

GEOGRAPHICAL FIELD NOTE

CORMORANT FISHING IN SOUTHWESTERN CHINA: A TRADITIONAL FISHERY UNDER SIEGE

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An important legacy of China's historical isolation is the persistence of traditional practices in the use of natural resources. The Cultural Revolution and, more recently, dramatic economic growth and structural change as China integrates into world markets have brought about marked changes in how rural people make their living and relate to their environment. We report, in this note, on the imminent demise of the traditional cormorant fishery in Lake Erhai, one of country's largest highland lakes and an important center of cormorant fishing in southwestern China.

During the summer of 2000 Maya Manzi conducted research in the prefecture of Dali, once a strategic point on the Silk Road and today a primary tourist destination in Yunnan Province, which borders on Tibet, Burma, Laos, and Vietnam. Dali is home to 3.19 million people, of whom some 40 percent are Bai, a regionally important ethnic minority long known for their practice of traditional farming and cormorant fishing (PRC 2000). Situated at 2,000 meters above sea level, Lake Erhai gathers water from the subtropical monsoons over a drainage basin of about 2,565 square kilometers, which includes the eastern slopes of the Cang Shan range. A relatively shallow but long lake, Erhai has been regulated since at least the 1970s, and its waters are increasingly in demand for hydropower generation, irrigation, traditional and nontraditional fishing, aquaculture, and tourism. Apart from travel accounts, which date from the sixteenth century to the early twentieth century (Jackson 1997), and some brief contemporary narratives (Hoh 1998, 2000), no systematic survey of cormorant fishing in China is available in the recent literature.

The initial object of Manzi's study was the practice and importance of cormorant fishing in Lake Erhai. With the assistance of an interpreter, she conducted formal interviews with local government officials, with the leader of the cormorant fishing community, Zhao Chong Bao, and with other cormorant fishermen of Lake Erhai. The interviews indicated that the cormorant fishery was in steep decline and revealed the factors that were threatening its viability. In addition, Manzi conducted a census of the fisher families of Lake Erhai, including making a photographic record of all fishing cormorants and their owners, in order to provide a

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