

# Preface

Poyang Lake is the largest freshwater lake in China. The area around Poyang Lake has such a rich tradition of rice cultivation and aquaculture that it is said to be 鱼米之乡. The Chinese 鱼 translates to *fish* and 米 means *rice*; the words together mean *land of fish and rice*. But one cannot fully appreciate its meanings and the subtlety of feeling it evokes, unless one understands the significance of rice in China's development history and has seen those rice paddies, with countless streams and irrigation canals meandering among them. It is a way of life so central and dear to generations of farmers in southern China. It is a culture, representing the wellspring of human civilization.

I did not know all these meanings growing up in northern China. But in the past ten years, I have gotten to know and grow fond of Poyang Lake and farmers in the area. It all started when I moved to Ann Arbor to pursue a PhD at the University of Michigan. I was working as a research assistant for my advisor, Dr. Daniel Brown, on a research project about land use and flood vulnerability around Poyang Lake. In the summer of 2006, we traveled around the entire lake to collect land-use data on crop and vegetation types. That was my first exposure to rural areas in southern China.

For my own dissertation research, I returned to visit nine villages around Poyang Lake in the summer of 2008. I stayed with farmer households and had the privilege of observing their daily lives. If that first visit in 2006 left me with pleasant but brief impressions on the rural south that had fascinated the mind, this field trip allowed me to learn much more about the rice culture and the rural livelihoods that had long depended on it.

Yet one didn't need to be a keen observer to see that the traditional lifestyle in 鱼米之乡, which meant working and living in harmony with nature, has been changing amid development transitions. In my more recent field trips to the area in 2014 and 2015, I noticed other dramatic changes, such as the rise of "landlords" who manage large farms, and an increasingly rural and urban mix in the cities.

During my visits to the villages, I was greatly impressed by the development progress I witnessed: newly built two- or three-story houses, solar panels on the roofs, children's playgrounds and senior activity centers, concrete roads leading to

every village, and in a village that had made its name for pearl growing and jewelry making, many new cars. Some of these advancements were direct outcomes of a national development initiative called “Build a New Countryside.”

What moved me most, however, were the farmers who still planted, tilled, and harvested by hand, the fishermen with tanned, weather-worn faces, and a hillside village on the lake that had developed a self-sufficient economy and maintained cultivation of many minor crops like peanut, sesame, and sweet potato, even now when it relied mainly on nonfarm income. There was a charm in them, and it was from them that I began to understand the culture of 鱼米之乡.

I was much taken with a young man who grew mushrooms in Anhui Province and wanted to farm in his own village if he could only secure a large enough farmland area; a young woman who came back to visit her parents and lamented that village girls got married too early; and a curious fisherman who came to see us while we were having dinner at the village leader’s home.

I still remember vividly a dark-faced woman who was tending both her sick husband and mother-in-law and made a living catching crayfish in the lake, and the village leader’s wife in that hillside village who always had a smile, whether she was cooking a simple winter squash dish or cutting sweet potato leaves to feed their pigs. Nor can I forget the accountant who welcomed us into his home and served our meals and refused to accept even a token payment, saying, “Let’s be friends.”

And those children in the villages—they are as lovely and intelligent as children anywhere. They give a real purpose to this work. After all, rural sustainability is all about them and their children and their children’s children. They have never left my thoughts since then.

I of course also recognized some of the rural development issues. For example, the insufficient education of children left behind by parents working far away in cities; the unoccupied new houses owned by migrant workers; and some uncultivated plots. I also learned about the pollution of rural industry, and the appropriation of farmland for industrial development, which left farmers worried about their livelihoods. Most of all, I felt the helplessness that many farmers expressed, not on account of flood hazards from Poyang Lake, but because they did not know what else, or more, they could do to improve their living conditions.

Traveling south (against the current) on the Gan River, one of the five major rivers that drain into Poyang Lake, one arrives at Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi Province. The contrast between the villages and the city in all aspects of social, economic, and cultural development is immediately apparent.

Right on the river’s eastern bank, in the north west of the city, stands滕王阁, the Pavilion of Prince Teng. 滕王阁 is one of the three greatest pavilions in southern China. Since its construction in 653 AD, during the Tang dynasty, numerous poets have visited and enshrined the historical architecture in their famous works.

The view from the Pavilion of Prince Teng is indeed impressive. To the east, new buildings spread out wide and far in a multilayered pattern imbued with rhythms. On the other side, the river, dotted with small fishing boats, looks serene at sunset; it seems as if the whole history of Jiangxi has sunk into the river flow, and it feels

heavier as the river reaches the countryside. The past and the future come together, and the city and villages are connected, right now, right here, at this vantage point.

It is a place for contemplation. How will urban culture diffuse to influence life in villages? What will the countryside look like a few decades from now? Can urban life, and the economy as a whole, prosper without healthy, strong agriculture? What kind of world will those children I met in the villages face when they grow up, and how will their lives be different from their parents'?

The work presented in this book is an attempt to make sense of what I saw and heard in the field. The reality I was exposed to was complex, and I have tried to untangle that complexity. I was fortunate because the University of Michigan's Center for the Study of Complex Systems has an array of stellar scholars, whose pioneer work significantly influenced my approach to examine rural development. And I felt an instant click with "complexity thinking."

The Poyang Lake area is a miniature of rural China. It is also a window through which to examine the larger issues of development in the developing world, where rural households struggle to improve their economic situations and are also disproportionately affected by climate variability and change. While I am clear-headed about the limitations of one case study, I cannot help wondering what the villages around Poyang Lake share with other less developed rural areas, and it is granted that at times such questions run the risk of overgeneralization.

But I do believe that government policy is essential for guiding development to facilitate rural households in their efforts to build robust livelihoods. Increasing the well-being of rural households, promoting agriculture, and reducing climate impacts are not separate goals; they should and can be addressed together. To achieve these goals, policy will have to foster healthy rural-urban development dynamics, adapt over time to suit ongoing social and environment changes, and attend to local variations as well.

Every time I visit China, I am amazed by how fast things move. I have to apologize here if any of the analyses in this book fall behind the swift steps of development. In fact, China has been constantly adjusting its development policy and is an exemplar for adaptive policymaking. Its recent plans increasingly emphasize harmonious development with local natural environments. In the field, I also saw government-supported agricultural research projects, trying different approaches in different places. In general, I feel confident about the development policy and am optimistic about the future of rural development.

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The view of Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi Province, from the Pavilion of Prince Teng on the eastern edge of the Gan River



The view of the Gan River at sunset from the Pavilion of Prince. In the background is new development of Nanchang along the Gan River's western bank



Children in a village alongside the Gan River, where the river flows into Poyang Lake

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