
Introduction

Toward a Phenomenology of Recovery

BACK ON THE MOUNTAIN

On a crisp spring morning in 2004, just before dawn, Xun Wei left his apartment. Most of his neighbors in Gejiu, a city of 310,000 residents crowded into a narrow valley floor in a mountainous area in southern Yunnan, had not yet awakened.¹ Xun entered Huawei Park, a wooded area to the east of the city center. Old Yin Mountain loomed above him. Its peak was accessible by mounting a winding staircase of more than twenty-five hundred carved steps.

He set forth for the mountain that morning, like many other times in his life, in pursuit of a work opportunity. Xun had once been a wealthy tin mining boss, enjoying a lavish lifestyle while overseeing more than two dozen employees at a nearby mountainside site. That was many years earlier, before his heroin habit contributed to his losing his mining tunnel to competitors. In recent months he had enrolled in a newly opened government clinic that provided him with daily doses of methadone to stave off his heroin cravings. Determined to heal his body and stay busy, Xun filled his days with walks around the lake and badminton games with his fiancée. When he saw signs posted by local government officials offering cash rewards for harvesting rodents in the nearby hills, Xun eagerly pursued the opportunity to reenter the legal workforce.

As he trudged up the steep slope, Xun passed a group of residents hiking to the top of the mountain. Approximately four hundred people, many of them unemployed or furloughed state workers, made the trip every day, with



FIGURE 1. Abandoned tracks on Old Yin Mountain. Photo by author.

a thousand or more regularly summiting on the weekends. Veering off this busier paved path, Xun passed over a defunct railway line that had once transported tin from tunnels on Old Yin to the city center (see figure 1). The minerals in these mountains had attracted human settlers for more than three thousand years. Remnants of infrastructure from various eras of mineral extraction were still visible on the mountainside and throughout the city center. In the new millennium, mining outfits drilled ever more deeply into the earth—now as far as two kilometers underground—to find unclaimed, high-grade ore.

Nearing a cluster of trees, Xun heard the rattling of a mountain rat inside a metal cage. He carefully picked up the device by the handle, then walked to

another spot nearby, then another. Within a few minutes he had retrieved all six of his traps, five of which held large, squirming rodents. He walked back down into the city center. The rats struggled furiously, and the cages occasionally bumped against his legs. Once back at his apartment, Xun carefully released this group into a holding pen in his living room, where they joined others he had captured in previous days.

“You should have seen all those rats!” Xun Wei paused in his retelling for dramatic effect. His narrow, angular face was framed by closely shaven hair, chunky black eyeglasses, and a pronounced Adam’s apple. A T-shirt tucked into acid-washed jeans accentuated his skinny frame. His voice was raspy, some might say grating. Like many residents in a prefecture famous for its tobacco, he constantly smoked cheap Red River cigarettes. As we sat in his apartment in early 2010, he took a puff, cleared his throat, and continued his story.

Twice a week Xun delivered his cargo to the disease prevention station (*fangyizhan*), where he collected a prearranged payment of 10 yuan per live rodent. He never learned the rats’ fate. Xun excelled at this job; in total, he secured close to 2,000 yuan in that first month, a sum equivalent to the salary of a midlevel government cadre or manager of a respectable local business. But the venture did not last for long. Overexploitation of the mountain’s rodents—several dozen other rat catchers competed with him for the government payouts—resulted in a decreased supply and smarter rats. His fiancée, unhappy sharing their apartment with such houseguests and worried about the gashes on his legs left by their teeth and the metal bumping against his skin, eventually convinced Xun that this business was best abandoned.

When talking about the role of the mountains in Gejiu life, local residents during my time in the region taught me an old Chinese slogan: “Mountain dwellers *kao* the mountains, shore dwellers *kao* the sea,” with *kao* translatable as “rely on,” “make use of,” or “exploit.” I initially imagined that this phrase referred to the stable rhythms that had emerged between this mountainside community and the natural resources that surrounded it. What became clear to me from my time in Gejiu was that in recent decades the possible futures nurtured by the extraction of natural resources in this region had been rapidly shifting. The mountains, of course, were always there, but the careers and rhythms of living they supported were in a state of flux.

People with a history of heroin use faced particular challenges adapting to the changes that had swept the region. Xun’s career is exemplary in this sense.

A child during the last years of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1970s, he scavenged steep nearby slopes for wild vegetables when state-rationed food did not provide enough calories for his large family. In his teenage years, during Deng Xiaoping's tenure, Xun submitted to the rigid schedule of state-affiliated mining enterprises before striking out on his own to become a wealthy private-sector mining boss. Following a stint in a compulsory labor center, he returned to the nearby mountains in the mid-1990s to start a trucking venture that helped connect sellers in regional open-air markets.² In the early 2000s, after he gave up rat catching, Xun opted to stay in the city, taking on a series of temporary, low-paying jobs that included helping his in-laws sell lottery tickets. But the mountains—and dreams of other futures—were never far from his thoughts. For Xun, like others I met in Gejiu, recovery from heroin use merged with striving to find a way to *kao* the mountains and achieve a “normal person's life” (*zhengchangren de shenghuo*) in changing times.

At the time of our conversation in 2010, Xun was serving as director of a grassroots nongovernmental organization (NGO), managing three part-time outreach workers and a financial accountant. Living in an apartment he and his wife had bought at a reduced rate from his father's state employer, Xun was one of a relatively small group of people I knew with heroin use history in the region who had found desirable, full-time work. The mountains provided him with a venue for periodic team-building and outreach activities. Peer educators from competing nonprofit organizations prowled mountain mining outposts searching for heroin-using miners, to whom they could provide HIV testing and referral services.

Xun finished his cigarette in silence. Despite his recent successes, he was unsure about how long he could successfully find donors to support his organization. We could hear the clanging of construction outside; another high rise was being built next to the lake, part of a seemingly endless expansion upward from the narrow valley floor. Partially visible through the window, Old Yin Mountain silently loomed above us.

OUT OF TIME? AN EPIDEMIC OF THE RECENT PAST

Drug users—and in particular those consuming heroin—have often been depicted as lacking an awareness of history. William Burroughs describes the heroin user as living in “junk time,” in which his “body is his clock, and junk runs through him like an hour-glass. Time has meaning for him only with

reference to his need” ([1953] 1977, 180).³ Caught up in the self-contained thoughts and actions born of physiological craving, drug seeking, and withdrawal, addicts, in this Beat writer’s account, are radically disconnected from a broader social world and, by extension, shared historical time. Focusing on experiences of those attempting to rebuild lives after extended periods of heroin use, *Recovering Histories* argues that the men and women I encountered in Gejiu were especially attuned to what we might call the fraught historical times of the nation. Achieving recovery for this group was inextricably linked to responding to the challenges of the historical moment, a struggle not only to find a position within society but also to become oriented to shifting experiences of social time.

A brief history of my own relationship to this topic and place may help introduce the reader to what follows. I first heard about Gejiu city in 2002 while working as an assistant programs officer in the Beijing office of a social marketing organization operating under the umbrella of the China-UK HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care project. Public health experts at the time warned of a looming “titanic peril” and potential “fault line” that could threaten national development (UNAIDS 2002; Wolf et al. 2003). Located fewer than two hundred kilometers from the Vietnamese border, Gejiu was identified in early epidemiological surveys as a priority area for HIV programming because of a concentration of heroin use and sex work in the region.⁴ Buoyed by a post-SARS commitment to effective public health and supported by deep-pocketed international donors (cf. Mason 2016; on surveillance see Fearnley 2020), Gejiu officials in the mid-2000s spearheaded dozens of projects targeting “high-risk” populations. International news media soon lauded the city as a “model” for China’s HIV prevention efforts (Yardley 2005). Service providers offered local drug users access to methadone maintenance therapy, needle exchange, targeted medical care, and expanded social support. Peter Piot, at that time the director of UNAIDS, and a handful of international public health luminaries made brief visits to Gejiu to inspect what was billed as an innovative and progressive local response to the country’s HIV/AIDS epidemic.

In 2008, when I was working part time for the International Harm Reduction Development Program (IHRD) at Open Society Institute (now Foundations), I visited the city for the first time to meet with a number of recovering drug users who had formed a regional network dedicated to improving the lives of their community. IHRD provided the group with a start-up grant to

fund work in five cities across the prefecture. As a result of my initial connections with members of this network and my growing interest in the dynamics of drug use in the region, I moved to Gejiu in August 2009 to begin my dissertation research, a project that I believed would focus on a widespread and visible heroin epidemic.⁵

Hyper-alert for drug references and struggling with the local dialect, my ears during my first weeks living in the city would prick up every time I heard the city's nickname; "tin capital" shares the same phonetic pronunciation as "using drugs" (*xidu*). I quickly found that my initial assumptions formed through reading reports about the local crisis were mistaken. Following a pattern of "drug generations" identified in many parts of the world (Golub, Johnson, and Dunlap 2005), consumption of heroin in Gejiu had in fact been confined primarily to a single historical cohort. Born during the second half of the 1960s or in the 1970s, most local users first encountered the drug in the late 1980s or early 1990s. At the start of the new millennium, as many as 15,000 of the city's 310,000 residents experimented with the opioid (Li and Zhang 2003). By the early 2010s, its use was limited to approximately twenty-five hundred predominantly middle-aged local residents.⁶ A heavy toll of overdoses and infectious diseases, as well as intense stigmatization of the drug by nonusers, had contributed to the rapid reduction of what was once a sizable heroin-using community.

I was also mistaken in thinking that most heroin users I encountered would be heavy users. Though "sneaking a puff" (*touxi*, the intermittent heroin use sometimes referred to in English as "chipping") was not uncommon, few of the individuals I came to know well were engaging in the "ripping and running" often associated with acute physiological addiction (cf. Agar 1973). By the time I arrived in Gejiu, the availability of methadone substitution therapy and intense police crackdowns on organized crime and drug dealing had noticeably constricted supply and demand in the local heroin market. In addition, supporting heavy habits had become more difficult for aging users, who were increasingly excluded from licit and illicit forms of economic activity. Cumulatively, this shifting scene led drug users and non-drug users alike to remark that I was "late" to arrive; if I was interested in experiences of an epidemic, I should have been in Gejiu to witness the widespread use that started in the 1980s and peaked in the 1990s.

Unlike many studies that have focused on encounters taking place in a clinic, service agency, or residential center (Carr 2010; Waldram 2012; Hansen 2018), my fieldwork in Gejiu was conducted largely outside of spaces dedicated

to drug treatment. As I lacked an official hosting institution, Green Orchards, an internationally funded, government-affiliated drop-in center for heroin users, became an important fieldwork site. During frequent visits to the patio where “members” (*huiyuan*) congregated, I met a rotating group of people with heroin use history—some actively using and others abstaining—who stopped by to while away the afternoon hours. In addition, former IHRD grantees from the regional network introduced me to their friends. Meals and tea in private homes and at outdoor restaurants, wedding celebrations, family and job-related events, and weekend hot springs retreats provided occasions for me to form longer-term, more intimate relationships with a smaller group of recovering users. Through these interactions, my initial interest in the intersection of drug use practices and state policing came to be replaced by a desire to better understand lived experiences of recovery.

The people with heroin use history I came to know in Gejiu fundamentally challenged my own preconceptions about addiction and recovery. Rather than seeing themselves as individual patients suffering from a relapsing brain disease, this group often spoke about their struggles as a generation of workers who had become lost while attempting to “get ahead” of other local residents as teenagers and young adults. Forging a life after heroin required searching for opportunities to live and labor in a world that bore little resemblance to either the Maoist work units of their childhood or the disorienting but opportunity-filled chaos associated with the mining boom of their early careers. Personal experiences of recovery were thus intimately shaped by their understanding of the collective horizons of their heroin-using cohort, the city, and the nation.

Recovering Histories describes distinct ways that individual members of this generational cohort conceptualized and moved toward life after addiction. In contrast to the government’s attempts to define distinct *phases* of recovery defined by bodily recovery, long-time heroin users in Gejiu frequently disagreed about what bodily habits, friendships, and career ambitions they should preserve from their pasts and what vision of a future life they should pursue. If the addicts in Burroughs’s fictional accounts existed outside of historical time, the recovering drug users who appear in these pages were intensely concerned with both the lived temporality of their own lives and the shifting collective time associated with China’s reform and opening. Close attention to their experiences reveal a complex temporal politics of healing and conveys powerful, rarely considered perspectives on China’s historical trajectory.

APPROACHING HISTORICITY

Conversations about historicity in anthropology, philosophy, and related disciplines provide conceptual scaffolding and methodological inspiration for this investigation. Phenomenologist David Carr argues that scholars interested in historicity “want to know how history is encountered, how it enters our lives, and in what forms of consciousness and experience it does so” (2014, 47). Carr’s formulation immediately raises important questions: What is the relationship between lived individual and collective experiences of time? To what degree are ways of encountering, living, and becoming conscious of history distinct processes? How might centering these philosophical questions inform a study of recovery from heroin addiction?

This account starts with a phenomenological interest in the lived time of individuals. While early phenomenological work aimed at developing a technical vocabulary to describe the unifying structure of temporal experience (Husserl [1928] 1964), more recent phenomenological attention to temporality by anthropologists has shown how individuals’ lived relationships to past and future horizons are shaped by concrete experiences in the world (Desjarlais and Throop 2011).⁷ Historicity grapples with the overlapping lived relationship between an individual’s immediate past and future (the flux or flow of qualitative time); more habituated ways of engaging the world (temporal orientations or shifting horizons of approaching the past or future); and the reflexive, shared narratives, discourses, and events that connect individuals to broader groups (Stewart 2016, 86). Historical time understood as the connection between the lived time of individuals and groups has been approached as social experience; a type of narrative; a form of consciousness; and shared knowledge, intuitions, and feelings. I briefly introduce three distinct approaches to historicity.

Certain cultural Marxist scholars emphasize the importance of historical consciousness as a critical means of gaining a perspective on the present. One author defines historicity as “a perception of the present as history; that is, a relationship to the present which somehow de-familiarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective” (Jameson 1990, 284). Whether struggling in a “thick present” of the post-9/11 global order (Harootunian 2007) or living “pure and unrelated presents in time” in late capitalism (Jameson 1990, 27), historical actors often struggle to understand how the collective past shapes the present. Particular individuals—often academics and cultural producers, but also workers

(cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1992)—through attention to historical process come to effectively diagnose, grasp, and critique events in an otherwise opaque historical present.⁸

If the writers in this first group see historicity as enabling a critical perspective on the complex reality of the present, postcolonial scholars and some anthropologists have emphasized the potential dangers of drawing on European ways of accounting for social time. This historicity scholarship discusses the cultural assumptions and political implications associated with historicism, the tradition undergirding modern understandings of history. Originating in the writings of eighteenth-century scholars in Europe and disseminated through commerce and conquest, the principles associated with historicism—including assumptions about chronology, historical linearity, and ideals of progress—spread around the world, partially displacing other modes of understanding the past and the present and shaping commonsense ways that individuals and groups experienced the movement of time (Anderson 1983; Koselleck 2004; Iggers 1995; Bambach 1995; Hodges 2019).

Assumptions associated with historicism inflect academic writing, national media campaigns, and individual narratives in potentially destructive ways (Fabian 1983; Young 1990; Chakrabarty 2000). In exposing the relationship of “Westernization,” modernization, and development, anthropologists have shown how tenets of historicism justified the spatialization of global hierarchies and advanced European and American colonial and imperial ambitions (Ferguson 2006; Pursley 2019). For example, at the height of the Cold War, Zambian urban residents were encouraged to embrace “expectations of modernity” and focus on the “not-yet” of a future horizon of imminent economic and social prosperity (Ferguson 1999). Dreams associated with narratives of Zambia’s future position in a global order worked to silence workers’ dissatisfactions in the present. In the new millennium, historicism continues to exert powerful effects on how people in many parts of the world experience and narrate their own positions within a shifting global order.

A final cluster of historicity scholarship has focused on “forms of human awareness of being and becoming in time” that emerge from “nonhomogeneous social field(s)” (Palmié and Stewart 2016, 210, 223).⁹ Rather than rely on experience-distant attention to discourses and social ideology, this work has been attentive to intuition, fantasy, and imagination in exploring historical sense (cf. Berlant 2011). Complicating culturalist formulations that emphasize sharp divisions between European and other conceptions of history, recent

anthropologists' attention to historicity has shown how concrete dramatic performances, shared rhythms of laboring, dreams, and perceptions of landscapes contribute to intimations of historical time (Lambek 2002; Hirsch and Stewart 2005; Stewart 2017; Stewart and Strathern 2003).¹⁰

I approach *historicity* broadly through attention to individual and social experiences of time. Following Paul Ricoeur's (1990) creative engagement with aporias in human time and Victoria Browne's (2014) multilayered approach to lived historical time in feminist conversations, the chapters in this book adopt diverging approaches and temporal scales. I attend to verbal and non-verbal experience, cognitive thought and embodied feeling, rhythms produced through everyday embodied routines, and the politics of negotiating personal and collective pasts in the present. Some chapters, for example, foreground the existential challenges of reckoning with difficult pasts, while others look at how recovering heroin users participated in public conversations about Gejiu's future. I also explore how contemporaneity—the intimate relationships that develop between long-term heroin users—functions as “a mediating structure between the private time of individual fate and the public time of history” (Ricoeur 1990, 113). The next three sections show how the three approaches outlined here—historicity as critique of the historical present, historicity as exploration of the legacies of historicism, and historicity as ethnographic attention to experience in concrete encounters—help to elucidate the dynamics of the recovering histories featured in this book.

ADDICTION AS A HISTORICAL PROBLEM: LABORING, IDLING, AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

The complicated temporal politics of recovery became clear to me in the tension that emerged between two common Chinese phrases: “quitting drugs” (*jiedu*) and “returning to society” (*huigui shehui*).¹¹ Though each could be translated under the English umbrella term “recovery,” these two phrases register important divergences in how efforts to build a life after heroin in China came to be conceptualized and lived. The most widely used term, *jiedu* or “quitting drugs,” referred to breaking physiological addiction to the substance—a potential synonym for “detoxification” (*tuodu*), though it also encompassed longer-term efforts to live an abstinent life. Focused on preventing relapse, private hospital doctors, “folk” minority practitioners, employees at the national methadone