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ICWA LETTERS

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Golfing in Guiyang —Playing with Guizhou's Affluent—

Xiuyang County, GUIZHOU, China

September, 1999

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter,

My partners and I strode down the fairway toward the 18th green as if it was Sunday afternoon at the Masters Golf Tournament in Augusta.

It was one of those "it just doesn't get any better than this" kind of moments. The manicured lawn's refreshing scent filled my nostrils. The course, thoughtfully designed along the contours of the mountain terrain, delighted the eye. The weather was overcast and cool — great for golf in August. I had played better than expected and had enjoyed the partnership of some of Guizhou's most wealthy businesspeople. A restful clubhouse welcomed us in the distance.

"Hand me the seven-iron," I asked the caddie.

"Sir, you're still one hundred and sixty yards out and the green is set up a bit. I suggest you use your six-iron."

My caddie, Xiao Ye, may have been just a middle-school graduate from Guizhou's countryside, but she spoke with confidence, like she knew what she was talking about. So I took her advice. The next thing I knew, my ball was on the green. Luck? Absolutely. But as Xiao Ye and I approached the green, I teased her that I should listen to her more often. She dipped her head in embarrassment, her hand covering her smile.

Local farmers-turned-groundskeepers wore faded-blue "Mao jackets" as they trimmed the grounds with imported weed-whackers. Other "peasants" hauled baskets of sand on their backs, spreading it over grass seedlings. It was all part of an effort to grow a golf course on what previously had been uncultivable mountainside.

Five years ago, when the Guangdong Province real estate company began to search for a suitable location in Guizhou Province, the team of developers drew a circle on the map around the capital city, Guiyang, 30 kilometers in radius. Then they began to look.

The golf course's president, Mr. Lin, himself a Guangdong native, says that



Author prepares to sink a putt at the 18th hole of the Guiyang Golf Club. A restful clubhouse in the background welcomes weary golfers after a full day of play.

at the time, four-wheel-drive vehicle was the only way to get to the resort's present location.

What was then a 30-kilometer overland adventure is now a 30-minute zip down the Guiyang-to-Zunyi expressway. Five years ago the mountain was rural refuse. Now — U.S.\$20 million [200 million yuan] later — the Guiyang Golf Club is a hotspot for Guiyang's wealthy to play, and to be seen.

Guizhou's affluent have indeed come out to play. The club is much more than just a place to drive a golf ball; it is an entire complex of sport and relaxation. The facility has tennis courts, a swimming pool, an elaborate fitness center, fishing in the lake that sets the 120-room luxury hotel off from the course, and Chinese and Western restaurants. In addition to all this, the first of more than a

dozen lakeside villas has recently been completed. They start at U.S.\$100,000 and word is, they're going like hotcakes.

All this at a 4,000-foot elevation in rural Guizhou! In fact, the elevation and rejuvenating mountain air is part of the club's appeal.

But it's expensive air: club membership costs U.S.\$24,000 [200,000 yuan] plus a U.S.\$30 monthly fee. And this in a province of China whose 36 million residents make on average just a couple hundred dollars each year!

There is no need to sign up for tee times yet at the two-year-old resort, but on weekends the course sees a steady stream of visitors. How many members? Company se-





Future golfers? Author's children, Margaret and Jon, pose for the camera at Guiyang Golf Club. Resort lake and 10th green in background

cret, says a course vice president. But it is not hard to find people to speak to about why they joined the Guiyang Golf Club.

THE PLAYERS

I decided the best place to make my initial encounter with Guizhou's affluent was at the club's double-deck driving range. So on that pleasant Saturday afternoon, my first of two visits to the course, I hung out hitting baskets of golf balls and looking for the right people to meet.¹

I enjoy all sports, but it had been years since I had hit a golf ball. Still, I thought, my look as an American — unusual in these parts — would appeal to some, particularly those fashion-conscious golfers as keen to pursue the right look as they are the low score.

Into-it enthusiasts exhibited their prized Ping and Titleist golf bags for all to see as they reclined in chairs behind the practice tees, sipping green tea. Another appeared proud to display his trophy — a chic, admiring companion in sunglasses and all-black outfit — as he powered balls over the pond with his driver. Ten feet away, a newcomer swung and missed in her high heels and skirt.

Farther down the row I noticed two men, probably in their early 50s, with decent swings and apparently serious about their golf. After I exhausted my basket, I walked over and commented to one of the men, now sitting in a chair watching his partner swing

away, "He's got nice form. Where are you from?"

"We're locals," the gentleman responded as I pulled up a chair.

"You are from the county here?" I asked with a twinge of surprise.

"Yeah, he's the... this," the man said as he showed me a thumbs-up. "He's the county party secretary. I'm the tax-bureau chief."

"You guys are good," I said, realizing that though these two did not fit the exact profile I was looking for, they certainly were among the most powerful people at the course.

If practice makes perfect, these two should be close to flawless — the day I saw them they had played 48 holes. They come out most weekends.

The following morning at 7:00, the three of us, with the required caddies, played the course together.

"Golf is a great way to meet people," the party secretary said to me between holes. "Those who come to play have money. They're usually the company's owner or general manager. We play golf with them. We promote our county. We invite them to invest here. Didn't I meet you this way? If it wasn't for golf we wouldn't have met."

Xiuyang County is one of the richest in Guizhou, largely due to its proximity to Guiyang. The big-time

¹ On my other visit to the golf course, a State Council News Department film crew followed me, part of a documentary, as I spoke and played with Guizhou's affluent.

investment from the golf course certainly didn't hurt.

"But how has the course affected local people who previously farmed the land?" I asked the party secretary.

"Most of it was barren mountain scrubble. And the course agreed to employ the local villagers at the course. The resort has put about 300 people to work. On balance, it has definitely helped the locals, enabling them to break the cashless, subsistence-level cycle most farmers experience in Guizhou."

I don't doubt him. Though there must be complaint among some about the resort's disturbing the village's sleepy way of life, for many of the locals who would have normally needed to leave for distant cities as migrant laborers, the cash has come to them.

The longest conversation I had with a local person was with my caddie, Xiao Ye. She's worked at the course since it opened two years ago. Xiao Ye comes from a typical small-town family. She's unconcerned about what one does after life as a caddie; she's just thrilled to have a job.

Though interesting, the two officials do not represent those who have joined the Guiyang Golf Club.² Most of those who pay dues are wealthy 30- and 40-year-olds from Guiyang, young company heads, many of whom undoubtedly hail from privileged backgrounds.

How else could the young businessman I played with on another day thrive as head of a private company that fits and installs entire townships with electrical hardware systems? That's what I call serious connections.

On that day, I hooked up with three young men, members of Guizhou's elite. The real McCoy. Each was the president of a company: real estate, fertilizer and the power company. Each had played most of China's best golf courses: Shenzhen, Hainan, Kunming and Dalian.

"How many are there like you all in Guiyang?" I asked the others in my foursome.

"There are probably 100 people in Guiyang like us, that have the money to fly anywhere in the country on any given weekend and play golf."

"Why golf?"

"It's a healthy alternative, a great way to relax. A lot of Guizhou's wealthy hang out in night clubs and recently bowling has caught on. But golf is different. At the end of a day of golf, you're physically tired, but



The cutest caddies in all of China, if not the world. The resort's team of 30 female caddies are all recent middle-school graduates from rural areas of Guizhou.

mentally rejuvenated. Golf is a game of you against yourself."

The fertilizer executive replied, "I've been playing for just one year. A friend brought me out one day and I've been hooked ever since. Golf is also a great way to spend time with a few good friends."

"And a great place to talk business," another company head jumped in.

"What else do Guizhou's wealthy do for fun?"

"We fish, we bowl, we play mahjong."

"Do your spouses ever join you on the links?"

"No, they prefer shopping."

A few hours at the driving range provide ample evidence that golf is also providing a new way to pursue

² Someone told me that these county officials would have probably been given "honorary" club memberships. Such an arrangement — a worthwhile investment — would go a long way in preserving healthy club-county relations.

Author watches as his business-executive playing partner chips the ball over a pile of limestone boulders toward the green.



that stylish, ever-elusive look of wealth and leisure: the right golf shirt, the matching hat, cool saddle shoes, baggy khakis, and for the very sophisticated... the golf glove dangling out of the back left pocket. And who better to model that look than Australian golf professional Greg “The Shark” Norman in a life-size cardboard cutout at the club’s pro shop.

Most, of course, are “posers” — a word I learned from a California-surfer friend that describes the dudes that have all the right equipment, the best boards, the pricey wetsuits, but rarely if ever face the breakers. Instead, they spend their day on the beach, walking up and down the sand, posing.

“Golf will be the new fashion sport of Guiyang,” one of my foursome told me. “In fact, I’m building a three-deck golf range right in Guiyang, with a restaurant, pro shop and everything. People in Guiyang with a little money want to look stylish, like us. Golf will be the new fad. The driving range opens after the country’s 50th anniversary, and it should really take off. We’re right behind the province’s military headquarters. Come visit us sometime.”

Weeks later, while sitting around a steamy hotpot dinner with a less-wealthy, but well-educated group of friends in Guiyang, I asked their opinion of Guizhou’s richest.

“How much money does one have to have in Guiyang

to be considered really wealthy?” I asked.

“We have a saying, ‘One million is just getting started.’”³

“How many in Guiyang are past ‘just getting started?’ Of those, how many earned their money through hard work, through legal means?”

“There are a lot of very wealthy people in Guiyang, but few outside the provincial capital. The guys you met at the golf club would have been among Guizhou’s most wealthy,” one quickly answered. “Wealth in Guiyang really took off in the mid-1990s. Any not corrupt?” he thought for a second, puzzled. “None.”

Whether or not his statement is true, his urban dweller’s perception is as important. The automatic association of wealth with corruption illustrates the reality that in many places of the country, political power [*quan*] and special favors are pre-conditions for making big money [*qian*].

Certainly, there are many talented people in Guiyang, and one must remember that the provincial capital ranks among China’s 30 most wealthy cities. Still, it is the endless shades of gray and black between business and government dealings that upset people the most.

Remember as well, as one government official told me off the record, with a city as well-off as Guiyang, it takes

³One million yuan equals about U.S.\$120,000. Most certainly, if the Guiyang Golf Course members have paid \$20,000 just to play golf, they’ve done more than just get started. They are rich!



Guiyang Golf Club's villas. It's not the expense that bothers people, or the foreign architecture; it's the illicit methods used to gain their wealth that anger many.

some pretty drastic poverty to drag the province's overall average down to the nation's cellar. This certainly simplifies and intensifies views about Guizhou's affluent.

TO STRIKE A BALANCE

While at the Guiyang Golf Club, I happened across a former provincial tourism bureau chief. The cheery Mr. Zhang was a guest of golf club President Lin, part of a review team Lin had invited to observe the resort and share their input. Mr. Zhang spoke glowingly of the tourist value of golf in Guizhou, the pleasing combination of a sophisticated sport and the natural beauty of the surrounding mountains and lakes. "A golf course adds to the attractiveness of Guizhou as a 'province of parks,'" he said, "not to mention its strengthening of Guizhou's investment environment."

The former government official got more serious, however, when he talked about the review team's recommendation that the club find ways to become more accessible to those who cannot afford membership. Their suggestion? Varieties of pro-bono services for groups, who could come out to the course, say on a weekday, for a day of rest and relaxation. Companies have already brought their staffs out for half-day retreats. I ran into a group of them. Also, the day before I arrived, on Teacher's Day, several hundred teachers were invited from Guiyang for a day of fun and all-you-can-hit golf balls at the driving range.

But would the exclusivity sought and paid for by those with the bucks get lost in all the public do-gooding? That's

part of the balance the course's management must strike between its appeal to those with the deepest pockets in Guiyang and the image the club projects.

Indeed, it harkens back to China's disparity question and to Deng Xiaoping's ever-pragmatic, ever-clever logic: "Let certain groups of people and certain regions prosper first."⁴

Sounds nice. But when one realizes that one golfer who chose to give up his club membership could finance the tuition of thousands of students for *all* of their years in school, it makes one wonder if it is even appropriate to allow such a course to set up in a province like Guizhou where such privilege is astronomically out of reach for 99.9 per cent of Guizhou's populace.

Good reason, however, suggests that if a profit-driven real-estate investment company from coastal Guangdong is willing to put up the money, there is no reason why the course should not be here. And if the course makes Guizhou a more attractive location for business executives, more power to them and to the province. Common prosperity is not guaranteed by simply maintaining the lowest common denominator.

Maybe Comrade Deng was right after all. In fact, if Deng was reading this report, he'd probably say, "Yeah, allow certain groups of people in Guizhou, let certain regions of the province play golf first..., until one glorious day when all 36 million Guizhou residents, all 30-something ethnic groups are able to play golf on courses all across the province's hilly terrain. Then

⁴Deng Xiaoping first said this in 1986 in defense of his outward-looking economic-growth recipe that gave preferential policies to special economic zones on China's coast. Deng added, "The goal is common prosperity. But an equal pace of development is not possible. In the past we pursued egalitarianism and all ate out of iron rice bowls — this was actually common backwardness, common poverty. We all lost out."

we will have reached common prosperity.”

After two years of living in Guizhou and associating with people from the poorest to the most rich, I have come to the conclusion that it is not disparity that bothers people in China’s most backward province the most — not even fees for the privilege of chasing a little white ball that total 250 times the typical farmer’s annual income — *it is corruption.*

Before Deng’s communist utopia arrives, the government — both in perception and in reality — will have to

bring under control levels of corruption that by all accounts have surpassed the poverty-stricken days of “pre-liberation.”

But how difficult would it be to remedy corruption? Try hitting a hole-in-one.

Sincerely,



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INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

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