

Colin Thomas Flahive has been living and traveling in China for more than 16 years. He currently lives with his wife in Kunming, where, in addition to writing, he runs multiple businesses and social enterprises.

In *Great Leaps*, Colin explores China's rural-urban migration against the backdrop of his own transition from Colorado to southwest China. There he partnered with three friends to open a café that became much more than simply an outpost of Western cuisine in a far-flung corner of the world.

Over the course of a decade, Salvador's Coffee House became home to more than fifty young women from mountain villages in the surrounding countryside. Most knew nothing about coffee or Western food, but they moved to the city to work at Salvador's and earn their independence.

*Great Leaps* follows the challenges faced by Colin, his partners and his employees as they leave their old lives behind to make a new home in a foreign land. They encounter unlikely successes, endure heartbreaks and nearly lose everything. But by taking the leap together, they all find their own places in the modern Chinese dream.



Yaya – photo by Stephan Schacher

# GREAT LEAPS

*Finding home in  
a changing China*

Colin Thomas Flahive

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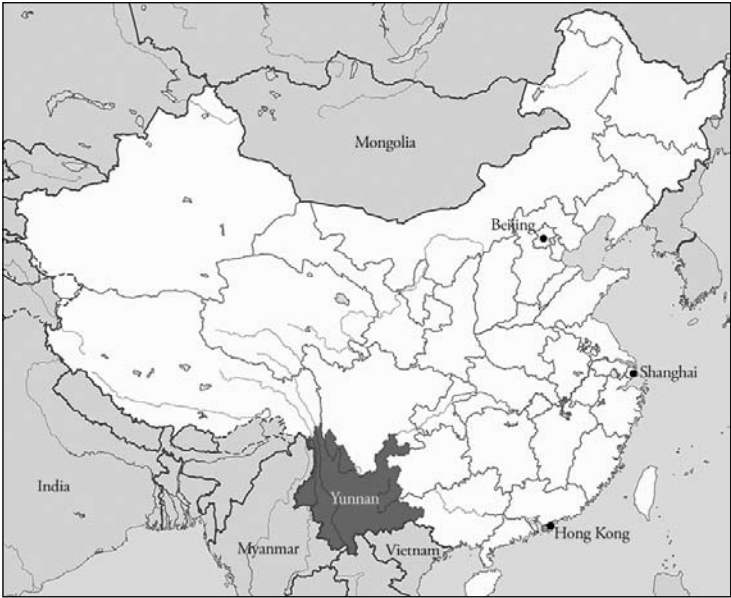
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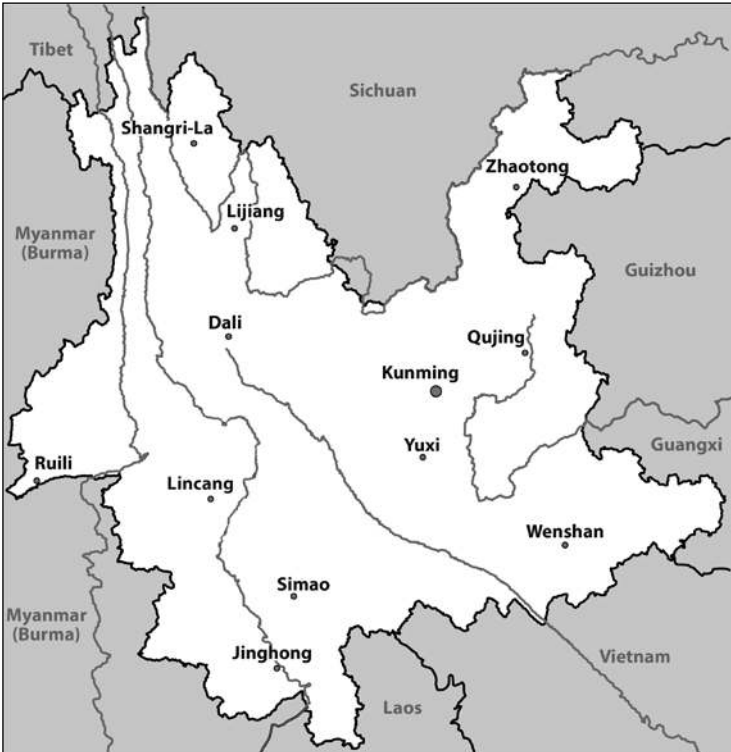
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Maps of China (above) and Yunnan Province (below)



## FOREWORD

Walking across Green Lake Park in Yunnan's capital city of Kunming on the morning of Christmas Eve in 2008, I was struck by the deep azure perfection of the cloudless sky above. As I made my way past the park's large willow trees and bamboo groves in just a t-shirt, the sun warmed my skin as a cool breeze gently lilted. Old people exercised and played music. Children ran around and laughed.

I was living the dream, or at least my dream: riding the wave of China's opening up to the world in a big city with a pleasant climate, clean air and lots of other dreamers. Normally on such a beautiful day – and Kunming has a lot of beautiful days – I wouldn't be in such a hurry. But my pleasant park surroundings belied the sick churning I felt inside.

A few minutes earlier, I had been jarred out of my dream by a phone call that I'd always secretly dreaded.

"Hey..." my friend said on the other end of the line, "did you hear about Sal's?"

I knew instantly from the tone of his voice that something very bad had happened at the café where I'd hung out almost every day for the previous four years. He was short on details, but did mention the word "bomb". I headed straight out the door.

Making haste to get to the scene of the bombing, I began thinking of a Kunming without Sal's and simply couldn't imagine it. Sal's was where I'd made dozens of good friends – both locals and expats. It was a place that made living in Kunming during those years one of the happiest times of

my life. Its owners and employees were all my friends, and I was intensely worried about their safety.

Arriving at Sal's, I saw the place that I jokingly referred to as my 'living room' in a cold and unfamiliar light. It was crawling with police and cordoned off from the public. A crowd had gathered outside the cordon and people were chattering about what had happened. Minutes later I got a call through to my friend Colin, one of the four owners. He was at the police station and sounded shaken, but he managed to utter exactly what I wanted to hear him say at that moment: "Everyone's OK."

\* \* \*

It was a late Friday afternoon four years earlier in the summer of 2004 when I first climbed onto a bar stool at Salvador's Coffee House. The day before, I'd finished my last day as an overworked editor at a publishing company in Shanghai.

And there I was, halfway across China, sitting at a big wooden bar a few steps above Wenhua Xiang, one of the cooler little lanes in Kunming's university district. My timing was good. It just so happened that that particular Friday was the opening day for Salvador's first location in my favorite Chinese city.

It didn't take long for me to start questioning my plan to return to Shanghai after a month's vacation to search for another soul-destroying desk job. By the time I was on my second drink, I'd already decided that I was going to move to Kunming. I also knew that Salvador's would be both my second office and hangout joint of choice.

It was an easy sell. I looked at myself: pasty white, run down, unaccustomed to smiling and sporting some serious panda eyes from working 60ish hours a week. I looked well older than my 27 years.

I felt like the odd man out at that night's opening party as I met many people who are still my good friends today. Everyone seemed to be tanned, smiling and glowing. The Chinese I met were friendly and welcoming. Most of the foreigners could speak decent Chinese, and many were fluent. Nobody was exchanging business cards. The sound of laughter



was everywhere. I felt at home for the first time in years. I decided that I'd rather be poor in Kunming than rolling in cash in Shanghai. At least I knew where to get good coffee and bagels.

I made the move, and for the next eight-plus years I probably averaged more than one trip a day to Sal's, as the growing number of regulars called it. For me it served many functions beyond providing coffee, food and booze. I had countless useful conversations with the four owners, getting to know all of them better than I had in Dali, where I'd met them all years before. I spoke with Colin about off-the-beaten-path travel spots in other parts of the province. Josh and I discussed different business ideas, some more crackpot than others. When he wasn't practicing his juggling or passing me shots of whiskey in teacups, Kris gave me useful help on where to get things around town. Naoko helped me better understand Chinese medicine and the local bureaucracy. All four of them were ready to lend me an ear during the many moments of self-doubt I experienced while trying to make things work in a city that even most coastal Chinese thought of as far-off and exotic.

After I'd settled into the chilled-out, sun-drenched Kunming lifestyle, the idea of moving back to smoggy and congested Shanghai or any other big Chinese city was out of the question. Life was an adventure rather than a routine. It was easy to smile, and I laughed more than I had in years. The whole city felt like a promising startup company that was just beginning to get traction, and for me Sal's was an apt symbol of what was going on in a city that was far behind Shanghai in opening up to the world – but whose day had come.

By the time Sal's opened in Kunming it already had a crew of reliable staff that had come over from the original location in Dali. They were from an impoverished area near China's border with Myanmar, a region I never visited until the wedding that opens this book. To them, I was basically a Martian. In the beginning I found it difficult understanding most of the girls' Chinese, which, if not speaking a minority language, was usually a mix of Mandarin and the Yunnan dialect, often with a heavy regional accent. But we would gradually get to know each other,

especially over the large ‘family dinners’ they cooked in the restaurant’s first year, when business was much slower than today. They would tell me tales of their remote villages and I would try to explain the American suburbs from which I came. Eventually we were cracking jokes in each others’ languages and I began to think of them as my *meimei*, or younger sisters, despite our very different backgrounds.

After I’d blown all my savings from Shanghai on a year’s rent, a nice new mountain bike and a bit of travel, I had to find a job. Other than teaching English, which I didn’t particularly enjoy, there weren’t really any jobs for me. Kunming wasn’t fully plugged into the global economy at that point, and I quickly realized that I’d have to create my own job. I decided to build a website that was an online version of what Sal’s was for me and many others – a place where people can connect with each other and learn what was happening in this increasingly buzzing blue-skied city where the ubiquitous rhythms of demolition and construction were punctuated by car horns, chirping birds or the singing advertisement of the man who sharpens knives blasting on loop from a crackly bullhorn.

Broke and frustrated with my website that nobody knew existed, I caught my first big break when I somehow convinced the owners of Sal’s to do a food-for-advertising barter deal with me. In retrospect, I don’t know how convincing my sales pitch was; they probably just didn’t want me to starve.

Suddenly, with my food and caffeine requirements covered (I still had to pay for booze – they weren’t fools), I was able to put more effort into my website. Things started coming together, and I frequently met with interview subjects or potential advertisers at Sal’s. Life was getting better for everyone, and it was hard not to feel genuinely optimistic about the future.

The bombing of Salvador’s shook everyone. It snapped me out of my happy daze and reminded me that nothing should be taken for granted. It also made me take stock of my life and find a new appreciation for the wonderful people I bumped into at the same places every day.

When Sal's reopened, it was a heavy but cathartic moment, a statement that just as before, everybody present refused to live their lives in fear. We moved forward together, all a little bit closer than before. We overheard, but ignored, the passersby who would point and say words like 'bombing' or 'terrorism'. After a year, the rest of the city seemed to forget about what had happened – the city was developing at a dizzying pace and had little time to dwell on the past.

I spent another four years in Kunming, during which the time came for me to sell the website, pack up and seek new challenges in Hong Kong. My last breakfast as a Kunming resident was, of course, at Salvador's. Colin and Josh were there to see me off. None of us spoke much. We'd said everything that needed saying over the past eight-and-a-half years. I was holding myself together fairly well until I grabbed my bags and began to walk away from Sal's. I began to sob, despite my efforts to put on a brave face. As a foreigner living in Kunming, Sal's meant more to me than burritos and beers. It was the one place that felt like it was home, and many of the people I'd met there were like family to me.

\* \* \*

This book is much more than just one American's story about his experiences in a random corner of China. It's a close-up shot of one of the biggest things to happen to the world in the past decade, in which the template for the economic boom that had dramatically re-made Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou was rolled out to the rest of the world's most populous country.

This wave of wealth generation set a lot of different trends in motion. Among them was the movement of both poor rural Chinese and young foreigners toward China's lesser-known cities in search of opportunity – and adventure.

Salvador's Coffee House was one of the many places in China where these vastly different worlds collided, resulting in no shortage of cross-cultural wackiness, lifelong friendships and even a few marriages and families.

My Kunming days may be behind me, but every day I'm reminded of my time there. Much of who I am today was shaped by the years I spent as a dreamer floating among a sea of dreamers at a tiny café in a forgotten part of the world. For that I will forever be grateful.

Chris Horton

*We must walk consciously  
only part way toward our goal,  
and then leap in the dark  
to our success.*

Henry David Thoreau

## CHAPTER I

# FROM THE COUNTRYSIDE

Yaya took nothing with her but a warm jacket, a toothbrush and a washcloth all bundled together in a tattered white shopping bag. It was the first time that she'd ever left her village and she looked nervous and afraid as she hiked down the dirt trail away from the only home she'd ever known.

It was a two-hour hike down the mountainside to the town of Moulán at the bottom of the valley. Moulán was already as far as she had ever been from her family, and that night, for the first time in her 17-year life, she would spend the night somewhere other than in her mountaintop village.

Her face was dark, tanned from years of working the family's tea fields, and one might have thought she was much older if not for her timid and anxious eyes. She didn't say a word to anyone as she hiked along the winding trail between terraced tea and corn fields where many of the villagers were out tending their crops. A warm wind rustled through drying corn stalks left over from the autumn harvest, making the air smell sweet.

I felt guilty. We were the reason Yaya was leaving her life in the countryside for Kunming, the largest city in China's Yunnan Province. My partners Josh, Naoko, Kris and I had started Salvador's Coffee House as a small business. It was not our intent to split up a family and take away their only child for the sake of employment. Yaya had never seen a foreigner before, never tasted coffee and had no idea how to prepare

Western food, but she would move to Kunming to work with us and she would learn.

We came to the village of Dalubian in southwest Yunnan with no intention of scouting out potential employees. We were there to attend the wedding of A Li, Salvador's manager. The entire Salvador's staff and a few friends made the 14-hour bus and tractor trip to join A Li and her family in their village. For three days we stuffed ourselves on fried pork, aged ham, pork fat-fried vegetables and stewed pork ribs – a pig had been slaughtered for the event and provided most of the occasion's cuisine.

A Li's family home was on a steep slope with terraces of tea, rice, corn and vegetables. Two wooden structures, separated by a concrete courtyard, housed the bedrooms and kitchen. The walls inside every room were plastered with old newspapers, serving as both a form of decoration and as a way to protect the old wood from stains and wear. Small steel bowls filled with stacks of burning charcoal were placed in the center of each room to keep us warm.

Water buffalo trudged along narrow dirt paths outside the house, some on their way home with their masters and some on the way to the fields to plow new rows for seeding. The distinct aroma of freshly turned manure wafted about.

The family's donkey had been put into his pen and did not seem very happy about it. Every so often he would launch into a long bray of hees and haws. Soon his friends, locked in pens in other households, were answering his call. The valley was filled with their song, sounding like a chorus of rusty seesaws.

A Li's parents had prepared their courtyard with 20 tables, each surrounded by eight stools, in order to feed more than 900 people from Dalubian and surrounding villages to celebrate their daughter's marriage. Every table would be seated about six different times that day in order to make sure everyone was fed. The cooks in the kitchen continually stoked the wood stove and worked feverishly to get the food out quickly.

Giant bowls of steaming rice, along with slow-cooked chicken soup with ginger, fried pork fat nuggets, boiled pork balls, sliced salted pork

belly, fish with pickled chili peppers and wild forest mushrooms came out of the tiny kitchen at a pace faster than any hotel buffet. There were even some special vegetable dishes cooked without pork fat for Josh and Naoko, both vegetarians. As families awaited their turn at the tables, a small group of chickens and two small dogs made sure that none of the food that fell to the ground was wasted.

The men of the village pressured us to drink shots of homemade corn liquor, a strong alcohol that Josh, Kris and I had learned to appreciate after years of living in China, but most other outsiders found revolting. Everyone welcomed A Li's husband into the family while we sang songs we didn't know the lyrics to and danced as the family's donkey looked on bitterly. At the end of it all, Yaya slowly made her way down the mountain with her tattered white shopping bag.

It wasn't the first time a village girl had left her family to come work for us. Yaya would be the 33rd teenage girl to leave her village to work at Salvador's. This time, however, was different. Usually, we first met the girls in Kunming after they'd been referred to us by friends and family members of other workers. This was the first time we were there to actually witness a girl's departure from home.

There were no goodbyes, at least none that we saw. Yaya's parents stood quietly saying nothing. It wasn't that they didn't care for their daughter or wouldn't miss her, but public displays of that sort were reserved for arguments or funerals. This was a time for celebration, and Yaya and her parents would not let their emotions turn into an exhibition of affection or loss.

Yaya had an opportunity that her parents never had – to move to the city and be a part of China's modern society. Rural youths who find work in the city can provide a supplemental income for their family, sometimes even for the entire village. Teenage migrant workers often send large portions of their wages back to their parents, who then reinvest the money into seed, livestock, home improvement and medical expenses.

For most of the villagers in Dalubian and throughout rural China, moving to the city is an unrealistic ambition. The move is expensive, good



work is hard to find and abandoning the farm means risking the family's only guaranteed income. Moreover, migrants from the countryside to the city are often treated poorly and discriminated against by urbanites who refer to them as *tubaozi*, or "dirt dumplings," a derogatory term for country folk similar in connotation to "country bumpkins."

China's urban migration, now the largest in the history of the world, is fueled by the idea that, regardless of birthplace or social class, cities offer everyone a chance at success. It's an idea tantamount to that of the American Dream – that people can start with nothing but succeed through hard work alone. Some might argue that in today's global climate the American Dream is dead, but for hundreds of millions in China a similar dream lives on.

Rural Chinese are nearly 50 percent of China's total population, a number that was closer to 80 percent only 30 years ago. Many of China's rural villages are hundreds, sometimes thousands of years old. When traveling through Yunnan Province you will often pass through villages that have remained relatively unchanged for centuries. Peoples' livelihoods revolve around caring for pigs, chickens, ducks, cows and sheep. They tend fields of rice, corn and wheat and collect wild mushrooms and other forest foods. They grow tea, coffee, tobacco and fruit. In the village, life is work. For many of them, the only experience of modern China comes from television.

Most outsiders, including many urban Chinese, never experience this side of China. I frequently meet tourists who say that they've traveled all over the country. They often go on to explain that they've been to Shanghai, Hong Kong, the Great Wall in Beijing, the Terracotta Warriors in Xi'an and the pandas in Chengdu. I usually just nod in agreement that, yes, they have seen *all* of China. But I can't help but think they have missed out on everything that is the China I have come to know and love. The China where meals pull families back together each evening and there's always extra just in case someone else happens to stop by. Where people cook for the pigs before cooking for the family. Where the proud clucks of a hen that just laid an egg don't go unnoticed by the hen's owner.

Where children don't practice the violin for five hours a day. Where the only traffic is a herd of goats and the only honking comes from geese. Where a walk to the neighbors' house might take a couple of hours. And where even with barking dogs, clanging cow bells, early rooster calls and roaring tractor motors, you somehow sleep more soundly than you have in a long time.

The countryside is the heart of China. The country's popular cities or historical sites will only reveal the outer layers of a much more complicated culture and society. The core of the country exists in modest homes near rice paddies, along twisting mountain trails, next to small rivers and streams and in deserts and high plateaus. There are nearly a million villages in China – home to over 700 million villagers – and it is in these villages that Chinese tradition is more than just a show for cameras, it is simply the way of life.

Yaya grew up in Dalubian, a village far removed from the modern urban China that we often read about. While urban girls her age went to school, shopped and joined internet chat rooms, she tended her family's tea, corn and rice fields and fed the pigs, cows and chickens. While urban girls were getting their nails done, Yaya's hands grew strong and calloused. Her family labored long hours to earn an income of about \$50 per month from their tea and walnut trees, but they also raised all of their own food. So although Yaya worked hard, she ate well.

The elementary school in Dalubian was a half-hour walk from home, but the nearest high school was over two and a half hours away. So Yaya, along with most others in her village, never planned to attend high school. Instead, she aspired to find work somewhere outside of the village – somewhere she could make enough money to send cash home to her mother and father. She hoped that perhaps one day she could build them a new home.

When Yaya's mother was only three months old, she fell into a fire that disfigured her hands and half of her face. Villagers in Dalubian depend on the ability to harvest crops and pick tea leaves in the fields. The permanent damage the fire had done to her hands made this kind

of work nearly impossible. She was eventually married to a man who was mostly deaf – it is village tradition to pair up handicapped men and women. Most men from Yaya's village found work in construction, but such opportunities were not available for the deaf. So as a young girl with two handicapped parents, Yaya had to take on much of the workload. The day she left her village to work at Salvador's was more than just an opportunity for her. It was an opportunity for her family.

After A Li's wedding, we hiked with Yaya down the mountainside to where our driver awaited us. She was silent and visibly nervous as she stepped onto the bus destined for her new life in Kunming. I thought back to the day when I took my first trip across the Pacific from the U.S. to China. I remembered how nervous I was and how I had no idea what to expect. I could only imagine how Yaya felt. In a way, my transition to China was easier than Yaya's to Kunming. For her, Kunming was a more foreign place than it was for me. I at least understood how cities worked, but for her there was no such familiarity.

Like me, she would be considered an outsider by those from the city. But unlike me, she was just another farm girl coming to the city to look for work, looked down on by urbanites for lacking culture and education.

Josh, Naoko, Kris and I had also moved far away from our homes in the U.S. and Japan in search of something more. We left everything behind to move halfway around the world, eventually found each other, and went into business together. With Salvador's Coffee House we found our place in Kunming. We could only hope that with us, Yaya would find hers too.

We knew that our responsibility for Yaya and the rest of our employees went beyond simply providing a fair salary with safe working conditions. Salvador's was a bridge to their new futures and an opportunity for success in the city.

Two years after Yaya left her village to work at Salvador's, nearly 10 years after the four of us left the U.S. for China, Josh, Kris and I returned to meet with Yaya's parents. We sipped on tea and munched on hemp seeds, a local snack, while talking up Yaya's accomplishments at Salvador's

since leaving the village. The small courtyard of Yaya's family home was nearest the top of the hill in her village and overlooked a wide valley. Hillside steps were carved into terraced plots of corn and tea and lined with walnut groves. We could see plumes of smoke rising from the valley floor as farmers cleared space for new crops by burning the old ones.

Yaya's mother brought out a big plate of peanuts and sunflower seeds. As we took in our surroundings we were surprised to discover a newly tiled house with a separate kitchen and another house extension that appeared to be under construction. This was a costly undertaking for any village family, let alone one with two disabled parents.

Yaya's mother, noticing our curious looks, pointed her scarred finger toward the new house. Proudly, she said, "Yaya built this."