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ICWA LETTERS

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They Call Me “Brother”

—Report from Big Nest Village (1) —

*“And many strange things there were I had
never seen or heard before.”*

— Mao Zedong, in 1927, after spending 200
days in Hunan Province’s countryside
investigating the beginnings of a peasant movement¹

Zunyi, GUIZHOU, China

JULY 1999

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter,

My grandfather once walked for 20 days — all the way to Chongqing in Sichuan Province, there and back — with a shoulder pole on mountain trails just to barter for two buckets of salt. My father wears sandals made of straw and smokes a homemade pipe. Mother never went to school, but in her no-print world she is the last to care that she cannot read or write. She weighs about 85 pounds, but can carry loads twice her weight with ease. I have seven brothers and sisters. They are all good kids and hardworking, but their worlds are limited to the poor mountains of northern Guizhou Province. They live somewhere between the secure but narrow predictability of farm life and wildly unpredictable dreams of cement, television and cash, the attractive-but-risky potential of life outside the village.

For most of the month of July, this was my family. We ate together, worked together and played together. The experience, like no other, provided up-close insight into family life in one of China’s poorest counties.² It also gave matchless opportunity to enter the rhythms of a village that had never seen a foreigner.

Call it a rustic vacation. The weather most days in northern Guizhou, even in July, is mild, ranging in the 70s to 80s. The air is fresh, the mountains are tall, shooting stars race across clear night skies. Chickens and finches greet each day with song. Water buffalo graze on lush hillsides, looked after by young cowherds. Tall, dark-green corn, tender-green rice paddies and yellow-green broadleaf-tobacco plants demonstrate that nature gives back what is

¹ The result of Mao’s 32-day trip, *Report on an Investigation of the Hunan Peasant Movement*, became central to the development of the communist revolution. For English excerpts of this document, see Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Volume II*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1960, p203-215.

² The county I lived in is a “nation-level impoverished county” [*guojiaji pinkun xian*], one of more than 300 such counties countrywide.



Guizhou's Zunyi District is known as the "Cradle of the Revolution." The Red Army spent nearly half of their 12-month Long March winding through Zunyi's mountains.

well cared for. The soothing sound of a gurgling stream is never distant. Naked boys play in the creek's big pool. Family members work together. Village adults sit on their porches chatting after a long day in the fields. That's life with the simple, slow-paced but hardworking peasants of the good earth.

Idyllic? Hardly. Raging flash floods wash out flimsy bridges and collapse terraced rice paddies. Sisters-in-law screech at each other from across their porches, continuing an ongoing quarrel. Peasants spread rumors behind each others' backs. Smudge-faced children's brown teeth rot from neglect. Fleas crawl on our bodies as we sleep at night. Flies swarm on a chunk of raw pork that dangles from a meat hook. Maggots and mosquitoes, not to mention the stench, make one think twice, and thrice, before visiting the backhouse. Curable sicknesses go untreated. Oppressive local-government corruption keeps resources and opportunity beyond the reach of most. Ignorance cripples. Worse, it kills.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

A certain tempo dictates life in Big Nest Village. That, I suppose, is inherent to life lived close to the soil. By

about 6:00 each morning, Second Uncle sharpens sickles on a stone slab outside my window, occasionally dipping the heated blades into a basin of cool water. The roosters' crowing competes with barking parents to make sure all the kids are out of bed and into action. From youngest to oldest, each has a role to play in the family-based economy.³

By breakfast, the Chen family accomplishes what many would imagine getting done in an entire day: the water buffalo is led out to graze; bushels of weeds are cut and chopped up for the two pigs, which are fed three times a day; baskets of potatoes that grow between rows of corn are dug from the earth (some are washed, diced and mixed with the weeds for the pigs; others are cleaned, peeled and boiled with rice for the family); the home is swept; tools are readied; the fire is started and breakfast preparation begins.

Breakfast, which is not served until 10:00 a.m., takes more than one hour to prepare and requires two people: one to continually stuff dried weeds, straw or cornstalks into an opening in the kiln-like stone hearth, while the chef, standing on the opposite side, prepares the food in one of three large iron woks mounted into the oven.

³ While I lived with the family, school was out of session for the summer. During the months the kids are in school, family responsibilities adjust a bit. Still, each has a role to play in the family-based economy.

Mother prepares breakfast as Brother feeds the fire in the family kitchen. Without the camera flash, the kitchen is dark, lit only by flickering fire light.



Mother or the oldest daughter usually cooks; a younger child keeps the fire going.

They've prepared food this way for generations, if not centuries. It's like something out of a Civil-War-era historic-preservation farmhouse in the United States. The

kitchen is dark, musty, and damp, but the fire is hot, and with a farmer's appetite, the food tastes good.

The family's staple consists of rice mixed with steamed potatoes, but the kids always try to get the bowl with the fewest potatoes possible. "Breakfast, lunch and dinner, everything is made of potatoes," one brother complains. "It's all we eat." Slight exaggeration. Yes, there are potato cakes, potato chips, and even thick noodles made from potato powder. But there are also vegetables [mainly cabbage], wheat noodles, homemade tofu and occasional pork [fried fat, meat cubes and sausages], as well as the variety of goods bought in the township on market day: soybeans, tofu skin, peanuts, seasonal fruit and other kinds of green vegetables. Oh, and there's lots of chili peppers cooked into everything. Big Nest Village is located in the heart of China's "chili belt."⁴



Abundant grain. Though still poor, an improved rice strain basically guarantees that food will not be a problem for Big Nest's villagers.

Until just five years ago, sufficient rice was not a guarantee in these parts. By July each year, families often needed to begin purchasing rice at the market. Since a new strain was introduced a half-de-

⁴Sichuan, Guizhou and Hunan Province make up China's "chili belt."



Family fun. Everyone joins in as family members make homemade tofu. Sister pours soybeans and water into the hole in the grindstone, while Father and Brother push and pull the long-wooden crank, suspended from a roof beam, that rotates the heavy stone. White, milky soybean liquid oozes out of the press and into a basin below.

cade ago, however, there is enough rice even for this large family that lives off of four peoples' worth of land. In the late 1970s, when the government decided to disband communes, arable land was divided into bands of quality, then parceled out according to the number of people in each family. Because the Chen family had only four members when the land was distributed, the family, now numbering nine, feels the pinch. Populations expand, arable land does not.

After breakfast, then again after a quick lunch break around 3:30 p.m., the family divides up and heads to their plots of land, spread unevenly around nearby valleys and mountainsides. Routine chores keep everyone busy: hoeing, pruning, digging more potatoes, weeding (weeding and more weeding!), herding the water buffalo and the just-bought ducklings.

Besides the daily chores, however, occasional tasks often force the family to juggle responsibilities: transporting buckets of human and pig waste out to the corn and tobacco fields, spreading store-bought fertilizer and insecticide in the rice paddies, preparing tofu with the large grindstone, washing clothes in the stream when the sun shines, bathing in the river, drying rice and rapeseed on large mats, sewing and making and repairing tools.

With the exception of blades, most tools, even plows, are made by hand. Every family has a bamboo grove — what for you and me may simply be a picture of traditional Chinese art is for the



Mother and Father make the best team on the crank, which requires smooth, steady pressure and balance to keep the weighty grindstone turning just right.

them a forest of rake, sickle and broom handles, flutes, children's toys, basket-weaving materials, even tobacco-pipe shafts.

Recycling is big in the countryside; little goes to waste: human and pig excrement becomes fertilizer; clothes are patched and worn for years, then handed down (one elderly man told me that until just recently he wore a jacket purchased in 1947!); straw is woven into rope; homework assignments become wallpaper.

By dinner, everyone looks tired from a full day. We sit quietly on hard, wooden benches, squeezed around a small table under the dim light emitted by a 25-watt light bulb that hangs from a wire in the ceiling. Food is gobbled down with little talking.

After dinner, some retire to their rooms (two kids to a bed). Others sit outside on the porch in the dark, chatting about the local gossip. The buzz one night was about a household that had been caught by county-government family-planning officials hiding a one-too-many child of another family — in fact, the child's father was a township-government official! Big trouble; lots to chat about.

The most constant thing about after-dinner is Father twisting off a strip of sun-dried tobacco leaf, rolling it, then stuffing it into his pipe's bowl and enjoying a smoke. He's usually the last one sitting at the table.

That is, unless the kids play a game, like the night I introduced them to "paper football." The activity evolved into the most playful night of the month. The excitement attracted neighbors and relatives, who squeezed into the small dining room to watch competitors, taking turns, slide a thick, triangle-shaped piece of folded paper across the table, trying to score a "touchdown" by getting some part of the three-sided object to hang beyond the table's edge, without falling off. Extra points were made much like a placekick: by booting the paper object with a flip of the finger through goal posts formed by the opposition's extended fingers.

Most nights, however, the dining room is vacated quickly, leaving Dad smoking his pipe in silence and one of the more studious children working on his summer-vacation homework assignment. The rest fall quickly into bed. No one is awake past 10:00 p.m.

TO MARKET WE GO

Outside the expected activities that occupy the Chen family's time and energy, larger parameters of village life provide cadence as well.

Besides the major annual markers — holidays (the highlight of which is Spring Festival) and the twin peaks



Third Brother studying in the dining room. He's 15 years old but just in sixth grade because his family lacked funds to enroll him in school until three years after he normally would have started. Notice the collage of paper — old homework assignments — that decorate the room as wallpaper.



Having just put on their best for market day — self-knit sweater-vests — Sister and a few of her unmarried friends asked if they could have their picture taken. Market day is a welcome change of pace from labor in the fields.

of busyness, planting and harvest — the strongest beat in life's meter is market day.

On each day of the lunar calendar ending with "1", "4" and "7", the township center swells from its normal population of about 500 to nearly 10,000. On days ending with "2", "6", and "9", the market-day crowd gathers at a different, nearby township; on "3" and "8" days at yet another. These three townships [*xiang*] form what was once a district [*qu*], an administrative layer between the township and county that no longer exists.⁵ Prior to the revolution, townships were home base for rival clans that fought bloody hand-to-hand, sickle-to-sickle and gun-to-gun battles.⁶

Nowadays, itinerant vendors follow the market as they alternate among the three townships. Rain or shine, farmers from surrounding villages converge on the township

nearest them to join in the festivities.

There are many reasons to go to market day. People gather to socialize, to hear and spread gossip ("You wouldn't believe what I heard happened in Big Nest last week....") to tend to business at the township government, to get a tooth pulled, or their hair cut, to have their fortunes told and, of course, to buy and sell goods. Half trade fair, half carnival, market day, more than anything, is an *event*, a welcome respite from work in the fields.⁷

By about noon each market day, after completing the necessary chores and finishing breakfast, an expectant atmosphere begins to build in the village. People change their clothes, prepare their goods and pack for the four-kilometer walk to the township. Unmarried young men and women wear their Sunday best. I made sure each market day to wash my hair in a bucket and shave be-

⁵ When communization occurred in 1958, districts [*qu*] — a handful of townships [*xiang*], each of which administers about a dozen villages [*cun*] — were converted into communes [*gongshe*]. Townships became production brigades [*shengchan da dui*]; villages became production teams [*shengchan dui*]. After Deng Xiaoping disbanded communes in the late 1970s, the pre-1958 administrative arrangement was revived. Districts, however, slowly disappeared, giving way to the following relationships, in descending order: county [*xian*], township/town [*xiang/zhen*], village [*cun*]. In many areas of China, then and now, one clan may constitute an entire village or several villages. Most families in Big Nest Village, for example, and four surrounding villages have the same surname. See A. Doak Barnett, *Cadres, Bureaucracy, and Political Power in Communist China* (New York: Columbia University, 1967), 110, 337, 453.

⁶ At the time of the Communist Revolution, Grandfather was labeled a counter-revolutionary for his role in a major clan feud. See my earlier report, "Home-Cured Tobacco" (DBW-11.4).

⁷ My motivation to walk the hour-long path to market day was simple: telephone my wife and children. On my first market day, around noon, I inadvertently spoke to Guowei and the children for too long on the public telephone. Villagers got politely impatient with me because many of them were waiting for their sons and daughters, with whom they had set appointed times, to call back from the coast where they are working as migrant laborers.

fore setting out with the others.

"Gan chang?" ["Are you headed to market?"] becomes the rallying cry as people greet each other. *"Zou ba!"* ["Let's go!"] friends and neighbors shout as they strike out on the dirt trail toward the township.

Farmers from a radius of ten kilometers gradually converge on the township center: a concentrated space not more than 100-square-meters large. What begins as a rivulet — a few people who set out together from their cluster of mountain homes — becomes a steady flow by the time one reaches the stony country road.

Some strain under shoulder poles, bent with weighty bags of seed, others under a wood-frame rack that supports a butchered hog, split down the middle. Most women carry bamboo-woven baskets on their backs to transport whatever needs to go to or from market. Some, of course, carry nothing — especially young people who want to look just right. The most common thing about villagers, whatever their age, however, is that everyone walks trying not to get their shoes dirty. On rainy days, it's not possible.

The stream of people becomes a river as we close in on the township. Then, finally, the river dumps into the ocean: a tremendous crowd of people squeezed onto the township's narrow mainstreet. A strange sensation overcomes me as I step onto the paved township road, boiling with people — as if I'm suddenly floating, carried by the movement of the masses.

Hours later we step off the pavement back onto our stony mountain road to return to our village — like an ebbing tide.

LIFE INTERRUPTED

As my brother and I tiptoed across the narrow, muddy embankment that separated the paddies, I could hear the slow, steady pounding of what sounded like the heavy head of an ax striking hollowed wood. The noise echoed through the ravine.

Then, as we neared the house, I saw them: two corpses lay side by side on tables in front of the village home. Disheveled hair and ashen faces partially hidden by a piece of cardboard, the bodies lay covered with a quilt — as if the couple was just sleeping. If only it was so.

It had rained the night before. During the storm, the bare wire that carried electricity to their home had somehow fallen from the pole into one of the rice paddies. The fields this time of year are full of water.

That morning, sometime before breakfast, the couple's five-year-old son was playing near the paddy immediately across from their home when he saw what looked like an egg beneath the water. He reached in to retrieve it, but slipped and fell in. The electrified water stung him. He cried out in pain.

Hearing the scream, the child's mother raced over to him. She hopped down into the water, just like she always does when she weeds or spreads fertilizer, only this time she received a strong shock as well. The young mother then made a fatal mistake: she reached over and grabbed the live wire.

According to the boy, his mother "got twisted up in the wire."

Father heard the commotion. He too sprinted to the paddy. When he saw his wife writhing in the mix of green rice and now-muddied water, he leapt into the paddy. The father quickly set his little boy up on the bank, then reached for his wife's hand....

Villagers say the young boy ran back to his grandparents screaming, "Mummy and Daddy are holding hands and they are all tangled up!"

Tragically, the boy was right: His mother and father perished, hands frozen together by a deathly charge of electricity.

Later that same day, we, like others in the village, walked over to the stricken family's home to express our condolences. It was a sight I will remember for a very long time: relatives and friends sitting in disbelief, the two corpses lying next to them in chilled silence.

The hollow rhythmic sound of a hatchet hewing two coffins continued to beat.

And it happened on market day.

Sincerely,



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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]**

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