Landscapes of Production-Landscapes for Consumption

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the second 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. While the first part focused on the value of these iconic landscapes as sources of identity, here I will show how their aesthetic appreciation is intrinsically linked to their productive power. I argue that it was largely the idea of productivity that made these landscapes amenable for aesthetic consumption and viable as sources of identity and meaning. It was the inherent instability of these productive aspects that made their aesthetic appreciation even more significant, as it ultimately depended on the precarious balance between the two.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetic Appreciation, Cultural Landscapes, Eight Views (Bajing), Linfen (China), Man-Land Relations, Productivity

INTRODUCTION

When Li Sewei, upon taking office as magistrate of the destitute county of Fenxi (see part one of this study), took solace in the mountains and rivers, what he saw in his mind’s eye was of course not untouched “nature.” Rather, what made the seemingly unchanging landscape magnificent and a potent source of civilizational continuity was the fact that it embodied the vital energy that was needed to make the land productive again to serve the well-being of man. As his preface to his own version of the local history reveals, behind his appreciation of mountains and rivers was the aesthetics of a productive landscape that would provide the material basis for a new civilizational beginning. In practical terms, agriculture had to be encouraged in the deserted mountain areas and plans to build an irrigation infrastructure were drawn up (Jiang, ed., 1674, j.7:6b).

The understanding of (the Eight Views ...) as a genre of poetry and painting seemingly representing landscapes for their aesthetic and recreational value with only a faint connection to the actual physical environment appears to pay little attention to the material underpinning of this idea. In their outline of the history of the genre, Li Kairan et al. argue that through the representation in poetry and paintings the Eight Views gradually turned into imagined scenes and that the actual landscapes appeared no longer relevant. Still, they see them as representations of real landscapes (as opposed to imagined “views”) in need of protection and observe that often those that survived in modern times did so because they became part of one of China’s national parks established from the 1980s. In their analysis of 100 sets of Eight Views they find that the majority were representing “nature” (60.5%), “religion” (51.1%), and “history” (30.5%), while only very few (8.7%) were showing “work settings, such as farmland during harvest” (Li et al., 2010), which would seem to undermine the idea of productivity as the basis of their appreciation. However, the Linfen case study at least seems to tell a different

DOI: 10.4018/IJPPPHCE.2017070102

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story. Even though the visual and poetic representations of Linfen’s Views primarily convey a sense of their aesthetic value, they also provide a glimpse of the actual physical features and practical uses of the places they relate to.

Serving as a source of the people’s livelihood to some extent jeopardizes the idea of an unchanging landscape. But this idea of unchanging mountains and rivers providing a sense of civilizational continuity also reflects an awareness of the existential dependence on the physical environment. I would like to argue that it was precisely the fact that these views represented productive landscapes that made them not only valuable in a material sense, but also aesthetically attractive. It was largely their productive potential that created the condition for an aesthetic appreciation of these landscapes in the first place and that made the views valuable as sources of identity and meaning. They were to be enjoyed and consumed by man. Packaged in sets of scenic views, productive landscapes were created for aesthetic consumption mainly by literati travelers.

LITERATI OUTINGS AND THE AESTHETIC OF PRODUCTIVE LANDSCAPES

Linfen’s most popular destination for spring outings was the Dragon Son Temple marking the site of the Dragon Son Springs at the foot of Mount Ping, a foothill of the Guye Mountains – a celebrated water resource, feeder of a large irrigation system, and efficient site for rain prayers. The earliest extant description of the place is by Mao Hui 毛麾, a jinshi [i.e. graduate of the highest imperial examinations] of 1176. He describes how in Song times (960-1279) the spring water irrigated several hundred qing [1 qing roughly equals 6.67 ha] of land, powered more than one hundred mills, and formed Lake Ping further down east (Xing, ed., 1696, j.9:11b-12b). Since that time at least playful outings to the temple area as well as to Lake Ping were commemorated in countless poems. In one poem visitors from the capital are mentioned who in their praise of the site went as far as comparing it favorably to Hangzhou’s famous West Lake (Xing, ed., 1696, j.9:68a). But the Dragon Son Springs area was by far not only a place for the occasional elite visitor. Much more important was its extraordinary fertility that was such that it was described as a place where “the farmers enjoy the gods” (Xing, ed., 1696, j.9:69a). Thanks to the springs that were hot springs (maintaining an average temperature of 18 degrees Celsius even in winter), cucumbers, bamboo shoots and a couple of other crops ripened earlier than elsewhere, and garlic shoots (蒜芽) were a special produce of the area (Liu, ed., 1933, j.2:43a).

But even in Mao Hui’s time, he had reason to delve in melancholic thoughts about a more prosperous past. He recalls the rich vegetation and extraordinary scenery for which the site was famous in the past. People used to go there to harvest lotus flowers and catch fish. In spring the governor as well as the common people from near and far came to visit – the temple fair, one assumes. Then it became a busy place, “filled with the sound of flutes and drums, where carriages and horses met each other.” However, by the time Mao Hui was writing war had devastated the place. For more than forty years people had hoped to restore the site to its former glory, but nobody had the means to do so – until an outstanding official remedied the situation. A certain magistrate Huang had not only the temple rebuilt, but also added a fish pond in front of it, a promenade, and the Qingyin or Pure Sound Pavilion (Xing, ed., 1696, j.9:11b-12b). The latter was a frequent topic of poems in the Ming (1368-1644) and later. This setting came pretty close to the idyllic water-rich place in the midst of a dry environment shown in one of the Eight Views (see Figure 4 in part one of this study) – and it offers a striking contrast to the photos shot by Japanese researchers in 1941 (Figure 1).

The latest poem to mention Lake Ping seems to be “An Outing to Lake Ping on the Shangsi Festival” (上巳日遊平湖) by the Ming scholar Zhang Yu 张宇 (Xing, ed., 1696, j.9:71a-b). The area of what is today Bozhuang 伯莊 or “swamp estate” village to the west of the city of Linfen is deemed to have been the site of the lake in earlier times (see Figure 6 in part one of this study). The fact that Lake Ping had ceased to exist by Qing times suggests how potentially problematic and conflictual the scarcity of water had become (Janku, 2007, p.285). It is also a reminder of the vulnerability of Shanxi’s arid environment. Not only the temple needed to be rebuilt and maintained, but also the
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