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The Institute of Current World Affairs
THE CRANE-ROGERS FOUNDATION
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

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EAST ASIA

Daniel Wright is an Institute Fellow studying the people and societies of inland China.

A Walk into the Past —Hiking the Long March—

GUIZHOU, China

July 1998

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755 USA

Dear Peter:

Like the Red Army in 1935, my friend and I entered Zunyi City on foot. Like many of their beleaguered company, both of us limped from physical pain and exhaustion. But that's where the similarities end.

When soldiers of the Red Army passed through Guizhou Province on their epic, 6,000-mile Long March in 1935, they were constantly beset by Nationalist Army raids, blockades and bombers. The only opponents we faced in our 150-mile hike were physical and mental. The Red Army numbered in the tens of thousands as they wound their way through the mountains of northern Guizhou; we were but two.¹ Theirs was a struggle to survive; ours was a personal challenge to revive the memory and significance of the Long March.

Despite the tremendous gap between our experience and that of the Red Army 63 years before, the opportunity to trace their trail — over five mountains, through a cave, a canyon and numerous towns and villages — provided powerful insights into the enormity of their struggle and the impressions their journey left behind on the people and places they passed through.

Our feet not only carried us into the past, they enabled us to move slowly enough to experience the people of northern Guizhou Province as they live in the present. How else could I have enjoyed the many families along the way who invited us to sit on their porches to sip tea and chat? How else could I have, while sitting on one of those porches, observed township-government officials parading a confiscated television set down the street — the price a neighbor family was forced to pay for giving birth to one child too many? How else could I have been refreshed by believers in a vibrant rural Catholic community? How else would I have stumbled across the terrifying scene of a man beating a woman with a leather whip in their dimly-lit, road-side home as she crouched, begging for mercy? And how else could I have experienced the awesome, devastating beauty of a 6,000-foot mountain peak that, like the Red Army, we crossed by narrow trails worn into the mountainside by generations of farmers?²

Fundamentally, our journey was about discovery: the pursuit of understand-

¹ My travel companion was a young Chinese man, a good friend who grew up in Guizhou's mountains.

² There was much to laugh about along the way as well: on two separate occasions locals guessed I was 60 years old — an observation that sapped even more of the energy from my 35-year-old legs. One person thought I was Chinese, another guessed I was from Japan. A villager even asked me how long it takes to walk to America.

ing about this segment of the Long March, deep in the country's interior, that provided a crucible for the development of China's communist movement; a search for knowledge of the people, young and old, who though carrying the distinction of being born in a cradle of the communist revolution, live today in the middle of all of the issues that face China's interior in the late 1990s.

By the time the Red Army troops entered Zunyi District in January 1935, they had narrowly escaped total defeat. Just months before in Jiangxi Province, the movement's 160,000 followers had been encircled and assaulted by half-a-million Nationalist troops and bombed by 200 warplanes. The offensive was an attempt to annihilate the growing communist movement. During the night of October 15, 1934, some 90,000 survivors, coordinated by Zhou Enlai, broke through enemy lines to the west and, scattering to escape Chiang Kai-shek's bombers, set forth on a strategic retreat — a 6,000-mile saga that would last 370 days, average 24 miles of foot-travel per day and include a full-dress battle every two weeks.

Edgar Snow, an American journalist, introduced to the West to the Long March shortly after its conclusion. Basing his writing on personal interviews with communist leaders, he described the magnitude of their accomplishment:

“Altogether the Reds crossed 18 mountain ranges, five of which were perennially snow-capped, and they crossed 24 rivers. They passed through 12 different provinces, occupied 62 cities, and broke through enveloping armies of 10 different provincial warlords, besides defeating, eluding, or outmaneuvering the various forces of Central Government troops sent against them. They entered and successfully crossed six different aboriginal districts, and penetrated areas through which no Chinese army had gone for scores of years. However one may feel about the Reds and what they represent politically...., it is impossible to deny recognition of their Long March as one of the great exploits of military history.”³

As remarkable as was its achievement, the Long March was a trail of death and escape, not a parade of conquering victory. As I interviewed people along the route, this reality impressed me the most. In almost every town we

hiked through, locals recounted stories of death: “Nationalist bombers flew in very low over those mountains,” an elderly man recalled as he pointed to the sky; “thirteen soldiers killed over by that bridge”; “hundreds slaughtered in that forest”; “two died of exhaustion at the crest of that hill.”

In fact, by the time the Red Army reached its final destination one year after setting out, the movement had lost 90 percent of its strength, shrinking to 7,000-8,000 men and women (of the several hundred women that began the Long March, no more than 30 survived).⁴ Some deserted along the way, intimidated by hardship. The vast majority, however, perished under the merciless onslaught of fatigue, hunger, frost and enemy fire.

But a remnant is sometimes enough to save a revolution. The survivors — “a hard core of tempered steel, a reliable and disciplined force”⁵ — settled into the desolate, dusty caves of Yan'an for the winter of 1935. And thus began a 12-year period [the Yan'an Period] during which the communist movement — saved by coinciding Japanese invasion and a temporary truce with the Nationalists — enjoyed a period of recovery, consolidation, expansion and eventual total victory.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the Long March in the development of China's Communist Party. The Long March's significance lies not only in the fact that it preserved the life of the movement, but also in the role it played in determining its leaders, its support-base and the heroic myths that would come to undergird the Party's legitimacy for decades to come.

Central to these areas of importance was the three months the Red Army spent winding through the impoverished mountains of northern Guizhou Province — approximately one-fourth of the yearlong March.

At Zunyi, for example, Mao Zedong achieved primacy within the communist movement, a position he would not relinquish until his death in 1976. When the Red Army arrived in Zunyi, their leaders were divided, spirits were low and total defeat seemed imminent. An emergency meeting was called and 20 of the movement's leaders met in a large, two-story home to deliberate their future.⁶

3 Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China* (New York: Grove, 1961).

4 Even for those who survived the Long March, the personal cost was staggering. Mao Zedong, for example, and his second wife reportedly left three of their children with peasant families along the way (and this in addition to the hardship of his wife giving birth en route).

China scholar Kenneth Lieberthal says the Long March “was a searing experience in the lives of the survivors. The going was so difficult that many of the survivors suffered stomach ailments and insomnia for the rest of their lives.” [Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China* (New York: Norton & Company, 1995), 47.]

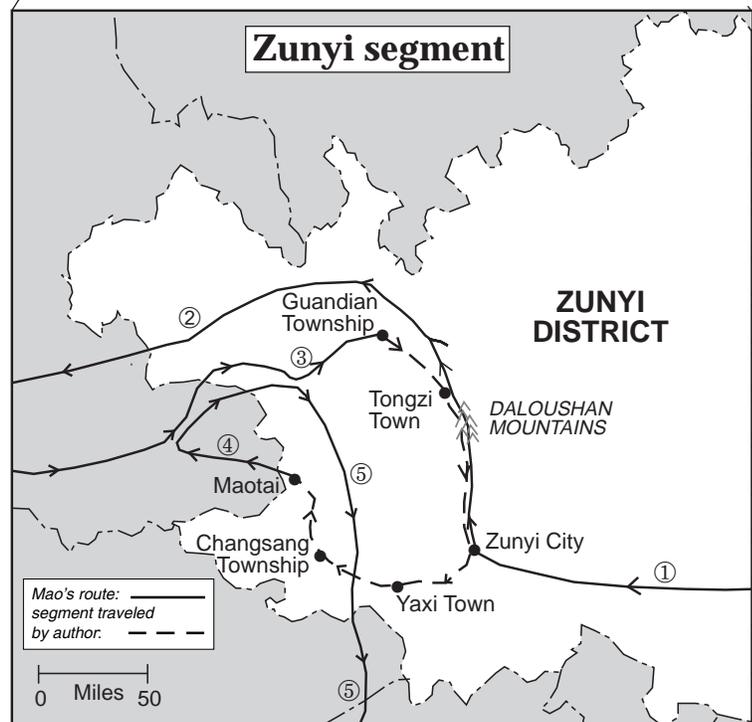
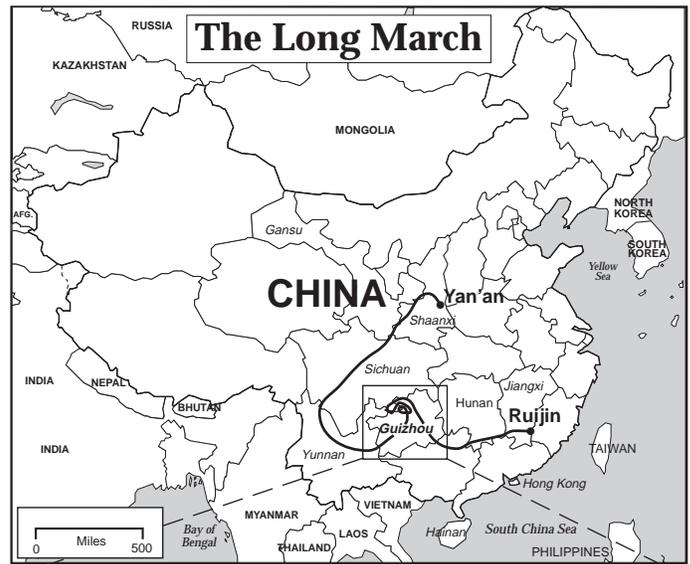
5 Tibor Mende, *The Chinese Revolution* (Worcester: Thames & Hudson, 1961), 111.

6 The home they met in (now a museum marking the site of the Zunyi Conference) belonged to a wealthy Nationalist military official. The six rooms on each floor provided living space for Red Army leaders as well as a large meeting room. Among the 20 people present at the meeting were Mao Zedong, Zhu De, Chen Yun, Zhou Enlai, Bo Gu, Deng Xiaoping, Liu Xiaohu, Li De and Comintern representative Otto Braun.

Key to the three-day meeting (January 15-17, 1935) was a heated debate over military strategy. Comintern military advisor Otto Braun and Soviet-trained Chinese communist leaders advocated conventional, positional warfare to engage the pursuing Nationalist Army. Mao Zedong, however, articulated guerrilla tactics and a “strategic retreat” away from the Nationalists further into the interior. By the end of the three days Mao’s position had prevailed and the leaders agreed to head north from Zunyi toward the Daloushan Mountains on a serpentine escape-route deep into the peaks of Guizhou.

Beneath the argument over tactics, however, lay a deeper layer of significance. At the Zunyi Conference the communist movement took a decisive step toward becoming more fully Chinese. In Zunyi, the Chinese Communist Party, now separated from direct contact with Moscow, had recognized its national leader. Moscow-influenced cadres (those who had up to that point overseen the movement) were relegated to a back seat. With Mao at the helm, the rural-based revolution — a characteristic that would shape its rise to victory through the 1940s and distinguish it from Soviet communism — was set in a new and different direction.

With the movement’s leadership and military strategy realigned at Zunyi, enthusiasm was rekindled. The renewed sense of energy and camaraderie among Red Army troops is nowhere better expressed than in the experience of a foreign missionary, who had been captured by Red Army soldiers while working in Guizhou Province, as he marched toward the Daloushan Moun-



Red Army entered Zunyi District from east (1); went north through Daloushan mountains and east in Sichuan (2); then circled back through Guandian Township, Daloushan Mountains and Zunyi City (3); circled again through Yaxi Town, Changsang Township and Maotai (4); finally headed south and west through Guizhou and into Yunnan (5).

Sketch of Mao Zedong in 1935. Mao emerged from the Zunyi Conference as the leader of the Communist movement, a position he would not relinquish until his death in 1976.



tains just days after the Zunyi Conference:

“The stony track leading north through the Daloushan Mountains toward the border of Sichuan was hard with frost beneath Jakob’s callused feet, but as he climbed in the gathering dusk at the end of the line of prisoners, the faint, sweet fragrance of winter plum blossom unexpectedly teased his nostrils. In the gloom he could just see the outline of a grove of trees whose bare branches were speckled with the early blossom, and the perfume of the white flowers lifted his flagging spirits. Ahead of him the troops were lighting torches made from bunches of mountain bracken lashed to staves: they flared brightly in the half-darkness, casting a warm glow over the long, winding column of marching men, and spontaneously the soldiers began to sing as they climbed.

“As they marched in the stillness of the approaching night, the rough voices of the peasant troops raised in unison carried clearly along the winding tracks, echoing from the funneled walls of ravines and flowing invisibly up and down the bare hillsides of the Daloushan. The singing, Jakob could sense, was binding the column together, fusing thousands of marchers into one serpentine body, imbuing each man with renewed vigor from a common well of energy. Although he did not join in and the sentiments bellowed into the night were crudely exhortatory, in

the deep silence of the mountains the songs in their essence took on the emotional force of hymns and Jakob felt himself strangely stirred by them.

“Not for the first time, the cadences of the youthful voices inspired in him an illogical feeling of community with the multitude of troops marching around him. He felt keenly the power of the common loyalty which bound them together; he felt the intense shared excitement of the challenge they faced, fleeing from a superior enemy into an unknown future, every man equal and carrying only the barest essentials for survival on his back — chopsticks, a rice bowl, a quilted blanket, an umbrella of oiled paper, a rifle. Jakob sensed that having survived the fiery slaughter of the Xiang River, each man felt himself chosen to fight on for his fallen comrades as well as himself and faith in their cause seemed to ring from the soul of every man when they sang on the march.”⁷

As the Red Army set its face north toward the Daloushan — which would become a bloody battlefield two months later — it began a circuitous route deep into Guizhou’s mountains. “Under Mao’s new strategy of ‘strategic retreat,’” said a guide at the Zunyi Conference museum, “the Red Army ran the enemy in circles ‘til they were totally confused.”

According to locals I spoke with, however, including those we spoke to as we hiked over the Daloushan Mountain pass, the enemy was not a bit confused. During this period, even Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek flew to Guiyang [Guizhou’s capital] to personally oversee military operations. The Red Army’s refusal to fight a decisive battle, as well as a scrappy ability to persevere, resulted in ever-dwindling numbers — but survival.

And survive they did. “Almost all of the 8,000 communist soldiers who survived the Long March later became the country’s political elite,” says Cheng Li, former ICWA Fellow and an authority on Chinese politics. “Their binding experience became the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, just as their hardship became the legitimate base for their rule.”⁸ Indeed, the Long

⁷ Retold as fiction by Anthony Grey, in *Peking* (London: Pan Books, 1989). See also the missionary’s autobiography: Alfred and England Bosshardt, *The Guiding Hand* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973).

⁸ China’s post-Deng era (Deng Xiaoping died in February 1997) marks the transition to a generation of leaders who did not experience the Long March firsthand. Whereas Long March veterans led as the result of an implicit appeal to revolutionary history, today’s leaders must seek and consolidate legitimacy — both their own and that of the Communist Party — from economic and policy success.

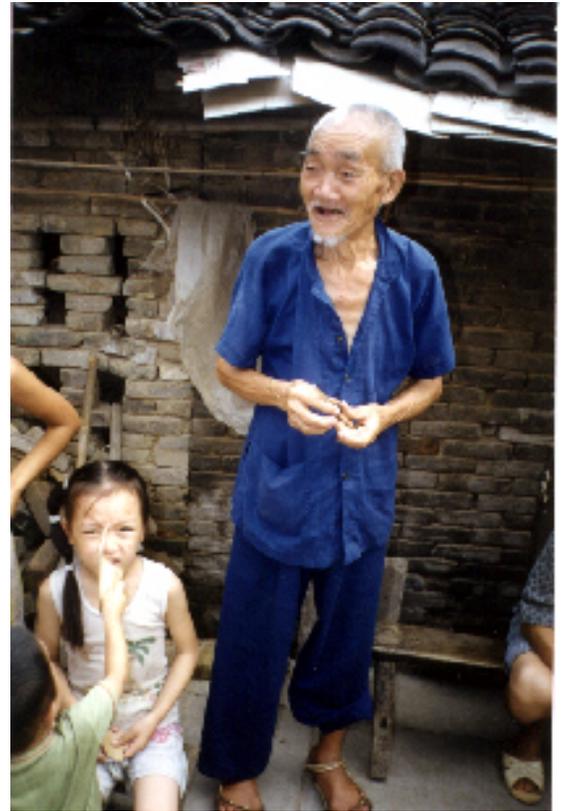
Furthermore, whereas shared experience among Long March veterans established camaraderie, school ties, family backgrounds and patron networks that now serve as binding forces among the political elite.

Today’s leaders, however, continue to claim the legacy of the Long March as part of their movement’s epic story, even though it is not something they experienced firsthand.

For a detailed discussion of characteristics of China’s changing political elite see: Li Cheng and Lynn White, “The Fifteenth Central committee of the Chinese Communist Party: Full-Fledged Technocratic Leadership with Partial Control by Jiang Zemin,” *Asia Survey*, Vol. 38, No.3 March, 1998), 231-264. Li Cheng and Lynn White, “The Fifteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party: Full-fledged Technocratic Leadership with Partial Control by Jiang Zemin,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (March 1998), 231-264

We bandaged their sore feet,” this elderly man told me. Notice his plaited-straw sandals, the same as those worn by Red Army soldiers over 60 years ago.

LIVING HISTORY

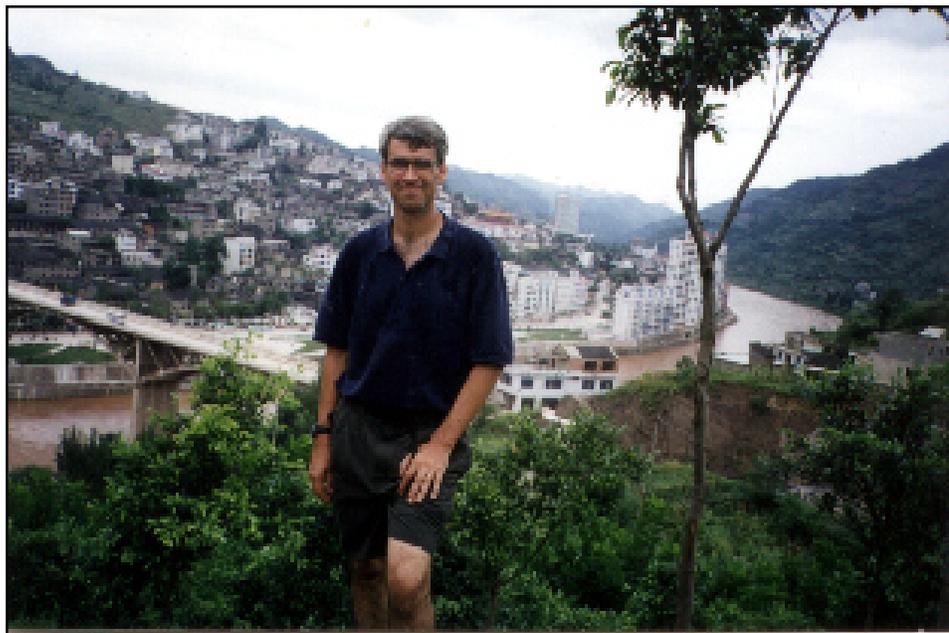


“We built this monument with our own money,” said this delightful man. He was seven years old when the Red Army passed through his town. His neighborhood has special significance because during a Nationalist air raid, a bomb dropped right into the middle of a bedroom sheltering Mao Zedong and Zhu De. The bomb did not explode. Had it, China’s modern history would have been quite different.

“Die! Die! Die!” shouted the old man seated in the middle (his mind a bit feeble) as he reenacted the day he and others lined up Red Army soldiers on reconnaissance, decided they were bandits, and executed them. Their township was a warlord stronghold and resisted the Red Army’s entrance.



Author pictured on the banks of the Chishui River in Maotai, with the famous-liquor town in background.



March veterans experienced an unusual camaraderie and unity that lasted for 30 years, until the Cultural Revolution.

A final, and important point of significance of the Long March from a national perspective is the basis it provided for heroic myth, an epic story that bolstered the legitimacy of the Communist Party in the eyes of the people. Every government needs a story to tell. For China's leaders — who until the 1990s were almost all Long-March veterans — the March was their ordeal in the wilderness.

This is what the Long March meant to those who would eventually make it all the way to Beijing and into Communist Party history. What about local folk in the Zunyi area who, though unwitting hosts to the Red Army in 1935, have never even left their villages? What does the Long March mean to them?

I was struck by the pride among those I spoke with, particularly the older people. Their attitude was, “we may be poor, but we helped make history.” Even some of the young people along the way, who spend most of their days loafing around soda stands and talking about migrant-labor life on the coast, when asked, said that the spirit of the Long March encourages them to persevere.

From another perspective, locals said the Long March acquainted them with the ideals of the movement. Just as the March has been described as an “involuntary and monumental study tour”⁹ for China's future leaders in regions of the country that would have otherwise remained unknown to them, the Long March familiarized those in China's interior with a movement that would

have otherwise remained distant and abstract. As the Red Army marched through their towns and villages its leaders held mass meetings, discussed land reform and distributed confiscated goods to the poor. The message was attractive for a people, who at the time experienced a 50-percent infant mortality rate, 30 years' life expectancy and near total illiteracy.¹⁰ The communist message, in its ideal, appealed strongly to the poor of Guizhou's mountains.

There must have been, however, many that resisted the Red Army. Powerful family clans, warlords, even allegiance to the Nationalist Party existed throughout the interior at the time. Nevertheless, the result after communist victory in 1949 was an interior region more fully integrated with the rest of the country; a degree of cohesion that could not have existed had it not been for the Long March.

The most practical difference the Long March made for many I spoke with, especially among those who live in non-farming communities [*i.e.*, town (*zhen*) and township (*xiang*) centers] is the economic development that came years after the Long March.

Over a bowl of breakfast noodles in the town of Maotai, famous for its distillery, a man shared with me the fact that Maotai liquor became especially cherished by Zhou Enlai who, when he and the Red Army passed through the riverside town, had used the fiery spirits (well over 100 proof) as ointment on his sore muscles. In fact, when Zhou Enlai became China's premier and foreign minister, he chose Maotai as the country's official state drink, and his personal diplomatic tool. Maotai, most certainly, has prospered because of it. In 1995, the Maotai

⁹ Mende, 224.

¹⁰ Harrison E. Salisbury, *The Long March: The Untold Story* (London: Macmillan, 1985)

distillery produced 4,000 tons of the drink and netted a 270-million-yuan profit (approximately U.S.\$34 million).

Though Maotai's example is extreme, the entire Zunyi District (Zunyi City, in particular) has received unusually privileged financial assistance from the central government its just because of their special place in history. This is not to say, however, that the Zunyi area — especially the rural areas — has shed its poverty. Far from it. Nevertheless, it is significant that many who live along the Long March's route believe that they have benefited economically by sharing in communist history.

It was also evident from those I spoke with that the difference between history "I have been told about" and history "I experienced personally" is becoming an important distinction in the way people in Zunyi evaluate their past. Among the young people I spoke with, for example, it was obvious that I was more interested in what the Red Army experienced in their hometowns than they were. They were much more interested in talking about working as migrant labor on the coast and pop music, than about something, however important, that happened 40 years before they were born.

The older generation could not have been more different. My interest in their local history was surpassed only by their desire to talk about what they had experienced or had heard about from older friends of the same generation.

All this made me wonder what the legacy of the Long March will continue to mean as veterans — both those who survived the March and local villagers who, in their own way, participated in the march — pass from China's stage. What is true for Beijing will probably be true in Guizhou as well. As the memory of the Long March becomes more and more "their history" — and not "my history" — China's 50-year experiment with Communism

will be increasingly legitimized by practical, life improvements and less by the prestige earned by 8,000 men and women who believed strongly enough in certain principles to persevere an incredible ordeal. In fact, this change is well underway, even in Guizhou's mountains.

Quite honestly, I expected to experience the feelings of a hero as my friend and I once again set our aching feet on the sidewalks of bustling Zunyi City, the place we had departed from eight days earlier. Not that I expected applause or anything, but just hours before we had sat with a village family, 15 miles north of the city, enthusiastically discussing the Long March. The elderly couple offered us tea as their cute seven-year old granddaughter, on her own initiative, cooled us by waving a Chinese fan. And just the evening before we had hiked over the famous Daloushan Mountain pass, drank water scooped from an underground spring and made a meal of wild blackberries in an uninhabited mountain area.

Instead, I felt a bit like a freak. Unshaven, dirty and limping, I felt more like a homeless person on K Street in Washington, D.C. than a modern-day hero. It made me wonder how Red Army soldiers felt when they first straggled into Zunyi.

Sincerely,



Recommended reading:

Alfred and England Bosshardt, *The Guiding Hand* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973).

Anthony Grey, *Peking* (London: Pan Books, 1989).

Harrison E. Salisbury, *The Long March: The Untold Story* (London: Macmillan, 1985).

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INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Shelly Renae Browning. A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. [SOUTH ASIA]

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. [THE AMERICAS]

Paige Evans. A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990. [THE AMERICAS]

Whitney Mason. A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called The Siberian Review in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the Vladivostok News and wrote for Asiaweek magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and

video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

Jean Benoît Nadeau. A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization." [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Susan Sterner. A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received her B.A. in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology at Emory University and a Master's in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. AP gave her a wide-ranging beat, with assignments in Haiti, Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border; in 1998 she was a co-nominee for a Pulitzer Prize for a series on child labor. Her fellowship topic: the lives and status of Brazilian women. [THE AMERICAS]

Tyrone Turner. A photojournalist (Black Star) whose work has appeared in many U.S. newspapers and magazines, Tyrone holds a Master's degree in Government and Latin American politics from Georgetown University and has produced international photo-essays on such topics as Rwandan genocide and mining in Indonesia (the latter nominated for a Pulitzer). As an ICWA Fellow he is writing and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings. [THE AMERICAS]

Daniel B. Wright. A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andreae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. [EAST ASIA]

Institute of Current World Affairs

FOUR WEST WHEELLOCK STREET
HANOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE 03755

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Phone: (603) 643-5548
Fax: (603) 643-9599

E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Website: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Administrator: Gary L. Hansen
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

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