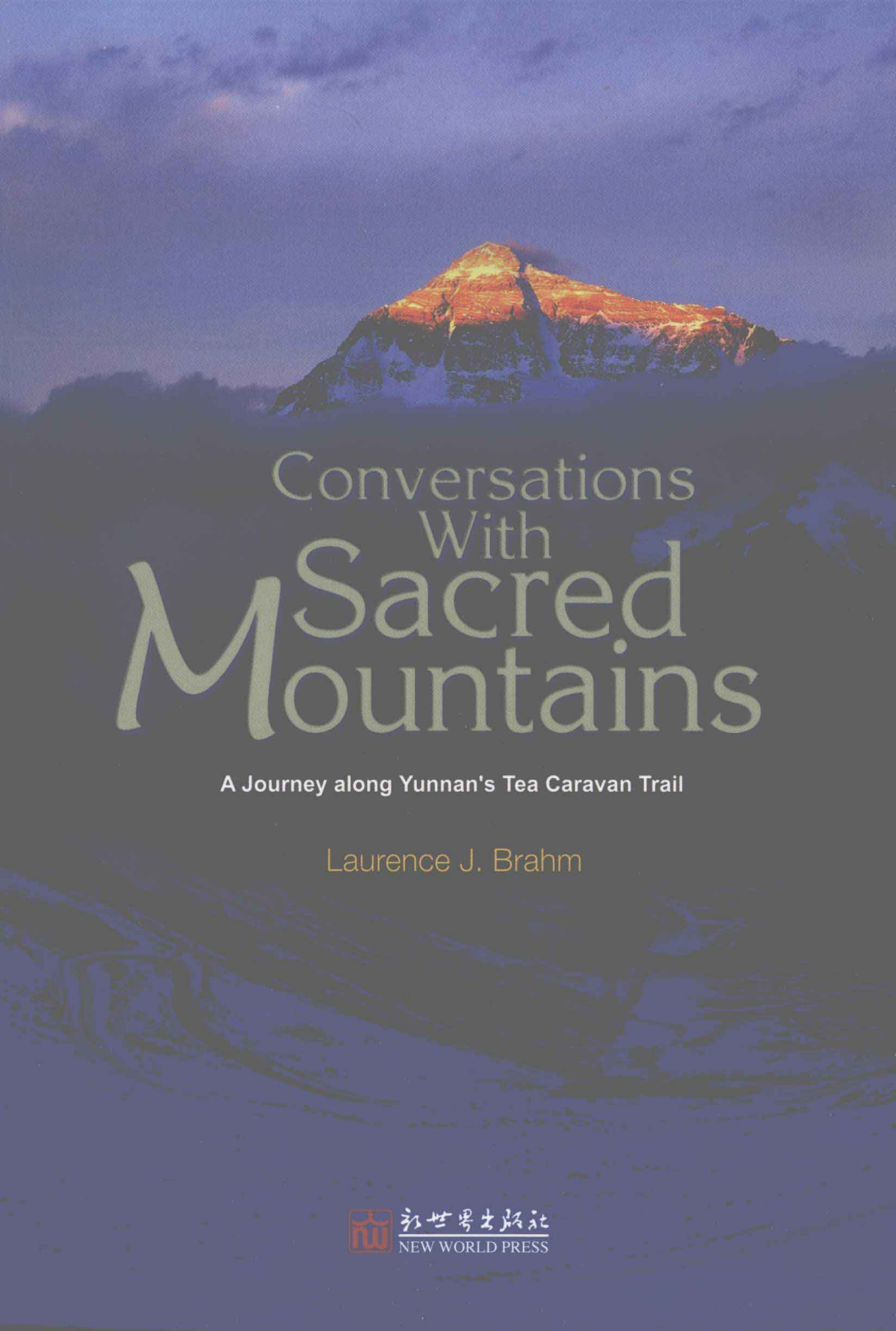

Conversations With Sacred Mountains

A Journey along Yunnan's Tea Caravan Trail

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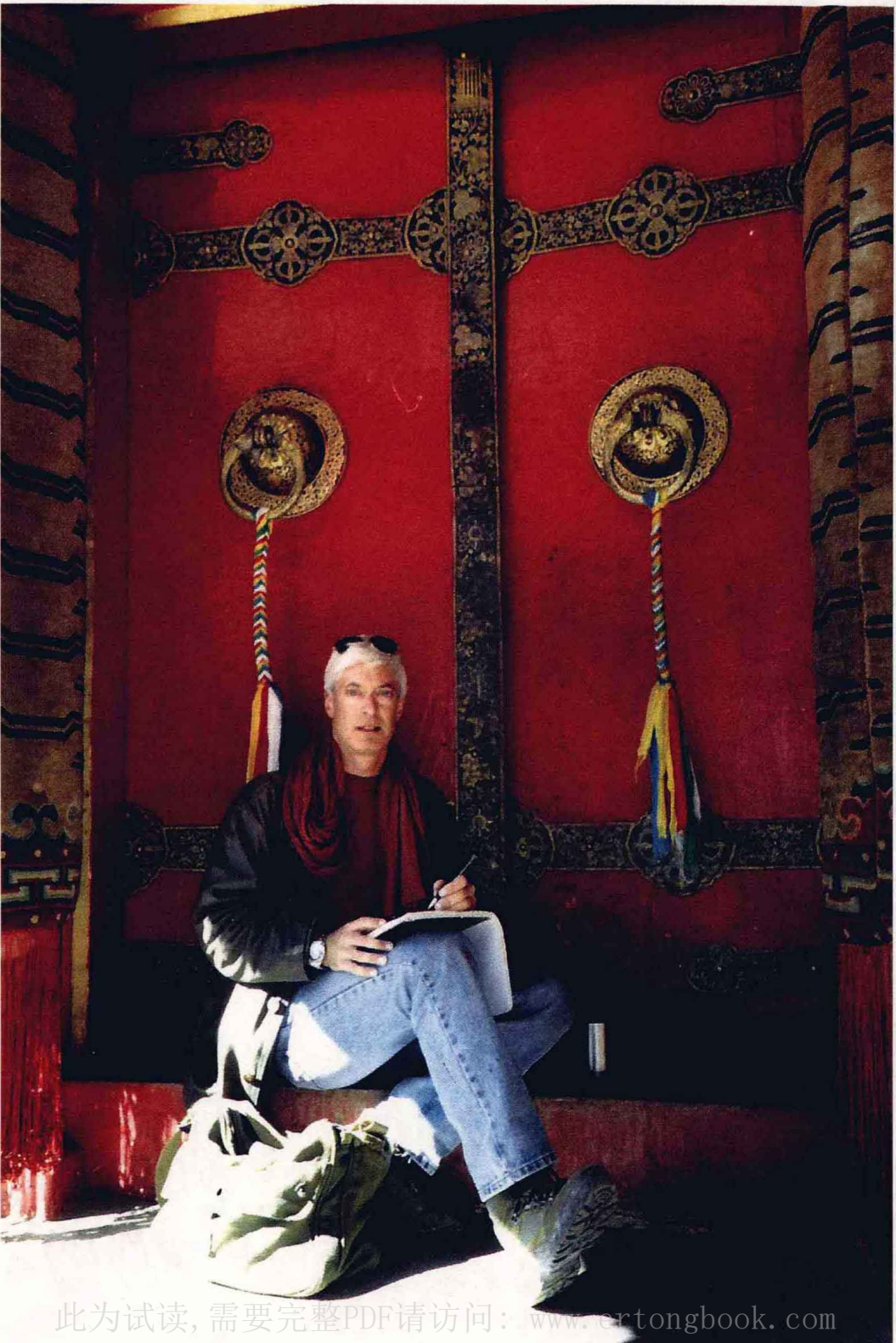
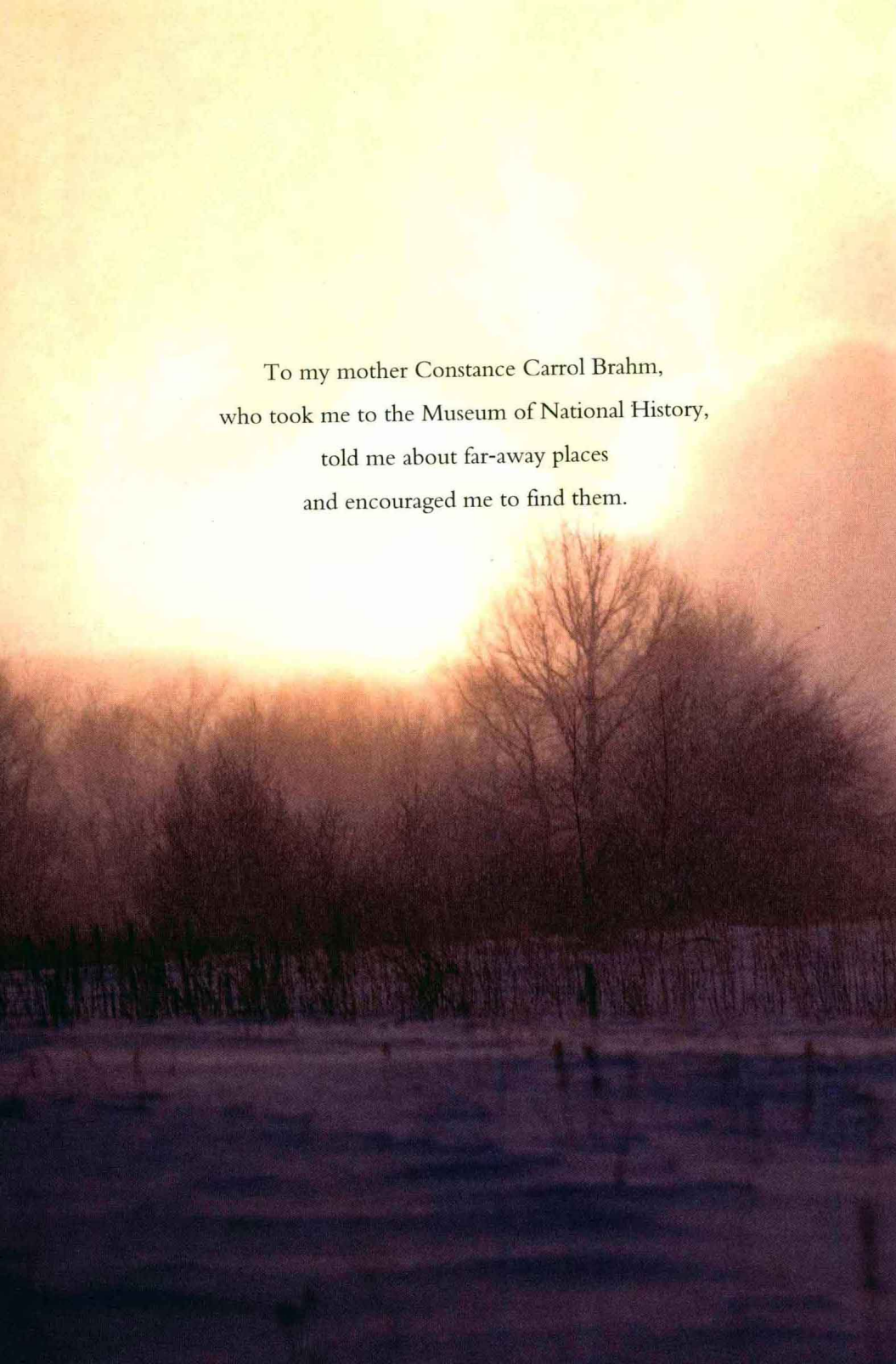




To my mother Constance Carrol Brahm,
who took me to the Museum of National History,
told me about far-away places
and encouraged me to find them.

Preface

After two decades of involvement with China, as lawyer and then investment advisor, I witnessed a nation — once entirely state-planned and ideologically propped — turn into a free-market paradise. Within a decade, the capital city became overwhelmed by Western brand infatuation. Materialism became the dominant social value, gradually replacing the important place of culture and traditional values in the society. Some called this the trade-off for development. Amidst traffic jams in Beijing, I began to wonder.

I wondered where this might lead to years later. Would China, a nation so vulnerable to extreme changes in social outlook, find itself on the cusp of another pendulum swing? Sensing China's social tectonic plates verging on another shift, I decided to find out.

While China's mainstream society is hypnotized by money worship, a tiny fraction thinks differently. At a quick glance, one might not think there is much in common between artists, environmentalists, rock and pop singers and fashion designers. But as one thinks of artists who have established their studios in

Yunnan and Tibet, and an ethnic dance studio in Kunming which aims to preserve traditional songs and dances, or of monks who have set up Internet schools for nomads, and backpackers from Guangzhou and Beijing heading to western China, then again, maybe there is.

Among these different groups, I found several common threads, which tied them together. First, they were all heading for western China — to places like Yunnan and Tibet — which represented an escape from materialism. Second, they were embracing their own ethnicity, seeking an independent non-Western identity. Third, environmental protection and cultural preservation were their overwhelming concerns. Fourth, Buddhist values were reviving and spreading rapidly.

Many people considered it outright crazy when I suddenly closed my legal and investment advisory practice in Beijing to become an independent media producer in 2002, embarking on the production of a multi-media project "Searching for Shangri-La". I was joined by one of China's most celebrated music composer, San Bao — an ethnic Mongolian — for whom the project became a re-discovery of his roots.

While trying to find Shangri-La, the legendary kingdom (said to be somewhere in western China) described in James Hilton's novel, *Lost Horizon*, the exploration was in fact to uncover and document — through writing and film — China's new counter-culture movement. This movement was concentrated in the cities of Kunming, Dali, Lijiang and Lhasa, which are fast becoming art

colonies that assume a hip 1960s atmosphere.

Between 2003 and 2005, I traveled, filmed and wrote throughout China's western regions. We started by filming a rock concert held in Lijiang, now trying to host an annual world ethnic film festival. Beijing artists are escaping to Dali — a burgeoning artist colony — where I met an artist-turned-Buddhist who had built a glass house alongside Erhai Lake to meditate over water.

Environmental activists have set up eco-tourism hotels while fighting big developers in Zhongdian — one of the world's 200 bio-diversity zones as yet uncontaminated. There, the party secretary, a Tibetan, has banned the public use of plastic bags.

Ethnic sounds are everywhere, fused into a Chinese new age pop movement spearheaded by Dadawa, as is ethnic clothing, China's newest fashion social statement. Small scale grassroots initiatives aimed at sustainable development can be found everywhere throughout this region.

I was greatly inspired by three particular individuals whose stories set me on the road in my search for Shangri-La.

The first, Tibetan artist Ang Sang, founded an art commune in Lhasa, and spends all his free time designing Tibetan clothing and art motifs for a factory of handicapped Tibetan workers. Established by a monk who applies Buddhism to social work, today, the factory, which only manufactures Tibetan crafts on the principle of maintaining tradition, not only supports the fifty handicapped working there, but also an additional hundred orphans — many of whom are also handicapped. The monk is not only a

factory director, but also a father to everyone in the social structure created around both factory and school that it supports.

The factory, which struggled for years, suddenly made a lot of money during the 2003 SARS outbreak when people in major cities that were stricken, like Beijing and Guangzhou, bought Tibetan incense, believing it would drive away bacteria and disease. Tibetan friends later pointed out that China's most materialistic cities were the ones worst hit by SARS, while the regions of Tibet, Qinghai and Yunnan did not record even a single case.

The second, a monk — Jigme Jensen — opened a cheese factory located in the remote mountains of Qinghai Province. By purchasing daily deliveries of yak milk, he provides rising income to nomads, thus encouraging maintenance of their traditional lifestyle. Yak milk cheese income is re-invested into building schools, so nomad kids can receive free education plus 24-hour Internet access.

I was particularly moved by the third, Yang Liping, a Bai ethnic minority and China's most celebrated dancer, who returned to Yunnan, forsaking comforts of Beijing's prestigious Central Ethnic Dance and Music Institute, to establish her own studio in Kunming. Traveling deep into Yunnan's interior, she finds yet untouched villages where dance and music are still an essential part of oral tradition. According to Yang, everything will be lost within a matter of years through development. This is what motivates her to recruit village youth to her Kunming studio, video-record their dance and music, and choreograph performing arts programs

to keep traditions alive. Yang now supports 80 minority kids at her studio through sporadic donations and personal savings from a lifetime of performances, while living in spartan conditions — representing this celebrity's painful and powerful commitment to preserving her people's ethnicity.

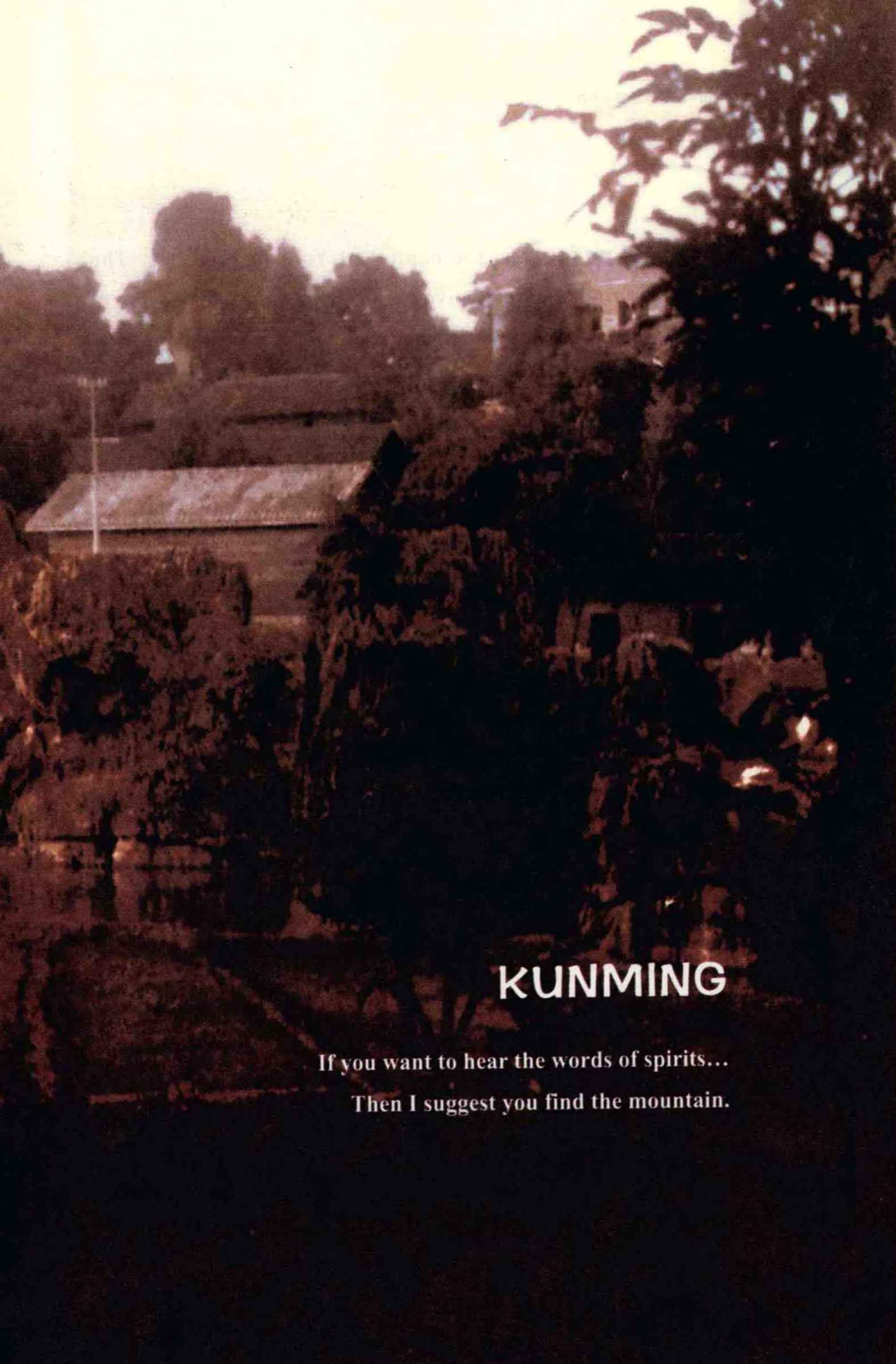
These initiatives are taking place without government financial support, in parallel yet against the backdrop of China's rapid economic development and increasing materialism. This activism is driven by a minority whose efforts are compelling and draw a following of intellectual youth with a newfound conscience. Despite the globalization onslaught, these activities are quickly converging into a trend with the potential to become an alternative value movement.

But this is not an antagonistic "anti-" movement as such. China's disparate "alternative global value" groups adopt positive approaches to activism pursuing small but meaningful grassroots initiatives, rather than attacking institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and World Economic Forum — often perceived as bulldozing ethnicity and cultural individuality.

As I went on my search for Shangri-La in 2003 by trekking the Tea Caravan Trail in Yunnan Province, I observed how everywhere, young backpackers from cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou were challenging conventional values of both Chinese GDP and Western consumerism. Many were transformed Buddhists traveling in search of its source in the Tibetan plateau. I came to learn how Tibetan Buddhism is spreading rapidly throughout China and

taking root in many major cities like Beijing and Shanghai. In Buddhist philosophy, a "revolution" does not necessarily mean a violent political-social transformation, but rather, the completion of a circular rotation; a turning of something onto itself. Maybe this is what is happening.

Contents



KUNMING

If you want to hear the words of spirits...

Then I suggest you find the mountain.

Kunming is the capital of Yunnan Province. The airplanes from Beijing arrive here. The airport reminds me of Bangkok, which all goes to show that this is probably the only province in China that has gotten its act together on tourism. This is because the people of Yunnan look south to Thailand and Southeast Asia for their inspiration. Less influenced by Beijing, they try a different approach here.

Of course, there is nothing new about this. In ancient times, Chinese emperors banished rebels to Yunnan. In those days, Yunnan was considered the furthest border of the Chinese empire, inhabited by hill tribes locked in by mountains and valleys and who clung on to their cultures. As for those rebels banished there by the emperors, they learned to survive in the hills from the tribes.

When I first visited Kunming over 20 years ago, it was a charming city of old wooden and gray brick buildings tottering along canals in leafy tree-lined streets. Now all the old buildings are gone and the trees have been uprooted. It is a so-called modern city consisting of lots of cement and glass. The city charm was obliterated for the international flower exhibition years ago and the local government thought it would be very international to destroy everything relating to the natural environment of their city by covering all the flowers with cement. So when you arrive in Kunming, it looks like any other Chinese city. But it is the starting

point of any journey in Yunnan. One must begin the journey by leaving the city.

Kunming has become a kind of rock-and-roll town. Factories along the old canals have been converted into studio lofts, where a number of creative artists work between the seasons. Like travelers, these artists really use the city as a stepping-off point to other places along the Tea Caravan Trail.

The Tea Caravan Trail literally runs north to south from Simao and Pu'er, Yunnan's rich tea-producing soil valleys. One route cuts south through the Red River Valley, extending to Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar. The second and main route runs to Dali, Lijiang, the Lugu Lake, Zhongdian, and overland past sacred Kawagebo Mountain to the holy city of Lhasa. From there it veers off to Shigatze, then to Nepal and India.

Each of the main stops along the Tea Caravan Trail has its own ethnic minority and each has its own sacred mountains. This story is about following the trail and talking to the mountains.