Jenny Chio’s *A Landscape of Travel* is about China becoming a nation that travels. Its rural workers by the hundreds of millions travel yearly to the cities to make clothes, to build skyscrapers, to serve diners, and to clean hotel rooms. Its consumers bought almost seventeen million cars in 2012, causing both monumental traffic jams and perhaps the world’s worst urban air pollution. Its premier high-speed train now takes travelers from Beijing to Guangzhou in eight hours, while its freeways are engineering marvels, allowing travelers to glide through, rather than over or around, formidable mountain ranges.

One way of traveling is to be a tourist, and China is also becoming a nation that tours. In 2010 Chinese tourists took an estimated 2.1 billion domestic tourist trips. They go to big cities to see historical and nationalist sites; they go to national parks and nature reserves to see scenery and to escape the city; they even go to the countryside to experience nostalgically that rough rural life that their grandparents and today’s migrant workers have fought so hard to escape. And increasingly, they go to China’s ethnic minority towns and villages to experience difference: the difference between their fast-paced, urban life and the bucolic rhythms of a longed-for simpler time; the difference between their cosmopolitan world, which can be a little gray, and the local world replete with colorful songs, dances, and clothing; the difference between their own affluence, with its noise
and pollution, and what they imagine to be the minority people’s “backwardness” with clean water, clear air, and expansive views.

Tourists do not, of course, go to ethnic minority regions to experience the poverty, the underdevelopment, the drug addiction, or the longing to leave that plague much of rural China these days. They go rather to experience a benign and colorful difference—a difference that local people must continuously shape and reshape to keep attracting the tourists. *A Landscape of Travel* tells the story of two communities occupied in creating and maintaining this gentle and alluring difference. Ping’an, a Zhuang village in Guangxi, and Upper Jidao, a Miao village in Guizhou, are two villages that are constantly remaking themselves to realize the tourist ideal of difference, so that they can eliminate the undesirable differences of wealth, education, and access to the rest of the world.

To meet their own goals, the villagers of Ping’an and Upper Jidao must “do tourism” (*gāo lìyóu*), as they themselves put it; they must maintain their landscapes to look attractively bucolic for photographers, regulate their architecture to look quaint and local, dress themselves to look exotic and ethnic, and perform songs and dances that people will want to listen to and watch. They must also provide clean, attractive rooms with indoor plumbing and comfortable beds; serve meals that have a hint of the exotic but still meet the particular tastes of the urban tourists; build roads and parking lots where tour buses and private cars can reach the villages without too much pothole-bumping or uphill hiking; and adjust their own schedules to make sure to be there, looking good, when the tourists arrive.

In other words, ethnic and scenic tourism in Southwest China is about maintaining difference while making it accessible, about how people do the work of tourism in order to allow tourists to bridge the geographic, economic, and ethnic differences between tourist and villager without eliminating that difference. It is about how to be modern, to participate actively in the modern economy of mobility while portraying themselves as un-modern, un-urban, and un-Han enough to stay interesting to the tourists. *A Landscape of Travel* is both a story and a portrait of this process of calibrating difference. Chio tells the story in a combination of vivid vignettes and fluent analysis, and displays the portrait in a series of stunning photographs, every one of which flashes both the irony of calibrating
difference and the fun of tourism that is shared by the tourists, the villagers, and us the readers.

A Landscape of Travel also reminds us how much ethnicity in China has changed since the first volume in the series Studies on Ethnic Groups in China, published in 1995: Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers. That book also contained both stories and portraits of difference, but the stories were about the encounter between state and local community, and the portraits were of differences that had been created by the long history of ecological adaptation and the shorter history of state projects of nation-building. How different the differences are now in the 2010s, as affluent urbanites and increasingly cosmopolitan villagers dance both the circle-dances that still symbolize minorities and the dance of difference that keeps them attracting and visiting each other. Certainly tourism is only one mode through which China’s mobility expresses itself, and we must remember that most villages have no tourists at all. But if we want to understand why tourists see and experience what they do on many of those two billion tourist trips, and how this reflects China as a nation that travels, Chio’s A Landscape of Travel is both delightful and essential.