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The Politics of Making Biocultural Diversity

How is the concept of “biocultural diversity” created through transnational encounters? How does it move throughout the world and possibly gain traction, and yet transform itself, in a bewildering number of countries and contexts? My paper highlights the temporal and conceptual novelty of biocultural diversity. The term extends, in surprising ways, from W. G. Rosen and E. O. Wilson’s promotion of the neologism “biodiversity” in the mid-1980s. Since that time, biodiversity has attracted a wide and passionate audience. Much of this research and advocacy generally views biodiversity as arising on its own, with no connection to people’s actions, and sees local peoples as threats. The main innovation of biocultural diversity is to posit a link between particular kinds of peoples (often those seen as “indigenous”) and biodiverse environments, and to use the sentiments of valuing and protecting already created by “biodiversity” as a rallying point.

This paper explores the varied forms of work that go into making “biocultural diversity” a statement of fact, an object of desire, and more. As Pete Brosius and Sarah Hitchner (2010) point out, biocultural diversity is a concept typically used as part of a crisis narrative (one suggesting that biological and cultural diversity are under threat), but its aims and strategies are indeterminate. Thus there are a variety of positions around biocultural diversity. For some it is merely an assertion that there is a strong link between cultural and biological diversity (Nietschmann 1992). Others suggest that it offers a particular agenda. In this short paper, I consider how we can understand biocultural diversity in relation to power, history, and the role of governance. I show how these questions arise by looking at their emergence in China.

Since the mid-1990s, I have been an active participant and observer in transnational nature conservation efforts in Southwest China’s Yunnan Province. This region has attracted a great deal of domestic and international interest, with dozens of projects, conferences, and NGOs. Using archival data and extensive fieldwork in project villages, conversations with expatriate conservationists, Chinese natural and social scientists, and Chinese officials, I have been tracing some of the major transformations in the politics of nature since the 1970s. One of the major trends has been a serious

re-evaluation of the role of local people in managing the natural world. Early projects often aimed to evict local peoples from newly created nature reserves and teach them scientific methods of farming. Recently, however, a number of Chinese natural and social scientists are playing a major role in transforming how conservation is understood and practiced in Yunnan. They have done so through critiques of previous methods, and through their own studies and projects, which advocate for new ways of understanding links between ethnic minority groups, knowledge, stewardship, and rights.

At the same time, conservation work in China is carried out in the context of a strong state. China's central government is well known for enacting far-reaching laws. While a number of outsider observers celebrate China's newfound status as an "environmentalist state," others more concerned about social justice have labeled such moves "draconian" (Lang 2002). Such laws can work against the rise of experiments that aim to recognize and create space for biocultural diversity, such as offering increased rural land rights, in part based on advocates' arguments that rural groups are already creating successful examples of "community forestry," "indigenous agroforestry," and "sacred forests." Unlike other countries, there is little tradition in China of romanticizing an "ecologically noble savage" with moving essays about indigenous knowledge or wisdom (Redford 1991; Conklin and Graham 1995). Instead, Chinese advocates for indigenous knowledges and practices use scientific languages, creating authoritative accounts aimed at convincing skeptical audiences of government officials and conservationists, who largely view rural peoples as ignorant and scientifically illiterate (Hathaway forthcoming). Their persuasive reports are often framed in the numeric language of conservation biology, such as the Shannon-Weaver Index, which quantifies biological diversity levels. These advocates argue, unlike mainstream conservation biology but along the lines of spokespeople for biocultural diversity elsewhere, that particular ethnic minority groups foster zones of high biological diversity.

The advocates sometimes use the English term "indigenous peoples." This terminology has often been acceptable and even attractive to international organizations, who often need little convincing that indigenous peoples exist in China. On the other hand, trying to create space within China for the umbrella term "indigenous people" is a substantial challenge. In China, the concept of "indigenous people" is officially rejected: the state declares that all people in China are equally indigenous, and therefore the term has no relevance. This is not just about semantics, for indigeneity is now hitched

to legal rights; there is a vast global network of indigenous groups and their advocates. Interest in biocultural diversity is one way in which the politics of indigeneity itself are being worked out in China (Hathaway 2010).

Yet there is danger in reifying cultural diversity, in accepting it as a naturalistic fact. Some scholars have pointed out that ethnic identity is a social process, and hence that cultural diversity is not just found but is produced as a social category. Studies of ethnicity in China reveal the powerful role of the state. Whereas elsewhere, questions of indigenous identity are often assumed to arise autonomously from the groups themselves, through common residence, language, culture, and so on, official statements about ethnic diversity in China have varied radically over time. In the early 1900s, for example, leaders began to think of China as a place with a Han majority and four ethnic minority groups: Manchus, Mongols, Muslims, and Tibetans. The very term “ethnic minority” came from Japan at this time, part of a new set of loan words, such as “society” and various scientific and Marxist concepts. During the mid-1950s, the state sent hundreds of researchers throughout China to demarcate and delineate ethnic groups. Well over four hundred groups applied for status, from Yunnan alone. By 1979, Chinese authorities settled on 55 minority groups, a number suspiciously close to Vietnam’s count of 54 and Mexico’s count of 56 groups, which may have been influenced by Chinese methods. Linguists argue that China may have over a hundred languages, most of which lack official recognition.

Ethnic diversity plays multiple and ambiguous roles in China. On the one hand, scholars reveal the strong bias against many of the ethnic minority groups in daily life, who are often represented as perpetually backwards, or feminized as objects of sexual interest. On the other hand, ethnic minorities play a key part in national performances, whether aimed domestically or internationally, where diversity is presented as smiling people dressed in colorful costume, singing and dancing. Ethnic tourism is gaining ground, and certain groups have gained some local power, wealth, and influence, fostering their own elite. Other groups who have pressed for greater rights, such as Muslims in northwest China, or Tibetans, find state retaliation swift and often severe. Thus, ethnic diversity functions in various ways, including as a national resource and object of display, and as a threatening reminder of a non-unified state.

Advocates for biocultural diversity, whether Chinese scholars or members of international NGOs, always operate within politicized spheres, a fact easily forgotten in

celebratory frameworks. We should examine how this term—originally developed, like the initial frameworks of global indigenous politics, mainly in reference to dynamics in North and South America—might travel around the world, and how it functions and morphs in highly divergent social contexts. Where does the term not work, and why? How does it change over time, as a rallying cry for action? In this brief description of the politics of culture and nature in China, I hope I have begun to provoke questions of this kind.

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