

A World at Risk*

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It was the summer of Tiananmen, and there were reports of military action near the Beijing airport. The United Airlines flight taking me there from San Francisco was terminated at Tokyo. What did I wish to do? My ticket was reissued as an involuntary reroute, and I went to Hong Kong to wait. Matters might soon ease up enough for a trip to the southern interior.

It was not to be: after a week I gave up and returned home. During that week, however, I rented a car and took a look at the Kowloon Peninsula.

One day during that week I turned off to the right at the last exit before the highway crosses into China. With that turn I lost sight of all the trucks that, loaded with containers, ply between Shenzhen and Hong Kong's great port. Instead, there was a slow but well-paved road wandering along the shore of Starling Inlet. Across the water to the left lay China; to the right were steep hills that were wooded at their distant tops but rimmed at their bases with bits of settlement, villages with names like Nam Chung and village ponds whose shores were white with thousands of ducks.

That's how I discovered Luk Keng, the village after Nam Chung. My map showed that the road was about to curve back clockwise toward Tai Po and Sha Tin, new towns as vertical as any settlements on earth. If I wanted to stay in the countryside I would have to stop here. I parked and started walking, for there is no other way to explore Luk Keng: the main road just touches one end of the village's one street, and that one street is closed to vehicular traffic.

The English-language radio channels were full that day of indignant expatriates outraged by the British government's refusal to grant the right of abode to Hong Kong's three and one-half million holders of British passports. But there were no angry voices on Luk Keng's one street. In fact, there were no voices at all, apart from the murmurings of a few elderly Hakka women who were recognizable from the hats they wore: woven and lacquered straw discs sixteen inches in diameter, with a hole for the crown of the wearer's head, covered by a cloth cap. The women sat in ones or twos in front of their houses, which lined the side of the street that lay at the base of the sheltering hillside. Houses and women alike looked across that street to the sedimented remains of what had once been a large pond.

There were no commercial buildings in Luk Keng away from the highway intersection -- and few enough there: Luk Keng proper was all houses mixed with a few Confucian temples. Most of the buildings were brick or concrete, informally joined together over the years into long rowhouses. New and old had been combined without the least regard for architectural harmony: gray blocks with casement windows and flat roofs sat, common-walled, next to temples whose roofs were dragonishly raked. The street itself was surfaced with concrete but grew narrower and narrower the farther it went from the highway.

After a few hundred yards the lane made a right-angle turn to the left. The paving soon stopped; so did the houses. Now there was a low wooden gate. It was no real obstacle, but I didn't know the local etiquette and was reluctant to go through. I backtracked to the corner, where a hard-trodden dirt path wound uphill. I started up, at first along a path through a grove of good-sized trees, mostly bamboo. Then, once again and to my frustration, there was another low wooden gate. This time I opened it and within twenty paces was at the top of the hill behind Luk Keng; I saw that I was actually on the crest of a ridge that extended to still higher summits in the distance.

The bamboo disappeared, replaced by terraces that stretched in front of me in amphitheaters rising from sea level—even from Nam Chung's duck ponds—to the ridge. In the distance, they climbed higher into the mountains beyond the ridge. I caught my breath and walked on tiptoe, as if tiptoes would somehow make me invisible and invisibility would somehow prolong the moment. I had escaped Hong Kong, was finally in the great Orient. I forgot the watch on my wrist.

It turned out that there was no need to tiptoe: there was no one to disturb. The irrigation ditches were happily bubbling, but the terraces themselves were covered in weeds--not just on the terrace risers but on the treads where rice should have been growing. There wasn't a panicle to be seen on the entire mountain. I walked in disbelief past a monument commemorating the concrete lining of the main irrigation ditch: here was proof that the abandonment of these terraces had happened recently. Yet erosion was already overtopping some of the terraces, and slumping had started. Soon the contouring would be smoothed away, and trees would invade and stabilize the slopes.

I shouldn't have been surprised. A few years earlier I had been down in Kuala Lumpur, in Malaysia. I was at a meeting called to improve the management of Malaysia's irrigation systems, but one of the engineers at the table finally lost patience and said with some heat that he wasn't worried about moving water: he was worried about keeping farmers farming. Despite everything the government had done for these people, he said, Malaysia's rice farmers were packing up and leaving for factory jobs in Pinang. "Phantom farmers," he called them: they had already walked away from about half the country's paddy land.

Yet Luk Keng *did* shock me. Here, in terrace amphitheaters, was an example of the most perfect fusion I know of nature and culture; here, bone and rock are more alike than different, and the earth's stability becomes our own. A few miles away in Hong Kong, meanwhile, there were plenty of people enlightened enough to fight to save old neighborhoods and to preserve the colony's remarkable set of wilderness parks. Yet none seemed to mind the loss of the last paddies; on the contrary, people seemed to assume that such a loss was inevitable and even welcome.

I went home thinking that I had seen two things of beauty in Hong Kong. One was those terraces; the other was the hats worn by the Hakka women. And I think now of the Muskogee leader I know who recently brought a pair of ballsticks to a classroom. I asked him why those handmade sticks, of hickory, were the only beautiful things in the room--why the chairs and tables and windows were devoid of beauty. He said that he understood me but that I was using the wrong word. What the ballsticks had, he said, was spirit, and he meant this very literally: the spirit of the hickory, preserved as he shaped the wood from its original form.

A year later I tried China again. This time I made it without incident to Kunming, which had been my destination in the previous year. A few days later four of us set out: a driver, a Chinese forester, an American economist working in Beijing, and myself. Our destination was the remote county of Zhenxiong. There had been a lot of rain, and the roads, unpaved, were slick with mud. We overnighted along the way, and the next day the driver, in hopes of getting to the Zhenxiong guesthouse before dark, went as fast as he dared.

The deserted road led through country so remote and mountainous that, with the exception of its narrow floodplains, it has only been brought under cultivation in the last 50 years or so. Some of this new land, on plateaus, is reasonably flat, but Zhenxiong rests on limestone, and farmers lucky enough to have such level summits must still work around residual limestone blocks scattered through their fields like tank traps. The chief crop on such land is potatoes, grown in sinkholes cultivated to their umbilical drains.

Over the less fortunate but more common sloping countryside, one might expect rice, but though the slopes are terraced they are instead planted to wheat followed by corn, with tobacco on the side. Rice could be grown in abundance if the terraces were irrigated, but they are not, chiefly because there is enough precipitation here for reasonable yields of corn and tobacco.

For mile after mile there were no other motor vehicles, and we went so fast that I got no more than a flashing picture of a countryside dark with young corn and equally dark houses. The houses were of unmortared and untreated limestone blocks that weathered into a beautiful and an almost basaltic blackness. Everywhere, they were built to a standard plan: a single story, with

a pitched roof and a rectangular floor plan that opened to a courtyard on the sunny south. The roofs were of thatch, darkened by unvented coal smoke to a hue as deep as the weathered stone walls. Often the houses stood next to clay barns, used for drying tobacco.

It took a day or so to arrange a visit from Zhenxiong town to Hengdi, a village that lay perhaps an hour's drive away, over increasingly mucky roads. There were no public buses here, not even the hand tractors that, hitched to a passenger-carrying cart, go banging along the roads of rural China. Instead we passed young men walking under huge loads of unthreshed wheat; they carried portable chairs with them--poles with a seat on which they could lean back to rest. Other villagers had already done their threshing, and piles of wheat straw were heaped outside their dark limestone houses. The grain had already been milled, and now, as long noodles, it hung outside like laundry drying in the warm sunshine.

It was the strangest sensation, sitting in the jeep and seeing these things: it was like looking through the frame of an eighteenth-century European landscape painting. I'm sure there were plenty of sounds out there, but they weren't the mechanical and electrical sounds I live with. They were the sounds Constable heard generations ago, sounds the farmers of Luk Keng had heard perhaps a generation ago.

Two black sows and their litters of white piglets meandered down Hengdi's muddy main street. There were single-story shops with a spartan selection of goods and very few customers. The town's one substantial building was a two-story brick structure that had a facing of yellow-painted plaster and, on the pediment of a classical porch, a quotation from Chairman Mao.

Luckily the officials of Hengdi spoke no English, and I, unlike my companions, spoke no Chinese, so while they were courtesy-bound to maintain a conversation I was allowed to drift like an idiot to the edge of the village. And at that moment I had the strangest feeling that rays of light were stretching here from Beijing. Not just from Beijing, but from the Temple of Heaven there.

The Temple of Heaven—that's what foreigners call it, though more accurately it's the Hall of Prayer for a Prosperous Year. It's where the emperors went to ensure a good crop season, and I suppose they might once in the centuries have thought of this place, or at least of the Yunnan Province of which it is a tiny part. But that's sophistry: the real connection between Hengdi and the Temple of Heaven lies in the geometry of the temple's plaza, which is rimmed with a square wall and then flagged with stones rising at the center a set of circular platforms on whose bull's-eye sits the temple itself, tiled to look like it's roofed in bamboo.

But come back to the enclosing plaza. Other walled curves come to mind, like Bernini's colonnade in Rome, the one embracing the piazza in front of St. Peter's. But the plaza in Beijing is no social space, no place for a shepherd's flock. This is a place where geometry symbolizes the Chinese world, where the capital stands at the center of creation and reaches outward through an infinite number of rays to the rest of the world. One of those rays came straight to Hengdi, which was suddenly transformed from the remotest and poorest of settlements to a landscape with the purity of an idea.

The next day my companions were busy with official conversations, and the Zhenxiong magistrate took pity on me and provided a jeep for a quick trip some 15 miles north of town to a feature I had spotted on a large-scale map: a good-sized river that simply stopped at a mountain where, I suspected, there must be a huge sinkhole.

The driver took me north over a summit covered with small white hydrangeas; we descended to the paddy-filled valley of the White Water River. It turned out to be a good-sized stream that ran for perhaps ten miles through a broad paddy-filled valley. Then the river headed straight for a hillside, where it did indeed disappear into a huge sinkhole called Falling Water Cave. The mouth of the cave was perhaps a hundred feet wide and half that high; the cliff behind it rose a hundred feet more before breaking away to a gentler slope. The water, I was told, emerged some dozen miles downstream; some local boys had dared to swim it.

Should I be embarrassed to admit that I thought that it would be a fine place for a luxury hotel, if only the logistics weren't so difficult? I certainly said no such thing the next day, when I had a brief meeting with the Zhenxiong magistrate. It was in a big room in the guesthouse. A dozen aides were scattered around the overlarge perimeter; they all held clipboards and stood ready to provide details.

The magistrate was a vigorous man with a Russian degree in chemical engineering. He explained that Zhenxiong County's number one priority was expansion of the traditional silkworm business. The silk factory here in Zhenxiong Town, he said, was working well below capacity; the solution was to get more peasants growing silkworms and to introduce silkworm nurseries and a big-leaf variety of mulberry. Meanwhile, he wanted to increase corn and wheat production, chiefly by applying lime to the fields. (Liming the fields may sound bizarre in this land of limestone, but so much coal is burned that the rain acidifies the soil.) He was keen on improved pigs, especially since nearly every one of the county's 200,000 farming households already had a pig. And he wanted forestry: he explained that a third of the county had been forested in 1949 but that by 1974 forest cover had fallen to four percent. Now it was back to 10 percent, and he wanted that number to grow one percent annually.

Foreign aid would help, but he would continue the reforestation work with or without it: "We've got to do it," he said.

He finished and waited for my comments. I think now of all the things I might have said. I might have spoken about Luk Keng and how the last terraces were fading from Hong Kong. I might have told the magistrate about the phantom farmers of Malaysia, too. I might have spoken about the kinds of farming that were replacing them. You only have to travel two hours from Pinang, for example, to see the Muda Scheme, up near Aloh Setar. It's Malaysia's equivalent of California's San Joaquin Valley: everything is straight, including the edges of the paddy fields, the ditches carrying irrigation water, and the roads. Everything is on a grand scale, from the 250,000 irrigated acres of the scheme as a whole down to the individual paddies, each one covering thirty to fifty acres—huge by Asia's traditional standards.

I might have generalized and said that I saw two trends sweeping across the Asian countryside. One was that the prime farmlands of Asia--the great plains of the Punjab, of the Ganges, and of the Yellow River, as well as the valleys of the Irrawaddy, the Chao Phraya, and the Mekong, were going to look more and more like American farms. They would become square, huge, nearly monocropped, and so heavily treated with chemicals that they would stink throughout the growing season. The traditional Asian village in such places would gradually be replaced by scattered houses built by farmers living on the increasingly large and consolidated blocks of land they would cultivate; most of the villagers, whose lives had been these fields, would drain away (I like the hydraulic metaphor) to the great reservoirs that we call cities.

At the same time, I might have said, the Luk Kengs of Asia would disappear: there would be phantom farmers everywhere. Steeply terraced or remote lands would gradually be abandoned to scrub and secondary forest. A colleague of mine calls it "social fallow." He uses that term in describing how the Berbers of Morocco abandon their terraced Atlas retreats for the lure of Casablanca.

The magistrate, a practical man by any standard, would have been puzzled. "So what?" he might well have asked. What's wrong with these things you see in the future? Intensification is just what we want, and the retirement of unneeded and economically marginal land is perfectly reasonable.

And then what would I have said? I would have had to go back to Sir Francis Bacon, that trumpeter of a new world. "The end of our foundation," Bacon had written, "is the knowledge of causes and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible." The language is archaic, but Bacon's idea is the tap root of the modern world, whether you consider our behavior or the landscapes we create.

In the ruins of scholasticism, Bacon had urged us to reject vain speculation and “whatsoever is empty and void, and to preserve and augment whatsoever is solid and fruitful.” A line of intellectual descent extends from those words to the Enlightenment, to the Utilitarians, and in our own time to the faceless experts upon whom we depend for nearly all things--things whose workings we no longer understand. In the name of knowledge “solid and fruitful,” we now have foresters who grow trees like cabbages, orchardists whose citrus groves look in the distance like golf-course turf, and horticulturalists who under a chemical cloud draw breath enough yet to brag about the wonders of modern agriculture.

I might have told the magistrate that in the West the weakness of the Baconian philosophy was well understood. I could have pointed to the great Victorian critics, among them John Henry Newman. He had been no foolishly categorical enemy of Bacon. He had written that the “mission” of Bacon’s philosophy “was the increase of physical enjoyment and social comfort,” and he conceded our debt to this man and his “method whereby bodily discomforts and temporal wants are to be most effectually removed from the greatest number ... [while] the gifts of nature ... [are] brought even to our doors.” Yet Newman would also go on to say that in seeking “the increase of physical enjoyment and social comfort” Bacon had “aimed low,” and when Newman wrote that the philosopher had “fulfilled his conception and his design” he chose his words carefully. This fulfillment, Newman had written, had been done “most wonderfully, most awfully.”

“Awfully” in what sense? I might have invoked Matthew Arnold, remote as he now seems, though to me yet admirable. Arnold, too, had been prepared to concede much to Bacon: “How necessary,” Arnold would write, “is the present great movement towards wealth and industrialism, in order to lay broad foundations of material well-being for the society of the future.” Yet what a colossal error it was, Arnold went on, to imagine that such progress was sufficient to produce a great society. “Never,” Arnold wrote, “did people believe anything more firmly than nine Englishmen out of ten at the present day believe that our greatness and welfare are proved by our being so very rich.” It was not so, Arnold argued: the England of his day would, a hundred years in the future, “excite the love, interest, and admiration of mankind” far less than the England of Elizabeth, “when our coal, and our industrial operations depending on coal, were very little developed.” On that point, Arnold has probably been proven wrong, simply because we are the children of the Victorians—the Philistines—he condemned. It is still true, as it was in Arnold’s time, that “faith in machinery is our besetting danger,” for we treat it “as if it had a value in and for itself.” We may still ask, with Arnold, what man is to do, “after he has made himself perfectly comfortable.”

I might have told the magistrate how these discontents had expressed themselves not only in the religious faith of Newman and in Arnold’s devotion

to what he called culture, but also in the romantic conception of the natural world as a place whose value transcended its worth as a storehouse of resources. That would have brought me, I suppose, to Wordsworth and a Nature that is our

best and purest friend; from her receives
That energy by which he seeks the truth,
From her that happy stillness of the mind
Which fits him to receive it when unsought.

From lines such as these, I might have said, the wilderness preservation movement had been born. From lines such as these an American Congress had, almost against its considered judgment, been led to create a Yellowstone Park, a Yosemite, and dozens more. Lines such as these, I might have said, had made it possible for some governments to ban outdoor advertising and to prohibit land uses that, though profitable, spoiled the beauty of the countryside. Lines such as these had inspired planners and designers from the days of Ebenezer Howard and his garden cities to Frank Lloyd Wright and his antiurban utopia, Broadacre. True, such plans had rarely been implemented, but the same romantic inspiration had led stockbrokers to buy New England farms and millions of Americans to buy suburban homes. Every advertising agency on Madison Avenue knew the power of appeals to Nature.

I might have turned to Asia and said that the Baconian philosophy had taken deep root there through the British administrators who, early in the nineteenth century, had consciously made India a laboratory in which to implement a grand experiment on utilitarian principles. English had been introduced as a medium of instruction, and with it a whole intellectual universe had been transplanted. Engineers would soon be trained on the banks of the Ganges, and they would be followed by agronomists and social planners. None of these institutions would disappear with the end of the Raj; indeed, they would be coupled to and reinforced by new international organizations--the World Bank, for example, but even earlier than that the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, which was created even before the British left India. A conference had been held in 1943 to organize the FAO, and the resolution passed at its conclusion called for "the uninterrupted development and most advantageous use of agricultural and other material resources." The phrase sounds trite now, but that is so only because it is so perfectly Baconian in content, so much a part of what has become our mode of thinking.

The magistrate might well have said that China had never been colonized, but I then would have asked him what air he had breathed in Moscow. Where had Chinese Communism come from, if not from a German intellectual who labored in the British Museum and lay buried a few miles from it now? What was the great tradition of scientific socialism, if not the application of Baconian

rationality to the entire domain of social organization and the relations of nature and society?

What Asia needed was an equivalent to the Victorian critics. Perhaps that equivalent might be found in such traditional beliefs as Taoism or the geomancy still practiced in Hong Kong. Perhaps, alternatively, China's great traditions of landscape painting could be considered not only as the stuff of high culture but also as an inspiration for contemporary land-use planning. No need for Wordsworth here: every magistrate in China needed only to be taken out to the Ming Tombs, where--particularly in the ruined ones, not those that have been restored--one is taught a lesson on the grandest scale about form and siting. Burial mounds, forests, enclosing walls, and gates: all come together in these tombs to create a cosmic axis upon which one can stand and feel the oneness of the earth.

What would be the result of such a cultural reformation in China? The magistrate of Zhenxiong would work to preserve the character of his county's traditional landscape. He would seek to control urban encroachment on the countryside, might control the use of materials other than limestone and perhaps mud brick in Zhenxiong's villages, might insure that landscape architects were involved in plans for new roads and power lines. He would seek the infrastructure to support tourism and wonder how to tax tourists and plow the revenue back to subsidize traditional practices.

Of course I said none of this. I said not a word about Sir Francis Bacon or his critics. Not a word about efforts to preserve the aesthetic qualities of the Western countryside or about Western ideas taking root in Asia. I said not a word about the need for a reaction to those ideas, or about the techniques the Chinese might use to preserve their own countryside. Not a word, I say: I did not want to appear the fool. What I did say, I have forgotten, and I am sure that everyone else who was in that room has, too. Looking back, I am inclined to think that we not only stand on the shoulders of our most important intellectual ancestors but go blindly wherever they take us.

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