Landscapes of Identity: Famous Views in Linfen, Then and Now

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the first part of an exploration into the history and meaning of landscapes, based on a case study of the “must-see” scenic spots or Eight Views (bajing 八景) of Linfen County in the south of China’s Shanxi province. County histories not only include poems and travel accounts describing these places, but often also, from the eighteenth century onwards, images representing them. They are thus well documented places, which makes it possible to trace fragments of their history and draw conclusions about the relationship between humans and their physical environment. This part of the study focuses on how the physical environment interlocked with the historical heritage of a place to form a cultural landscape that gave identity and meaning to a place and its people.

KEYWORDS

Cultural Landscapes, Eight Views (Bajing), Fenxi (China), Identity, Linfen (China), Man-Land Relations, Recreation

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1657, little more than a decade after the Qing had established themselves as the new rulers of China, Li Sewei 李色蔚, an official in-waiting from the eastern province of Zhili, was appointed magistrate of Fenxi, a small, mountainous county at the margins of the Fen River valley in southern Shanxi.1 Apparently he did not consider this to be a particularly enviable posting, but people assured him that “while Fenxi may be a small place, it has the Guye Mountains in the west and the Fen River in the east, and thus its scenery belonged to the finest in the country.” He was told that the county’s tax income was high and its land fertile, that its numerous people were wealthy and even extravagant, and that they had exquisite food to eat and magnificent houses to live in (Jiang, ed., 1674, j.8:4b). While this may or may not have been true at some point during the height of the preceding Ming dynasty, the reality Li encountered was very different. Wherever he looked he found desolation and misery, hungry people survived on grass and chaff. After severe famines in 1584, 1599-1601, 1632-1633, and 1640-1641, locust plagues and the warfare of the final years of the Ming that had lingered on until the end of the 1640s (Jiang, ed., 1674, j.7:11b-12a), the county was utterly devastated. The extant population data may serve as an indicator of the degree of devastation. Local records give the figure of 23,642 for the county’s adult male population in 1609. The figure for 1659 was 3,725 (Jiang, ed., 1674, j.3:8b), nearly 85 percent less. There may be questions about the reliability of these figures, but there is little doubt that the loss was tremendous. As in many places across the country, the mid-century disasters had left many villages deserted, the agricultural economy destroyed, and the educated elite virtually eliminated (Parker, 2008, p.1059).

Li Sewei was certainly not entirely unprepared, but still, his own account of his experiences suggests that when he arrived in Fenxi he struggled to cope with the situation. “Did these people fool
me?” he asked. Through enquiries with a local scholar he learned that the favorable descriptions he had been offered originated in the previous edition of the local history, which dated back to the year 1600, nearly 60 years ago. But even these were found to “follow appearances and miss the reality” (循名失實). What Li then did was to immerse himself in this old history in an attempt to overcome his “inability to find comfort in the present by searching for the sentiment of the past” (不勝撫今, 追昔之感). He used memories of past splendor to make the reality more bearable, before embarking on his own local history project as a first step to rebuild the community (Jiang, ed., 1674, j:8:4b). This new history would instill in its readers a profound sense of the pristine poverty of the people in a remote mountainous county – a cry from the image of prosperity the late Ming history had conveyed. He spent a couple of months to search for the “remnants of the old”: the loyal and filial, the virtuous and public-minded among the few remaining people, but all he found was that “the mountains and rivers were the same, but the people had changed” (山川如故，人民已非), a phrase that captured both hope and despair. Among all the material destruction and moral decay there was only the landscape – the mountains and rivers – that could provide a sense of continuity and ground for optimism.2

For Li the mountains and rivers provided the continuity people in Fenxi needed to be able to reconnect to earlier times of prosperity and restore a proper moral order. In his mind at least the seemingly unscathed landscape provided the foundation for a new start. It reminded the people of the potential of the place – and thus also of their own potential. Using another proverbial phrase, the introduction to the section on “Mountains and Rivers” in the local history unmistakably makes this point: “The greatness of man lends glory to a place, and it is man who brings to light the qualities of the land.” Reversely, “the lofty mountains sent down a spirit that produced the princes Fu and Shen,” who went on to become famous ministers early in the Zhou dynasty.3 That is, it is a magnificent landscape that has the potential to produce great people. The conclusion is easily drawn: “Man depends on the land for his livelihood. Man and land shine on each other, only together they are great.” It is this reciprocity that produced landscapes that not only reflected the achievements of human civilization, but also unfailingly generated them: “Therefore these polished mountains and rivers gloriously generate culture, generate virtue and moral integrity, with the accuracy of scientific instruments.” Thus the civilizational potential of a place was reflected in the beauty of its landscape. Now, Li – assuming it was him who had drafted this text originally – realized that Fenxi did not boast any famous mountains or great rivers, but, even though quite far away, there still was the Fen River in the east and the Guye Mountains in the west. “Were these not also extremely precious views?” (Jiang, ed., 1674, j:1:又5a). The local history that eventually got printed in 1674 includes a list of Fenxi’s Eight Views or ba jing 八景, famous scenic spots, splendid landscapes that, if one follows Li’s reasoning, were meant to reflect the great potential of the place and its people. The list is headed by the Guye Mountains and the Fen River – both depicted on a sketch map of the county’s mountains and rivers (Figure 1). The map is unlabeled, but the section on “Mountains and Rivers” identifies two mountain ranges to the West of the city, the Guye Mts at a distance of 60 li (ca 30 km) and the Shengshui Mts 聖水山 at a distance of 50 li. The former has an old Shrine of the Immortal (仙人祠) and a more recent Hall of the Northern Sky (真武殿), so one of the mountains with temples on them to the west of the walled town must be the Guye Mts, likely the one with the peak in clouds. The one with the big trees on it matches the depiction of the Shengshui Mts, the site of the third view. The Fen River flows past Fenxi in the east, though at a far greater distance than the map seems to suggest. There is another mountain in the north, and together with the Fen River and a few smaller waterways they almost encircle the county town. The northern end of the mountains and the Fen River are shrouded in numinous clouds, emphasizing the auspicious atmosphere created by the landscape. The six remaining views are all related to water sources.3

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