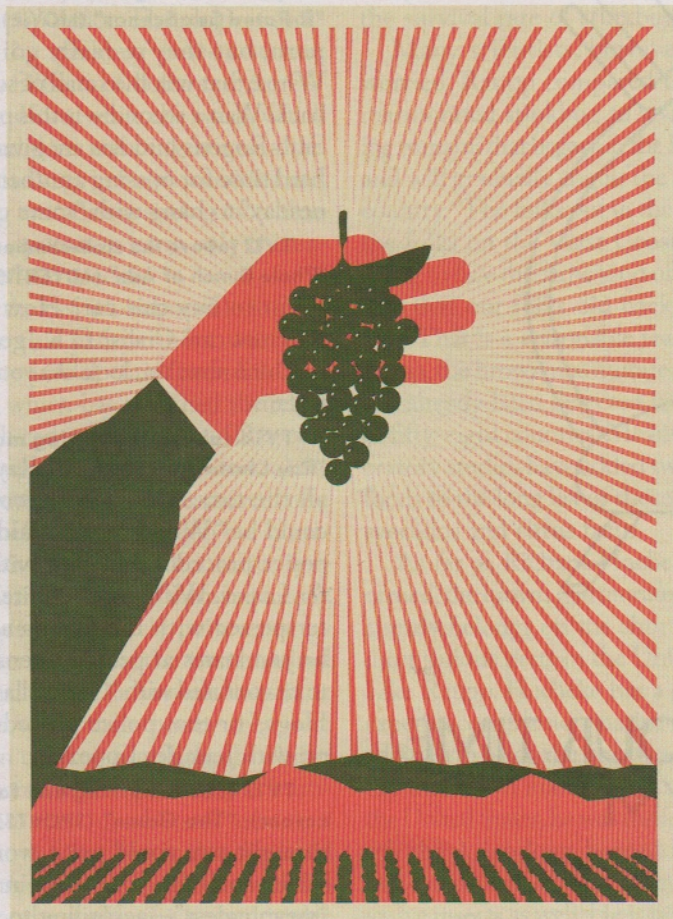


LETTER FROM NINGXIA

# THE SPREADING VINE

*A Chinese region's winery boom is about more than just wine.*

BY JIAYANG FAN



The city of Yinchuan, in northwestern China, is the capital of Ningxia, a tiny lozenge of land that accounts for just half a per cent of China's population and a similarly tiny proportion of its landmass. Yinchuan's name means "silver river," and, according to local legend, the city owes its existence to a phoenix, known as the Bird of Happiness. A flock of these birds lived in southeastern China, bringing fertility to the land. One day, they heard about a wasteland, near the deserts of the Mongolian Plateau, whose people struggled to work the arid soil. Full of pity, one phoenix flew north to help, and soon flowers bloomed, crops thrived, and a city came

into being. But the good times did not last. The city was besieged by an enemy tribe and then fell under the sway of a corrupt official who eventually killed the phoenix. As it died, it made a final sacrifice, turning its blood into a canal that would irrigate the land forever.

"Now Yinchuan turns water into wine," Su Long told me on a sunny September morning, when he picked me up from my hotel in a hunter-green jeep. Su, a Yinchuan native in his late thirties, was taking me to the Chandon China winery, where he is the estate director. As we turned onto a broad boulevard, he gestured at the buildings on either side. "About fifteen years ago, this was all farm-

land," he said. In the near distance, a high-rise came into view. "That's the government offices," he remarked. "Usually, the best-looking building in any Chinese city is the government building."

Two thousand years ago, Yinchuan lay on the Silk Road, along which goods and ideas travelled between China and Europe: silk went west, and wool, gold, and silver came east. In more recent history, Ningxia was a poverty-stricken coal region whose dusty scrubland was in danger of desertification. But, in the nineteen-nineties, the government began to invest seriously in its infrastructure, irrigating immense tracts of desert between the Yellow River and the Helan Mountains, much as the phoenix had done. A few years ago, local officials received a directive to build a "wine route" through the region, similar to Bordeaux's Route des Vins. European winegrowers, hired by the government as consultants, had identified Ningxia's continental climate, high altitude, dry air, and sandy, rocky soil as ideal for vineyards.

Wine is still a minority taste in China. Su told me that, when he decided to study viticulture, in the early aughts, it was scarcely recognized as a subject. He'd never even tried wine until he took classes with Li Hua, a professor who is generally considered the pioneer of modern Chinese wine production. "I didn't like it at all," Su recalled, screwing up his nose. For a moment, he'd suspected that the aura of sophistication that had first drawn him to wine was some sort of Western hoax. What's more, during Su's first tasting, his face turned scarlet, a reaction known as Asian flush, which affects about a third of all East Asians—myself included—and is caused by a deficiency of the enzyme that metabolizes alcohol. His professor wondered if he would survive in his chosen career.

We left the city and drove along the Helan Mountain Grape Culture Corridor, a wide, sinuous road that was recently laid to boost development and tourism. Billboards advertising various wineries—housed in faux-French châteaux, sleek modernist structures, giant pagodas—appeared, like fast-food signs along a highway. The road was lined with poplars, Scotch pines, and desert willows, and, beyond them, I could see the

*The Chinese government hopes that vineyards can help transform rural life.*



gray-blue ridge of the Helan Mountains. Su described the range as the primordial father of Yinchuan, which it shielded from Inner Mongolia's vast Tengger Desert, whose sandstorms would otherwise make agriculture impossible.

We soon pulled up to a courtyard dotted with honeysuckle. Chandon China's main building, a minimalist box constructed in 2013, had been painted yellow, to match the distinctive yellow silt of the Tengger. A young man named Liu drove me out to the vineyard to see the grapes being harvested. The temperature was in the high seventies, but the workers in the field—all women—wore long-sleeved shirts and had scarves wrapped around their heads, for protection against the sun. They squatted next to buckets, wielding shears with one hand and catching bunches of grapes in the other.

I crouched down, picked a grape, and popped it into my mouth. It was astonishingly sweet, less like fruit than like jam or sticky nectar. I smiled at a woman nearby, and the weathered skin around her eyes formed itself into deep grooves as she smiled back. Her dialect was hard to understand—what Chinese call *tu hua*, the language of the soil. She told me her name, Juhua, which means “chrysanthemum.” “Like the flower,” she said. “Except I was never pretty.”

Chrysanthemum was fifty-three, born in an impoverished mountainous region in the south of Ningxia, and for much of her life she had worked on her family's farm. About six years ago, she moved to the village where she now lives, as part of an extensive government resettlement program designed both to alleviate rural poverty and to stimulate growth in more economically productive population centers. When I asked her how life was here, she used an old peasant phrase I heard often in Ningxia, *kao tian chi fan*—to rely on the sky for food. She had left home at four that morning and waited in the village square for a ride to the vineyard. Liu told me that middle-aged, uneducated women like her were the least employable people in Yinchuan: “They don't have looks, they can't speak Mandarin, they have no skills.” It was why they accepted ten dollars a day for backbreaking work.

Liu introduced me to a neckless man with a meaty face, known as Boss Zhang,

who was contracted by the vineyard to recruit the workers and ferry them from their villages to the fields. For these services, he collected fifteen per cent of their daily wages, in addition to his own wage. The city government had recently named him a “model Yinchuan citizen,” and his picture had been in newspapers and on posters. He received the honor, Liu explained, “because he responsibly looks to the future.”

Zhang turned to me and began to hold forth on his vision of what he termed “the new countryside”: “When they used to live in the mountains and farmed for themselves, they determined their own schedule. As long as there was enough food to eat, there wasn't much incentive to work. But now it's a whole new world.” I asked whether relocation made people's lives harder, and he let out a brusque laugh. “Life is easier for the hardworking and enterprising,” he said. “Chinese society will no longer support the weak and lazy.”

I chatted more with the workers, most of whom were already grandmothers. Chrysanthemum told me that she had never tried wine and imagined that it would taste like Sprite, the one soft drink she liked. I asked her if she would ever be interested in trying the wine made from the grapes she'd harvested. She laughed and said, “Isn't the wine here very expensive?”

Liu answered that it cost a hundred and eighty-eight yuan a bottle—around thirty dollars.

Another woman nearby looked up. “That's three days' wages,” she marvelled, looking down at the grapes in her hand. Then she went back to work.

In the second century B.C., the Han dynasty explorer Zhang Qian returned from modern-day Uzbekistan and brought with him tales of vines bearing giant clusters of grapes that made ethereal wine. Seeds from these vines were planted near the Imperial Palace, for the Emperor and his court, but wine remained an exotic novelty in China. Grain liquors, known as *baijiu*, have always been the national drink. In 1996, however, the conservative premier Li Peng toasted the National People's Congress with red wine, praising its health benefits and its contribution to “social ethics.” He condemned the excessive consumption of

*baijiu*, which was endemic in official and business circles, declaring it to be both unhealthy and a waste of resources. At a time when nearly ten per cent of the population was malnourished, twenty-five billion kilograms of grain were being used annually to make liquor. Li's speech had the effect of a political edict, and wine imports soared.

Suzanne Mustacich, the author of “Thirsty Dragon,” a book about wine in China, told me that the elite initially paid outlandishly for mediocre vintages, and often bought wine more for its value as a status symbol than for personal enjoyment. “Enthusiasm for the concept of wine outpaced concrete knowledge,” she said. Few people understood that Bordeaux was not a brand but the name of a region. Counterfeiters started obtaining empty bottles of expensive wine and filling them with plonk, and even created ersatz wine by mixing sugar water with artificial color and flavor. “Chinese people didn't really know what wine is supposed to taste like, so it was spectacularly easy to get away with,” she said.

Growing demand for wine in China—imports increased twenty-six thousand per cent in the first eleven years of this century—has prompted a surge in domestic production. China is now the seventh-largest producer of wine globally, and has more acreage devoted to vineyards than any other country besides Spain. There are a dozen or so Chinese wine-growing regions, of which Ningxia is the most significant. Ningxia now has around a hundred wineries, spread across a hundred miles, which, in 2016, produced a hundred and twenty million bottles' worth of wine. Most of this comes from large, state-backed enterprises, but the region's reputation is anchored by privately owned boutique operations, which have been accumulating international prizes.

So far, the wines produced are mostly Cabernet Sauvignons, Cabernet blends, and Chardonnays. The noted wine critic Jancis Robinson told me that she'd found the best ones to be “fully ripe, satisfying, well-balanced wines that seem to have some potential to age,” closer in style to French than Californian wine, something that may reflect the involvement of several French companies in Ningxia. She added, “I've never come



across such a determinedly wine-focused local government,” and recalled how, when she visited in 2012, all the most senior officials involved in the wine region’s development insisted on meeting her.

The official most responsible for Ningxia’s predominance is Hao Linhai, who, before his retirement, in 2016, oversaw all wine production there for fifteen years, and was president of a government-backed organization called the International Federation of Vine and Wine of Helan Mountain’s East Foothill. Before taking the wine job, Hao, who moved to Yinchuan with his family as a child, had served as the city’s mayor and then as the deputy governor of Ningxia. I met him one evening in his office, a two-room suite in a high-rise, outfitted with boxing equipment, a telescope, and an imperial-style wooden throne. He drew me to the window and pointed out his house, which was on an island in the middle of a lake and had a boat docked alongside it.

Chinese government officials tend to be circumspect, but Hao, a trim man in his sixties, spoke with the freedom of someone accustomed to authority. “Here’s something you have to understand about the Chinese reality: everything is about being bigger and faster,” he said. “Quality and longevity of an industry are not priorities.” During his tenure, he tried to learn from the mistakes of Chinese wine regions that had expanded hastily, insisting on rigorous quality control and work-

ing to foster small wineries. It was a difficult tactic to maintain, given that officials are typically assessed according to their ability to fulfill quotas set in Beijing, but his seniority gave him latitude to do things his way. “I’ve been in the Ningxia government since the eighties,” he said. “I’ve had my hand at the wheel.”

Nonetheless, especially at the bulk end of the market, quality does sometimes suffer. Robinson told me that Ningxia’s industry is currently much better at turning grapes into wine than it is at growing the best possible grapes. As a result, she said, “the less good Ningxia reds tend to have a rather tart streak of underripe fruit to them—perhaps because yields are too high.” (A crucial task in viticulture is the rigorous pruning of vines, which reduces potential yields in order to get grapes with a concentrated flavor.) Part of the problem, a former wine-industry official named Rong Jian told me, is that large, government-run operations are often balancing quality against societal considerations. Now that crop prices, which used to be fixed by the government, are subject to market forces, some government wineries accommodate farmers by accepting all the grapes they harvest. “What do these farmers know or care about winemaking?” he said. “There’s clearly an incentive to haul in as much as possible, so how discriminating do you think they’re going to be?”

In 2005, Rong retired from his government job and co-founded a small

vineyard called Helan Qingxue, which produces just sixty thousand bottles a year and has emerged as one of the three or four best wineries in the region. “We manage the assembly line from start to finish, grape seeds to bottling,” he said proudly. He introduced me to one of his co-founders, Zhang Jing, who is in charge of wine production. Zhang, who has a round, bespectacled face and an effervescent manner, is one of a cadre of well-travelled, sophisticated women in their early forties who have become the most celebrated winemakers in the region. As she showed me around the winery’s fermentation and bottling equipment, she spoke of the time she’d spent learning her craft in the Rhône Valley. “When I saw the vineyards for the first time in Avignon, I forgot to breathe,” she said. The small scale of many of the châteaux contrasted with what she’d seen of Chinese wine production, and she knew that she wanted to emulate their ethos when she returned home. Like many Chinese vigneron who study in Europe, she was struck by the wealth of institutional knowledge that informed the winemaking traditions there. “The more I learned, the more ignorant I felt,” she said.

Zhang led me to a banquet room where four bottles had been set out: a Chardonnay, a rosé, a Cabernet Sauvignon, and a blend of Cabernet, Merlot, and Cabernet Gernischt (a name used in China for the varietal Carménère). Zhang mentioned that rosés were relatively new to the Chinese market; she suspected that they’d catch on, thanks to their juicelike color and clean, slightly sweet taste. It was a Cabernet blend, though, named Jia Bei Lan Grand Reserve, that had made the winery’s reputation, after its 2009 vintage won the top award in its category at the *Decanter* World Wine Awards, the biggest international competition. A 2014 Cabernet blend I tasted bore out what Robinson had said: medium-bodied and somewhat floral, it seemed like a Bordeaux. New wineries and new regions often announce themselves with wines full of fruity swagger, but Zhang had clearly avoided the temptation. The wine’s restraint was all the more impressive given that Chinese consumers are not generally thought to appreciate such subtlety. But Zhang told me she was confident



*“I was hoping to be rescued by a Marvel superhero.”*



that her strategy—making wine that was “dignified and complex but approachable”—would help change that. “Many Chinese people haven’t been exposed to it yet, but good wine is good wine,” she said. “The standard is universal.”

In Yinchuan, I found a burly man in his fifties named Liu who agreed to drive me around the countryside for a few days. When I asked him what wineries he knew, the first one he suggested was Chateau Changyu Moser XV. As we approached, I caught sight of a building that resembled the Cinderella castle at Disney’s Magic Kingdom. The chateau has stone towers with conical roofs, in imitation of the châteaux of the Loire Valley, and cherub-adorned fountains recalling the ones at the Boboli Gardens, in Florence. During my visit, men and women in rented tuxes and wedding gowns posed for photos in front of a colossal sculpture of a bunch of grapes. The theme-park appearance was not incidental: the government’s investment in the region aims not only to boost wine production but to turn Ningxia’s wineries into a major tourist destination.

Changyu Moser, which opened in 2013 and cost seventy million dollars to build, is the joint project of a long-established government-backed winery, Changyu, and Austria’s leading wine-maker, Lenz Moser. A tour costs a hundred yuan, and for forty more you can harvest a pound of table grapes. Inside, pseudo-medieval halls contain exhibits that often have nothing to do with wine. The guide who showed me around told me that she’d had to stop taking visitors into a room containing 3-D murals of Pixar characters, such as Nemo the fish, because she could never get them to leave. At the end of the tour, there was a shop with souvenirs, including bottles of wine that could be branded with a label of one’s choice. One of the most popular labels featured a BMW emblem, under which were printed the words “Sheer Driving Pleasure.”

Ningxia’s emergence as a wine region is a source of national pride. While I was there, CCTV, the state broadcaster, was making a documentary celebrating its progress. It was to be shown during commercial breaks in the coverage of the Nineteenth Party Congress, in October, which established President Xi Jinping

as the most powerful leader since Mao Zedong. I caught up with the film crew at Silver Heights, probably the region’s most famous winery, which is run by Emma Gao, another of Ningxia’s female wine stars. The film’s producer, a woman in her thirties, was prepping Gao for an interview by showing her a previously filmed segment, in which another vigneron intoned propagandistic lines to the camera. “Increased capacity here means we can compete with superpowers like America,” he said. His delivery was so wooden that Gao asked who had coached him on his lines.

Insofar as most Chinese people think of Ningxia at all, it is as a place of deprivation and backwardness. The producer said, “Before I was sent here for my job, in 2013, I thought it was the kind of place where you rode camels to work.” She regarded overturning such preconceptions as a patriotic duty, and was proud of the fact that notable European winemakers were investing in the region. “For Silver Heights, we want to convey its internationalization,” she instructed Gao, who spent several years in France, becoming a certified enologist and working at a Bordeaux estate, and is married to a Frenchman.

“Well, here’s a reporter from New York,” Gao said, pointing to me.

The producer smiled politely in my direction, but then frowned. “Right,” she said. “But we want someone who communicates that instantly on camera, you see.” She didn’t need to elaborate, but she did: “An *authentic* foreigner.”

Although Ningxia, administratively speaking, operates like a province, it is one of China’s autonomous regions, and a third of its population is Hui, one of China’s officially recognized ethnic minorities. A Muslim people partly descended from Central Asian, Persian, and Arab traders who travelled along the Silk Road, the Hui have, for generations, lived mostly as subsistence farmers in Ningxia’s inhospitable mountain regions. Their land is increasingly threatened by climate change, and they make up the majority of the nearly 1.2 million people in rural Ningxia who have been resettled by the government.

The owner of a winery called Lilan took me to see a new Hui village where most of his workers live. Built in 2012,

Yuanlong Relocation Village looked like an Asian Levittown: clean, straight streets of low-slung houses with pagoda roofs and minaret-shaped gateposts topped with crescent moons. There was a school, a marketplace, several mosques, and a park for the village’s twenty-eight hundred families to play and exercise in. I visited the village’s Party chief, Hai Guobao, who lived with his wife and the family of one of his sons in a traditional courtyard house. Dressed in the white tunic and skullcap typically worn by Hui men, he was tending vegetables in his garden when we arrived.

“Didn’t I see a Mercedes-Benz in your driveway?” the winery owner asked teasingly. The shiny car we’d seen outside was actually Chinese-made, but Hai admitted that life had improved since his family moved here, from a farm at the foot of the Liupan Mountains, some three hundred miles to the south. “There, what we harvested, we ate,” he said. He took us inside and pointed to an enormous photograph, in a gilded frame, that filled a wall of the living room. “The Chairman visited us last year,” he said, with reverence. In the picture, President Xi, who toured Ningxia in 2016, sat on a couch, surrounded by Hai and his family.

Xi’s visit was one in a series he has made to promote the development of China’s remotest and poorest regions. He has declared that a war on poverty will be a priority of his second term, and has pledged to move a hundred million rural residents into cities by 2020. Party officials believe that urbanization will raise the country’s standard of living, thus boosting domestic consumption and rebalancing China’s export-reliant economy. The government gives resettled Hui peasants plots of land, smaller than the farms they come from but closer to urban centers. The land on which Lilan’s grapes are grown is almost entirely rented from the Hui farmers of Yuanlong Village, who own it collectively.

Hai’s son and daughter-in-law entered with bowls of Hui cuisine: rough pancakes soaked in steaming mutton soup and side dishes of nuts and seeds and fried dough. The family served the winery owner and me as honored guests, and then looked on intently as we ate. I asked Hai if he was happy in the village or if he missed his old farm. He thought for



a second and said, "We have convenience, modern appliances, a better quality of life generally. That is happiness." One of Hai's grandchildren, a shy girl wearing a sparkly T-shirt with the word "Lovely" on it, came over and snuggled against her grandfather's knee. I asked if I could take a picture, and Hai's eyes widened: he had a better idea. "We'll re-create it!" he said, and it took me a moment to realize that he meant the photograph with President Xi. Hai's sons and grandchildren dutifully arranged themselves around him on the couch, and he motioned to me to sit in the spot where Xi had sat.

Hui people I met elsewhere were less sanguine about the resettlement scheme. One day, Liu, my driver, took me to a famous Hui market on the outskirts of Yinchuan. Row after row of stalls with bright awnings were piled high with coils of fried dough, freshly killed ducks, and huge sunflower blossoms. Banners bearing Quranic verses hung above an outdoor halal food court. Fruit and vegetable peddlers hawked their produce from three-wheeled electric carts.

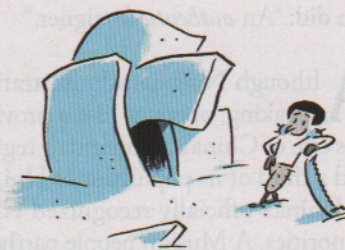
Liu belongs to China's ethnic majority, the Han, and offered his views on the Hui as he led me through the streets. They live in enclaves, socializing only among themselves, he said, and had arrived in the city in waves, starting in the nineteen-eighties. Back then, he thought of them as "uncivilized and filthy, like stray dogs." On the other hand, he'd come to love Hui restaurants, finding the Hui to be great cooks and fastidious around food—"cleaner than us Han."

His opinions seemed to be rooted less in animosity than in anxiety about his own life. "The Hui get more government assistance than us natives," he complained. The government built apartments for resettled Hui, whereas he'd had to buy an apartment, after market reforms led to the termination of public-housing programs. In the late nineties, he'd started working on a state-owned farm just as the government began dismantling state-owned enterprises in order to foster competition. The feel of the city had changed, he said. It looked like a construction site, and was full of migrant workers from places like Shanxi and Inner Mongolia. Liu had been brought up an atheist

Communist, but he was familiar with Muslim rituals and customs. He told me that it was Eid al-Adha, the holiest days of the Islamic year, which are marked by animal sacrifices. "The rich Hui sacrifice cows, and the others make do with sheep, chickens, and ducks," he explained, as we passed by a cow carcass dangling from a hook.

We entered the walled courtyard of a local mosque, simple and slightly derelict. A hunched man in a skullcap introduced himself as the imam. He was in his sixties and, like the Hui I met in the model village, came from the Liupan Mountains. Of everyone I met in Yinchuan, the imam spoke with the rawest emotion, not bothering to hide his anger with the government; it had taken him from his land and set him down in a place where there were no jobs he was qualified for. Although resettled families were given land, a place to live, and a cash subsidy, he said that everyone felt cheated. Farmers received only five to ten per cent of their old land's value, and the subsidy for a family amounted to a hundred dollars a year—"hardly enough to live on." The new government housing was shoddily constructed and cramped, and city living was making the younger generation less devout.

A young man had entered the courtyard on his bike, carrying the coarse, fleecy hide of a lamb that had just been ritually slaughtered. Remains of sacrificed animals are traditionally donated to char-



ity. The imam took the hide and shook his head: you couldn't get much for a lambskin these days.

It was getting late. "We'll see you again, hopefully," Liu said, as a farewell. "Probably not in these parts," the imam replied. A directive had come down for the Hui who had been resettled here to move yet again, in order to make way for a new phase of the city's expansion. "For thirty years now, they have herded us from place to place," the imam said,

shaking the bloodied hide in his hands. "Tell me, please, how am I different from this sheep?"

Some days, Liu brought along a friend and fellow-cabbie, whom he introduced simply as Fatty and who took over most of the driving. Both of them said that they enjoyed drinking and had no problems with Asian flush, but, like most of the ordinary Yinchuan people I spoke to, they had rarely drunk wine. Liu preferred the fiery taste of *baijiu* and liked that you could get drunk on it for twenty yuan. "Can you imagine how many bottles of fancy wine it would take to do the same job?" he asked. Fatty said that he had drunk wine just once, with a rich couple who were in the habit of consuming six hundred yuan's worth a night.

"Yinchuan folks drink everything, especially Fatty," Liu said.

"Not you, if you had married that Hui girl!" his friend replied with a devious smile.

Liu blushed. "It was a long time ago, and I would have needed to convert," he said. "Imagine me giving up pork!"

Liu and Fatty told me that ferrying visitors to wineries was their most lucrative work, but they'd never been inside one, as it would have meant paying admission. They stayed in the car while I made my visits, and talking to them after my conversations with the winemakers brought into focus the oddly bifurcated nature of China's modernization. The world inside—affluent, privileged, and cosmopolitan—was foreign to the two men. For them, Ningxia's emergence as the Bordeaux of the East was a cause for excitement but also puzzlement. It must be a good thing, because it brought in money, but why people were willing to go to such effort and expense to produce something that didn't even taste very good was a mystery.

One of the strange things about the speed of China's transformation is how it heightens your awareness not only of dramatic changes but also of what doesn't change. The government's schemes, centrally planned and then implemented in province after province, can make fortunes, ruin lives, or leave social hierarchies much the same as they were before. I thought about the phrase the woman in the vineyard had used, about relying on the sky for food. The sky could



ripen your vines or ruin your crops and there was nothing you could do about it. Here the government was no different: a distant power inscrutable to those on the ground.

At a state-run winery named Xixia King, I snuck Liu and Fatty in for a tour. A guide boasted about the winery's achievements while showing us scale models of the topography of the Helan Mountains, dioramas of viticultural scenes from imperial times to the present, and a cigar hall. Liu and Fatty took pictures of everything with their phones. On a map of the region, with colored lights indicating the various wineries, they tried to pinpoint the locations of their homes, but couldn't find them. They were amazed by the prices of the bottles. One cost more than a thousand yuan, and they teased each other about how many days they'd have to drive in order to afford it.

The opulence of the winery made the men recall tougher times, once we were back on the road. Fatty, like Liu, had had his life upended by market reforms. He'd worked at a government-owned chemical factory, met his wife there, and assumed that he'd be there until retirement. But the factory closed six months after they got married.

"It was unimaginable at the time," Fatty said. "People jumped off buildings, drank poison, went to the sanitarium."

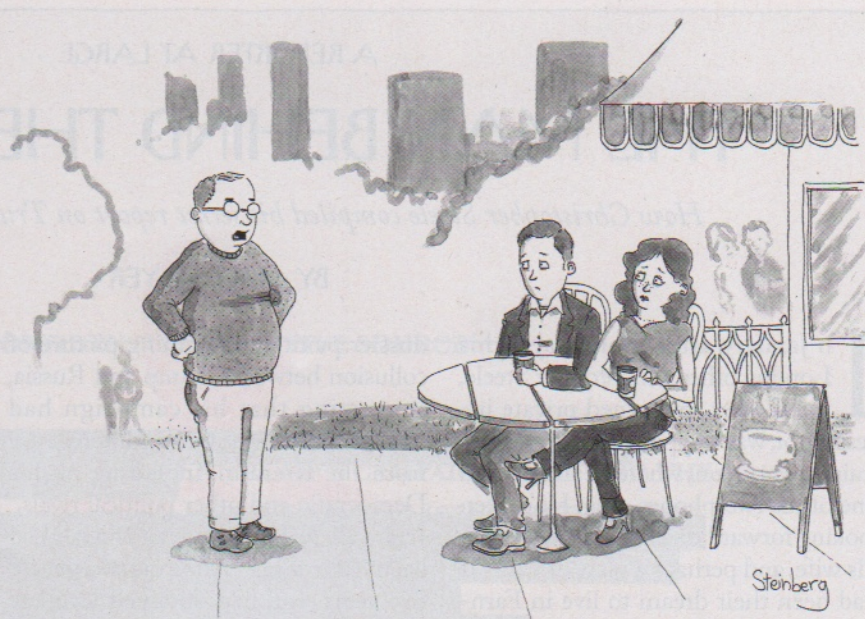
"Things were hard then, brother," Liu said.

"Do you remember those years when all the trees were bare? People who didn't have money to buy groceries would climb trees to pick leaves that they would take home to boil."

"Only after dark, though."

Fatty nodded. "The college grads. They couldn't bear the shame of it in the daylight."

We turned onto a narrow, gravelly road lined with cypresses. Liu told me that he needed to pick up something from a friend he'd known since his days as a farmworker, who was now a security guard at a new vineyard. The place looked run down, with withered vines and empty trellises. Liu's friend, a wiry man in his fifties, emerged from a shack, followed by several guard dogs. The estate belonged to a young couple, he told me, rich kids from a coastal city who were away for the season. They'd invested



*"Not so much fun being people-watched back, eh?"*

several million yuan to build a guest-house, but during construction the roof had collapsed. He said that, for every winery owner who succeeded, half a dozen invested lavishly but failed.

The guard was carrying two large plastic bottles sealed with Scotch Tape. Inside, dark-red liquid sloshed and frothed. Nobody would miss a few jugs, he said. He instructed Liu to take the tape off the top a little while before drinking the wine, having observed the way people at the winery uncorked bottles and then let them sit. The men started avidly discussing an open secret around the wineries: the burgeoning black market for wine. A few workers stay late, fill vegetable-oil containers with the dregs from winery tanks, and then sell them on the street for fifty yuan each. "Well, we are the proletariat, after all," the guard said. "What's wrong with skimming a little from the capitalist class?"

Being in possession of contraband wine put the men in a giddy mood, and, not long after we left, Fatty pulled over and Liu fetched one of the jugs of wine from the trunk. Having driven me to at least half a dozen wineries, they took me for an expert and were eager to get my opinion. As Liu produced some grimy plastic cups from the recesses of the car, I remembered a tasting at Silver Heights, where wines were daintily paired with

Camembert imported from Normandy, via Shanghai. The bootleg wine was warm, and, when I raised my cup, I could see thick sediment dancing inside. The security guard had mentioned that the wine hadn't yet been filtered, but Liu and Fatty didn't seem bothered. We took a sip, and Fatty's mouth puckered. The wine was harsh, sweet but astringent, and the taste seemed to register in the esophagus as much as in the mouth. As the men drained their cups, Liu reflected that at least it hadn't cost them anything.

We got back in the car. An expanse of yellow rape flowers appeared in the near distance, and the Helan range had a shadowy look, despite the mid-afternoon sun. The road rose slightly, and I saw that fifty feet away its surface simply gave out, with a drop of several feet to a rough track below. I shouted at Fatty to stop, and he shot me a perplexed look as he turned the car around. "It's a small thing," he said. With the current pace of construction and development, you couldn't expect all the roads to be finished. We made our way back to the main road, and I spied a fairyland castle the color of a robin's egg behind a copse of trees. As we passed the entrance, a pair of signs on the gateposts suggested that it could be called either "Ningxia Chteau Farsight Co., Ltd" or "Ningxia Chteau saint louis-ding." ♦