue, wild-n’-crazy. But that declaration followed earlier remarks on the wave of protests that pitted social-democratic activists against a union-busting Republican governor in Wisconsin. In the US we have many reasons to link right-wing religiosity with an unreasoned drive to the endless accumulation of capital. Dan sees the next chapter of Wisconsin’s activism as concerted opposition to the Republican-mandated opening of taconite mining activities in the north of the state. He was aiming to suggest the possibility—or better, the fast-approaching reality—of intensified grassroots opposition to mining in China.

His remarks sent a surge of feeling through the crowd, a good way to open up the questions about Continental Drift. But after the public session was over, our new friend from the HomeShop group, Qu Ge, came up to take issue with Dan’s materialist hopes for China. What he said was basically this: the lack of any other spiritual belief only opens the floodgates to intense consumerism, the lust for profit, infinite corruption.

We carried out no collective reflection on this debate, except to echo it, to recount it to each other, to wonder what it could mean. And it kept echoing beneath the surface, as we moved from Wuhan to the Lijiang Studio run by Jay Brown and a family of Naxi farmers in Yunnan province, near Lijiang city, on the edge of the Himalaya in Southern China.

PEACH PARADISE

What can be done with a non-profit arts organization and a ten-year lease on a traditional housing compound in the Lashihai basin, surrounded by apple trees, fields of corn, peas, potatoes, cabbages, and whatever else the farmers can grow on small plots with ox-drawn plows, animal fertilizer and lots of human labor? The still-unfolding answer lies in a series of collaborations

between the organizers, the local family, visiting artists, and the residents of the area, mostly of the Naxi minority, who have lived here forever and seen their lands transform into a major Chinese tourist destination. Our connection to Lijiang Studio came through Sarah Lewison and her son Duskin Drum, who worked here on an ecological project, “illuminating the solar economy.” It involved hands-on public research into the cycles of growth and decay, with mushroom cultivation and beer-making that eventually culminated in the hilarious World Heritage Beer Garden Picnic. Via Sarah we met Jay Brown, a discreet and extremely capable Chinese-speaking American who has moved from art historian to events organizer and quiet advocate of Naxi culture. In 2010, standing alongside a car out in the ruins of Detroit, we all agreed it would be great to go to China. And now, after our seemingly endless travels through the mega-gentrification of the coastal cities, after the industrial and commercial sprawl of Wuhan, we have finally reached a longed-for destination: the countryside.

No one expected utopia here, because we don’t believe in God either. The studio compound includes three traditional buildings, a twisted pine in the courtyard, Chinese and Tibetan characters on the walls, and a few big leather chairs under a sheltering roof. Plus lots of funky and fascinating books, artists’ works and sketches, and a wireless net connection. There is a kitchen, but except for morning coffee and tea almost all meals are eaten next door with the He family, who participate extensively in this subtle long-term project that aims to foster experimental intersections among Chinese artists, foreign visitors, and the diverse members of a highly original rural community.

It began raining soon after we arrived on the night train from Kunming, so we appreciated that sheltering roof. During a break in the clouds Jay took us out to see the latest big government scheme, what he calls “The Peach Paradise.” It consists in digging up and straightening a small river, lining its bed and a surrounding walkway with stone, then planting peach trees which the tourists will come to pick in bucolic surroundings beneath the blue sky, with the towering Jade Dragon Snow Mountain in the distance. Puddles of mud, piles of rubble, and construction materials were strewn over land that had been more or less expropriated from local villagers—with compensation, to be sure—leaving a commercial scar in the dense fabric of cultivated fields. The future peachtree pathway aims straight at Lijiang Studio and beyond, towards the lake. The He family and their neighbors have resisted the logical extension of the project, for now anyway. The Chinese characters on the bright red signs proclaim: GRAB THE LAND AND ORGANIZE IT. BUILD A PEACH INDUSTRY. SPEED CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW SOCIALIST COUNTRYSIDE!

Back at the studio we started asking what we were really doing here, what our collaboration between Americans, Europeans, Chinese and expats could mean. Communication is so uncertain! Could we somehow bring it all together, by focusing on this rural context? Dan recalled the image of the peach as a symbol of immortality in Chinese art and literature: myth in the service of a consumerist dream. We started talking with Mai Dian, who had come with us from Wuhan, about the similarities between the peach plantation here and the Happy Valley development where he lives: yet another land grab, yet another phony paradise.³ Sarah brought up Benton Harbor, Michigan, not far from Chicago, which is a black working-class city with heavy unemployment that has recently come under emergency financial management. In that city a public park on the lakeside, ceded by its former owners to the people in perpetuity, has been partially expropriated for the construction of a golf course aimed at tourists and Whirlpool corp executives: the public trust betrayed, democratically.⁴ As we spoke from our different positions, a dialectical image was emerging between us. The peach as a transcendent symbol, a paradise just out of reach. The multiple amusement parks as instrumentalized utopias, tasteless cellulose in greedy hands. And the possibility of another pathway, a material and sensuous connection to the land and its fruits, in a world that includes both radiant life and bitter death without all the illusions.

REINVENTION

Rain be damned! We grabbed some dry clothes, bought some rice and oil and a bottle of white lightning and piled into the seven-seater Iveco van for a long muddy trip to the village of Wu Mu, above the upper reaches of the Yangtze at the end of a cliff-clinging road. Forests, green terraces, vistas of mountains through the clouds. Sharp turns, deep ruts, impressive face-offs with big blue trucks that force you to do the backing up around the corner. And finally, frank relief and a big round of applause when Jay got us there in the drenching downpour at the fall of dark, without falling down any of those precipitous slopes.

When I was young on a first trip to Thailand, gazing across the Mekong River to Laos and Burma, I dreamed of someday walking the hills beyond Kunming, among the “tribal peoples.” Dreams become realities! Clamber down the muddy path, clutch that cheap umbrella, try not to step on the sharpest stone. Down, down, down the wide uneven steps, beside the traditional houses, the tethered cattle, the peering faces, the guy in the thick woolen cape. At last we made it through the gate and instantly, such impressive generosity, we felt at home. Tea was offered, rooms were organized. A small crowd of locals gathered at He Jixian’s house where spirited exchanges ensued beneath the usual conditions of in-the-dark uncertainty, with food

for all and home-made *baijiu* liquor. Whoah! I can't transcribe those drunken conversations, but let's say the quest for international understanding took great leaps forward. And my head felt never better on the pillow, beneath the curving tiled roof, in the deep black of night, above the sleeping pigs that would come out snorting for some food at daybreak.

He Jixian is brilliant, energetic, inquisitive, and capable—what Gramsci would have called an “organic intellectual,” but in a southern Chinese context that throws a new light on Gramsci's “southern question” (concerning culture and regionality, domination and resistance). He is a young shaman who studies Naxi language and traditions, performs the *dongba* rituals, writes the forgotten characters, makes his own paper (plus the *baijiu*), goes to conferences all around China and still farms a few small plots of land. After meeting Jay through the intermediary of an Italian artist, he turned up one day at Lijiang Studio with a map of water use in the village. That's an important subject, because water is scarce (you wouldn't know it in the pouring rain) and each family's irrigation is another's drought, so all the decisions must be collective. The debate extends to what you plant, when, how much, how the pipes and rivulets are maintained, so many vital details. The government has proposed its own plan, but it doesn't stand a chance: the information is too complex and variable to be synthesized at a distance, too sensitive and vital to be entrusted to the the market. In fact the market is a danger. One ambitious and enterprising villager wanted to plant an entire orchard of walnuts for sale, requiring intensive irrigation; he was dissuaded of the idea in a long village council. When people speak of upland autonomy or “the art of not being governed” (to quote a recent book by James C. Scott), that's exactly what they mean.

“Is there a center of this village?” I asked no one in particular. I thought there must be a temple somewhere. “The center is the basketball court,” answered Sarah quite sarcastically. Normally she would have been right: the government builds them everywhere. But hardly had we snaked down a trail and crossed paths with a few wheat-laden horses when an arched entryway appeared before our eyes, decorated with what seemed to be images of Tibetan gods. Inside were more bright acrylic paintings on a clean white ground: a seated Buddha flanked by protector dieties, with sacred blue mountains growing directly out of a boulder encrusted in the base of the wall. Such is the hybrid iconography of Naxi ritual, combining Tibetan and Taoist elements. This was actually a village development center (paid for, we later learned, by money from the program for a New Socialist Countryside, which most villages can't agree what to do with and just divide as pocket cash). We met the Communist Party secretary, who assured us that we were welcome, that all of this was at our disposal.

We admired the finely rendered images. The painter was there on the spot: he explained that these were the mountains of Hell, which the dead souls must traverse on their way to Paradise. No peach trees in sight! We walked up a few steps, out where the unfinished toilet should have been. Here was another mural work, showing a frog inside the circle of the four directions, pierced by a metal-tipped arrow. The mischievous frog had just eaten a sacred Naxi text, so the villagers stabbed him in the stomach; water spurted from between his legs, blood gushed bright red from his mouth. Water, wood, metal, fire: the four elements. The rivers flowed from south to north, just as they do in this region. The painting was both a map and a local cosmology.

There was a beautiful kitchen along one side of the courtyard, with mats on a raised surface around a cooking fire; plus a schoolroom with a blackboard and TV, as well as two more meeting and sleeping rooms upstairs. What caught our eyes was the library. Lots of stuff in Chinese: literature, farming, kid's books, and an extraordinary set of ritual writings in Naxi script, with Chinese and English translations. Several dozens of meticulously bound volumes boxed in blue cases with gold lettering, printed by the People's Publishing House of Yunnan Province, detailing the rituals for the worship of the heavens. It seems that after the Cultural Revolution, amid the rising tide of economic development, the far-sighted editor of these volumes saw that the Naxi culture might entirely disappear beneath the oncoming waves of prosperity. So he began the long task of gathering all the texts that still remained in the country, photographing the originals and transcribing them into phonetic script. Because so many of the sources had been found in Wu Mu, the publisher offered the full set of books in return. Here was a precious resource for He Jixian, in his quest to rediscover the disappearing Naxi culture and learn the *dongba* rituals.

Sarah began to interview him, through Jay's intermediary. She wanted to know if the rituals contained anything about the relation to nature, any kinds of laws or guidelines. It turns out they did, yes, many specific things: not to kill snakes and frogs, not to eat any other than domestic animals, not to overgraze the mountains, and so forth. Then Sarah asked an even more interesting question. Each of these rituals was forged long ago, they come down as a tradition. Could a ritual be invented today? No, replied He Jixian. But they can be reinterpreted, clarified, adapted for our needs. This was the reason for studying and preserving the ancient culture.

It was a magic moment. What we were seeing was the preservation and reinvention of a cosmological map: a way to give order and meaning to the relations between human beings and their natural environment, a linguistic and artistic pathway through chaotic times. In Naxi writing a character becomes an image, an image becomes a character again. Codes lead outside themselves, signs grow into intensities of feeling. In this context, culture is

not a yoke of the past, a burden to be shaken off before achieving modernity. Instead it is a collection of fragments that point beyond themselves, toward the shaping of a whole, the survival of a new society. Life beyond the deluge of the modern world-system.

Of course a casual visitor cannot know what this map means, what it offers, what it delivers. But we had come to a site of subtle power, where we could see the unfolding and recreation of a cosmology in its elemental state of reinvention. Even more, we could begin to imagine what kind of place such a cosmological map could have in our own existence—if only we could discover or create one.

THE COOKING-POT

Three paintings adorn the He family courtyard, adjacent to Lijiang Studio. Mural paintings are common in local courtyards; but these were done by the brilliant young Chinese artist Hu Jiamin. The first, in a classical style, shows grandfather and grandmother He Shiyuan and He Shufen, seen from behind, gazing out over a lake toward the wispy fog of the Western Mountains. Dudu the dog stands beside them, along with the family horse; to the right, a pair of black-and-white cranes cross necks, as though tenderly embracing. A traditional village with fruit trees and farm plots extends toward the lake. We feel the idealized calm that pervaded, not the reality, but perhaps the imaginary of the older generation.

In the second panel, Er Ge and his wife Xuemei stand before the lake, looking us directly in the eyes, radiant, in full realistic detail. We see a couple of boats, the leaping dog and the family cow mounted on Er Ge's farm truck in the middle ground. The style is popular-impressionist. As if to insist on this poster-like style recalling the era of the Cultural Revolution, the couple is portrayed on a billboard in the distance, like an advertisement for themselves. Three puppies lies curled on the ground, warmly obedient. The theme is success, health, tranquility, prosperity.

The portrait of the third generation is more troubling and strange. The two brothers, Jixing and Jiyu, look directly at us—indeed, they stare intensely. The naturalism of the previous portrait has disappeared; the emphasis on their oversized heads suggests a new, far more cerebral culture. Beneath their colorful coats, both boys wear tee-shirts silkscreened by Sarah's son Duskin, the American activist. Something about Jixing's posture suggests the Chinese interpretations of hip-hop. Dudu cavorts behind them, her teeth bared in a kind of wild grin. Mushrooms dot the grass in the foreground, while between the boys are two tiny shells. Behind them, the lake seems to have morphed into a strange blue sea; jellyfish float in the air, their tentacles extended, like parachutists landing in a hallucinatory scene, except one of them is upside-down. The theme, I would say, is deterritorialization.

We are beginning to understand China's rise on both traditional and Maoist foundations; but how to see into the future world that will be the heritage of this third generation? While still in the village of Wu Mu, all of us continental drifters began reading a book that Sarah had brought, Minqi Li's *The Rise of China and the Demise of the Capitalist World-Economy* (2008). Li is a Marxist economist, an expatriate member of China's New Left. With this new study of China he has made a decisive contribution to the theory of world-systems. In a chapter on "China and the Neoliberal Global Economy" he discusses the runaway industrial growth of the past ten years:

If the current level of investment is sustained for longer, it would leave China with a massive amount of excess production capacity that is far greater than what is needed to meet the final demand in the world market and far greater than what can be supported by the world supply of energy and raw materials. China would then be threatened with a major economic crisis. For the Chinese economy to be restructured on a more "sustainable" basis (from the point of view of sustaining capitalist accumulation), the Chinese economy must be reoriented towards domestic demand, and consumption must grow as a share of China's GDP.

That's the economist speaking. But as Li knows very well, the question is not just whether more banknotes circulate among the population, but *how* they circulate, to what use and to what ends. The strong point of the book is to integrate the results of energy shortage, environmental decay, and climate change directly into the political-economic picture. Much less is said, however, about the cultural consequences of hypercapitalism.

We took a ride to Lijiang city, to send some companions off to the airport. Later we climbed the steps to the old Worker's Palace, abandoned, decrepit, with garbage rotting in the strangely majestic halls that used to house the cultural service. In the distance one could see the sprawl of contemporary Lijiang, a vast expansion over the last fifteen years. The Naxi city—a "world heritage site"—was reduced to next to nothing, drowned in a wave of concrete.

That night we went over for dinner with a Lashihai family and began talking about what had happened. The man of the house was acidly critical; let's just call him Lu Xun. When I asked what people thought today about the loss of the Naxi urban center, he replied: "Now they realize. At the time they just wanted the money. No one paid any attention. The corruption of the city government was tremendous." The conversation turned to Wu Mu, to the pictographs and the *dongba* rituals. Lu was visibly interested—but as he said wistfully, "We don't have that here."

Later on we watched a DVD on the reconstruction of Lijiang by the Global Heritage Fund (Sarah had chanced upon the disc in a secondhand shop in southern Illinois). "They come to make a big project, but they don't

care what happens to the people. The project is just for their careers,” remarked Lu. Another video went up on the screen: a British documentary on cormorant fishing in Lashihai lake, obviously a total romantic farce, a fake. “Sometimes you don’t know why these things happen, but they happen, and you lose your self-respect.” Doing things together, on the ground, in reality, was a way to preserve your dignity, he continued. That was what he hoped to pass on to his children.

There was something fresh, bracing, in the fact of talking about real problems across such vast cultural distances, through the intermediary of Jay’s translation. Could my questions have meaning for someone who had known the transition from utter poverty to hypercapitalism? Did Lu understand how I could feel implicated in these changes sweeping through, not just Lashihai, but the planetary space of the world economy?

The *baijiu* liquor flowed, the meal ended. After a while, everyone talks politics. “The world is like a big cooking-pot, with Obama and Hu Jintao holding the handle of the spoon,” said Lu, laughing and gesturing. “They stir and stir and everyone is caught inside.”

“I feel like I was born in that pot,” I replied. “Just these last years I’ve been jumping out.”

“It boils and boils,” Lu said. “No one can escape.”

Does anyone know which one of us is right?