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Keeping Matsutake in Motion:

Infrastructures of Freshness in Yunnan

Matjaž Pinter

Jidi: The Market Begins in the Forest

In late summer 2024, northwest Yunnan began to move with matsutake (松茸), one of the most closely studied non-timber forest commodities in the region (Yeh 2000; Hathaway 2022). Traders in Shangri-la kept directing me to Jidi, a village north of the town once known as Zhongdian.[1] Jidi has national resonance: the culinary documentary *A Bite of China* filmed its matsutake segment here (CCTV 2012), and the village has been associated with the fungus ever since. A gate at the village entrance bore the sign 松茸谷—'Matsutake Valley'. Its slogans invoked the 'Two Mountains' concept, framing forests as ecological assets for development (Yeh 2023). Beyond the gate stood rows of apparently deserted houses. During peak season, the village empties into the forest, as in Tibetan cordyceps economies (Winkler 2009).

[1] Zhongdian, known in Tibetan as Gyalthang, was renamed Shangri-la in 2001, linking James Hilton's fictional paradise to tourism-led development (Hillman 2003; Kolås 2008).

Dorje, an older villager who had just got back from the forest with a modest harvest, was weighing his mushrooms. His wife and daughter-in-law returned moments later with heavier baskets and, after a hurried lunch, set off again. "We leave at five in the morning and stay until eleven," he explained, "then come home to weigh and eat before going back out from twelve until three." Rather than returning to the forest, Dorje stayed behind to sell the day's harvest and took me along with him to the village market. Watching this routine, I realized that the market extended beyond the trading hall. Much of the work required to make matsutake marketable had already taken place in the forest.



The gate reads: "Working hard to make Jidi green and beautiful. Deeply practising the 'Two Mountains' concept." Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.



Dorje reviews matsutake harvest records in the family room, where carved timber panels and political calendars situate the seasonal mushroom economy within the household's material and political life. Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.

As we walked towards the village centre, mushroom-pickers could be seen gathering outside the new matsutake market. The dense display of national flags gave the building an official presence, situating this forest economy within longer-term projects of state incorporation and development in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands (Yeh and Coggins 2014; Galipeau 2024). In front of the locked entrance assembled people who had spent the morning scattered throughout the surrounding forests. Through the glass, I could already see traders waiting inside, seated behind their tables and scrolling on their phones. Standing in the crowd, I asked various pickers whether I might accompany them into the forest on another day, but they all declined. "There is no time. I have to go back quickly," one woman replied.

Studies show that matsutake harvesting in northwest Yunnan is governed through village compacts (乡规民约), locally agreed rules that set when the forest opens for picking, who may harvest and what fees outsiders must pay (Yeh 2000). In many villages, access is common: every household may pick anywhere in the village's collective forest. Increasingly, however, access is privatized, with the forest divided into plots whose harvesting rights are allocated to individual households or leased through open bidding (Yang et al. 2009). Forest labour remains self-directed, yet increasingly it unfolds according to the market's temporal demands.



↑ ***Jidi's new matsutake market, built in 2024, replaced an older wooden structure. The village produces around 300 tonnes annually, worth nearly RMB 39 million (Peng 2024).***
Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.

← ***Pickers wait outside the locked entrance, which keeps them apart from the traders until the market opens.***
Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.

At the exact opening time, the market door was unlocked. The line lurched forward. Pickers rushed towards the traders' tables, many of them returning to the same buyers they had traded with before. These relationships, and the trust they entailed, channelled the daily harvest through the market. As infrastructure, the new market building compressed the day's trade into a narrow window timed to meet the logistical chain that followed. As the pickers returned to the forest, traders loaded fresh purchases into vans bound for Shangri-la.

Shangri-la: Coordinating Freshness

At the Shangri-la market, overnight handling was synchronized with the regular 8 a.m. flight to Kunming. Exhausted after his shift, one trader told me he had neither slept nor eaten breakfast. He had spent the night making sure that around 500 kilograms of fresh matsutake would be in the right hands by morning. "In the past, most of the mushrooms went directly to Japan," he observed. "Since the pandemic, we mostly sell domestically, but it still takes up to seventy-two hours to reach anywhere in China."



As pickers hurry to sell their harvest, traders carefully check the freshness of the matsutake.
Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.



Bagged matsutake travel from Jidi towards Shangri-la, beginning the transition from village harvest to regional circulation. Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.

Shangri-la's matsutake market had long been organized around export routes to Japan: established importers, exacting grading standards and regular international flights coordinated the rapid movement of fresh mushrooms. Domestic demand was already expanding before Covid-19, but the pandemic accelerated the shift. A sharp reduction in international passenger flights cut the air cargo capacity on which time-sensitive exports depended, while uncertainty about Japanese orders encouraged traders to seek buyers within China. When exports stalled, traders feared collapse. Instead, mushrooms previously destined for Japan entered a domestic market enabled by the logistics and digital platforms built over the preceding decade (SF Airlines 2021).

Freshness remains the main principle of the matsutake trade. Yet, as Freidberg (2009) has shown for other perishable foods, this is not just a natural condition but also a technical and commercial achievement (see also Perera 2025: 21–22; Wang 2026: 68). In Shangri-la, freshness forms part of a broader bundle of qualities, including size, maturity, intactness, appearance and origin. Traders must recognize these qualities in the mushroom's form, translate them into grades (on such valuation, see Thiemann 2025: 28–29) and preserve that condition through a carefully timed logistical chain for buyers who cannot inspect it themselves.

A scene in the market suggested how freshness is mediated to distant buyers. In one corner, a grading table had become a small broadcasting studio. Beneath a camera light, a presenter rotated matsutake before two smartphones, describing their freshness and purported health benefits, while another worker handled orders and shipping details. Qualities normally assessed through touch and smell were translated into visual demonstrations and verbal claims. Livestream selling joined the physical labour of handling mushrooms to the transactional labour of processing orders (Duan, Lin and van Dijck 2023). It also turned sensory inspection into a commercial encounter in which buyers could watch, ask questions and feel momentarily present in the market.



Inside the Shangri-la market building, traders and workers sort mushrooms, negotiate sales and prepare outgoing shipments. Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.

Kunming: Buffering Time for Redistribution

Matsutake reached Kunming's Mushuihua Wild Mushroom Wholesale Market in labelled insulated boxes. Workers moved them into refrigerated rooms, then repacked and relabelled them for cities in southern and eastern China. Cold storage provided a limited window during which shipments could be consolidated and redirected before declining quality reduced their value, a buffer sustained by workers' labour as much as by refrigeration (Hopkins 2022: 52, 56–57).

↓ Selling matsutake by livestream in Shangri-la's overnight market. Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.


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The mushrooms are graded again here, with size informing the initial sort. Yang Guang, whose family has traded matsutake for nearly forty years, took me through their warehouse, where the mushrooms are separated into 3–5 cm, 5–7 cm and 7–9 cm size bands. "The medium ones can be marketed as premium," he said, "but size alone does not determine grade." Within each band, mushrooms with open caps, insect damage or broken stems are placed in lower categories, while intact, firm specimens with tightly closed caps fetch higher prices. Classification, therefore, translates biological variation into shared commercial categories through which the produce can be priced, packaged and directed towards different buyers.[2] As Liang and Münster (2022) show for fresh cordyceps, perishable fungal commodities become saleable at a distance through interconnected arrangements of vacuum packaging, air freight and refrigeration. On a map in his office, Yang demonstrated how matsutake now move through a more formalized cold chain: they either fly directly to Shanghai, Guangzhou and Beijing, or transfer to a redistribution centre in Wuhan, from where onward delivery takes a further day. This has extended the geographical and commercial reach of a mushroom that continues to deteriorate in transit.

↑ ***Workers in a cold storage room preparing matsutake for onward distribution.***
Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.

[2] On the comparable practice of crab grading, see Zhang 2022: 46.

After repacking mushrooms, workers clean stacks of insulated containers at Kunming's Mushuihua Wholesale Market.
Photo: Matjaž Pinter, 2024.



Concluding Remarks

Across Yunnan, matsutake markets operate as highly tailored infrastructures, coordinating temporalities that do not readily align: the seasonal rhythms of foraging, fixed moments of exchange, the classificatory work of grading and packing, and the logistical time of transport. They compress time around harvesting, trading and dispatch while creating limited buffers through refrigeration and storage. Labour and material arrangements hold this chain together, while responsibility for losses caused by decay passes from one set of hands to another. Freshness is thus not a quality carried intact from forest to consumer, but a temporary accomplishment remade at every point where mushrooms change hands.

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