Chapter 6

Landscapes and Local Identity: The Eight Views of Linfen

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ABSTRACT

This chapter 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 (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 18th 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.

INTRODUCTION

A little while ago the Shanxi Museum in Taiyuan acquired a handscroll, 52 cm high and 872 cm long, featuring the Eight Views of Linfen, a county located in the Fen River valley in the South of Shanxi province. According to its preface (dated 1614) the scroll was created to commemorate the benevolent rule of Hu Xinming, who was magistrate of Linfen from 1591 to 1595, a period of peace and prosperity, when morality prevailed and the people happily pursued their occupations in a way reminiscent of the golden age of the Three Dynasties. In their leisure time the scholars and gentlemen would wander around at ease, boating on Ping Lake, treading carefully on the bank of the Lao River, walking quietly through the Guye Mountains, contemplating the Western Cliff, angling in the Lao, picking water caltrops in the Yun Springs, tasting the water of the Golden Dragon Pond, and exploring the secrets of the Jade Cave – all made possible through Hu’s enlightened government that let the right morality and the rites and music thrive. This moral quality was reflected in Linfen’s majestic mountains and simple and honest people depicted in every single one of the Eight Views. The authors of a short piece describing and analyzing this scroll rightly ask: Why have these Eight Views not been included in the official literature (Zhao and Wang, 2013, p. 35)?

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Given the crucial role of the ‘mountains and rivers’ of a place in the creation of not only local identity but also of a political *imaginaire* that links the local to the state, this is indeed an intriguing question. While a simple comparison of the chronologies of the creation of the handscroll and the compilation of local histories might provide an initial answer, a closer examination of what I see as an unacknowledged presence of a slightly different set of Eight Views in those histories gives further insight into the ways in which the physical environment became part of a cultural landscape that played a crucial role in the creation of a local identity that was firmly integrated into a larger socio-political and cosmological context. In the second part of this study I will then trace the ways in which the Eight Views as a genre of poetry and painting are linked to the actual physical landscape they represent and how an appreciation of the history of these places can contribute to a heightened awareness of environmental change.

THE GENRE OF THE EIGHT VIEWS

Sets of Eight Views described in poetic four-character phrases can be found in many local histories, usually in the chapters on geography as appendices to the sections on “Mountains and rivers” (*shanchuan* 山川) or “Famous scenic spots and traces of the past” (*mingsheng guji* 名勝古跡). Overview maps often indicate the sites of some if not all of them. Literature chapters abound with poems and travel accounts describing the beauty of these landscapes. From the eighteenth century onwards local histories often include illustrations of the views. Due to their popularity with the literati they are generally well documented places, making it possible to reconstruct fragments of their history and draw conclusions about the relationship between humans and their physical environment. At the same time, it has rightly been assumed that the Eight Views are largely imagined landscapes, representing certain aesthetic and cultural norms designed to create an auspicious aura as well as a sense of identity and belonging for the cultural and political elite. Accordingly, it has been stated that they are significant not because they show any “objective natural features,” but because they “create historical and cultural value.” The genre is thought to represent the “perfect harmony of nature and culture, history and reality,” and it is closely linked to ideas of the harmonious unity of man and nature (天人合一) and geomancy (Zhang, 2003).

All of this suggests that these ideas might be more important in the representations of the Eight Views than any physical reality that they are based on. They follow, to a significant extent, the conventions of a genre and are thus often regarded as an empty form and their historical and geographical value is questioned. To many it seems artificial to assemble exactly eight sites. It is obvious that some were made up and others ignored in order to achieve the required number and spatial structure. This critique is not new, and those voicing it are in illustrious company. Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724-1777) and Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738-1801), probably the most famous, though not the earliest critics of the genre, rejected it on the basis that ultimately “cultural meaning” was at the heart of the Eight Views — a notion much too vague for these icons of eighteenth-century evidential research. Dai Zhen thought of them as fancy and playful descriptions of scenery, a “vulgar practice” (陋習) that denigrated the mountains and rivers. Therefore he advocated the abolition of the Eight Views as a feature of local histories. Zhang Xuecheng criticized the genre because he saw it as “ornamental and unsubstantial” (華而不實). The inclusion of “decorative scenic spots” was one of his Eight Taboos for the compilation of local histories (Zhang, 2003). Later editors of local histories sometimes paid lip service to Dai Zhen’s verdict, but this did not prevent them from preserving their Eight Views all the same. One example is the local history of Hongtong County,