

READ THE LANDSCAPE, READ THE PEOPLE

THE ROLE OF GEOGRAPHY IN TEACHING CHINA

By C. L. Salter

One of the grand romances in American culture is our absolute fascination with Asia, or more exactly, our culture's fascination with China. From children's images of digging a hole into the ground so far that it would come out in China, to images of Chinatowns in most American larger cities (Fig. 1), to parents' exhortations to their children dawdling over food that "there are people in China who would love this meal," to the harsh line from nineteenth-century Chinese immigrant histories that led to the line, "he's not got a Chinaman's chance" when discussing something really bound for failure, the evocation of Chinese images surfaces continually.

When trying to deal with such a broad range of images and interest in a foreign country and a distant culture, it is always difficult to know what filter to utilize to get a clear picture of the world you are attempting to image. In this essay, I have selected the landscape as the prism through which to view the Chinese world because it is the medium that underlies so many of our images of China. It is also the canvas that supports so much of China's success in creating international visions of monumental capacity to deal with the problems of a large population and a reluctant nature.

In trying to capture scenes of the landscapes that will evoke the people who have created such worlds, live in them, and have shaped history from that base, I want to introduce a series of central images that come to the mind of a geographer most quickly when picturing the landscape and people of China. The universe of such images is vast and somewhat idiosyncratic, so I acknowledge at the outset that there are bound to be images omitted that may seem critical to some readers. Recall, as frustration finds

you in the absence of favorite images, that the real message intended here is the power of what can be learned and felt about China or Asia from reading the landscape in China. These chosen images, however, have probably all touched the minds of scholars of all disciplines as they have attempted to comprehend and appreciate the vastness and the richness that has been—and is—China.

"TEACHING WATER": THE MANAGEMENT OF CHINA'S MOST CRITICAL RESOURCE

One of the most all-pervasive landscape images of China is the marshaling of human energy to control water. Whether at the scale of a small mud wall in a narrow canal, diverting water from a main stream into a side channel, or the monumental Three Gorges project on the Chiang Jiang (Yangtze or Yangzi River), the Chinese have devoted enormous human energy and local resources to the management of water.

Not only has such activity been telling—landscape images are always "telling," for they serve as explicit evidence of the human authoring of a landscape signature—about the Chinese patterns of environmental transformation, but such scenes also have major social and political importance. To be able to manage water does not mean simply possessing the engineering skill necessary to dam, channelize, pond, and distribute water. It also means that the management unit has the political authority to be able to set controls on the various political realms of the stream and water network. The implications of such authority are vast because of the potential for disagreements, not in good times when rainfall is abundant, but in bad times when upstream

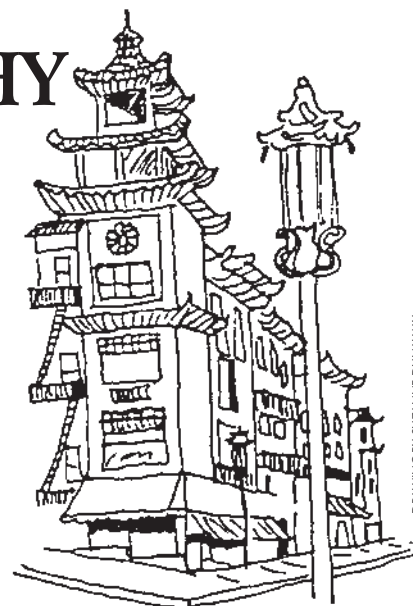


Fig. 1. The exaggerated eaves and temple-like roofs are common signatures of Chinatowns in many Western cities. Sometimes lampposts and even telephone booths are also given Chinese features to help create a stronger image.

units will try to take normal allotments, leaving downstream locales suffering powerfully from having relatively less water. To control water is to control the whole fabric of a farming society.

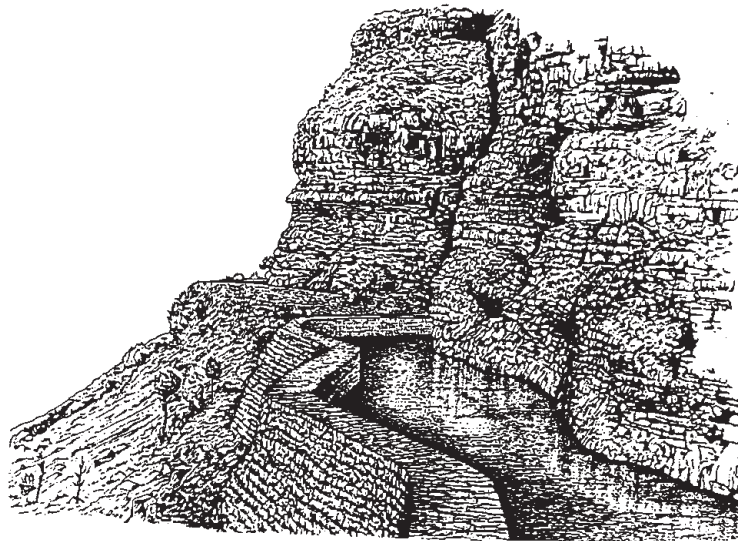
The Chinese phrase "teaching water," (*jiao shui* [or *zhi shui*, "managing water"]) connotes the significant Chinese perception of water as a malleable resource, a facet of nature that can be manipulated, controlled, transformed, and put into human service through human effort. It is not just in the arid Northwest of Xinjiang, or Nei Menggu (Inner Mongolia) that such landscape patterns make evident the Chinese control of water. This trait and skill is also on the arid North China Plain—a region very central to China's annual agricultural production—and even South China. In the well-watered South, water is controlled in concert with the creation of step terraces and the pushing of productive farmland and farm patterns up the slopes of the hill and mountain lands of the region (Fig. 2).

With every decision to create step terraces on the Chinese landscape, there comes an associated—and requisite—pattern of water management. Terraces are designed and constructed to remake the

sometimes highly sloping mountain flanks. To create smaller, level terraces of farmland in the place of traditionally less productive slope land cultivation—ofttimes lands that had been utilized as slash-and-burn agricultural land—means that the Chinese farmers not only had to find the human energy to move land, create level plots, engineer and construct front and back terrace walls (sometimes of stone)—but the engineers of this landscape pattern also had to control water. Slopes that had accommodated heavy slope runoff during the wet season now had to be able to modulate the flow of water, diminishing or concentrating its downslope flow so that the new terraces were not undermined and eroded by regular rainfall patterns.

The benefits in the creation of these terraces was not only in the replacement of slope land by plots of level land, it was also in the enhanced capacity of the soil to accommodate and store moisture. Precipitation falling on level terrace plots had a greater tendency to pond, percolate downward, and to be available in a more productive fashion for whatever crops were planted in the terrace plots. In addition, the likelihood of sheet erosion on the mountain flank—with its attendant erosional impact on the settlements in the stream valleys at the base of the terraced flanks—was also diminished.

This particular landscape signature, created through the wedding of land management and control of water (*zhi shui*) speaks a good deal about the industrious nature of the Chinese people. It manifests their keen sense of the need to make nature accommodate their relentless requirement for not only more land, but also higher levels of production of the land that is already being farmed. This demonstrates the fundamentally practical interest the Chinese have in the transformation of the landscape into ever more effective patterns for the maintenance of large, rural populations. This landscape signature is writ large over virtually all the Chinese agricultural landscape, and it also bespeaks similar cultural patterns in



DRAWING BY NOEL DIAZ

Fig. 2. This illustration shows in great detail the scale of construction and engineering that is sometimes built into the control of water. While major projects are often thought of as requiring work teams of hundreds or even thousands of people, there is also considerable engineering that is required. The graphics in figs. 2 and 3 played an instructional role in the pages of *Chinese Literature* during the 1960s and 1970s.

other parts of Monsoon Asia. In a sense, considerations of the importance of hydraulic skills (and associated hydraulic despotism) derive at least in part from the lessons learned by the Chinese farmers and builders who spent great time and effort in “teaching” or “managing” water.

SELF-RELIANCE IN TASKS OF LANDSCAPE CHANGE

Central to any understanding of the Chinese scene is the centrality of the family unit. In the countryside, the (traditionally extended) family unit is the work force, the decision-making committee, the farmstead defense group, and the insurance program for all associated individuals. In the city, the traditional (less often, but still frequently extended) family is sited in household complexes with courtyards and walls of nondescript stucco and adobe showing to the world, but these walls frequently hide scenes of familial cooperation often characteristic of the urban work and living unit. Key to these two models of existence is self-reliance and, as often as possible, self-sufficiency (Fig. 3).

Peasants traditionally tend to learn early on that the most reliable source of labor is the family which will benefit directly from successful accomplishment of food growing, shelter construction, and

landscape modification. The self-reliance that has been so important to China’s success in making its world productive was learned because of the small scale of the operations of such a large proportion of the farming, home building, and small factory activities. In a society in which the accumulation of major amounts of capital was monumentally difficult, tasks that embraced family-size needs were

made more manageable, and hence, more customary.

Such a pattern begins in the countryside where peasant farmers learned early that land that was better leveled, better irrigated, and better accessed by farm labor was more productive, and any increase in productivity generally brought benefits to all who participated in such efforts. The crafting of fields surrounded and served by controlled water, in a setting of tillable land, regularly enriched with organic fertilizer, and worked with intensity by family labor was a reward for all who gave of themselves in such tasks and achievement.

In the urban setting, similar patterns of broad familial cooperation led to the creation of city households that provided the basis for cottage industry, the quarters for wage-earners of all ages, and local gardening and family maintenance that crossed generational lines. This traditional unit was also self-reliant in that the resources of the city could be engaged at many levels, helping to provide a broad infrastructure for family maintenance and, at least occasionally, prosperity.

Ironically, the landscape signatures of these patterns of self-reliance were not as obvious as the markers of the irrigated world cited above. The Chinese have traditionally been reluctant to proclaim their economic success through showy housing in either the countryside or the city, but careful examination of fields, flower boxes, outbuildings, condition of the waterways, rooftops, and doorways—and stolen views into city courtyards—can all

lead to a better understanding of the power of self-reliance in the Chinese living and working units, urban and rural alike.

Ironically, such self-reliance came to be a major hallmark and goal of the first quarter century of the Maoist regime in China. In the countryside particularly, Mao's leaders called on all villages, all farming units, all rural people, to undertake their own improvement through sheer human force and drive. This relationship between village effort and individual and village success was particularly important during the heyday of the Maoist Revolution in the 1960s (Fig. 4). This quote from the leader of the Dazhai Brigade is particularly instructive.

Even to this day I cannot memorize any quotations from Mao Zedong. But I did have class feelings, and I knew that we did not have enough people to do all the work that needed to be done. We had to get together and we had to work together. And when we did that we transformed our lives.¹

While it may never be possible to truly comprehend the relative success or failure of these campaigns of *zeli gengsheng* (self-reliance) from the 1950s until the mid-1970s, the history of the communist revolution was keenly influenced by Mao's efforts to take the traditional family capacity to fend for itself and transform that perceived national trait into a national capacity for the Chinese to go it alone and "stand on two legs" in the era when China was fundamentally isolated from Western and even Third World support.

THE SMALL RADIUS OF THE TRADITIONAL CHINESE "KNOWN-WORLD"

In reading the landscape to better read the people, the traditional patterns of landscape show worlds within worlds—regions that are made up of nested smaller regions characterized by relative isolation. China's traditional lack of a network of surface transportation—beyond river systems—helps to demonstrate the general pattern of traditional lives being played out within small worlds of birth, upbringing, marriage, and job. Villages have been at the center of these universes for millen-



Fig. 3. The distant terraces and the proximate work team and tractor by the windbreak are all elements of the Chinese agricultural landscape in transformation. *Chinese Literature.*

nia. A traditional Chinese male peasant might venture twenty to forty kilometers to find an appropriate bride, and might have occasion to go to a large town now and again for some scribe work or government requirement, but the great majority of lives were played out within the confines of a universe that had the typical Chinese travel less distance in his or her entire life than a Western urbanite will commute on an average day between home and work. This phenomenon is shown with particular clarity in the fiction of Pearl Buck, and even though her narratives are fiction, there is a traditional reality expressed in her work.

This small known world shows up in the landscape through the traditional absence of a well-developed road network, or even rail network. The pathways that linked farmland with city markets and urban nightsoil resources were always better developed than the larger roadways that were intended to connect the larger regional centers. It has only been in the past four decades that both rail and road networks have begun to be constructed between and among these larger urban places.

One of the most profound impacts of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s was the role it played in changing forever the Chinese capacity to be content with the local environment. In Chairman Mao's call to "go and make revolution" to the youth of China in the second decade after the Communist victory over the Nationalists in 1949, he unleashed the pent-up localism of a Chinese people who almost never traveled out of the home counties or province. Suddenly it was not only acceptable to explore other provinces and their distinctive landscapes, it became virtually mandatory for ambitious youth to undertake such travel. They were granted free passes for railroad trains, buses, even long distance trucks—anything that would bring such travelers into new worlds of the China they had never seen.

The outcome of such a campaign—particularly in conjunction with the "rustication" of the Chinese urban population in the 1950s and 1960s—has been to expand the radius of the known world of the Chinese by a factor of ten, or even a hundred. Youth who came from families that traditionally could chart their spatial life range in dozens of kilometers suddenly gained experiences in regions of China that were profoundly distant and different from their known world. This shift in the past quarter century played a significant role in the increased willingness of the Chinese to experiment with new patterns of culture, economy, and lifestyle.

THE STRONG REGIONAL IMBALANCES IN CHINA'S WEALTH AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

In any cartographic study of China's patterns of economic vitality, levels of personal education, income, or energy use, it becomes graphically apparent that China is enormously imbalanced. The rich expression of all the markers—both positive and negative—of rapid economic development tip profoundly toward the southeast coast, toward major urban centers, toward river valley settlements, and toward the centers that have the strongest links with the Western world.

In the western part of the country, in the hill lands of the southwest, in the arid reaches of Nei Menggu, and the highest

latitudes of the Northeast, economic activity is only a modest percentage of what is now virtually normal for these more prosperous regions. In the countryside, the populations are still seeking evidence of China's "tiger" role in the international press's discussion of the Tigers of East Asia. In the arid Northwest, not only is there a broad lack of clear evidence of strong economic upswing for the region, the demographic shift toward new concentrations of Islamic populations (nearly all of them ethnically Han Chinese) has further compounded the regional imbalance with coastal Southeast China.

These regional distinctions are manifest in the disproportionate numbers of cars, cell phones, neon, and Western dress styles in the more prosperous regions. In the areas seemingly more distant from all of these characteristics, there is a resident frustration in the face of all the talk about the changes that the late Deng Xiaoping fomented with his opening of China's doors to the West and its celebration of free market economics, including abundant financial rewards to the daring and ambitious. Such disparities within the body politic of China have given the Chinese government images of class stratification that evoke the harsh gap between the rich and poor of China so characteristic of the beginning of this century. "What has the Revolution achieved?" is asked by those peoples living outside the domain of rapid growth, outside the regions touched by these signs of economic and cultural change.

THE USE OF THE STREET AS KITCHEN AND SOCIAL SPACE

It is the rural world that so often is the more evocative of Chinese images than is the city. When you realize that China has more urban dwellers than the United States has total population, the city begins perhaps to take on more appropriate importance. The larger cities—and especially the ones in the zones of the most rapid economic growth and change noted above—have a whole suite of customary urban images. These include skyscrapers, enormously crowded sidewalks and streets, as well as gritty air, monumental ceremonial areas, and great crowds of people in business, recreational, and public spaces. But the Chinese use of the



Fig. 4. From 1964 until the late 1970s, the exhortation "In Agriculture, Learn from Dazhai" was carved on stone walls, painted on building walls, written in big character posters, and voiced over radio seemingly endless times. In this illustration the message is carved in stone at an isolated farmstead to remind this family that self-reliance was the way to improve their lives, and to be a part of the larger Maoist Revolution. This comes from the December, 1974 *Chinese Literature*.

street as a social and cooking space is a more unusual hallmark of the place and the people.

Such an image is not central to the most crowded avenues in Chinese cities, but on streets that are more toward the edge of the center of town, and streets that are more residential than commercial, there is a wonderful spring, summer, and fall appearance of small hibachi cookers and both men and women on their haunches, squatting close to these cookers. Working in squatting position most often are ladies with sharp knives, small cutting boards, and deft fingers moving vegetables into and out of the cutting zone of meal preparation. Water boiling, steam escaping, mealtime fragrances, and quiet, steady conversation are the components that make this image a nice marker of the Chinese city. Children will be playing street games near the cook. Some adults will assume casual, wall-leaning

postures and engage in conversation among themselves or with the cook. Occasionally, a shoe repairer, a tea seller, or a fresh fruit vendor will circle close to a few of the street cooks, and banter will flow from person to person in an aimless but socially engaging fashion.

Like so many landscape images of China, once you see a certain scene and begin to think about it, you realize that you have seen it in other Asian places . . . or even in other more distant regions. Like landscape lessons that teach you as much about seeing as they do about the phenomenon being seen, the learning comes in making yourself conscious of regular events of the everyday world that help explain the structure and dynamics of that world.

The street cookers in China remind the viewer of the centrality of food and meals and meal preparation to Chinese culture. The fact that the traditional Chinese greeting is "Have you eaten?" as opposed to our more customary, "How are you?" serves to help us see the importance of this urban street image. Like so many images, it represents a cultural trait that is much larger, much more dominant than the single scene that catches your attention.

THE RAPIDITY OF LANDSCAPE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

While the patterns evoked by the landscape lessons outlined in this essay are, in fact, very real in seeing the patterns of people and place in China, the whole pace of change in the landscape that is China is shifting so rapidly that my final exemplar is one that calls earlier observations into question. The pace with which the most densely settled regions of China—especially those located on major avenues of intercourse with the West—have been changing life styles, and associated landscapes are breathtaking. The development of urban condominiums, of automobile-based commuting patterns, of the domestic stock market (especially, the "red chip" specialties), and the prodigious importance of urban mass consumption of consumer goods is reflected in the most aggressively developing cities in China. While, as noted above in the discussion of



Fig. 5. The signage in Chinese cities is likely to show influences that come from many other worlds. This scene could as soon be a Chinatown with other contesting cultural forces in the United States as it could be a street scene in China. The icons of many nations now stand in garish union in Chinese city scenes.

regional imbalances, there is not an even distribution of these markers of new economic success, the media depiction of the China of the 1990s is focused primarily upon these icons of change (Fig. 5). It is in this landscape of cultural diffusion and cultural adaptation that the signs of the Chinese landscape of the future are to be found.

While the images of this highly urbanized, consumeristic, and free market-dependent Chinese population may seem to fly in the face of many of the earlier images presented in this essay, in fact the energy of the Chinese most deeply involved in this pattern of change shares many of the characteristics noted above in discussion of the more orthodox landscape images. There is a self-reliance in the economic drive of the most successful change agents in contemporary China (and, again, especially in the coastal cities and Hong Kong)—and they often involve their family members as the working group.

There is a highly intensive cultivation of the local resource base of friends, contacts, and information, not unlike the agricultural pattern that has led to images of intricate, well-crafted and engineered, and economically critical artificial terrace systems in the Chinese countryside. The known-world has expanded its radius to not just hundreds of kilometers, but thousands of kilometers through international trading. For the most modern Chinese, such a known world is now the universe upon which their productive effort is focused.

And, although street-side cooking is ever less present in the most rapidly changing urban centers, the importance of golf courses, city parks, cafes, and urban

recreation facilities has taken on a major new significance. Such recreational use of both formal and informal city space has some parallels to the role of the sidewalk hibachi in bringing a streetside negotiation to a productive outcome.

CONCLUSIONS

Cultural lessons abound in the humanized landscape. These lessons are open to anyone who makes an effort to read the scenes and signatures of the artificial environments that serve as the settings for human populations. In this essay, my particular concern has been the consideration of a half-dozen landscape images that are noteworthy in China. By looking at the landscape elements that characterize such scenes, it is possible to begin to better comprehend the people, culture, traditions, and political realities of the peoples who have crafted such landscapes.

The beauty of this “reading” is that geography allows us to study the most dynamic, even dramatic, of all of our primary documents—that is, the cultural or humanized landscape of the world around us. The Chinese have created an artificial world of agricultural, industrial, and urban environments that have been authored with enormous energy, skill, and technical competence. The reading of such works brings us all in closer contact with a primary source of major international significance. ■

NOTES

1. From Chen Yung-gui in Smith, 1991: 71.

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C. L. SALTER is Professor and Chair of the Department of Geography at the University of Missouri, Columbia. He was in the first group of geographers invited to China in 1977. He founded *The China Geographer* in 1975 as a journal for students of the Chinese landscape and has continued his interests in the evolving Chinese scene. His most recent work is the revision of a major text in world regional geography, and he is writing a long section on Human Geography for the National Geographic Society for a new Desk Reference book they are producing.