

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

HUMAN LIFE & HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY:
A YANGTZE THREE GORGES ADVENTURE

Part I

“The First Impression’s A Lasting Impression”

Shanghai, China
Summer 1994

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Dear Peter,

Ever since my boyhood days I have been dreaming of taking a cruise to the Three Gorges. This 200 kilometre stretch of the Yangtze River gorges, starting from Fengjie in the east of Sichuan Province to Yichang in the west of Hubei Province, is one of the great scenic attractions of China. Its gorgeous scenery and turbulent waters have not only fostered a number of legendary military tacticians in Chinese history, but have also inspired many of China’s painters, poets and philosophers.

I always remember a photo that my father showed me when I was a child. He took the photo during a cruise to the Three Gorges (*Sanxia*) in the early 1960s. In the photo, scores of trackers (纤夫, *qianfu*) lined the hilly riverbanks and hauled a big boat with long ropes against the current. The boat, as my father told me, was loaded with fish and other aquatic products. Fishermen were transporting their catches to

Cheng Li is a an ICWA fellow studying the political economy of the coast of China.

nearby cities for sale. My father also taught me a Chinese saying as he commented on the photo: "Those living by the mountain live off the mountain, those living near the water live off the water" (*kaoshan chishan, kaoshui chishui* 靠山吃山, 靠水吃水).

Actually, my father showed me a lot of other photos and told me many stories about his journey along the Yangtze River. But this was the only photo that left a deep impression on me. During the past thirty years, my notion of the Three Gorges as well as the upper reaches of the Yangtze has always been connected with that photo and that Chinese saying.

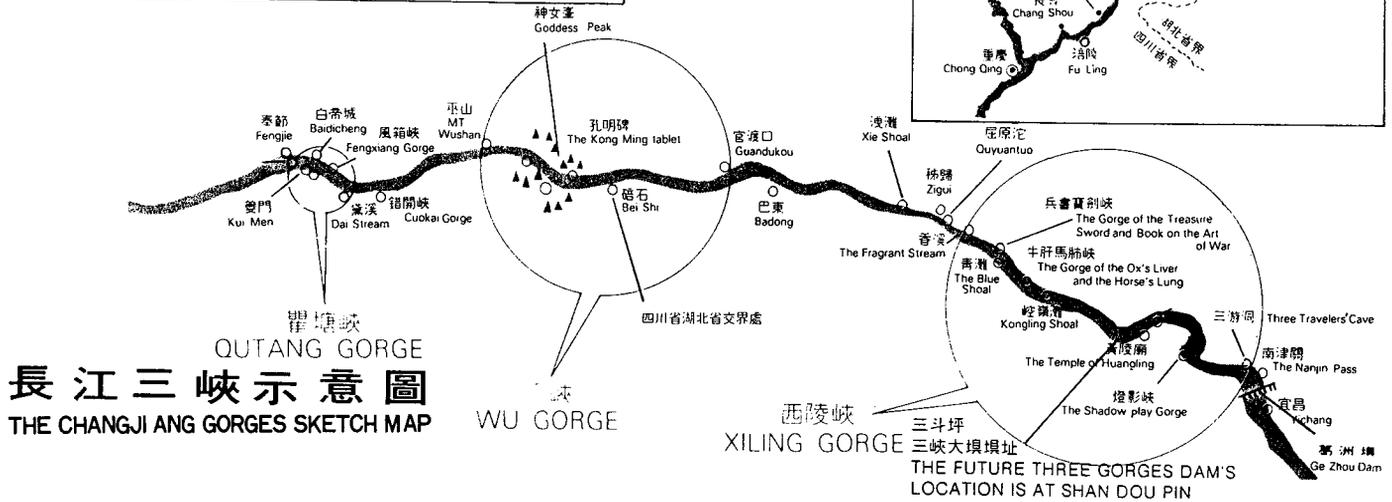
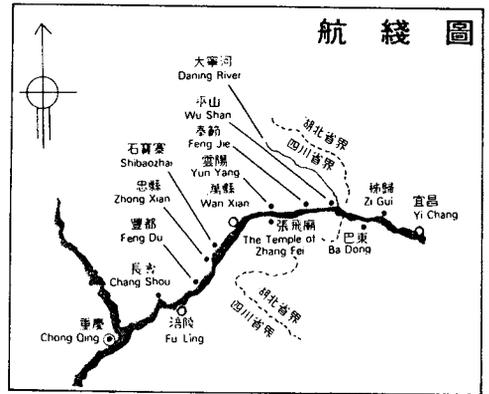
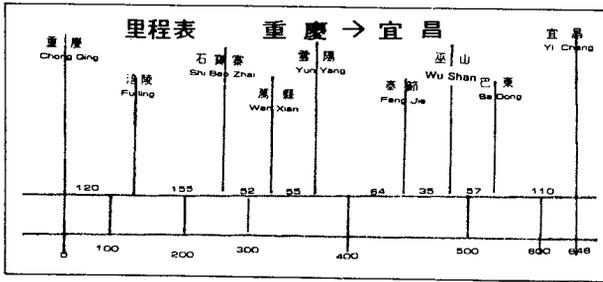
My desire to visit this area and to see how diligent Sichuan and Hubei people live and work, however, has become stronger with each passing year, especially when I heard that the Chinese government decided to build the Three Gorges Dam near Yichang, in central China's Hubei province.

Full-scale construction of the Three Gorges Dam is expected to begin in 1995, although preparatory work, which includes clearing the construction site and evacuating residents in the area, is already underway. According to the proposal, the



Trackers on the Yangtze River.

Photo/Song Huajiu



A sketch map of the Yangtze Three Gorges.

dam will be 1,983 metres long, 175 metres high, and the peak of the dam will be 185 metres high. Construction of this would-be world's largest dam is scheduled to take 17 years.

Such a huge project will certainly affect people's lives and the environment. According to a Chinese official newspaper, about 632 square kilometres – encompassing 2 cities, 11 counties, 140 towns, and 1,351 villages – will be displaced by the waters of the Yangtze river, as the water level is going to be lifted over 175 metres. At least 1,130,000 residents in Sichuan and Hubei provinces will be resettled to make way for the project. The ecological system of the region and the Chinese landscape will fundamentally change after the construction of the dam. Many kinds of fishes, for example, will disappear from the Yangtze (Sociological Research, No. 2, 1993, p. 17; and China Daily, Nov. 12, 1993, p. 6).

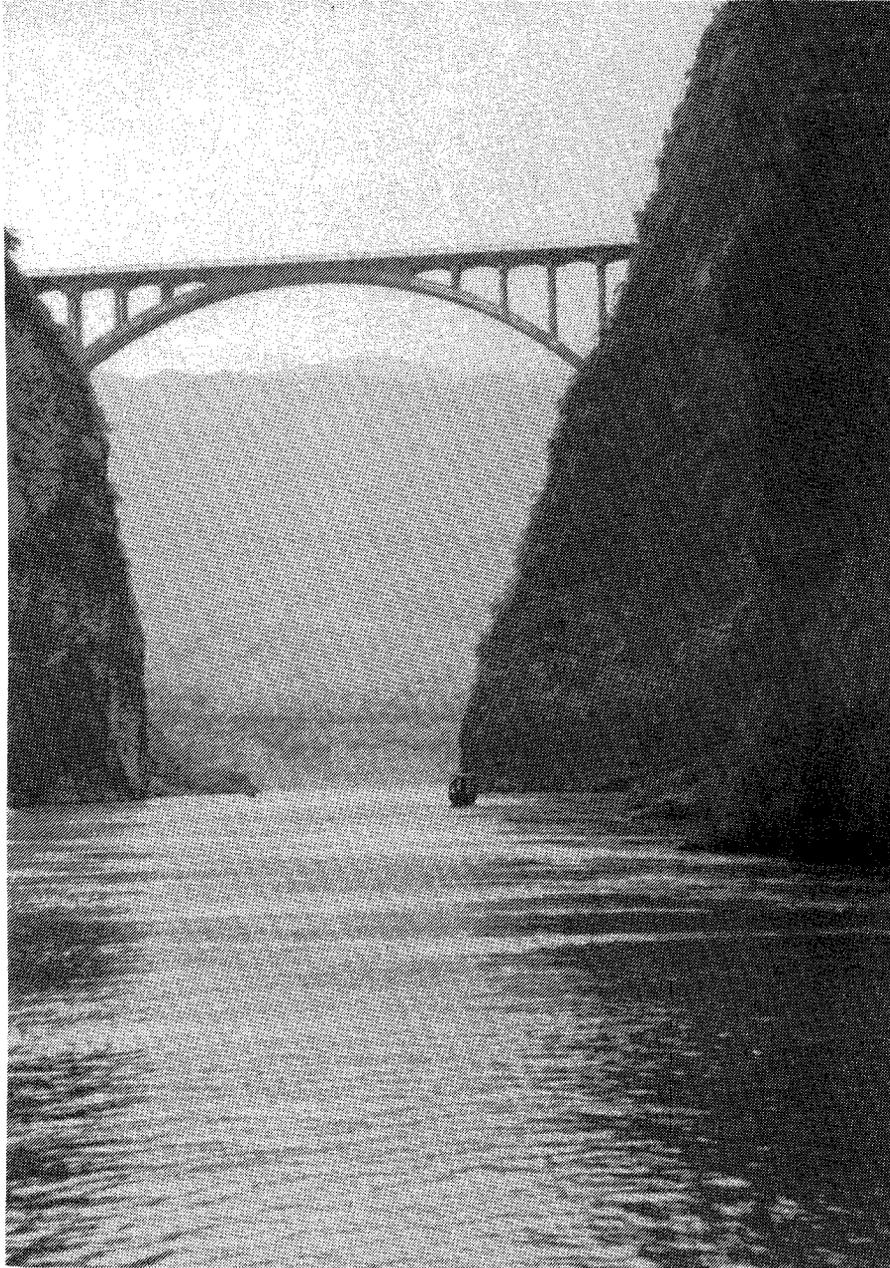
What have worried scientists and other people the most are the potential catastrophic consequences of any major technical problem with the dam. If it is not built properly, or it were sabotaged by terrorists or foreign powers, or it were damaged by an earthquake, the dam would flood the vast area of the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, including some of China's major cities. To put the matter bluntly, the lives of one-third of China's population will depend on the safety of this gigantic dam in the future.

Qian Weichang, a well known Chinese scientist and President of Shanghai University, wrote an article in 1991 in which he argued that it would be an unforgivable mistake if the Chinese government really decides to spend billions of dollars to build the Three Gorges Dam (Gongdang wenti yanjiu, May 1993, p, 71). It is worthy of mentioning that Mr. Qian has been Vice Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and one of the most influential advisors to the Chinese authorities.

In April 1992, when the National People's Congress convened a meeting to vote for the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, 177 deputies voted against the project and another 664 deputies abstained from voting. This meant that a third of the congress had reservations with the dam project proposed by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council. In the People's Republic of China, deputies of the congress are supposed to unanimously support any proposal by the Party. It was the first time in the history of the congress that so many deputies voted against a proposal by the central government (Journal of Dialectics of Nature, No. 3, 1993, p. 41).



Fishing in the upper reaches of the Yangtze River. The ecological system of the region will fundamentally change after the construction of the Three Gorges Dam.



The Dragon Gate Bridge at the Daning River. Although this bridge seems to be far above the river, it will be inundated. The water level of the upper reaches of the Yangtze is supposed to be raised by 175 metres after the completion of the Three Gorges Dam project.



A scene of the Qutang Gorge.

Despite strong criticism from many people, especially from environmentalists, both in China and abroad, the Chinese government has already made the final decision to start the project. I felt an urgency to visit the Three Gorges before the construction of the dam. So when three former students of mine at Hamilton College invited me to spend a week with them during their journey in China, I immediately told them that I would take a cruise to the Three Gorges with them.

* * * * *

Alex, Tony and Steve graduated from Hamilton College last May. They all grew up in New York City (and all will work on Wall Street as financial analysts after the summer). Like many young Americans, they love travelling, especially to exotic places such as China's southwestern province, Sichuan.

They were not entirely unfamiliar with Sichuan. At Hamilton College, Alex and Tony took my course on contemporary China. One of the books we read for the course was Jung Chang's autobiography Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China. Born and educated in Sichuan, the author Jung Chang told a lot of fascinating stories that took place in Sichuan. Some human tragedies described in the book have profoundly touched the hearts and minds of her readers.

Alex and Tony still remember, as both of them told me during our journey in Sichuan, that altogether seven million people in Sichuan – about ten percent of the population of this “rich province” of China then – died during the famine in the early 1960s. The great death toll should not be attributed to the famine only, as Jung Chang told us. It was Mao's radical policy during the Great Leap Forward that aggravated the shortage of grain and caused such a human tragedy.

The Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), as the name itself suggests, was a fervent optimism that proclaimed China's ability to accomplish monumental tasks in a short period of time. There were no detailed blueprints for the Great Leap. It was more the product of a social vision than an economic plan. The Great Leap Forward glorified human will and human effort, advocating that popular mobilization was an effective method for resolving problems in all spheres of action.

The Great Leap gave undue prominence to heavy industry at the expense of agriculture and light industry. Heavy industry grew by 230 percent between 1958 and 1960. Peasants were ordered to abandon their cultivated land and engage in steel making. Consequently the agricultural labor force decreased by over 20 percent in 1958. Grain rations declined significantly during the years of Great Leap Forward. When the famine occurred in the early 1960s, the entire country was starving and millions of people died.

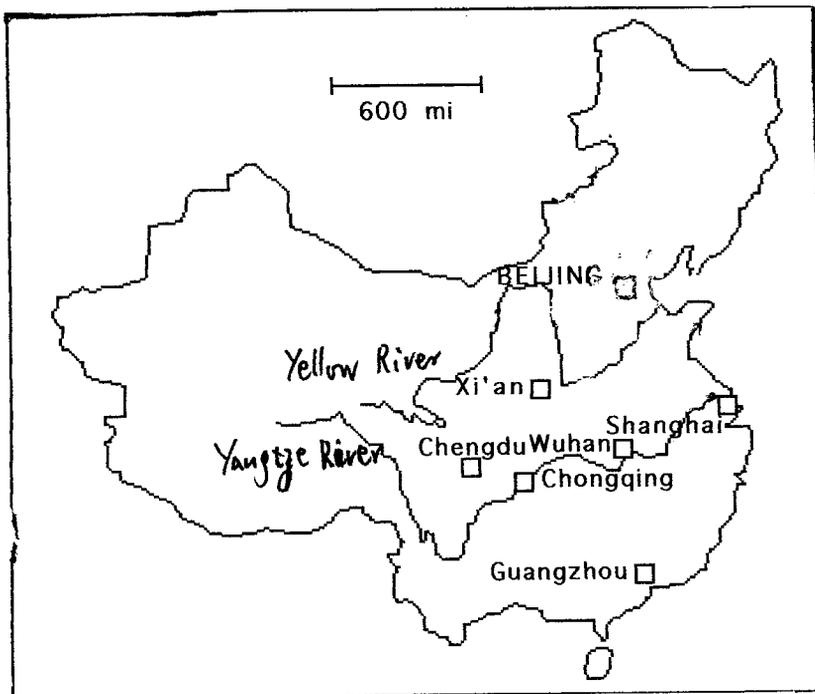
In China, the first three years of the 1960s were inappropriately called “the period of three-year *natural* disaster.” But it was primarily a man-made disaster, or indeed a Mao-made disaster.

Seven million people died of starvation in a Chinese province! This was an inconceivable historical event to American college students who grew up in a totally different political and socio-economic environment. For Alex, Tony and Steve, visiting Sichuan and the Three Gorges would not only be entertaining, but also educational. I was glad that as a college teacher I had the opportunity to help my students understand a subject, not just in the class room, but also in the real world.

* * * * *

As planned, they flew directly from New York to Beijing on June 2. Before we would meet in Chengdu on June 7, they were scheduled to spend a few days in China's capital and then go to Xi'an to see the famous Qin Tomb and the army of terra-cotta warriors. They phoned me twice in Beijing – the first was when they arrived and the

second was after they paid a wonderful visit to Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Great Wall and the Summer Palace. They told me that they would not phone me anymore before our meeting at the Chengdu airport.



Map of the Yangtze River and the Yellow River as well as some selected cities.

But the telephone in my apartment in Shanghai rang at midnight on June 6. It was Alex on the phone.

"Professor Li," Alex said. "I am calling from Xi'an just to let you know that we are all fine."

"That's good." I replied politely, but I was wondering why he called me at midnight to say this.

"We also called our families in New York to report that we are O.K."

"You did." I became even more puzzled.

"Tony's mother was so relieved to hear from him, because she had just watched the news about the crash in Xi'an on CNN," Alex continued.

"Crash in Xi'an!" I asked.

"Yes, you don't know about that?"

"No, I didn't watch the TV news," I said. "Besides, only the hotels that accommodate foreigners in China have CNN."

“What caused the accident?” I asked.

But I immediately regretted asking such a silly question. It usually took years, if not decades, for the Chinese authorities to release information about the cause of an airplane accident. Such information is always a State secret. A similar example happened this summer in Shanghai when over a hundred cases of epidemic cholera were diagnosed. But this was a State secret. The municipal government ordered doctors to call the cholera epidemic “No. 2 disease” instead of its real name.

“I don’t know the cause of the accident,” Alex answered. “What I do know is that a Russian- made Tu-154 plane crashed ten minutes after it took off from Xi’an airport and headed for Guangzhou this morning. The plane belonged to China’s Northwest Airlines. All 146 passengers and 14 crew members on the plane were killed.”



My former students at Hamilton College – (from left to right) Tony Leness, Alex Sacerdote, and Stephen Hess. Four of us planned to meet at the Chengdu airport, while they would fly from Xi’an and I from Shanghai. The day before they left Xi’an, an airplane crashed near the Xi’an airport. All 160 passengers and crew members were killed. The Chinese airlines were strongly criticized, both in China and abroad, for their poor safety record and lousy service.

As we later found out, among the victims, 133 were Chinese, four were from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and nine were foreigners. The youngest passenger was only 2 years old and he was killed with his parents. A four-member-family from Italy was also among the victims.

“The Xi’an airport was closed for a while, but we were told that it will be no problem for us to fly from Xi’an to Chengdu tomorrow,” Alex continued.

“Yes, you should not worry about your flight,” I tried to comfort Alex. Anyone who was going to fly from a city that just had an airplane crash must have some “psychological shadow.”

“The Chinese airlines are usually fine,” I told Alex a *white lie*. I knew that the Chinese airlines were quite often *not* fine. An international aviation organization recently ranked the Chinese airlines as one of the world’s worst airlines in terms of safety. Some of my friends in the United States do not want to visit China simply because they are afraid to take any Chinese domestic airlines when traveling within the country.

Chinese airlines’ poor service is also notorious. The following day, for example, I took Flight 4502 of China’s Southwest Airlines from Shanghai to Chengdu. When I received a boarding pass at the airport, I asked the woman working at the check-in desk to give me an aisle seat if possible.

“What do you want?” The lady seemed to be entirely unprepared for my request.

“May I have an aisle seat please?” I repeated.

“No!” the woman said bluntly. “No one can select a seat on Chinese airlines, unless he is a VIP.”

“Why?”

“It would be too much *mafan* (trouble) for us if every passenger wanted to select a seat,” she answered.

“Is this a policy of the Chinese airlines?” I asked.

“If you want to discuss policies, go see my supervisor,” the lady seemed to be angry with me. “Don’t waste our time here. Look, there are so many passengers who want to check in after you.” So she assigned me a window seat and gave an aisle seat to the person after me.

I almost wanted to yell at her, but I did not do so because, after staying in China for several months, I have learned how to be tolerant, not of different opinions, but of various kinds of humiliation.

When I and other passengers were entering the cabin of the plane, we were stopped by the pilot. He told us to wait until the arrival of the stewardesses. Therefore, instead of the stewardesses welcoming the arrival of the passengers at the entrance of the plane, the passengers stood on the two sides of the plane gate waiting for the stewardesses.

“I have travelled on many international airlines, but have never experienced such lousy service as that of the Chinese airlines,” a passenger from Hong Kong said.

“Do you trust a crew that even fails to be at their posts on time?” A middle-aged Chinese asked.

No passenger wanted to answer that question.

During the flight, I had a brief conversation with a stewardess who was serving beverages to passengers.

“Miss, how long have you been working on planes?”

“About six months.”

“May I ask how old you are?”

“I’m nineteen.”

“Do you like your job?”

“No, it’s really boring. I am tired of asking passengers ‘Tea or coffee?’”

“But this is an important job,” I said to her. “For foreign guests, you represent China and the Chinese people. Your service and attitude can be a window through which foreign passengers see our home land.”

She did not say anything, but her facial expression clearly indicated that she did not care what I just said.

I felt really sorry for that nineteen-year-old stewardess who had such an attitude towards her job. I thought she should be transferred out of the civil airline service for she had a poor understanding of her post.

Although the plane was late in taking off, it arrived in Chengdu on time. The flight that my student friends took from Xi’an was about an hour late. We were very happy to see each other. They told me that a teenage Chinese girl who sat next to Alex was so nervous on the plane that she sat like a Buddhist – she didn’t open her eyes, and prayed all the time during the flight.

“None of the passengers on the plane laughed at her,” Tony told me.

The safety of the airplane is a matter of life and death. Is anything more important than life and death?

* * * * *

I arranged our Sichuan trip through a hotel in Guilin where a friend of mine was a manager. He told me that his colleague in the department of tourism at the hotel would be very helpful.

“Will your colleague earn a commission on our cruise tickets?” I asked my friend over the ‘phone.

“No, absolutely not,” my friend answered.

My experience in China told me that earning a commission (*huikou* 回扣) is prevalent in virtually all kinds of business in the country. I did not mind paying for service, but it did not make sense to let the agent, or in many cases, the agent’s agent, earn a huge commission.

A few months ago, I accompanied my teacher at Princeton and his family to Suchou, a garden city near Shanghai. Whenever we entered a gift store for window shopping, someone who worked in the store always approached me first. “Mr. Interpreter, tell these foreigners to buy gifts here. We will give you a good commission.”

“A good commission?” Once I asked a shop manager how much commission I could earn if foreign guests buy any thing in the store.

“As usual, you can earn a commission of forty percent on each sale,” the manager told me.

“Forty percent! That’s a lot of money,” I blurted out these words. The items in the gift shops, for example, Chinese paintings and silk-made clothes, were usually very expensive. I told my professor that I might not resist this temptation if he were not my teacher.

My teacher laughed and his wife even suggested that I should first get the commission if we buy anything because it could reduce our expense by 40 percent.

My friend’s colleague in Guilin was indeed very helpful in arranging our trip to Sichuan. The hotels where we stayed in Chengdu and Chongqing – the Minjiang Hotel and the Chongqing Guest House – were nice and comfortable. The rent in both places was also very reasonable. However, as we later found out, my friend’s colleague did draw a big commission from our cruise tickets.

Soon after we arrived in Chongqing on the morning of June 9, a sales representative from the East International Travel Co., Ltd came to our hotel to deliver the cruise tickets and to receive our payment. The representative, Ms. Li, was a young lady in her mid-20s. Like many professional business women in the United States, she was dressed fashionably and worked efficiently. Before asking us to pay, she said that we were really wise to take a cruise to the Three Gorges because the great sights on the Yangtze River might be lost after the dam is built.

When she handed me the bill, I found that the charge for the 3-day cruise changed from \$450 per person, the price that the folks in Guilin gave me, to \$480 per person.

“Your original price for the cruise is already very expensive,” I said to her seriously.

“We are not going to pay any extra money,” my American friends all agreed with me.

“Mr. Li, don’t worry,” Ms. Li said calmly. “If \$450 was the price that the folks in Guilin gave you, you just pay that amount of money.”

“I can show you the fax that they sent me,” I gave her the fax.

Ms. Li looked at the fax and said that she would telephone the folks in Guilin immediately.

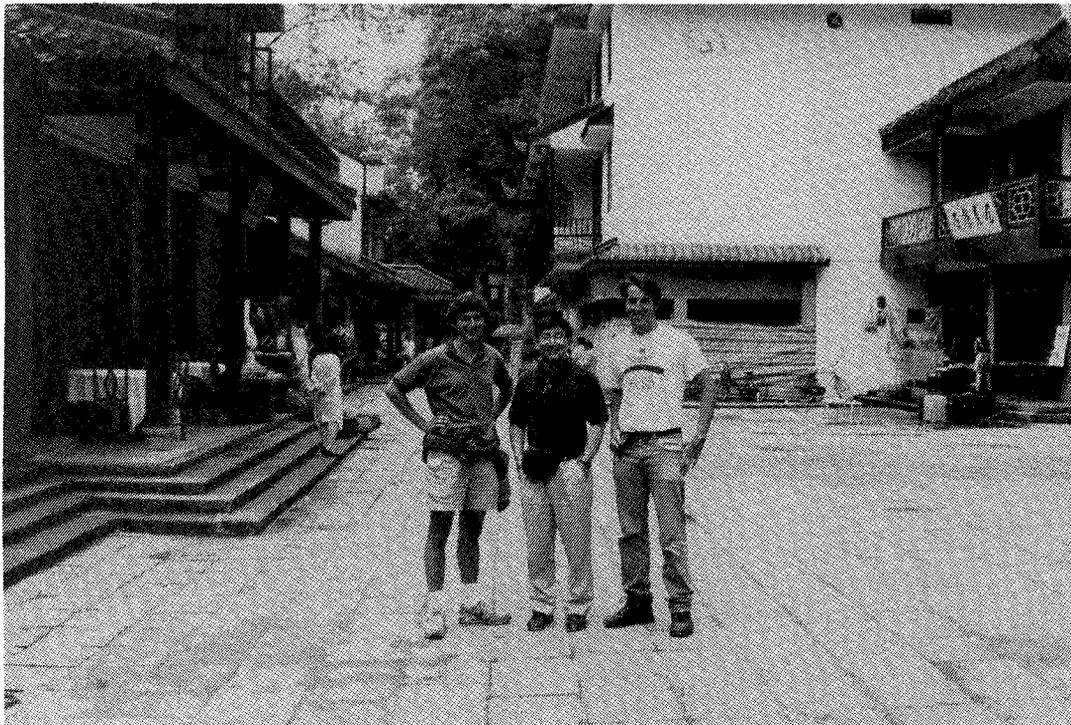
She talked to my friend’s colleague in Guilin and told him that she would only take \$450 per person from us. What she really wanted to tell him was that she would solve the problem by deducting the difference (\$120 for four of us) from the commission that she originally promised to give him. The telephone conversation lasted for about ten minutes. I could sense that person on the other side on the ‘phone was not happy with her solution. But she insisted that it was his fault to give us the price of \$450 instead of \$480.

Alex, Tony, Steve and I looked at one another. It was an interesting experience for us to see how a travel agency ran its business in China. We never knew how much the folks in Guilin really got for their commission on our cruise trip, but we were

glad that we did not need to pay \$30 extra. We understood that \$30 (250 yuan) was the average monthly salary for a worker in Sichuan.



Young men and women are selling corn in downtown Chongqing. The city is overpopulated and many people can not find jobs. The increase of migrant workers from the rural area in Sichuan has aggravated the shortage of jobs in the city. These young people make very little money (less than \$1 per day) by working as vendors on the street. "This is better than the countryside in which I used to work," a young man said to me. "I could not make a living if I stayed in the countryside."



Visiting a small town near the Dujiangyan Irrigation System in the western part of Sichuan province.

When Alex, Tony and Steve went to the reception desk at the hotel to cash their traveler's checks, Ms. Li asked me what was the relationship between these Americans and me.

"They were my students in the U.S.," I replied.

"Do you have a lot of American students or friends who come to China?" She asked.

"Yes, four groups of my former students have already visited me since I came to China last fall."

"Will more of your American students and friends visit China in the future?"

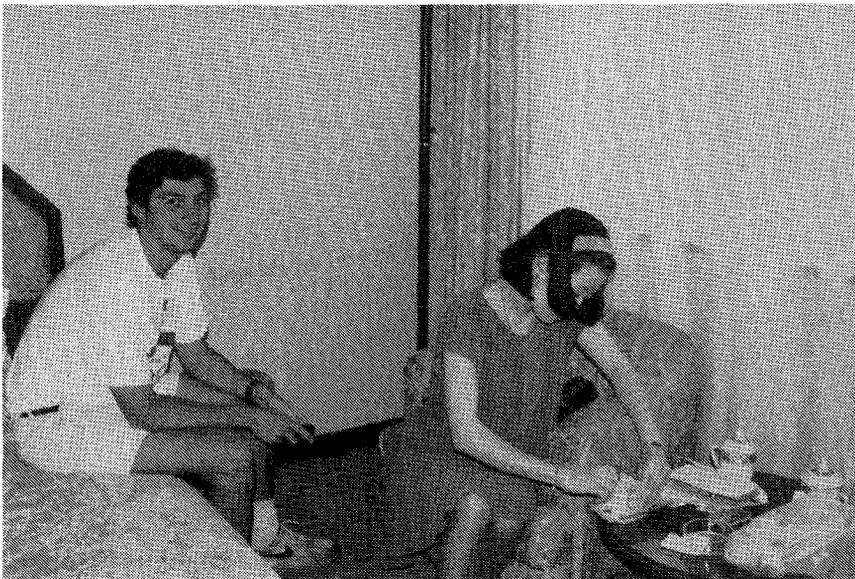
"I guess so," I answered.

"Mr. Li, I would like to give you a commission," she said.

"Well," I was completely unprepared with her offer. "I don't think it's appropriate. As you know, they were my students. Now they have graduated from college, but I consider them as friends."

"So what?" she said.

I explained my ethics to her.



Ms. Li, a sale representative from the East International Travel Co., Ltd in Chongqing, came to the hotel we stayed in the city to deliver the cruise tickets and to receive our payment. As a professional business woman, Ms. Li gave me a \$50 discount for my cruise ticket. She proposed that I should encourage many foreigners to take the cruise with her company and in return she would give me a "really big commission." She could speak only a few English words, among which the word "commission" was the one she frequently used. She was really surprised that I seemed not very enthusiastic about her proposal.

“What if I give you a discount for your cruise ticket?” Ms. Li said to me. “You can pay me \$400 instead of \$450. I hope that you will encourage more foreign guests to take the cruise with our company in the future.”

“I don’t want to promise anything, especially when I haven’t taken your cruise yet.”

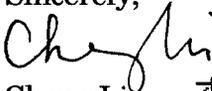
“Anyway, I would like to give you \$50 discount this time,” Ms. Li said to me. I could sense the decision-making power in her voice.

“If you are interested in working with us in the future,” she continued. “You can get a big commission from us. I can hardly imagine that you would refuse this good opportunity to make a lot of money.”

I was about to tell her that there are a lot of things in life that are more important than making money. But on second thought, I did not say so because I doubted she would listen to my “old-fashioned propaganda.”

After we paid her the fare, Ms. Li left the hotel where we stayed. I told my American friends that they would not need to pay for meals that day, because \$50 was enough to two nice meals for four of us in Chongqing prior to our cruise on the Yangtze River on the following day.

Sincerely,


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Titles of *Letters from China* by the author:

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- CL-3-5 CHINA’S FALSITIES & CHINA’S FUTURE
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- * Trends and problems of foreign investment in China