

Landscapes and Local Identity:

The Eight Views of Linfen

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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: Eight Views (*bajing*), Linfen (China), Landscapes, Man-Land Relations, Identity, Recreation

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.¹ According to its preface (dated 1614) the scroll was created to commemorate the benevolent rule of Hu Xinming 胡忻命, 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.² 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)?

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

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² The handscroll includes a preface by Xing Dadao 邢大道 (*jinsi* 1609), eight paintings showing Linfen’s famous scenic spots, each accompanied by two poems, and two postscripts (the later one dated 2001). The texts and images are reproduced in Zhao and Wang, 2013, who attribute the poems and possibly the paintings to Zhu Zhi’ao 朱知鰲, aka Taiyu Shanren 太宇山人 (?-1613).

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.³ 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 Views⁴ – 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

³ In any case, the number “eight” was not set in stone. Some places boasted ten views (e.g. Xiangling), twelve (Wumen), sixteen (Yanjing), 32 (West Lake), or even 36 (the imperial summer palace), and so on. Still, eight was regarded as the ideal number. Some sort of standardization seems to have taken place in the early twentieth century, when e.g. the Ten Views of Jiujiang were “perfected” by reducing them to Eight Views (see Xiao et al., 1990, p.92).

⁴ See e.g. the editorial guidelines (*liyan* 例言) in the local history of Fenzhou (Sun, ed., 1771). Consequently, this prefectural history has a series of gridded topographic maps instead of impressionistic illustrations. This critique, including that by later authors, such as Sun Yirang and Lu Xun, is summarized in Zhang, 2003, pp. 41-42.

“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, Linfen’s northern neighbor. The early-twentieth century editors were quite unflattering about the genre and dismissed it as vulgar and the images as useless, but they still included the list of the county’s Eight Views, complete with their poetic four-character names.⁵

The history of the Eight Views as a genre of painting is well documented since Northern Song times (960-1127), but goes back at least to the Tang (618-907). The earliest extant and most famous example is the Eight Views of Xiaoxiang 瀟湘八景 (roughly modern Hunan), dating back to the late 1070s (Liu 2003; Li et al., 2010). The polymath Shen Gua 沈括 was the first to comment on the Eight Views in his *Mengqi bitan* 夢溪筆談 composed in the 1080s, allegedly intrigued by them because of their qualities as “silent poetry.” But while much speaks for a reading of the genre as a sublime expression of political dissent (Murck, 2000, p.66), interpretations in terms of the Buddhist theme of illusion and perception, or simply as exceptional scenery to be enjoyed in leisurely outings or just by looking at the pictures and reading the accompanying poems were more common, certainly by Ming-Qing times (1368-1912). Take for example how the need to add illustrations to the poems

⁵ See the “editorial guidelines” (*fanli* 凡例) in Sun, ed., 1917. The list of Hongtong’s Eight Views was included as an appendix to the geography chapter (j.7:9b-10a). The illustrations from the 1730 edition, however, were scrapped.

describing views of famous scenic spots is explained in the editorial rules for the early eighteenth-century local history of Xiangling (Linfen's south-western neighbor):

The old history had views but no illustrations. If one opened it to read, it seemed a bit dull. Therefore images have now been added to be enjoyed in recumbent travel and to open up a fresh outlook on the landscape (Zhao, ed., 1732).

The frames, all of different shapes, surrounding eight of Xiangling's ten views make the idea of idealized landscapes, even dream worlds, quite explicit. The view of the Sleeping Dragon Mountain for example emphasizes the spiritual character of the landscape. Buildings, among them the temple in the back, seem to disappear in an environment dominated by mountains and numinous clouds (Figure 1). The accompanying text points to the hidden location in the deep mountains, and to the oak trees, the luxurious vegetation, and flocks of unusual birds in front of the temple – all of which made people want to recline there for ten days to enjoy the view (Zhao, ed., 1732, j.4:4b). The illustration of the water-rich landscape of the foothills of the Guye Mts conveys a similar message (Figure 2). But this does not mean that there is no relation to any kind of reality. The accompanying text describes the mountain springs in a factual tone, the protected Golden Dragon Pond is clearly depicted and labeled, and the importance of the observation pavilion is highlighted through the presence of two scholars. That in times of drought the site was also sought after as an efficacious location for rain rituals may have added to the mystical aura of the place, but it is also an unmistakable hint at its everyday significance (Zhao, ed., j.4: 5a).

[Add Figure 1 here]

[Figure 1: “The sleeping dragon’s efficacious response” (“Wo long ling ying” 臥龍靈應), *Xiangling xianzhi*, Zhao, ed., 1732.]

[Add Figure 2 here]

[Figure 2: The site of the Dragon Springs and Ping River as represented in one of Xiangling County's Ten Views (“Pingshui tuolan” 平水拖藍), *Xiangling xianzhi*, Zhao, ed., 1732.]

The more realistic depiction of the same site in Linfen's local history shows that the claim that representations of the Eight Views can, to varying degrees, provide information about real landscapes is not unfounded (Figure 3). It clearly shows the crucial features of the Dragon God Temple area as a hydraulic landscape. While the pavilions indicate that this was considered a beautiful landscape to be enjoyed in leisurely outings, there is nothing left of the mystical aura seen in the Xiangling version of this view, but a lot that points to the importance of its physical features, such as the Golden Dragon Pond up in the mountains, the source of the Ping River closer to the pavilions, and the canal system in the foreground in this exceedingly arid environment.

[Add Figure 3 here]

[Figure 3: “The Dragon Temple on the Ping River” (“Pingshui longci tu” 平水龍祠圖), *Linfen xianzhi*, Xu, ed., 1730.]

Despite the continued presence of critical voices, it is certainly not true that the eighteenth-century critique led to the decline of the genre (Liu, 2003). If anything, it encouraged illustrators to strive for greater authenticity. Still in the 1880s and thereafter, every single county in Pingyang prefecture (to which Linfen belonged) included the eight or in one case ten views in their history, even in Hongtong, where the genre was criticized along

Dai Zhen's lines, as mentioned above, and in Linfen, where it was not made explicit. Most are illustrated. Editors in the republican period also cherished the genre, and some used photographs instead of the woodblock illustrations to represent the Eight Views (Zhang, 2003, p.36). Others, such as the editors of the local history of Yueyang, still used woodblock illustrations, but explicitly strove for authenticity (情景逼真) in their depiction of the views (see editorial guidelines in Li, ed., 1915). At the national level the genre was to some extent amalgamated with publications such as the *National Encyclopedia of Scenic Spots and Ancient Relics*, covering the famous sites of the entire country (Gu, 1921).

After the establishment of the Nationalist government in Nanjing in 1928, the Ministry of the Interior gave order to all the provinces to investigate their famous scenic and historical sites as well as ancient relics (古物). In Shanxi this resulted in a detailed report published three years later, with information provided by 68 of the 105 counties who had been asked to do so. According to this publication, investigators consulted the local histories first and then visited the sites to verify the information (Wang, 1931). Thus the continued recognition of the Eight Views was reinforced not only by the rise of modern tourism (which was important for the West Lake and other sites of national renown, but probably did not have a very strong impact in places like Linfen), but also again by an effort to encourage the search for cultural as well as natural monuments as part of the nation-building process.

THE CASE OF LINFEN

To do justice to the critics it must be said that nowhere does it say in the local history of Linfen that the illustration showing the Dragon Temple is a representation of any kind of scenery that forms part of a set of Eight Views. In the spirit of the evidential scholarship of the time, the editorial guidelines of the 1730 edition explicitly reject the identification of

“eight views” and the corresponding four-character phrases as a “vulgar custom” (*louxi* 陋習) and see this as an expression of the scholarly seriousness of the project (Xu, ed., 1730, “Fanli,” 5b). As noted by Zhao and Wang, the Eight Views depicted and named in the late Ming handscroll cannot be found in any of the editions of the local history.⁶ The earliest extant local history was compiled by Xing Yunlu 邢雲路 (1549-?), who was magistrate of Linfen from 1586 to 1590. His tenure coincided with what was probably the most protracted and deadly drought the Ming dynasty had seen to that date. The drought reached its zenith in 1587, the year Ray Huang famously called “a year of no significance” (1981). Xing engaged in scientific observations and experiments and made huge efforts to improve the hydraulic infrastructure needed for effective irrigation in the Lao River area as one of the measures of recovery. His history completed in 1591 is to some extent a monument to his own achievements. The detailed depiction of the Lao River works in the overview map of the county is one example that shows this clearly (Figure 4). The handscroll was only produced more than a decade later. While the set of Eight Views it represents might have existed earlier, the reality of the drought and widespread starvation does not seem to have inspired an exclusive focus on leisurely outings. The brief section on the county’s “advantageous geography” (“Xingsheng” 形勝) shows a different concern: It describes Linfen as closely attached to Pingyang, the ancient capital of Emperor Yao and then focuses on the protective features of its natural environment: “In the East arise the Floating Mountains and in the West

⁶ The handscroll features the following Eight Views: 1. 平湖飛絮 (Passing winds on Lake Ping), 2. 錦岸落花 (Falling blossoms on the Lao River Bank), 3. 姑射晴崗 (The clear mounds of the Guye Mt.), 4. 西岩夜雨 (Nightly rains at the Western Cliff/Guye Mt.), 5. 澗水流雲 (Floating clouds on the Lao River), 6. 淵泉荷艷 (Splendid lotus flowers at the Deep Springs), 7. 金龍涌液 (The bubbling Golden Dragon Pond/Dragon Temple), 8. 玉洞藏仙 (The hidden immortal of the Jade Cave/Guye Mt.).

it is surrounded by the Guye Mountains. It has the Fen River running through it, and the whirling waters of the Ping and Lao Rivers. Its geographical outlay is magnificent, its customs are perfect. It truly is a key strategic area of the province and a great fortification of the place” (Xing, ed., 1591/1696, j.1: 3b). The emphasis on protective mountains and nourishing rivers was crucial, in particular after the disaster people had just gone through. Creating cohesion by focusing on cultural integration and cosmological balance was imperative. These are the geographic and cultural features emphasized in the overview map. By the time the history was updated and reprinted in 1696 the scroll might well have been forgotten. The illustrations in the new history completed in 1730 suggest what a different set of Views would have looked like. All of them are discernible already in the 1591/1696 map. A comparison of that “official” set with the scroll shows a greater emphasis on the strategic qualities of the mountains in the east and west together with an equal number of water bodies in the official version of the Eight Views. It also includes places linked to the heritage of Emperor Yao, most importantly the site of his thatched hut in the south and his burial mound in the north of the county.⁷

⁷ The “Maps” section of the 1730 edition includes a series of constellation charts, illustrations of the walled city, the Confucian Temple (文廟圖) and the government yamen (縣署圖), followed by scenes with an emphasis on the natural surroundings: 1. 茅茨土堦圖 (Earthen Steps to the site of Yao’s thatched hut), 2. 堯陵圖 (Yao’s burial mound), 3. 堯廟圖 (Yao Temple), 4. 晉山書院 (Jinshan Academy, with the Yongli Canal 永利渠), 5. 正誼書院圖 (Zhengyi Academy, including the Temple of the God of Literature 文昌廟), 6. 姑射山圖 (Guye Mts), 7. 平水龍祠圖 (Dragon Temple on the Ping River), 8. 汾河圖 (Fen River), 9. 臥虎山圖 (Sleeping Tiger Mt.), 10. 澗河圖 (Lao River, with a postscript outlining the hydraulic works initiated by Xing Yunlu in 1589), 11. 澗泉圖 (Rushing Springs = Deep Springs in the handscroll version). The last six would form a typical set of Views: the Guye Mts, Fen River and Ping River irrigation system to the West of the county seat, and the

[Add Figure 4 here]

[Figure 4: Map of Linfen County (“Xianjing tu” 縣境圖), *Linfen xianzhi*, Xing, ed., 1591/1696. The approximate locations of the “official” Eight Views are marked with red numbers, those of the Eight Views shown in the handscroll are marked with green numbers.]

Thus, the significant additions are another mountain in the east, the Sleeping Tiger Mt, part of the Fushan range, the Fen River, and most importantly, the sites related to Emperor Yao. While the images seem to make a claim to geographical accuracy (manifest e.g. in the fact that the orientation, which varies according to the requirements of the view, is indicated in four of the eight images), the composition overall owes much more to cosmological and ideological requirements than the earlier version that largely reflected the leisurely practices of the educated elite. This is reflected in the symmetrical positioning of the mountains and rivers – that, according to the editorial guidelines, are “the origin of the magnitude of the state’s foundation” (山川形勢乃立國規模之始, Xu, ed., 1730, “Fanli,” 1b) – and other water-related sites, as well as in the emphasis on the Yao heritage. It is however only in the 1933 edition that the illustrations were rearranged in a way that leaves no doubt about the cosmological and cultural concepts behind them, headed by magnificent mountains fortifying the county and perfected by Yao’s Thatched Hut and Tomb, both of which symbolize the integrity and modesty of this cultural hero who until today is used in Linfen’s

Sleeping Tiger Mt, Lao River and Rushing Springs irrigation systems to the east. These include all the sites of the handscroll version, with the exception of Ping Lake, which has disappeared (see pt. 2 of this study), though the handscroll set of views does not have a similar sense of symmetry. The first five all represent the cultural heritage of Yao, plus the institutions that cultivate this heritage (Xu, ed., 1730).

project of identity making.⁸ As to the unacknowledged Eight Views, it is astonishing that even in 1991 a map showing Linfen's 'famous scenic spots, historic monuments, and memorials of the revolution' still clearly identifies them (Figure 5).

[Add Figure 5 here]

[Figure 5: "Distribution map of the famous scenic spots, historic monuments, and memorials of the revolution of Linfen city" (临汾市名胜古迹革命纪念地分布图), in Shanxi sheng Linfen shi zhengxie wenshi ziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui, 1991.]

Both maps show more sites that could have been eligible. Most prominent in the late Ming map are perhaps the bridges, temples, and an unnamed pagoda. The modern map seems to have less to offer. Still, the opera stages from Yuan times, which were never deemed worth mentioning before, would seem noteworthy. What distinguishes the Eight Views from these other places of interest is mainly the way in which they represent the subtle and sometimes

⁸ In the 1933 edition two maps showing the county and the walled city respectively are followed by illustrations of the "mountains, rivers, and scenic spots" (山脉水道风景): These are (1) the Guye Mountains (姑射山) and (2) the Sleeping Tiger Mountain (卧虎山) marking Linfen's borders in the west and east respectively, the (3) Fen River (汾河) and its tributary, the (4) Ping River with the Dragon Temple (平水龙祠) at its source on Ping Mountain, a foothill of the Guye Mountains, two further water sites in the east, (5) the Rushing Springs (湮泉) and the (6) Lao River (涝河), and finally the two sites related to Emperor Yao, (7) the earthen steps (茅茨土堦) to the site where his thatched hut was supposed to have stood in Yi village (i.e. Yao's village), to the south of Linfen, and (8) his burial mound (尧陵) far in the north-east. The final two illustrations show the Yao Temple and the Confucian Temple (9. 尧庙图, 10. 文庙图), which however emphasize the institutions, not the landscape (Liu, ed., 1933). The image of the Fen River is the only one with people in it.

not so subtle interplay between man and nature within what can be described as a broadly orthodox cultural framework. It is the mountains and rivers, dragon gods and cultural heroes that provide the continuity and stability that people need to pursue their livelihoods.

Going through the material documenting the history of these places I will focus on aspects that show them as a form of appreciation and conservation of precious resources: water, flora, fauna, recreation, spirituality, with different parts of the population valuing these resources differently, but valuing all of them nevertheless. The story starts with literati outings and the appreciation of landscapes by the scholar-official elite in the Song (960-1279) and Ming (1368-1644), and ends with the political vicissitudes of the twentieth century and today's efforts to develop the tourist industry. The available sources largely limit the investigation to the aesthetic pursuits of elite travelers. One may assume that while commoners mostly went into the mountains to collect fuel and food, elite travelers would be much less attracted by the blatantly productive aspects of landscapes than by the cultural traces to be found in them (such as the cave temples, inscriptions and the legends associated with individual formations of the Guyeshan), and not least by the sublime landscape itself. However, the first and more pragmatic aspect was also important for the 'elite mode' of the appreciation of landscapes. The example of Xing Yunlu will show that what on the surface looked like an aesthetic quest was essentially the appreciation of the productive power of nature. It would be presumptuous to assume that commoners would not have developed some sense of aesthetic appreciation of the world around them either. When it came to temple fairs and the spectacle of official sacrifices, these differences would be even more meaningless. What was different was the mode of expression. The important point is that people identified what was valuable and to be preserved, thereby creating or strengthening an identity that not only linked them to a locale, but also to a much more comprehensive national culture. Finally, by restoring and preserving these sites they made them again available for

consumption. In this sense the genre of the Eight Views shares some of the functions of UNESCO programs for the protection of cultural landscapes today (Fowler, 2003).

The history of Linfen's Eight Views, however, shows that the effect of any protective measures are limited. The need to identify and protect cultural landscapes implies a second theme, that of change. It is true that the mountains and rivers did not change, in the sense that basically they are still there. But while not all the mountains might have been as transient as the Fushan 浮山 or Floating Mountains at the south-eastern border of Linfen County apparently once have been – the local history explains the name with the waxing and waning of the mountain during the deluge (Xing, ed., 1696, j.1: 8a) –, the examples examined here show how these harmonious and productive landscapes were constantly recreated. They were not simply here to be. It seems that although 'nature' did play a part in this story – major threats were earthquakes and droughts (Janku, 2007) –, the biggest challenge was man and his follies.

THE GUYE MOUNTAINS AS A PLACE TO NOURISH BODY AND SOUL

The Guye Mountains, part of the Lüliang Massif that separates the Fen River Valley from the Yellow River Valley, are located 25 km west of Linfen, rising to 1890m above sea level and covering an area of about 40 km². They were one of Shanxi's earliest province-level "areas of scenic and historic interest,"⁹ a label conducive to the development of the site as a tourist attraction starting in the 1980s. According to a booklet published to promote this

⁹ In 1991 Shanxi had six protected areas of scenic and historic interest (*fengjing mingshengqu* 風景名勝區). By 2010 their number had increased to 16. In addition, the province had five national-level areas of scenic and historic interest, five sites listed as national heritage, and three sites listed as world heritage (Zhongguo xinwenwang, 2010).

development “four curiosities” make the site outstanding. The first is its many caves and grottos and their symbiosis with temples and shrines. The most famous is the Nanxiandong 南仙洞, also known as Cave of the Southern Immortal or Jade Cave, which is described as a “temple in a cave and caves in a temple.” The second is the bizarrely formed peaks resulting from the exposure of the rock through wind erosion of the limestone massif. Popular lore has more inspiring explanations of these shapes and regards them as traces left by immortals. Among the most famous are the Phoenix Peak in the Nanxiandong area and the Sleeping Immortal in the Beixiandong (Cave of the Northern Immortal) area. The dramatic features of these formations, and in particular of the steep gorge that separates the northern and southern areas, are highlighted in the pictorial representation of the view (Figure 6). Still, as a more recent photograph shows, the basic physical features of the area are recognizable (Figure 7). The third feature that distinguishes the place is its rich flora and fauna. It is home to strangely shaped plants and trees, and precious birds and weird beasts, such as the leopard elm, which according to legend grew first from a twig that Zhao Kuangyin (the later founder of the Song dynasty) had stuck into the ground in replacement for incense, which he forgot to bring when he came to worship at the Southern Cave, the auspicious black stork, a now protected species, and others such as the white snake. The fourth characteristic feature is the symbiosis of the three teachings in one place, bringing together the spirits of heaven, earth and man, representing Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian teachings respectively (Zhen, 1991, pp.2-5, see pp. 40-43 for the Zhao Kuangyin story). This last point however seems to give undue prominence to the orthodox teachings, as in fact historically other cults, in particular that of the Water Goddess (水母娘娘), were at least equally popular. An entire pantheon of gods and saints all lived happily together, including even the legendary Monkey King Sun Wukong

who at some point could be found next to the Jade Emperor in the Cave of the Immortal (Xing, ed., 1696, j.2:6b-7a; for Sun Wukong see Qiao, 1995, pp.46-48).

[Add Figure 6 here]

[Figure 6: The Guye Mts (“Gusheshan tu” 姑射山圖), *Linfen xianzhi*, Xu, ed., 1730.]

[Add Figure 7 here]

[Figure 7: The Guye Mts, 2009, photo by author.]

The eremitic tradition of the site goes back to the mythical times of Yao (trad. 2356-2255 BCE). A few lines from the *Zhuangzi* are always quoted when the saint of the Guye Mountains is described:

A saint is living in the Little Guye Mountains (藐姑射之山). Her skin is like ice and snow and she is as gentle and submissive as a young maiden. She does not eat the five grains, breathes the wind and drinks the dew [of the mountain]. Riding on the clouds and controlling the flying dragon she tours the regions beyond the four seas. When the floods are so great as to reach the sky she still does not drown, and when the droughts are so great as to melt metal and stone and burn the soil and the mountains she still does not feel hot. Yao went to pay her respect. Deeply mystified he lost his kingdom (Xing, ed., 1696, j.8:6b).

While this final remark is rarely included when the passage is quoted, it seems apt that the most notorious imperial visitor was emperor Huizong (r. 1100-1126), who was fond of the arts, but lost his empire to the Jurchen Jin. As to the saint, while “gentle and submissive,” she is in control of the forces of nature and the embodiment of resilience in an environment that

threatens people with flood and drought, hunger and thirst. Thus, the Guye Mountains are marked as a powerful spiritual place.

The first documented Daoist temple was built within the Southern Cave in Tang times. The earliest record goes back to 618 (Zhen, 1991, p.7). With Huizong's visit in 1118 the site gained considerable fame and was renamed Guye Cave on imperial order (Xing, ed., 1696, j.1:8a). By Yuan times temple construction had expanded to the Northern Cave area.

According to a stele inscription dated 1279, the building of the main temple dedicated to the Queen Mother was sponsored by more than 500 people, including many women, female Daoist masters, who were recorded with their personal names (Zhen, 1991, p.8; Shanxi sheng Linfen shi zhengxie wenshi ziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui 1991, p.28). During the Ming Buddhism became the dominant faith and brought about another frenzy of temple construction. Among the most famous was the Jade Cliff Temple 碧岩寺 (1506) in the Southern Cave area, also known as the Western Cliff, attributed to a monk from Wutaishan, which however fell into neglect when the Northern Cave area rose again to greater prominence. There the Hall of Great Strength (大雄寶殿) was built in 1728. Buddhist monks accumulated considerable wealth through various economic undertakings. The site continued to flourish, and when in 1810 a fire in the Northern Cave destroyed the temples they were rebuilt even more majestically within just two years. The Jade Cliff Temple was restored only in 1869 (Zhen, 1991, p.9).

While religious activities were often closely related to leisurely outings, by the late Ming and through the Qing such outings, at least those documented in local histories, were often devoid of any explicit religious meaning. Rather the enjoyment of the scenic beauty of a place was linked to its positive effect on the physical and spiritual well-being of scholarly visitors. In 1673 for example, a certain Wang Hongyu 王鴻譽 toured the Mountains of Fenxi,

a county to the northwest of Linfen, together with visitors from the capital. He left an account describing how they made their way to the top, first on horseback, than by foot, overwhelmed by the scenery, the rich vegetation, the winding paths, and astonished by the people they met on their way: a woman with two children staring at the party of scholars full of amazement, while they surpassed them on their horses; some villagers who shared their simple soup, on which Wang commented that the people in the mountains had tastes so “distant” that they seemed to belong to a different world. Remarkably, he also noted that it seemed strange that he as a baptized Christian should visit a Daoist master and ask him to be their guide (Jiang, ed., 1674, j.8:20b-23b).¹⁰

A more famous travelogue was composed in Ming times by a certain Zhang Fanggao 張方杲, a low-ranking local scholar, poet and calligrapher from Nanliu Village 南劉村 west of Linfen just across the River. He is described as a talented but ailing person who had turned his sickness into a trademark. The characters on his personal seal were 病張 – Sick Zhang (Liu, ed., 1933, j.3:65a). With Sick Zhang any assumption that it was only people with an urban background who experienced an outing to the mountains like a trip into a world of wonders turns out to be wrong. Although Zhang grew up in a village near the mountains his illness as well as his scholarly upbringing rather than physical distance had prevented him from exploring his immediate environment earlier:

The Little Guye Mountains mentioned in the *Zhuangzi* are right at my doorstep, but still I never went there for an outing. On the fifteenth day of the third lunar month of the *wuzi* year (1588), when the rains had finally stopped and the plum blossoms were coming out, my father took me along to join a group of people entering the valley,

¹⁰ Li Sewei, the magistrate of Fenxi, made the tour in 1660 to help erect a stele commemorating the Western Peak of the Nine dragons at the Hall of the Northern Sky (九龍西頂) (Jiang, ed., 1674, j.8: 16a-17b).

because it would be ungrateful not to take advantage of the seasonable weather and the magnificent place (Liu, ed., 1933, j.5:76a-77b).

The party made the first part of their journey on horseback, climbing up the White Stone Slope. Zhang described the view down to the valley with the Fen River surrounding the city of Linfen, and on the other side the forest and the rich vegetation of the mountains by referring to Huang Dachi, a landscape painter of the Yuan dynasty. It is idealized views that shaped the representation of the experience of the landscape, as much as the experience itself. By the end of the next leg of the journey the mountain became amalgamated with the structure of a temple – in the same way as the main gate to a temple is known as the *shanmen* 山門 or mountain gate:

The next four or five *li* were all stone steps. Looking down, there was no end, the steep cliffs allowed just enough space to put down one's feet. Giving up riding I dismounted. In a moment the vines climbing up the cypresses opened up to a level path. All the way my father repeated how majestic everything was. At this point the mountain was like a hall with a gate (ibid.).

Zhang was awestruck by the narrow mountain path that followed next, and was rewarded for his efforts when they reached the temple in the Lotus Cave (i.e. the Northern Cave). From there the party went further uphill to the Pond Reflecting the Sky (照天池), which Zhang described as the hub between the Northern and Southern Caves. He marveled at the creative powers of nature, wondering how it could be that a water source located that high never dried out and also never overflowed, while at the same time he was gentleman enough to generously “nod with a smile” when a monk explained to him that the pond was linked to the sea. From there they went to the Southern Cave and he vividly described the three different tunnels as well as a stele inscription he considered to be from Tang times, which had been

rubbed blank and shiny by the visitors who had touched it through the centuries.¹¹ Along the way, what was assumed to be the real world turned into a superficial appearance that only pointed to the real world beyond it:

I had just looked at [the Southern Cave] from the Northern Cave. Then it had appeared as close to the eyes as the eyebrows and eyelashes. One could communicate between both places through echoing voices. But as a deep mountain stream forms the border [between the two caves], one had to walk for more than ten *li* along winding paths to get here. Is it not true that the beauty of nature does not want to reveal itself too hastily? Therefore winding paths lead one into this fascinating world. I wonder if there are yet other residences of immortals and jade palaces, based in the clouds and going beyond the Milky Way, dimly discernible in the spheres beyond the material world. What we see here is just a superficial appearance.

On a more practical note, a familiar-sounding remark on the healing powers of nature follows:

Since my childhood disease I could never do more than a hundred tiny steps, but today this was more than a hundred times that, and I did not feel exhausted at all. Should it indeed be true that one is fragile when running around in the worldly dust, but healthy when crossing places of scenic beauty?

Turning to the father's perspective, yet another layer of meaning is added to this journey, the simple attempt to escape the mundane "quest for fame and privileges that prevents people from mastering the Way" (Liu, ed., 1933, j.5: 76a-77b).

¹¹ This stele is still in the cave (if it is the same). It is however from Song times and tells about the eremite Hong Yazi finding the Dao (洪崖子得道碑) (Liu, ed., 1933, j.4:97b).

Much of this appears to be strikingly modern. One wonders how the quiet poetic mood of this account related to the actual experience of climbing up a mountain, visiting temples and exploring mysterious caves with a group of fellow travelers on a spring outing. Reading Zhang's account, one might easily forget that father and son were not travelling alone. One also wonders how his experience of the mountain compared to that of people who regularly went to the mountain to glean it for fuel and other consumable items, such as the women and children observed by Wang Hongyu, or who visited the temples for all kinds of more or less pragmatic reasons. But regardless of these differences, they all *used* the mountains and their resources to meet their particular material and spiritual needs.

Maybe the late-Ming disasters meant a respite for the flora and fauna of the mountains. In any case, the site continued to flourish as a favorite place for outings, commoners and elite alike. Visitors usually stayed overnight, and people continued to write poems praising the majestic mountains, their rich flora and fauna, bizarre geologic formations, and the symbiosis of temples and caves. Apart from the fact that there are by far not that many poems on these outings from the Qing as from the Ming period, there is little in this literature to suggest in which ways the mountain environment may have suffered during the economic recovery of the Qing, as well as during the mid-nineteenth century rebellions. The most outstanding example from a later period is perhaps the prose poem by Guo Yi 郭儀, an educational commissioner who grew up in a village in the area. Equipped with his book case he climbed up the mountains in the fall of 1864 to lodge in a pavilion in the Northern Cave area and undertake leisurely outings from there "in his spare time." He describes how he enjoyed the strange rocks and dark pines, the rare birds and unusual beasts, the ancient trees and luxuriant vegetation, and wonderful flowers, as well as the flying pavilions and the traces of beautiful immortals spread out right before his eyes – a spiritually nourishing experience that could not

easily be conveyed by reading famous ancient prose poems on capital cities (Liu, ed., 1933, j.6:69a-73b). Guo was known for his love of classical prose and rare characters, so one cannot be sure to what extent one has to read this account as an example of his literary accomplishment rather than as a straightforward record of things heard, touched, and seen. These are of course the two ends of a spectrum. What can be said with confidence is that the richness of the mountain environment and its recreative quality has suffered a lot since Guo wrote in the middle of the nineteenth century.

In the republican period more than 100 *mu* of economic forests were planted outside the west gate to be harvested every 10 years, which would have made a profit of more than 1000 Yuan every time. By that time, “no big beams could be got” from the natural grown forests of pine and cypress in the mountains because of lack of protection (Liu, ed., 1933, j.2:44a). While there is little material that would allow a detailed documentation of the environmental degradation the area has suffered, coal mining and logging, as well as neglect responsible for the sorry state of the temples and shrines, are clearly the biggest culprits. The campaigns of the Great Leap Forward and the early years of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1950s and 1960s are usually blamed for the declining health of the mountain environment, which includes the extent of deforestation and loss of biodiversity on the one hand and the destruction of temples and other structures representing “the old” on the other hand. In contrast, the Xiandong Gorge irrigation system project and a well-drilling project first carried out during the movement of “Learning from Dazhai” and “in the spirit of the old Man moving mountains (愚公移山)” in the late 1970s is assessed positively (Xin, 2009, pp.57-58). The big change, however, came with the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978, when economic reforms, development and modernization became the catchwords of the day. As far as the Guye Mountains were concerned, new

institutions in charge of protection – and development – were set up, illegal loggers punished, and tourism was inaugurated as a key part of the local development project.

The initiative to elevate the Guye Mountains to the status of a province-level scenic area started in the mid-1980s with a petition with the imploring title “A famous scenic area that urgently awaits development – the Caves of the Immortals” (急待开发的名胜---- 仙洞). This petition resulted in a number of further documents and an official investigation and a report (关于开发仙洞风景区的考察报告), and was ratified in 1984. The Linfen municipality was put in charge of the repair of the temples, afforestation projects, development of hydroelectric power, and the building of traffic and tourism infrastructure. In 1987 the Guye Mountains were listed as a protected province-level scenic spot (省级名胜保护点). Xin Hongbao, a villager and local historian from Yukoucun 峪口村 at the foot of the mountains, reports that the Jade Cliff Temple was repaired in the same year with huge government funding, the first time since the restoration in 1869. But this development brought little benefit for the villagers of Yukoucun and apparently was greatly resented. One example is that one family that had been allocated rooms belonging to the temple during the land reform period in the early 1950s was now urged to sign a contract with the government (which was considered unfair by Xin Hongbao) and to move out in order to help develop the tourism industry. Despite all the work they had done for the protection of this national treasure and collective good under the most primitive conditions – this at least is how Xin represented this case – there was no question that now they had to abandon the interests of their “small family” (小家) for those of the “big family” – the state (國家). Be that as it may, the bottom line is that the people of Yukou Village still feel that they have been cheated out of their (economic) interests by the method of “skillfully taking away [the major profit] by giving a small benefit” (小惠巧夺), because “cultural relics belong to the state, and the

development of tourism is for the benefit of the state and the people,” not for them (Xin, 2009). While Xin was diplomatic enough not to spell out what exactly the negative impact for the villagers was, it seems reasonable to assume that for them the development of economic forestry and mining would have been more interesting than the at best moderately successful development of a tourism site managed by higher authorities and potentially impeding the further expansion of their own undertakings. Whether this is good or bad in the long-term is hard to say.

The preservation of any site depends on people appreciating and using it. Here the point is reached where the discussion must come back to where it started. The political turn at the beginning of the 1980s marked the beginning of a new discovery of landscapes as places of identity, but now identity understood as something that could be marketed. This found expression in official local publications such as *Yaodu shengji* or *The Beautiful Scenic Spots of the Yaodu District* (Shanxi sheng Linfen shi zhengxie wenshi ziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui, 1991), and a new type of local historical materials compiled specifically with the needs of the tourism industry in mind, such as *Fengjing zhebian duhao* – perhaps best translated as “Come and enjoy the unique scenery Linfen has to offer” (Linfen-shi zhengxie xuexuan weiyuanhui wenshi weiyuanhui, 2002). The rediscovery of the Eight Views is equally part of this development project (Yang, 2007). But while some of the sites promoted in these publications have made a good or at least reasonable start, others fared less well. At the beginning of the 1990s, for example, there was some hope to develop the Sleeping Tiger Mountain into a tourist site (Shanxi sheng Linfen shi zhengxie wenshi ziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui, 1991, p.44). Judging from its condition in 2009 this was hugely overdrawn. Already in the mid-1990s, Qiao Zhongyan published an account of his explorations in his home county with the title *The Changing Yaodu District of Linfen* (Qiao, 1995), which has a less optimistic overtone.

YAO'S HERITAGE

On the outskirts of Yi Village just a few kilometers south of Linfen, a solitary stele marks the place where once, or more precisely, more than 4000 years ago, according to local lore, simple and overgrown earthen steps led to Emperor Yao's modest thatched hut (Figure 8). It oversees the village and the agricultural land next to it. The earthen fortification built by the villagers was regarded as the remnant of these steps. History has it that even when the wild grass had grown three cubits (*chi*) high Yao would not cut it.¹² The thrift and frugality of the local people, as well as the custom to make a living from weaving reed mats was explained as Yao's legacy (Xing, ed., 1696, j.1:11a-12a). The stele that marked the site until very recently was erected by a magistrate in 1608 (Mizuno & Hibino, 1956, p.89). The Japanese researchers who studied Linfen's ancient heritage in the early 1940s found it intact on the top of a loess mound, protected by a brick structure, overseeing the cultivated land (Figure 9). In 2009 the site of the stele was in a rather sorry state, though the stele itself was still protected by a brick fortification of the somewhat diminished mound, and revered by burning incense in a plastic pan filled with sand in front of it (Figure 10).

[Add Figure 8 here]

[Figure 8: The Earthen Steps to Emperor Yao's Thatched Hut ("Maoci tujie tu" 茅茨土堦圖), *Linfen xianzhi*, Xu, ed., 1730.]

[Add Figure 9 here]

¹² One *chi* 尺 would have been 15.8 cm in Shang times.

[Figure 9: Japanese researchers visiting Emperor Yao's stele in Yi Village in 1941. Mizuno & Hibino, 1956.]

[Add Figure 10 here]

[Figure 10: Yao stele, 2009. Photo courtesy Zhou Ya.]

Apart from the stele there was not much in the physical appearance of this site to make it into a sight. It is the only one of the ten places listed as “traces of the past” in the late Ming local history that has been chosen as one of the sites meriting an illustration in the local history. Why not Liu Yuan's famous wall (劉淵城)? Or the slope where Deng You once abandoned his own son in favor of his late brother's son (鄧子坡)? Or the ancient residence of Cang Jie, the legendary inventor of the Chinese script? Obviously, while Liu Yuan's story was prominent in popular lore, he was a barbarian invader. Deng was a heroic example of filial piety, brotherly love and self-sacrifice, but after all only a local hero, a moral model, yes, but ultimately an emblem of misery and disaster, not a positive national icon. Cang Jie was a cultural hero, but not on a par with Yao who was both cultural hero and moral model. Yao was a towering figure, the sage king, who shared a temple with Shun and the Great Yu, the other two legendary sage rulers, whose workings, according to traditional historiography, led to the foundation of the first Chinese dynasty, the Xia around 2070 BCE. He also had the advantage to have lived and died in Pingyang (Xing, ed., 1695, j.5:1a-3a, 5b) and made it his capital.¹³ The prestige this figure could give to the place was immense. But while all this was

¹³ The temple appears as the Temple of the Three Sages (三聖廟) in the late Ming map (Figure 4), but by Qing times it was known as the Yao Temple. One of its prominent features was a well drilled by Yao himself when he established Pingyang as his capital. The temple was rebuilt in 1703, when the Kangxi emperor stayed in Linfen

reason enough to include the Earthen Steps into Linfen's informal set of Eight Views, it was not enough to make it a successful one. While miraculously the stele has survived, there is no evidence suggesting that the site ever had any practical importance beyond Yi Village – apart from the visit by the Japanese researchers in 1941. The local history preserves not a single poem that would commemorate a visit to the site. And while there are records of an “inexhaustible well” (滿水井), it seems that even by Qing times no trace of it was to be found, and there was no mountain or other interesting physical feature either to make the place attractive. Apparently, while thrift and frugality linked to the prestige of Yao were features that were welcomed to create a sense of identity for the place and its people, the transformation of the site of Yao's thatched hut into a ‘view’ reveals the inherent contradiction between the imagined vision and the actual site – until quite recently.

As part of the project to rebuild Linfen's image and turn Yao's ancient capital into a tourist attraction, the local authorities now have entirely reinvented the site. In 2011 a huge temple complex was built in Yi Village, close to the original site of the stele. The stele was moved there and put under a protective pavilion to the right in front of the main hall, joined by another stele to its left commemorating the construction of its new home. The site is now known as the “Terrace of King Yao scenic area” (堯王臺景區) and features not only the huge main temple where in an attempt to create a tradition Yao's birthday is celebrated with elaborate rituals, but also a huge platform for the veneration of heaven, overseeing a water pond beneath it. With the exception of the annual celebrations, this seems to be a rather quiet place that serves as a recreational space for the local community.

on his campaign against the Dzungars and graced the three halls to Yao, Shun and Yu with his calligraphy (Qiao, 1995, pp.4-5).

The same values were associated with Yao's burial mound about 35 km east of Linfen – a rather modest elevation if compared to the tombs of later rulers, with a grove of pines and cypresses. The way in which it is depicted strongly underlines this aspect: the early eighteenth-century illustration shows a tiny mound that barely surmounts the stele in front of it, surrounded by cypresses and situated within a sublime mountainous environment (Figure 11). According to the late Ming/early Qing edition of the local history there was no doubt that the site was authentic. As opposed to Shun, who had died during his travels and was buried in the Jiuyi Mountains (in what is today Hunan province), and Yu, who was buried in Kuaiji (modern day Shaoxing in Zhejiang), there is no evidence that Yao ever toured the country and therefore he must have been buried in his native place. While the authenticity of the place was clearly established, the question why another place in Shandong was recognized as Yao's burial mound and had become the site of the official sacrifices to Yao since the beginning of the Ming dynasty, while the site in Linfen was ignored, still remained. It was assumed that this was because Linfen was still under the control of the Yuan when the newly established Ming rulers carried out their investigations (Xing, ed., 1696, j.2:9a-b; see also Liu, ed., 1933, j.4:92a).

[Add Figure 11 here]

[Figure 11: Emperor Yao's burial mound ("Yaoling tu" 堯陵圖), *Linfen xianzhi*, Xu, ed., 1730.]

The important difference between Yao and other rulers was that the people were so grieved by his death that they voluntarily piled up the 50 meter mound. The temple facing the river, a tributary of the Lao, can be traced back to Tang times. This is recorded in a text

dating from 1202, which was carved into stone in 1590, during the magistracy of Xing Yunlu. This stele in front of the mound is at the center of the illustration, surrounded by what could be old-growth cypresses and mountains. In this case, maybe, the real features of the site would have been in contradiction with the values Yao represented. A temple, for example, is nowhere to be seen in the illustration. In real life, in Ming and Qing times temple fairs were held in spring during the Qingming festival and fall, accompanied by a general amnesty, and rampant gambling, drugs, and illicit sex – a far cry from the proverbial modesty, thrift, and virtue linked to the figure of Yao. The fair was discontinued at the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war in the late 1930s, and after 1949 the temple was used as a school (Shanxi sheng Linfen shi zhengxie wenshi ziliao yanjiu weiyuanhu, 1991, p.16; Liang & Li, 2006, p. 141; Qiao, 1995, p.24 for the illicit sex).

The site of Emperor Yao's burial mound was declared a provincial-level protected cultural unit (文物保护单位) in 1986. The dimensions of the development that the site experienced thereafter forms an even starker contrast, not only to the former site, but also to the values attributed to Yao (Figure 14). A majestic newly-built drive framed with pairs of statues of animals and miraculous beasts (and leading to a huge parking lot) suggests that the Ming Tombs served as a model. The authors of *Yaodu shengji* still suggested, in 1991, to take a bus from Linfen to Yuebicun, and to continue on foot from there. One should follow the bed of the Lao River for seven or eight *li*, jumping over gullies and wading across streams. While this is what Qiao Zhongyan seems to have done in 1994, it is definitely not the mode of travelling the designers of this new site had in mind. And it is a new site indeed, built under the pretext of creating a sense of cultural identity, but in fact for the purpose of touristic consumption.

[Add Figure 12 here]

[Figure 12: Yao's burial mound in 2009. Photo courtesy Zhou Ya.]

CONCLUSION

It might be worth noting here as a side note that a couple of years ago Linfen, one of the centers of China's coal mining industry, attained the dubious fame of being "the most polluted city on earth" (Feinberg, 2008). The local authorities have since been trying hard to fight this image. The resurrection of Linfen's sites of natural beauty and its cultural heritage was seen as part of the solution. A popular collection of Shanxi's *bajing* poetry not only highlights the value of the Eight Views for "patriotic education," but also for the development of tourism (Yang, 2007, 2-3; see also Zhou, 2010; Nyíri, 2006), openly pointing to the link between landscapes and identity in political and commercialized contexts.

Landscapes such as those represented in Linfen's famous views mean different things to different people. The rural residents may have cherished the Guye Mountains most for their resources, such as fuel, timber, and coal, while still cherishing their spiritually nourishing aspects. Urban residents may have been more inclined to value landscapes per se as sites for recreative leisure activities (Wang, 2001), while being less aware of the extent to which they also satisfy their material needs. Local authorities might have wished to use the notion of continuity and stability of the 'unchanging mountains and rivers' to create a sense of identity and social cohesion, an idea resonating with Paul Claval's observation that "[f]or those who struggle to maintain local identities, preventing the transformations that would deprive local populations of landscapes representative of their historical triumphs is crucial" (2007, p.90). At the same time tensions might arise for example when political and cultural authorities think of "the exploitation of landscape for the construction of national identities" (Claval, 2007, p.89), and when particular sites are identified for protection at the provincial,

national, and global level. Particular interests and power relationships always play a role and create potential for conflict.

While there was a certain degree of continuity in the ideal and reality of the Eight Views of Linfen, what they meant to different people at different times was never the same. Moreover, this very study of Linfen's landscapes may "further transform [their] meaning, depositing yet another layer of cultural representation" as the cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove reminds us (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988, p.1). What is common to all is the development of a sense of place and its appreciation, the discovery of its value, material and spiritual, and an increasing awareness of its fragility. What is not immediately obvious is that all forms of appreciation of landscapes constitute a form of appropriation and thus involve consuming them in one way or the other, with hugely varying consequences. This is most obvious in a precarious environment such as Linfen's.

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