



Revisiting Shangri-la: Photographing a Century of Environmental and Cultural Change in the Mountains of Southwest China

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Revisiting Shangri-la: Photographing a Century of Environmental and Cultural Change in the Mountains of Southwest China

By Robert K. Moseley. Kunming,
China: China International Press,
2011. 255 pp. US\$ 58.00. ISBN
978-7-5085-2173-2.

The author of *Revisiting Shangri-la* served as director of conservation science for the Nature Conservancy's joint project with the Deqin County government between 2000 and 2005, although the coverage includes several of the neighboring counties of northwestern Yunnan, such as Zhongdian and Yulong. Zhongdian has recently renamed itself "Shangri-la," considered an ingenious gambit to promote tourism and well it might: the entire northwestern section of Yunnan is a "far-away" landscape of spectacular high snow-capped mountains, the easternmost ranges of the Himalaya and Tibet; home to many ethnic peoples with histories that date back before the Han; transected by three of the world's deepest river gorges; and shrouded in ancient mysteries and colorful folklore. Until approximately 1990, it was comparatively inaccessible to both Chinese and foreigners.

Robert Moseley took with him on his first visit in 2000 a *National Geographic* magazine article by Joseph Rock about his 1923 expedition to the same area. For most of the period from 1922 to 1947, Rock had lived and worked in northwestern Yunnan, based principally in the village of Yuhu, 10 km north of the main town of Lijiang. Among many other accomplishments, Rock was a prodigious photographer, and the bulk of his photograph collection was archived by the National Geographic Society. The magazine article mentioned above led Moseley into a

major project of replication of the old photographs as a key to determining landscape change. Moseley did not limit himself to duplicating Rock's photographs, however: his project entailed a massive search of the records of several other early adventurers and scholars, including Frank Kingdon-Ward, Heinrich Handel-Mazzetti, John Walter Gregory, and Peter Goulart. By the end of his last visit in June 2005, Moseley had replicated 420 photographs, most by Joseph Rock. Eighty-six of these images, together with the author's replications, provide the basis for this large-format (29 × 21 cm) book.

The major section of the book, divided into 8 chapters, all of which feature photo replications, illustrates Yunnanese landscape change over a period in excess of a hundred years. In addition to photo analysis, Moseley includes interviews with villagers and excerpts of relevant passages from diaries of the early travellers to explain the causes of landscape change in a variety of contexts, as indicated by the chapter titles: "Yunnan Horse and Tea Road," "Mountain Villages," "Towns and Cities," "Sacred and Religious Sites," "Three Great Rivers," "High Mountains," "Forests," and "Impacts of Climate Change."

The "old photographs" are in black and white; many are reproduced full page. They vary in quality, understandably, although most are excellent, especially those taken by Rock. Moseley's replications are in color, but the majority are of a much smaller format (9 × 12 cm), so that sometimes the conclusions that the author wishes to derive from comparison with the originals are less clearly demonstrated than reproduction at the same size would have permitted. However, the color photography is of high quality, and the book as a whole is beautifully produced.

Changes in landscape and human activities are manifested throughout the world, and northwestern Yunnan is no exception, apart from having

been closed to foreign and most Han visitors between 1947 and 1985. Many of the photographed localities of Deqin, Shangri-la (Zhongdian), Yulong, and especially Lijiang town, are scarcely recognizable today, after the passage of a century or even 25 years. Precarious mule trails, ferries, and rope bridges have become 2-lane surfaced roads and concrete and steel structures. Hydroelectric installations are among the more egregious encroachments on traditional landscape. Nevertheless, Moseley maintains that "the repeated images do not support many common assumptions regarding the environmental deterioration, especially those blamed on the mountain peasants" (p 245). He states that, in April 2001, he was "the first foreigner to live in this Tibetan border region [Deqin] since the French missionaries were expelled 50 years earlier" (p 16). He goes on to explain that his findings "contradict most other accounts of forest dynamics in Yunnan and China. Most places where we documented forest loss are dominated by the Yi ethnic groups ... or [were forest] stands clear-cut by commercial logging between the 1970s and 1990s" (p 196).

The chapter on "Forests" states that "the forests of northwest Yunnan have changed during the past century, although not as much as prevailing expert opinion assumes" (p 196). As causes of relative forest stability, (1) wild fires in the first half of the 20th century were followed by vigorous fire suppression after 1950, which allowed natural reforestation; (2) despite local timber harvesting for village fuel and construction, forests remained stable or increased in density due to careful village management; and (3) in spite of a rising population, much cropland was abandoned, which led to reforestation.

It is disconcerting that the author makes not a single reference to the research of the United Nations University team in the same region. From 1982 onward, replicate photography was used, which emphasized

the value of Joseph Rock's work. Many publications ensued from fieldwork during the 1980s and 1990s, identifying much of what *Revisiting Shangri-la* claims for its own results, and more besides. For instance, intensive work at the village level in the 1990s by my graduate students demonstrated a much fuller understanding of the complexities of forest management. Failure to recognize the detailed work of Lindsey Swope (1995) on the forest management of Wenhai and other villages in Yulong County and the massive contribution of Seth Sicroff (1998) on tourism issues after 1985 is regrettable. Important information is also contained in subsequent publications (Ives and He 1996; Swope et al 1997). The relevance of replication of old photographs was stressed by Messerli and Ives (1984). This was taken up

both in northwestern Yunnan and more extensively in Nepal (Ives and Messerli 1989). One can only wonder what the project undertaken by the Nature Conservancy has missed.

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