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DOWN THE LI RIVER: SEAGRASS FROM THE DESERT AND OTHER TALL TALES FROM THE CHINESE

By Cammy Wilson

A sense of the absurd is an asset for a visitor to China. Sometimes even a bit of fantasy goes a long way to make a foreigner make sense of the inexplicable.

For example, I decided that the Chinese must gain many of their impressions of the western world from the CHINESE NATIONAL INQUIRER. Not that I actually saw one. The Chinese are funny about it - - I think they keep it under the counter and don't sell it to foreigners. But I'm sure there is one. How else would they be able to understand so well what goes on in decadent western society?

Take the common western practice of young men marrying wealthy elderly women for their money. The Chinese know all about it. This came to light when Mr. Wong, the Chinese tour guide, confided that he knew the situation with the German painter and her 'son': - - two other passengers.

"What?" asked Lynn Thomas, an advertising executive on my tour, practically falling off the chair where she'd been sunning herself in the best decadent western fashion. "What are you talking about?"

"You know," Mr. Wong persisted. "Young man marry old woman for money. That happen all the time in your country".

"That's not her husband, that's her son."

She, at least, dismissed the matter. Mr. Wong said nothing for a few moments.

"Maybe not this time," he finally said. "That happen though."

My tour group of five people plus two guides had joined several other tour groups on an excursion aboard a boat that plied the Li Jiang River. A luxury cruise this was not. Essentially, we were aboard a sizeable tugboat; its lower deck had been outfitted with tables and chairs. The upper deck was bare except for a few chairs and a canopy.

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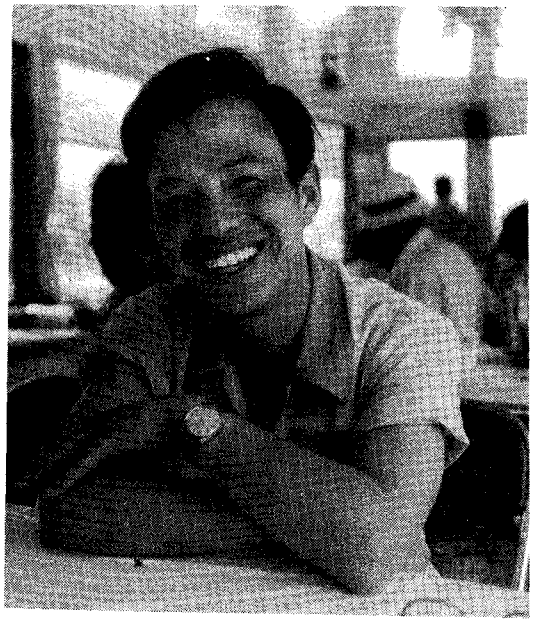
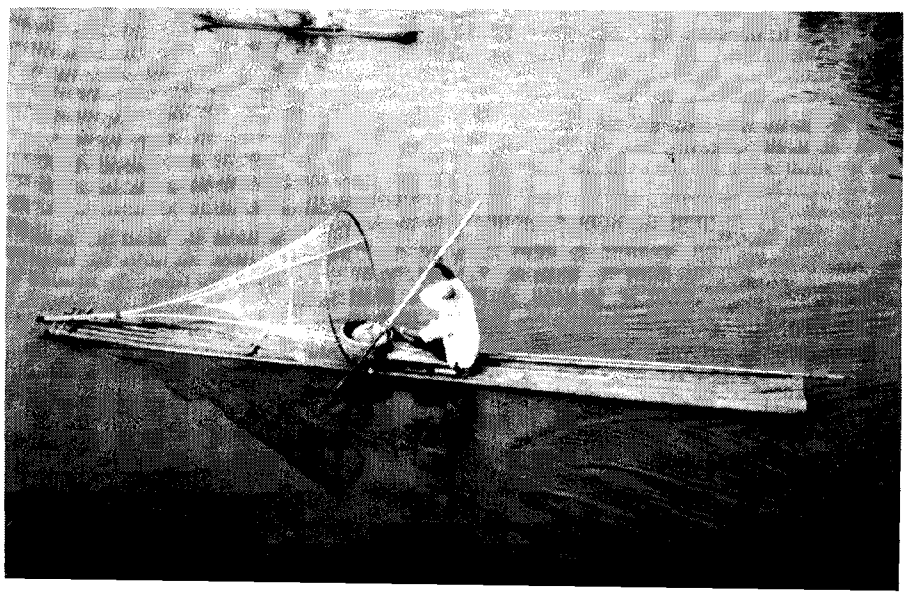


Mr. Wong, our guide, keeps up with western ways.

From this vantage point I and several other passengers settled down to enjoy a view of life along the river bank. Somehow life seems to slow along a river and the Li was no exception. Here and there groups of small boys, apparently charged with tending the water buffaloes, had hobbled the animals and taken to the river. There they splashed and played, diving underneath each other and pulling one another down with shrieks and whoops of laughter. Further along, adult women clad in black pajamas walloped wet clothes with sticks that looked like shortened boat paddles. No suds seemed necessary. They, too, chattered and laughed among themselves, bringing the paddles down resolutely on the wet clothing. A paddle and a large sack of wet clothes must be one way to reduce tension.

The current was fast and boats slid rapidly along beside us. The most common craft was made of six to eight bamboo logs lashed together; it typically held a single fisherman, a large basket for nets and a long slender bamboo pole for steering.



The simple life: A net, a pole and a bamboo boat.

What a sight it was to watch the fishermen toss the nets up into the air; there they opened like silver parasols, shimmering in the hot sunlight and then dappling the water as they fell. The fisherman's catch became visible when a boat glided close by, the fish skimming the surface, secured by a string attached to the side. While all the adults along the banks seemed to work, none appeared to toil. A guide explained that people were enjoying a slack period in the growing season.

Black-pajamaed women - hats level with the water - bent in half along the bank, reaching for water greens. In the shoals were numerous large baskets and a few bicycles waiting to carry the produce away. On the previous evening at dinner we'd had a salty soup; across the top had slithered long narrow blades of grass. "It is the grass from the sea," one of the guides had explained.

"Are they gathering seaweed like what we had in our soup last night?" I asked.

"No, no," said Mr. Wong. "They gather grass for the buffalo. Otherwise the buffalo will eat the young crops."

He looked puzzled.

"Last night did you have seagrass from the sea or sea-grass from the desert?"

We thought we were being had.

"Seaweed from the desert?"

"Oh yes, seagrass from the desert," he said, nodding vigorously. "We have (it). Very expensive."

"No doubt."

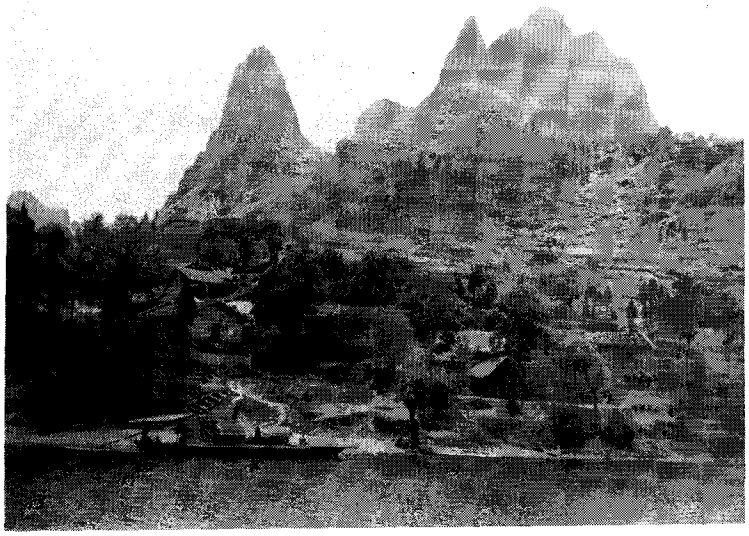
"The Hong Kong people they like it very much," our Hong Kong guide interjected. "The word is similar to the word to be rich, to be happy so the Hong Kong Chinese buy."

Seagrass from the desert reminded me of westerners buying elixirs to revitalize hair or skin. Many of the large Hong Kong department stores literally have ginseng and antler departments where the shopper can purchase various potions. Americans have Geritol and the Chinese have ginseng and antlers and seagrass from the desert.

While I concentrated on life along the river the tourists around me snapped pictures of the famous Guilin scenery. The peaks and crags sometimes sheared away abruptly from the river itself but mostly they towered grandly in the distance.

The limestone formations were beneath the sea three million years ago, according to geographers. Eventually hills and mountains were forced through the earth's crust and wind and water over time left them in the strange, looming figures before us. Few have described the area more aptly than Han Yu, a poet of the Tang period.

"The river forms a green gauze belt," he wrote. "The mountains are like blue jade hairpins."



"Blue jade hairpins" hold the landscape in place.

Regardless of the river's resembling "green gauze" my mouth began to feel like cotton after a few hours aboard the boat. There was nothing cold to be had. No ice, no cold drinks, no cold water. Lunch offered no relief; crew members brought tea and steaming food bowls to the tables, one per passenger. Inside swam beansprouts, greens of undetermined origin, a few pieces of meat (derivation unknown) and a single shelled egg, darkened to a purplish sheen. I recalled that a Hong Kong travel agent had called Guilin food "the worst in China." After a few bites, I pulled out of my bag a small cake saved from breakfast. This and the quite palatable peanut candies that filled a small jar on every table sufficed. Other members of my group did not fare so well. One woman was still trying to get something other than tea or beer to drink.

"Do you have mineral water?"

"Yes, we have mineral water" said Mr. Wong.

"That'll be fine."

"Not here," he said incredulously. But, somewhere in China there was mineral water.

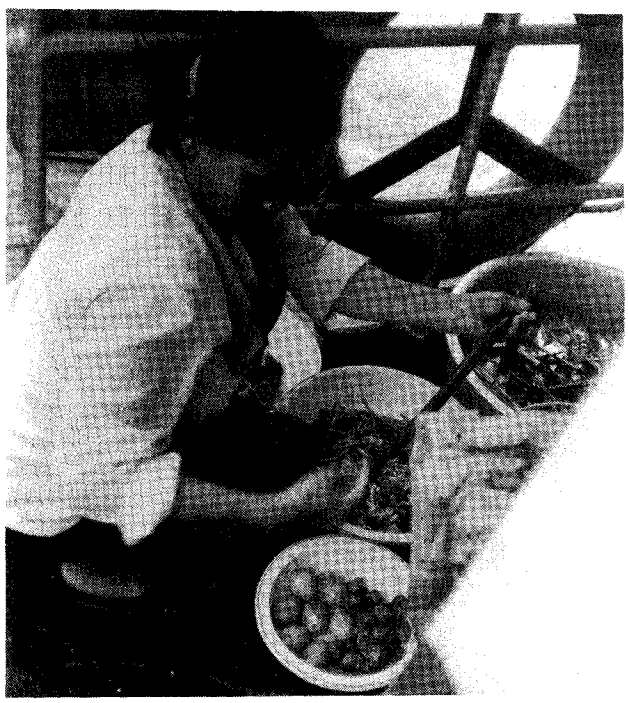
Lynn Thomas, American advertising executive. She asked for mineral water.

When the crew took away the bowls, many were nearly as full as when they had arrived. I returned to the deck. Like a parade with no end, the small boats filed past. On one skiff a mother poled cautiously, her small child squatting behind her, motionless on the narrow craft. There was no hollowed out area for passengers; indeed, the total "boat" was five bamboo logs lashed together. One slight start and the child would be off the side.

Mother poling her way down the river.

Coming rapidly past was a larger boat, this one with a small space in which a bicycle rested; boats carrying bicycles were common. Occasionally one would see them dock. One passenger would hop into the water and pull the boat onto the bank; someone else would then roll the bike off, load it with sacks and pedal away. A bicycle and a bamboo boat: the maximum in mobility.

Rounding a corner, I came upon half a dozen crew members intent on their work. Lunch was apparently only over for the passengers. Women were bent over large pans in which they were washing the remains of lunch. On one side of the pans sat the bowls recently brought from the tables inside. Rather than dumping the contents, the women painstakingly separated the contents of each dish: beansprouts into one pan, greens into another. In a third lay the pieces of meat and the purplish-coloured eggs. Water for dousing the food came from a small hose that brought water onto the deck from the river.



Why waste perfectly good food?

Inside, I encountered one of our guides.

"What are they going to do with the food that they're washing out there - the food that was left over from lunch?"

The guide began to giggle. He said something in

Cantonese to the other guide, then he said in English: "Maybe they give to some animals."

"But why would they wash it?"

He laughed harder.

"They might not want animals get sick."

Apparently I looked unconvinced.

"Joke, joke," he said. Then he added soberly, "You see them wash?"

"Yes."

He turned away. "I do not know."

Our attention turned abruptly to the boat. A sharp scraping sound filled the room - we were aground. The guides dashed out; when one returned, he said:

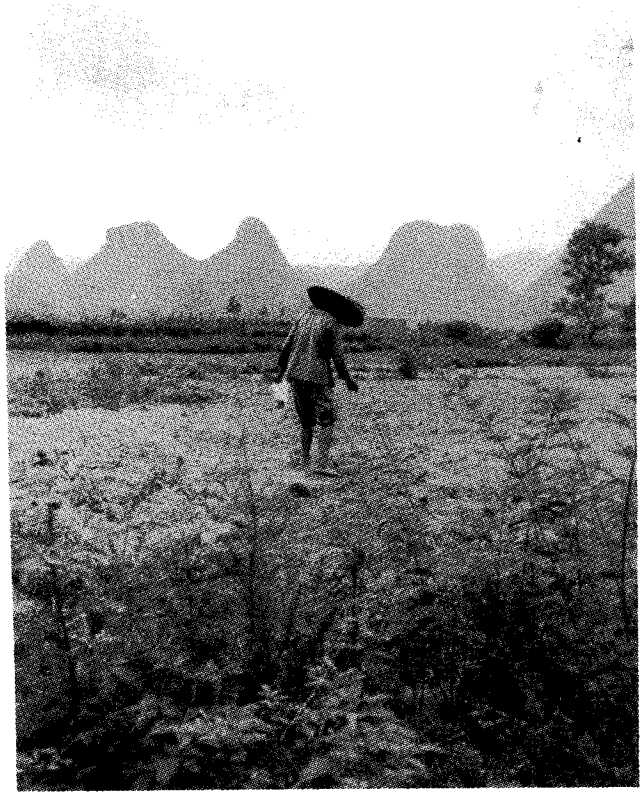
"The river is too shallow here, we must get out."

The passengers gingerly made their way from the craft through shallow water to the bank, where a small crowd had begun to gather. The people were far poorer than those we had seen on the streets of Guilin. These people wore tattered blue and black pajamas, often patched and re-patched until they resembled a monochromatic quilt. Apparently even the rags used for patching were all blue or black.

The guides were embarrassed at the grounding, which they seemed to view as an embarrassing lapse on their part rather than a caprice of the river.

"Today you get special program," one of the guides joked. Indeed, it was an opportunity to see a bit more of China than was included on a tour. I left the group on the shore and walked up a hill to the fields. Here and there workers planted or ploughed; one woman, carefully pulling watermelon seeds from a small black pouch worn about her waist, dropped the seeds into a furrow and then swished it shut with her bare feet. She shuffled down the rows, making the same movements over and over: pull, drop, swish. Pull, drop, swish. A study in efficiency.

An hour or so later, after several additional boats had pulled our craft over the sandbar, we made our way back aboard. By this time even the hot tea on the blazing deck looked good and we looked forward to Lasheudi, the river town, where an air conditioned van waited to transport



High above the river, a farmer plants her seeds and closes the furrows with her feet.

us the fifty kilometres back to Guilin.

"Can we get anything cold in Lasheuti?" someone asked.

"Oh, yes," Mr. Wong beamed. "Coca Cola."

I don't know whether the Chinese National Inquirer carries ads for Coca Cola, but I am reasonably certain they carry articles on discomania. Our Guilin travel guide, for instance, seized upon the advertising executive as if she were his only chance to learn the John Travolta dance steps apparently so beloved in the People's Republic.

"You know how to disco? Oooh! I want to learn disco," the guide exclaimed, "You teach me disco?" At this point he was literally hanging two-thirds of the way over the front seat of our van, which was bouncing along at a ridiculously high speed. The crew-cut driver was apparently intent on running every bicycler off the fifty-mile stretch of road between Lasheuti and Guilin.

"Well, I'd like to see down-town Guilin again," she countered.

"Sure, sure, no problem," he replied. "Then we go

disco, ok?"

One of the amenities the Chinese provide their foreign guests is a hotel disco. The Inquirer must have left the impression that all Americans frequent discos as often as they drink Coca-Cola. Regardless, after a final shopping trip down-town, we visited the Hotel Jai Shan's disco and bar. Gold tinsel streamers suitable for an American Legion Hut's New Year's Eve Party hung from the ceiling of a cavernous room. Western music blared from the stereo system - - they had the volume right anyway. Several overly solicitous staff members started in our direction like poorly concealed mafiosi surrounding the prey in a Marx Brothers movie.

But there was no Mr. Wong. Had there ever been a Mr. Wong? That would have been the question if this had been a Marx Brothers movie. But this was China, not a movie, and Mr. Wong had apparently gotten cold feet. So had the rest of the Chinese patrons: the place was completely deserted.

Clearly this was a case of not enough advertising; perhaps they just need a few more ads in the Chinese National Inquirer.

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