Toward a Beautiful Rural Life

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Jenny Chio's book ***A Landscape of Travel: The Work of Tourism in Rural Ethnic China*** attracted me because of its connection to my current research project at the Rachel Carson Center. One of the reasons for this is that we share the same research area—southwest China. My own research focuses on the changing landscape of ethnic minority villages in Sichuan Province; Chio's book tells a story of two ethnic minority villages located in Guangxi and Guizhou provinces respectively. Together, these are three important places in southwest China. Another main reason is that we are both interested in how minority peoples' living environments and everyday lives have changed and been shaped by the influences which have come from China's rapid urbanization and economic development during the last nearly four decades.

The two communities that Chio's fieldwork focuses on in *A Landscape of Travel* are Ping'an, a Zhuang village in Guangxi province, and Upper Jidao, a Miao village in Guizhou province. Chio describes everyday life in the two villages, informing our understanding of tourism by offering a portrayal of the tourist encounter from the perspective of the aboriginal "host" communities. That unique angle is valuable because most available documents and literatures relating to the study of rural tourism in China are from the perspective of decision-makers, planners, managers, or even economists. These perspectives only consider the political or economic benefit to mainstream society, but the aboriginal "host" communities—village residents—have mostly been ignored. It is rare to find research that really focuses on how village residents feel about tourism and how tourism has changed their everyday lives and shaped new ethnic identities for them. However, the aboriginal "host" community is precisely one of the most important groups driving social development. As such, *A Landscape of Travel* provides a lot of essential elements and methodologies for an academic at the initial stages of a research project, like me. It encouraged me focus my research on the ethnic village itself and its residents to find an appropriate way to help them.

My first encounter with cultural landscapes in China occurred on a cold and wet February day in 2014, when I visited a mountainous ethnic minority village in Mabian Yi Autonomous County, Sichuan province. I was deeply struck by the conflict between the beautiful natural environment and the unexpected evidence of human-made destruction: the flow of rivers was disrupted by dams used by small privately owned hydropower plants; mountains and hills had been cut open for mining. A few new but ugly “modern” concrete buildings stood alongside hundreds of old, run-down Chinese vernacular buildings which nevertheless had a much more harmonious relationship with the natural environment around them.

My experience in Sichuan echoed Chio’s findings. Although minority peoples’ understandings of ethnic identity are becoming increasingly blurred, there are still a few indigenous Yi people who have a strong ethnic consciousness, and I met one: Mr. Jiang, curator and chair of the Yi minority cultural center in Mabian Yi Autonomous County. Mr. Jiang’s original Yi name is 曲比兴义, but he also has a Han name, Jiang (蒋), so as to better communicate with China’s Han majority. Curator Jiang was clearly very proud of his cultural background and was working enthusiastically to safeguard and carry on Yi culture. He sought to showcase Yi culture to the nation and even the world. Not only was he endeavoring to find out everything he could about traditional Yi customs and record them, he was also trying very hard to learn both the Han language and computer skills, so he could communicate about the Yi people to “the outside world.”

As we studied the village we realized that most Yi indigenous people do not understand how predominant their culture is. And many of them, especially of the younger generation, are looking to leave the old and “backward” villages to live in modern cities. They don’t care about their ethnic identity but rather would like to become, or at least live like, Han people and never want return to their home village again. This phenomenon means that it is becoming increasingly difficult for the Yi minority group to maintain its great and unique culture, which is vanishing.

Although the future is not promising for the traditional nature of Chinese rural ethnic villages, the central government has made large capital investments in infrastructure in rural areas over the past decade to improve living conditions in ethnic villages. One of the latest local examples is “New Yi Villages” (彝族新寨). These are large government-built residential areas, which house Yi families who originally lived scattered across mountains or valleys. Everything is new: new buildings, new livelihoods, new social relationships—new lives. The indigenous Yi people are given the chance to buy their home

cheaply from the government, but most lose the sense of belonging they once had. Their new house may be “beautiful” but it is not in harmony with the natural environment as their traditional buildings are. The traditional wooden Yi house, for example, has a fireplace in the center of the living room—it is literally the center of traditional Yi life. But for safety reasons, the new structures are not only made of concrete but also lack a fireplace inside. That design style has wreaked havoc on Yi family life and has been widely criticized. But the government has not accepted such feedback and continues to promote the “New Yi Villages” as a model for ethnic minority villages around the country.

In her book *A Landscape of Travel*, author Jenny Chio describes how most of these “New Socialist Countryside” sites have become tourist attractions, especially in ethnic minority areas in southwest China. The “New Socialist Countryside” is not just about rural tourism—it is one of the key national policies intended to modernize rural areas and widely enhance rural living conditions. But there have been increasing demands over the past decade for Chinese tourists to go to China’s ethnic minority villages to experience “difference”: the bucolic rhythms, quaint villages with unique architecture, clean water, clear air, expansive views, colorful songs, dances, and clothing—which are precisely the rich resources that most ethnic villages in southwest China have. That is why rural tourism has become one of the most significant ways to build the “New Socialist Countryside” around China. Studying this phenomenon in *A Landscape of Travel*, Chio tries to understand “how rural ethnic Chinese village residents make sense of their livelihood and formulate new aspirations” (xxvi). As with my experience in Mabian Yi Autonomous County, Chio found that most minority people in Ping’an and Upper Jidao villages have gradually abandoned their traditional agricultural way of life, and now it seems that the only way for them to make a living is by “doing tourism” (“*gao lüyou*”). Additionally, after China’s post-2012 political retrenchment and economic downturn, more and more people, not only tourists but also investors, have shifted their interest from the city to the countryside. In fact, tourism has become the pillar industry for Chinese ethnic villages seeking to develop their economy. This “rural tourism” is often referred to as *nong jia le* (农家乐), which Chio translates as “peasant family happiness.” This kind of tourism business normally “involve[s] family-run rural guesthouse, rural-themed restaurants, and the experience of relaxation and leisure in a rural, homey environment” (xix). As Jenny Chio says, “What did the building of a New Socialist Countryside and this attention to rural life mean for the residents of Ping’an and Upper Jidao villages? Were village residents satisfied with the ideas and suggestions put forward in government policy?” (xix)

The questions Chio asks are relevant not only in the two villages she studied and the villages I visited, but in almost every rural ethnic village in China. Certainly it is hard to promote rural tourism to a village if it is not, in fact, different from other villages. The homogenization of, and thus the competition between, domestic rural ethnic villages for tourists has therefore become a serious concern. And learning how to be ethnic and rural enough to attract tourists seeking "difference," while simultaneously offering a sufficient level of comfort for urban visitors, is a constant challenge—and a significant one. Chio's *A Landscape of Travel* takes the "host" as the actor, which means she tries to analyze how village residents themselves modify their visual environment and everyday life to achieve their economic and social goals. That is one of the reasons the book is so worthwhile for both academics and ordinary readers.