

Final Progress Report

Sustainability Science Program

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Name: Yu Wang

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Fields of Study: Anthropology, Political Ecology, and Tourism Studies

Degree Program: Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology at Duke University

Harvard Faculty Hosts:

Michael Herzfeld (Anthropology Department)

Anthony Saich (Ash Institute at Kennedy School of Government)

Dwight Perkins (Economics Department)

Project Title:

Pushing Grain for Water: the Sustainability Challenges to Hani Highlanders' Agro-Ecosystem in Southwest China

Abstract:

Social scientists have long recognized the role of nature in the creation of nationalisms, and have continually contributed to a rethinking of how ethnic identities are formed in relation to constructions of ecology and landscape. However, scholars and conservation advocates have tended to ignore an emerging irony: While indigenous peoples are often trumpeted for their enduring ecological knowledges and practices, many of these indigenous peoples are actually struggling to be free from such practices as they embrace development and modernity. In the Ailao Mountains of southwest China, where the rice-growing terraced fields are under review for a World Heritage designation, the Hani cultivators living in this region now wish to abandon their less-lucrative rice crops and "irrigate" their terraced fields year-round, thereby providing a spectacular liquid pattern on the mountainsides to attract tourists. Water, for the first time in 1300 years, is assuming a new yet non-ecological role in Hani highlanders' livelihoods. The Hani's vision of "pushing grain for water" defies explanation in terms of evolution or revolution, progress or regress, and challenges China and outside observers alike struggling to practice sustainable development and landscape conservation. This vision suggests novel forms of environmental logic, which, I argue, must be investigated beyond romanticized holisms of culture-nature and simplistic hopes for sustainable development. My research thus explores interactive approaches involving both indigenous institutions and modern agronomy in the creation of effective conservation policies that take into account indigenous people's desires for economic development and, at the same time, promote ecological sustainability.

Identification of the Problem:

In the Honghe region of southwest China, the Hani have created and maintained a highland agroecosystem for more than 1000 years by channeling mountain waters seasonally throughout terraced fields to irrigate their rice crops, which produced a spectacular liquid pattern

on the mountainsides during specific months of the year. In recent years, tourists have increasingly flocked to see this spectacle in Honghe. Consequently, the Hani highlanders want to abandon their less-lucrative rice crops altogether and simply fill the terraced fields with water all year round in order to ensure a steady flow of tourists, despite the fact that they know that seasonal irrigation and land conversion are essential in sustaining their agroecosystem and terraced landscapes. However, because this landscape is currently under review for a world heritage designation from UNESCO, this local dream of “pushing grain for water” has not been put into practice. What is interesting here is the ironic manner in which fundamental connections are made between the Hani’s ecological practices and their ethnic identity (by Chinese government and UNESCO) on the one hand, while the Hani themselves are now seeking freedom from such practices on the other.

Key Research Questions:

How can UNESCO’s conservation regulations help sustain Honghe’s terraced-field landscape when the Hani locals themselves want to abandon the farming and irrigation practices of over one thousand years? What is missing in the current mechanism of World Heritage management? Specifically, I want to find out:

- (1) How is the protected site of “Honghe Hani Terraced Fields” defined?
- (2) What are cultural, environmental, and political consequences after eco-tourism was introduced to the Hani community in Honghe?
- (3) Has conservation failed in Honghe? If yes, why and how?
- (4) In terms of linking knowledge with action, what are the lessons that can be learned from this case?

Research Methods: This research uses several methods of investigation, including ethnography (participant observation), archival research, document surveys, household surveys, and person-centered interviews.

Principle Literature to draw upon: Tourism and Heritage Studies; Landscape Conservation; Ethnicity and Nationalism; Globalization and Transnational Governmentality; Chinese history and anthropology literature on the Honghe Hani.

Empirical Data Acquisition:

Most of the empirical data for this project are acquired from my first-hand ethnographic research in the Honghe region. By living with Hani locals and through semi-structured interviews with different types of actors in the Honghe region (including Hani locals, tourists, photographers, developers, local officials, and scholars), I glean information on the relationship between Hani and their natural environment, institutions of state power, as well as effects of development and conservation reality. I pay particular attention to how “World Heritage” and “Hani” are understood (or imagined) by different parties, and how Hani locals receive these understandings and play them into everyday practice in negotiating their ethnic identity and economic interest through their interactions with others.

Geographical Region Studied: Honghe Yi and Hani Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province, Southwest China.

Recommendations for Honghe's problem:

- (1) Local Training Programs (especially to local officials and tourism guides) about heritage protection supervised by UNESCO are very much needed;
- (2) Involvement of ethnic locals into the terraced-field landscape protection policy making process is necessary;
- (3) Tourism development projects should take into account such costs as heritage damages and environmental degradation, and they should be cautiously introduced yet strictly monitored.

Final Products:

I am at the final stage of finishing two articles based on this project

#1: "Hani Face, Cultural Remedy, and National Intimacy"

#2: "Pushing Grain for Water: Rethinking Eco-Ethnicity and Sustainability"

which I plan to submit to two journals —*Conservation and Society* and *Current Anthropology* respectively — by the end of August, 2009. I am also working on the revision of my dissertation, trying to incorporate the body of literature on linking knowledge with action (science/policy) as well as a comparative approach on development/conservation issues (China vs. other post-socialist counties) in to the book manuscript, which is tentatively entitled "*The Politics of World Heritage in China: Ethnicity, Locality, Sustainability.*" I have sent out my book prospectus to a few university press offices in the US, and am still waiting for their response.

Other Advancement Activities:

- (1) Presented a paper at the Rappaport Prize Panel (organized by the Anthropology and Environment Section) at the Annual Meeting of American Anthropological Association in November 2008, San Francisco.
- (2) Peer-reviewed an article for the journal *Annals Research of Tourism*.
- (3) Serving on the Advisory Committee of organizing an international conference on Honghe Hani terraced fields' sustainable future, which is to be held in Yuanyang County (Honghe Prefecture) of Yunnan Province in November 2010.
- (4) Regularly attended the Asia Fellow Seminars at HKS and China Luncheon Seminars at the Fairbank Center.
- (5) Took one statistic software courses given by Harvard Institute for Quantitative Social Science in the Spring.
- (6) Applied for 20 or so academic positions across the US, and been short/final-listed by a few schools. But none worked out in the end.
- (7) Also applied for several professional positions at some international organizations in NYC, and the results remain unknown yet.

Awards and Grants:

- (1) Junior Scholar Grant (\$15,000), Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation (2008-2009)
- (2) 2008 Conference Travel Award (\$300), American Anthropological Association

A Couple of thoughts:

What I found most valuable of this fellowship experience was the great opportunity of working and interacting with a group of scholars and practitioners from a wide variety of backgrounds and countries. It not only provided an excellent multi-disciplinary platform for me to engage in active communication and exchange on various approaches to sustainable agro-ecosystem services across the developing world. It also advanced my knowledge and skills in comparative research and policy analysis, while solidifying my interest in collaborative research efforts on pro-poor development policies and practices.