

The Ecology of Our Lives*

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This past summer I had the good fortune to spend a few days in Zhenxiong, a county in northernmost Yunnan. It is only 300 miles from the provincial capital, Kunming, but the road was mostly unpaved and muddy, so it was a two-day trip through increasingly mountainous countryside. Our progress grew slower and slower, yet the increasingly mountainous countryside became paradoxically more and more intensively cultivated, until finally we were going up and down steep ridges covered top to bottom with winter-wheat stubble and new crops of corn, potatoes, and the local cash crop, tobacco.

Zhenxiong is a Poor Area. That official designation sounds harsh to ears long massaged by euphemisms, but there's a lot to be said for Chinese bluntness. We saw many small coal mines in Zhenxiong, fongle, and from their mouths teenage boys emerged with wicker panniers loaded with a hundred pounds of watermelon-sized chunks of coal. We stopped at one such mine. A half-dozen boys were building their own stacks of coal, neatly separate, because this is piece work. They told us that the coal face was 300 steps down through a tunnel barely large enough to allow a single person to pass. How much better—more honest—to call it a “poor area” than a “disadvantaged” one!

A few hundred yards below this mine, we visited a farmstead with naked and severely malnourished children. Their dire poverty would make them in a few years into prime candidates for jobs in the mines. We were in a township of 4000 people who had no electricity, no telephones (except three for official use), and no bus service. Everyone lived in nearly windowless limestone houses that were dark even in midday and which, at an elevation of 6,000 feet, were heated even during summer nights with unvented coal stoves. The smoke filled everyone's lungs before filtering through the roof thatch.

Yet to my eyes the Zhenxiong countryside was beautiful: with its high relief and variety of crops it was more densely, more opulently beautiful than the famous paddy lands of Guilin, let alone the drier plains of North China. Half seriously and half in self-mockery, I told a friend that a Bali-style country hotel could be a smashing success here. He pointed out the difficulties of access and supply, and both of us I suppose had visions of helicopter landing pads, satellite dishes, and designer boutiques. Still, the beauty of the place was such that a country hotel *could* have been a smashing success. I felt that I was looking at a painting through whose magical frame I could step into the sublime silence of the preindustrial age.

The county magistrate had a portfolio of development plans. It did not include luxury hotels. Still, I have begun to think it odder and odder that the preservation of this cultural landscape--and others like it, which dot the "poor areas" of the world--figures hardly at all in the development plans of the foreign-aid agencies at work in China or elsewhere. If I, or anyone else, speaks of the need to preserve such landscapes, development professionals put on their stern faces of earnest "poverty alleviators." How much beauty is there, they will demand to know, in lugging baskets of coal all day long? The implication is that the desire to preserve these places is about as reactionary as the Frenchmen who lost their heads in 1789.

This rebuke, however, seems to me to be as foolish as the comments heard not so long ago from supporters of oil development in Alaska, who told us that if we did not want that oil we could "freeze in the dark." We knew that theirs was a false dichotomy, though a useful one in an age of political simplification. Yet when it comes to preserving cultural landscapes, we have succumbed to another false dichotomy, as though the alternative to clodhopping development is destitution. The economic planners of Tuscany and Provence might, by this bizarre logic, regret that 50 years ago they didn't welcome factories making carbon black and petrochemicals. The truth is that there are many places doing far better with cultural preservation than they would if they had eagerly welcomed the arrival of Coketown.

The Chinese are as guilty of this as anyone. After all, they're emerging from a Marxist world in which there's nothing more beautiful than a foundry, unless it's a turbine. For us, the chief impediment is that we approach landscape conservation as a scientific matter, rather than an esthetic one. It has been politically useful to do so: environmentalists don't want to be laughed at more than anyone else, and it's easy to argue for the preservation of tropical rain forests on the grounds that they are the home of wonder drugs or because they are crucial to nutrient cycling and atmospheric stability. At least it's easier to do that than base the argument on esthetics or emotions or--gasp!--feelings. But in doing their best to appear like guys who eat steak, not quiche, environmentalists have ignored or hidden or denied the fact that their real motivation is that preservation is good for the human soul, especially in a culture with precious little stability, either social or environmental. The price we all pay for choosing the easy path and the dishonest one is when it comes to the preservation of cultural landscapes the modern environmentalist or ecologist is speechless. These places have no endangered species, have no essential role in stabilizing the global "machine." They are only extraordinarily beautiful places, places that make us feel good.

This was all encapsulated for me recently when I was reading that wonderful book, Nirad Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (MacMillan, 1952). Chaudhuri spends a great deal of time--more than 100 dense pages--talking about the villages of his childhood. (There cannot be many

autobiographies in which the author does not get to his own birth until page 129.) And toward the end of that lovingly detailed introductory section, Chaudhuri writes of the need to describe yet one more place, a place that had a role, as he puts it, in "the ecology of our lives."

I stopped dead at that phrase. It was unidiomatic. Who else has used the word that way, I asked myself. And yet a moment later it seemed to me that Chaudhuri was exactly right--that the word can indeed be used as he was using it. Where we have gone wrong (and here I leave Chaudhuri, who pushes the matter no further) is to value the ecology of everything except *our* lives. After all, the day may well come when poverty no longer exists in the Zhenxions of this world. How will we feel when we are all well-off enough to know what we have lost? We will not look back with pride on the development manias of an earlier day, when experts had no time to preserve the places in which human beings, having lived in them for centuries, feel most at home. The destruction of those places will then seem in retrospect like the height of wantonness. What we as human beings need in the midst of a plethora of environmental campaigns, is, in the words of old-time politicians, a little equal time.

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