

LIFE

A place where rocks are anything and grass has feelings

I knew we were close when I saw the “breasts”.

That is, a pair of mountains that Tibetan nomads have anthropomorphized as resembling a woman's bosom near their isolated settlement on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, where I've run a volunteer initiative for nearly a decade. It reminded me of the extreme pervasiveness of this tendency in China.

Indeed, nearly every land formation inside a ticketed attraction at least is likened to something with a cultural connotation.

Take the Rainbow Mountains in Gansu province's Zhangye, where the peaks take their colorful

names from their ostensible resemblance to people, animals and objects.

Like countless places in the country, geology and anthropology blend to paint the Rainbow Mountains with a vibrant allure.

Landforms there take such names as Huge Scallop Rock Cumulous, Returning Sail in the Sunset, Monks Worshipping Buddha, Spirit Monkey Views the Sea and Tassels of the Yugu Maiden.

The lesser-known nearby Ice Valley, in turn, hosts such formations as Toad Looking at Red Clouds, the Yin-and-Yang Pillars, Camel Greeting Guests, Goshawk Head, Three Friends, Egyptian Pharaoh, Turtle Diving into the Sea, Peacock Stone and Colored-Glaze Palace.

A single 5-meter-high stone alone shares three names — the

Torch of Qilian, Red Flag and Neighing Horse.

Indeed, many of China's most iconic landforms take such appellations. Many are featured in the works of ancient poets, who penned odes to them and the legends surrounding them.

Think Yunnan province's Tiger-Leaping Gorge, Beijing's Silver Fox Cave and the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region's Dragon Backbone Terraces.

Indeed, other countries and cultures also impose cultural symbolism on natural landscapes — Mauritius' Eye of the Sahara, New Zealand's Split Apple Rock, South Africa's Giants Castle and Norway's Pulpit Rock.

However, many seem more likely to name landforms after people — Egypt's Mount Katrina, Mount Washington in the United States

and Australia's Ayers Rock, whose aboriginal name, Yankunytjatjara, refers to the ethnic group who has long dwelled there.

Or, they often use descriptions of the landform's characteristics, as with Yellowstone, the Great Barrier Reef and the Rocky Mountains.

And that's not to say China doesn't do this, too, as with the Yellow River, Yellow Mountain (Huangshan) and the Yangtze, whose Chinese name, Changjiang, translates as Long River.

The Loess Plateau's name leaves little guessing as to exactly what it is.

However, China seems to demonstrate a stronger tendency to imbue natural landscapes with supernatural, or at least mythological, identifications.

And this proclivity to anthropo-

morphize extends beyond landforms to life forms — even lawns.

For instance, signs that in the West would read something like “Please keep off the grass” read in Chinese, and are sometimes directly translated into English as, “The grass is smiling at you. Please detour”; “Do not disturb. Tiny grass is dreaming”; and “I like your smile but unlike you put your foot on my face.”

Frankly, I'd never thought about what grass thought about my smile — or my footsteps. Because, well, I'd never thought about grass thinking at all — let alone feeling ... let alone feeling particular feelings about me, in particular.

Humans have projected our collective psyches onto the shapes of clouds, constellations and landforms for as long as we know of. These have served as cultural

Rorschach tests for millennia before the test was invented. And it was developed as analysis of this exact human propensity, albeit on an individual, rather than civilizational, level.

And many earlier societies attributed consciousness — even souls — to not only plants and animals but also mountains and rivers.

As such, contemporary China is a place where natural landforms blend with landscapes of the mind, where imagination is projected onto the rock that projects toward the sky, and where stone and culture show their colors, in every sense.

Oh ... and you may offend the seemingly friendly grass.

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Candid camera: Framing a new era



A plane takes off as workers below handle the steel frames of a new roof for Terminal 3 at Guiyang Longdongbao International Airport in Guizhou province, on Thursday. The terminal, covering 167,000 square meters, will be able to accommodate an annual passenger flow of 14.5 million by 2025.

QIAO QIMING / FOR CHINA DAILY



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Craftsman fired by passion revives porcelain tradition

ZHENGZHOU — Ceramic bottles and jars fill craftsman You Guangming's studio, spilling out the door and onto the roadside. The flowerpots he uses are items he made that are not up to the required standard.

You, 63, is from a small village in the city of Gongyi, Central China's Henan province. Formerly known as Gongxian county, the city is a base for ancient kilns that fired the famous tricolored glazed pottery of the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

With a studio in the village, You reproduces famous local ceramics.

“I hope locals will use the delicate earthenware that was once exclusively for royal and noble families,” he says.

Located at the intersection of the Yellow River and the man-made Grand Canal, Gongxian kilns originated in the Sui Dynasty (581-618) and their popularity peaked in the Tang Dynasty. Porcelain fired in the kilns was shipped to Central Asia and Europe via the ancient Silk Road, and to Southeast Asia, Africa and other areas via the Maritime Silk Road, winning global fame, says Ren Wei, head of the cultural heritage administration of the provincial capital Zhengzhou.

You has known of Tang tricolored pottery since childhood, but he did not know his hometown was one of its production bases until the age of 13.

“The glory of my hometown made me proud but also sad. How could the beautiful art fail to be passed down?” says You, who has long dreamed of reviving the porcelain for modern use.

When he was in high school in the 1970s, You found a part-time job loading and transporting kaolin for a mine, but he didn't know the white clay was an important raw material for ceramics at the time.

You once saw a batch of earthenware at a local ceramics plant and became interested in a particular drinking vessel.

“It was decorated with the story of the Monkey King,” You recalls. He begged the craftsman to make one for him but instead received a scolding.

“He said all the items would be exported and not even the waste products were allowed to be taken out of the plant,” says You.

The episode left him more determined to produce porcelain by himself so that ordinary families could have access to them.



Artisan You Guangming examines a ceramic ware he made in the style of the ancient Gongxian kiln at his studio in Gongyi, Henan province, in September. LI AN / XINHUA

Cadre in rural Guizhou leads by example

By CHENG YUEZHU in Beijing and YANG JUN in Guiyang

With a genuine affection for the countryside, 38-year-old Hou Yuanjun from Southwest China's Guizhou province has been a resident cadre for four years, and plans to stay on.

Because of his diligence and contribution, he has been rated “excellent” for three consecutive years, winning several county-level or city-level honorary titles. In 2019, he was awarded the title of the province's “poverty alleviation excellent resident cadre”.

Hou attributes his resoluteness of working in the villages to his fondness for the countryside: “I was born and raised in the countryside, so I just like the things about it.”

His work in the villages started in June 2016, when he was selected to work as the resident Party secretary at Muziling village, Guanzhou township, Yanhe Tujia autonomous county of Tongren.

Together with the poverty alleviation team and the villagers, the village's poverty incidence decreased from 19.37 percent to 2.72 percent, and its infrastructure was substantially upgraded. By the end of 2016, the village was removed from the impoverished list.

After completing two years of residency work in the village, Hou could have applied to return to his original position. But knowing that there were still people living in poverty, he said that his mission was not yet complete.

Therefore, he took the initiative to apply to continue working on the front line of poverty alleviation, and became a resident Party secre-



tary of Hongxing village of Guanzhou township in April 2018.

When asked about their impressions of Hou, several local cadres and residents from the village expressed gratitude.

Tian Xiaobing, Party secretary of Hongxing village, says Hou is a very dedicated, pragmatic and hard-working person whose deeds are more shown in action than words.

“His own family is actually quite poor. He is still living in low-rent apartments with his wife and daughter. Still, he often spends money and energy on doing something for the impoverished families,” Tian says.

He gave an example. A villager suffered from a shattered bone in a work accident and could not afford the treatment costs. Hou applied for a personal loan of 40,000 yuan (\$5,982) so that the villager could be treated.

“He often comes to help us with farmwork and housework. We all

feel greatly thankful to him. He is serving the villagers with all his heart, unafraid of any hardship,” Tian Hongcheng, a resident at the village, says.

When he first arrived at Hongxing village, Hou worked hard to apply for governmental support so that the village could start to develop industries and landed three agricultural projects. However, the projects had to be launched in order to receive financial aid.

He then put up his salary as a collateral for a loan of 200,000 yuan and lent the money to the village cooperative. The village started to develop its industries including cattle, chicken and chilies.

All impoverished households in the village became members of the cooperative and received dividends. The cooperative has helped 132 households, including 425 people, to shake off poverty.

Hongxing village has made major improvements in terms of



Left: Residents of Hongxing village, Yanhe Tujia autonomous county, Guizhou province, sort and pack red chilies, one of the crops they harvest and sell to boost income.

Above: Hou Yuanjun, resident Party secretary of Hongxing village.

PHOTOS BY YAO XU / CHINA DAILY

infrastructure, industries and living conditions. Roads and footpaths have been built to facilitate transport, and nine drinking water projects have been established to provide clean water for residents and livestock.

By the end of 2018, the poverty incidence in the village dropped from 13.66 percent to 2.36 percent, and the village was removed from the impoverished list.

In the past two years, Hou continued to work on the development of industries and infrastructure at the village. He says that now every household has access to tap water and electricity.

When asked about his next goal, he says he will continue to work in Hongxing village and possibly other villages in the future.

“I just want to do something for the countryside.”

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