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Robert P. Weller
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1 Discovering nature

The notes from my first period of fieldwork in Taiwan, in the late 1970s, reveal no sign of nature beyond the immediate demands of farming. Almost two years in a village just outside the small town of Sanxia produced no reference to complaints about pollution, for example, even though two decades of rapid economic growth had caused serious environmental deterioration.[1] One study found that thirteen of sixteen major Taiwanese rivers and streams (including Sanxia's largest river) were seriously polluted in their lower reaches; the others were moderately polluted. Only 1 percent of sewage water received even primary waste treatment.[2] With the exception of a large noise meter that appeared in the busiest part of Taipei during that time, there was also little visible environmental activity from the government. Nor did anyone seem very interested in the appreciation of nature for its own sake. One friend raised orchids, and his adult children sometimes accompanied me on walks in the hills. We rarely saw anyone else on those walks though, with the exception of a very few of the more exciting mountain paths that attracted Sunday groups of college students from Taipei, a bumpy hour and a half away by bus or motorcycle.

In part, the absence of nature in my notes reflects my own interests, which were in religion at the time. Yet it also reflects local priorities and conceptions. Most people in Sanxia were either farmers or farmers' children who had newly entered Taiwan's rapidly developing industrial economy. They were just too close to their daily toil with the environment to feel much affection or nostalgia for it. Those years of the late 1970s had not been easy for farming. Families typically no longer had enough labor to harvest their crops, and soldiers had to come help out. This period also marked the beginning of the end for the tangerine farmers who occupied some of the higher hills in Sanxia. A terrible glut of tangerines in 1978 drove the price down beyond what most farmers could bear. Like everyone else in town, I ate dirt-cheap tangerines until I could not stand to look at another one. Country roads stank with piles of rotting fruit that farmers had just abandoned. The industry never recovered. As a sign of the

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gradual decline of this old rural way of life, the last of the working water buffaloes disappeared from the local area at roughly this same period.

I would never have attended to the absence of nature in my data if I had not returned to find a complete contrast in Taiwan a decade later. Taiwan had discovered "nature" sometime in the mid-1980s. I could hardly pick up a newspaper without seeing reports of environmental demonstrations, although I had never heard about one in the 1970s. Some cities had enormous, ongoing movements against factory construction. In the most famous case, the multinational giant Dupont had been forced to cancel plans for a titanium dioxide plant in Lugang in 1986.[3] Smaller skirmishes popped up all over the island, and fights over landfills were so numerous that the newspapers dubbed them the "garbage wars." These even affected Sanxia, as I discovered when I visited only to find the streets smelling awful again – this time because a blockade of the town dump meant that trash had gone uncollected for weeks in Taiwan's tropical summer heat.[4] The government also gingerly began to face its environmental problems at this time. Several important environmental laws were passed in 1987, and the government created a separate Environmental Protection Administration that year.

Just as astonishing to me, the island suddenly boasted four national parks, having had none before. They were impressive, too, rivaling anything in the United States. They had excellent roads and facilities, and state-of-the-art exhibits and interpretations. These parks had a broad appeal as well; all four were among the top ten domestic tourism destinations in 1988 and 1990, and they accounted for three of the top five.[5] As further evidence of this strong new domestic market for nature tourism, hundreds of private sites had opened up, and were booming. In some cases, rural farmers had bought their old water buffaloes back to feed a new market in farm tourism. Even some of the old tangerine farms got new life from pick-your-own arrangements. Others let the hills grow wild, built a pagoda near a waterfall, and charged admission. Still other mountain backwaters received heavy investment to develop into full-scale resorts.

Magazine racks in bookstores confirmed this new consciousness of nature with a wealth of new offerings. The most spectacular was probably *Nature* (*Da Ziran*), with its large format and gorgeous color photography, but there were many others focusing on gardening, fishing, environmental protection, exotic travel destinations, and much more.[6] Just a decade after my initial experience there, many Taiwanese had apparently rethought their ideas about their relationships to the environment. Notions of nature itself were transformed.

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Related changes are happening in the People's Republic of China (PRC) right now, although not entirely in the same way. Local environmental protest has become common when people feel that some nearby factory has directly damaged their health or economy, although it is politically impossible for them to organize on the scale of Taiwan's demonstrations. The environmental protection bureaucracy also receives massive numbers of letters of complaint, and acts on at least some of them.[7] This is a remarkable change in a country that had dedicated itself to utter environmental transformation in the cause of socialist revolution, denying any possible negative consequences.[8] Vaclav Smil has documented the results of this in depressing detail, from unsustainable agriculture to undrinkable water.[9] An airplane ride over even sparsely settled rural areas of north China on a cloudless day provides enough casual proof in the coating of smog that obscures the ground everywhere.

As in Taiwan a decade earlier, environmental protection has been upgraded within the national bureaucracy, with the State Environmental Protection Administration receiving ministerial status in 1998. Many new environmental laws have been passed, and there have been extensive propaganda campaigns about the environment. Actually implementing these laws is a more serious problem (as I will discuss in chapter 6), but the effort has had a dramatic effect in a few cases. Major cities, for example, have stopped selling leaded gasoline. They have also successfully converted large numbers of urban residents to using gas instead of coal for heating and cooking.

The domestic market for nature tourism remains smaller in the People's Republic than in Taiwan. Nevertheless there is strong evidence for the beginnings of new attitudes, especially among urban people. City residents typically rank the environment high on their list of important problems, and show some significant knowledge of issues like global warming or the ozone layer.[10] Many imperial-era scenic sites remain popular and some areas are now developing new tourist sites as an economic strategy.

These changes have been more government-led in the PRC than in Taiwan, where popular protest was a stronger driving force. Still, they do translate into behaviors that go beyond any government campaigns. Tianjin and some other very large cities, for example, had a fad for "oxygen bars" (*yangqi ba*) in the mid-1990s. These were small businesses where people could pay to breathe pure oxygen from tanks for a few minutes. The primary clients were mothers bringing their children in for relief from the pollution. A shift in both government and popular (or at least urban) attitudes is under way, comparable in part to what happened in Taiwan a decade earlier.

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This book explores the causes and consequences of these changes in the ways people understand the environment and in the concept of nature itself. Both "nature" and "environment" entered the Chinese vocabulary in their modern forms only early in the twentieth century, but both terms also resonated broadly with earlier ways of thinking about how humanity relates to the physical world around it. My focus is the interplay between the older and newer concepts, and in what the results mean for actual environmental behavior.

In particular, I will concentrate on two broad and intertwined mechanisms. The first is the influence of globalization, both directly through influential carriers of new ideas about the environment, and indirectly through reactions to the vastly increased industrialization and commercialization that occurred over the twentieth century. The second is the influence of different forms of state power, which the contrasting political histories of Taiwan and China allow us to explore in some detail.

The globalization of nature

Taiwan and the People's Republic of China are not, of course, the first places to show these signs of a new consciousness of nature. In modern times, nature tourism initially took off in western Europe and North America over the course of the nineteenth century, beginning as the Alps became a defining Romantic experience of elite Grand Tours, and ending with John Muir's quasi-religious paeans to wilderness that ultimately helped to create the first national parks. This was a stunning change from an older view of wilderness as chaos to be made bountiful through human intervention. Colonial North America, for example, had lived much closer to God's words to Noah after the flood: "The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything."[11] This was the general view of nature, common throughout Western civilization at the time, that Keith Thomas characterized as "breathtakingly anthropocentric."[12]

Environmental policy changes in the West began most strongly early in the twentieth century, especially with the sanitation and conservation movements. This was already several decades later than the first popularization of new forms of nature tourism. Environmental protest and a broader environmental politics became regularized even later, especially in the decades after important crises like the Love Canal protests or the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island. By the end of the twentieth century

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environmental politics loomed as large in eastern Europe as in western Europe or North America, and was one of the important factors in the political transformations of 1989. At this point environmental politics is important around the world, and nature tourism (at least for an international market) is equally widespread.

The rapid changes in Taiwan and the People's Republic thus appear to be facets of changes that have swept the entire world. We can understand some aspects of the global spread of environmental concern as responses to the prior spread of modernity, and to the exploitative environmental thinking that went with early industrialization. Some of the new concern grew directly out of reactions against the environmental degradation that has accompanied industrialization. More broadly, though, new ways of thinking about nature – both environmentalist and exploitative – simultaneously responded to and resulted from the general cultural and moral experiences of modernity, including the drive to ever more efficient and rationalized production, increased bureaucracy, and the transformation of many social relationships to market ones.

I will expand on the significance of those processes in chapter 3, but for now let me simply note that many explanations for the rise of environmental consciousness in North America and western Europe are versions of this approach. They focus on how some of the core experiences of modernity encouraged new ways of thinking about nature that became increasingly important beginning in the nineteenth century. This was the period when the proportion of the population in agriculture began its historic decline, as the industrial revolution and its related infrastructure attracted people to the cities.

Nature began to take on a new meaning for these urban people in several rather different ways. Some embraced the power and progress that modernity promised. Both socialist and capitalist states reveled in their new control over nature, trumpeting every new and more technologically sophisticated dam, canal, and railroad line as another victory for humanity. Genres ranging from oil painting to children's books celebrated the power of steam shovels, locomotives, and airplanes. While this attitude faded to an extent toward the end of the twentieth century, we continue to see it clearly in projects like China's colossal Three Gorges dam.

Others, however, were far less content with the new world of modernity. Some looked for an untamed contrast to the artificial world of the city, the wilderness ideal that had attracted the Romantics and helped encourage the national park movement. Others developed a nostalgia for an imagined, but now lost rural world of bucolic peasants.[13] Both versions react to the broad discontents of modernity – the new disciplines

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of an increasingly rationalized work world, the pervasion of political and social bureaucracies, the reduction of all values to market price, and the shifts in personal identity.[14] These pressures are part of modernity everywhere, not just in Europe and North America. We should thus not be surprised when people in newly successful market economies like Taiwan and increasingly China imagine similar natures as an idealized alternative to urban, industrial life.

Related to this is the simple increase in wealth that the middle class enjoyed during this same period when new attitudes about nature were developing. Nature tourism, for example, could only thrive when people had leisure time to take such trips, had the cash to afford them, and had a transportation infrastructure that could get them there. One of the most influential explanations of the rise of environmental consciousness around the world focuses on these new characteristics of the middle class. Ronald Inglehart, for example, correlates wealth and education with the global rise of what he calls "postmaterialist values," including environmental consciousness.[15] Urban-based professionals in fact dominate environmentalist organizations (as opposed to anti-pollution demonstrations) in many countries. People in the "new" middle class – lawyers, teachers, doctors, and others in the knowledge sector – tend to be particularly active environmentalists. García, for example, argues that just these kinds of people form the heart of Venezuela's environmental movement.[16] I will return more critically to this issue of class and nature consciousness in later chapters (especially chapter 5), but the cross-cultural evidence does suggest that these new class positions are one important factor in explaining new attitudes toward the environment.

This kind of explanation – based on how people around the world react to the economic and cultural experience of modernity – has some important limitations. It explains global similarities as parallel adaptations to a set of shared underlying conditions, the way very different animals may evolve to look similar because they adapt to similar niches – marsupial and mammalian mice or wolves, for instance. In this case, the underlying pressure is an implied necessity of adapting to modernity in ways that reproduce the earlier experience of the West. In fact, however, the situation is more complicated because, among other reasons, North American and western European views of nature are themselves globalizing, creating a broad and direct diffusion of ideas through various colonial and postcolonial mechanisms of transmission to the rest of the world.[17] These ideas sometimes clash directly with the market globalization that spreads at the same time. The West exports both land reclamation programs and wetland protection schemes, both broader markets for new foods and attempts to protect endangered species.

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In this view, the market may have been a crucial driver of culture in the first cases of capitalism. After that, however, the new economic system and its associated culture spread throughout the world. There is thus only a single case – the entire world system – instead of many separate cases that can be treated as if they were independent. The creation of this world culture has not been just a matter of benign diffusion for many of these theorists. They see it instead as an act of domination, historically rooted in colonialism, with an economic division of labor in which the core capitalist countries profit from the peripheral position of the rest of the world. Such a view animates the anti-globalization demonstrations that have accompanied important international economic meetings in recent years. Protesters oppose the ability of global rule-makers like the International Monetary Fund to impose social policy or the power of multinational capital flight (or just its threat) to influence local labor. McDonald's – as both economic actor and cultural icon – represents this process for many; others like to cite Hollywood or MTV.

For the environment we can see this in the spread of specifically Western ways of conceptualizing nature and human interactions with it, carried through development programs, the worldwide spread of environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) based in the West, education, and the media. Specifically Western forms of nature tourism also spread widely, initially through the creation of preserves under colonialism and more recently through the international ecotourism market. Many African national parks, for example, began as colonial hunting preserves and evolved into conservation areas to protect wildlife from the native peoples. In the unequal contest between colonial and indigenous views of how people should relate to the environment, the colonial view of a preserved, wild nature largely ousted local people from the land on which they had made a living for centuries.[18]

All of these approaches, whether they focus on the shared experience of market modernities or on a more direct kind of cultural imperialism, suggest that the world today has an increasingly homogenized and universalized view of how humans and the environment interrelate. As a result, they also share some problems. The first is that the case for global convergence tends to be made too forcefully. People have met globalization everywhere by embracing it, but also by reworking it and rejecting it. We typically see reassertions of local or regional culture, identity, and economy even as globalization creates a pressure toward international homogeneity. Japanese pop and anime, for example, show this kind of reworking in a way so successful that they have created their own globalizing flow.

Several authors see a threatening tension between globalization and local culture. Anthony Giddens, for example, writes that

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> In a globalising world, where information and images are routinely transmitted across the globe, we are all regularly in contact with others who think differently, and live differently, from ourselves. Cosmopolitans welcome and embrace this cultural complexity. Fundamentalists find it disturbing and dangerous. Whether in the areas of religion, ethnic identity or nationalism, they take refuge in a renewed and purified tradition – and, quite often, violence.[19]

Others, and I include myself, see less Manichean drama in the interaction between local and global. Empirically, it seems more fruitful to examine the long interaction where the local and the global change each other, and where some kind of dualistic struggle is only one, rather extreme, possible result.

One of the questions this approach opens up is the way indigenous categories of knowledge may reshape globalizing culture. In chapter 2 I take this problem up for the concept of "nature" itself. For the sake of semantic convenience, I will be using the word "environment" to indicate the broadest physical world in which humans live, and "nature" to indicate social constructions of that environment. Nature, in this sense, has particular histories. As I will discuss in the following chapter, the modern term "nature" (in English or in contemporary Chinese) had no real equivalent in classical Chinese, although it has now achieved a dominant position in Chinese discourse. Nevertheless, earlier ways of thinking about humanity and the environment in China did not wash away when Western ideas about nature became entrenched in the early twentieth century. Instead they remain in a lively and evolving dialogue with the global concepts, and they continue to influence a broad range of environmental behavior in China and Taiwan. One of the problems in massive statistical surveys like Inglehart's study of "postmaterialist values" is whether people in different contexts actually understand the same things by "nature" or "environment." Cross-cultural surveys of that kind assume a prior globalization of categories, and leave little room for the influence of indigenous ideas.

Taking a closer, empirical look at the local side of globalization also complicates the issue of just what the local is. In loose opposition to the idea of global homogeneity, the concept of the local can point to everything from a small village on a remote mountain, to regional agglomerations of millions of people (Cantonese speakers, for instance), to nation-states. The complexities of local social structures can also be lost when locality becomes a simple shorthand for opposition to globalization. Even the most local communities include a range of social and power dynamics based on gender, age, wealth, and many other factors. Much of this book will spell out the very different ways people in different social positions in Taiwan and the People's Republic of China relate to their environment

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through nature tourism, environmental protest, and environmental policy implementation. The local is not a simple opposite to the global.

A second kind of problem is that discussions of globalization tend to treat the globalizing forces themselves as homogeneous and unitary. This ignores the enormous disagreements that exist within the areas that are said to be the primary emitters of global ideas. American society, for example, promotes a global neoliberal market ideology, but it is also a major source of ideas opposed to that ideology. It exports both cigarettes and antismoking campaigns, big dam construction and tree-hugging protestors. A wide range of people carry globalizing messages – intellectuals, business executives, development consultants, tourists (old and well-heeled, young and at loose ends), missionaries, the media, and more. Some are more powerful than others, but all have globalizing influence and all may carry different messages.[20]

Nor is globalization simply a diffusion from a single core to the rest of the world. While the United States, followed by western Europe, plays a dominant role, other areas and other kinds of geographies rework globalizing ideas and create new global forces of their own. In East Asia, Japan has played an especially important role because of its economic clout and its colonial history. Pop music and fashion, which had obvious Western origins, have taken on distinctive East Asian styles as they are reworked in Japan and often Hong Kong, followed by the rest of the region. Uniquely Japanese models of nature tourism (and golf, which is related) have played an important role in Taiwan, as I will discuss in chapter 4. In some cases, East Asia itself is the primary emitter for globalizing forces. Zen Buddhism and Japanese corporate management styles, in their very different ways, have had periods where they swept the world.

Other kinds of globalization have no clear geographical center. Arjun Appadurai has argued effectively that the combination of extensive migration and easier communication is fostering new kinds of transnational communities.[21] These often claim a common place of origin, but in practice exist across all lines of nation and geography. Such transnational connections are as important for East Asia – especially mainland China and Taiwan – as for the Indian cases that Appadurai documents. All these multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting forms of globalization shape environmental attitudes in China and Taiwan.

Comparing political contexts

The combination of global influences and indigenous social and cultural resources has altered the entire spectrum of daily life in the environment – changing fuel costs, protest movements, the labor requirements of

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cooking, government regulations, education, leisure activities, and more. Both Taiwan and the People's Republic have been transformed, in spite of their differences. At heart, these changes imply a genuine innovation in how people conceptualize the relationship between humanity and environment, as I will argue in chapter 2. China and Taiwan share most of their history, but have also taken separate political and social paths since 1895 (except for the brief and unhappy unity of 1945–9). This makes them a fruitful way to compare how similar global influences and a largely joint cultural tradition may (or may not) lead to divergent results in different contexts. As much of this book will discuss, the differences turn out to be less salient than we might expect from the contrast between capitalist and communist paths of development.

Both Taiwan and the People's Republic had powerful authoritarian governments for most of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, they took sharply different political and economic roads over the last century. The mainland spent the first half of the century struggling with warlords and later enduring a corrupt but more unified rule by the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, GMD) until the Japanese invasion of World War II and the Communist revolution tore through the country. The Communist state that took over in 1949 completely reorganized social and political life under a centrally planned economy. The reform period that began in the late 1970s gradually opened up a market economy and created more social space for people, but the underlying political system remains intact.

Meanwhile, Taiwan spent the fifty years between 1895 and 1945 as a Japanese colony, molded to serve primarily as a rice basket to feed Japan's industrialization. It spent most of the next fifty years under the very tight authoritarian control of the Nationalist Party, which moved its governing apparatus there after losing the civil war on the mainland. Taiwan's market-based economy grew steadily, but its politics changed only after 1987 when the forty-year state of emergency stemming from the "Communist bandit" insurgency – martial law in all but name – was finally lifted and the island quickly democratized.

In spite of these differences, Taiwan and the People's Republic share some features that may help explain changing environmental attitudes. The most obvious is that both places are severely polluted as a result of decades of government encouragement of economic growth regardless of the economic consequences – one of the indirect results of the globalizing industrial economy. Rivers and urban air suffer from serious industrial and agricultural pollution, exacerbated in northern China by extensive burning of coal and biomass for winter heat, and by the dusty winds that blow eroded soils through the region. A recent World Bank study, for

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