

China 6th Installment

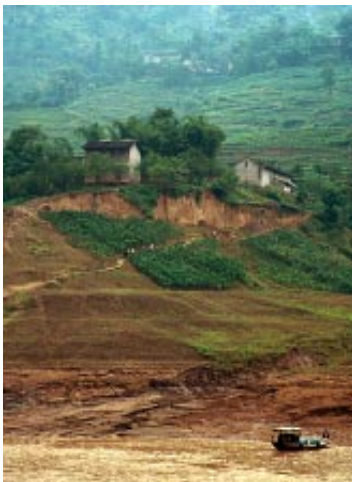
Tuesday, June 1, 1999, our 12th day in China:

We started the day with shore leave. We had safely passed through the Three Gorges and were now approximately 20 hours downstream from Chongqing. We took a half-day tour of Wanxian, a city of 400,000 people. Two-thirds of the original city will be under water when the Three Gorges reservoir is filled.

We climbed what seemed like 50 steps straight up from the dock to the road where a bus waited to take us into the center of town. While narrating the bus tour through the city, the local CITS guide made an unsolicited statement that the people of Wanxian had nothing to gain from the dam and were opposed to its construction. This was the first public criticism we had heard about the project. Michael, our country CITS guide who lives in Beijing, had told us that there were grumblings about the expense of the project in areas outside of Chongqing and the Yangzi basin, where the benefits are obvious, but this was unheard of in-your-face criticism.

We toured the provincial museum, which had a reconstruction of a thatched-roofed farmhouse of a well-to-do farming family in its garden. The complex had a central reception room, two side bedrooms, a kitchen, a workroom, and a separate bedroom for the older son(s). We were shown all of the tools that the farmers would have used and how they worked. Inside the museum was a display of a Ba coffin and some artifacts associated with the Ba culture. Again, we were impressed with the quality of the provincial museums, in this case a very small one.

Our next stop was the local street market. The street was lined with shops and vendors' carts. On one side were fruit and vegetable stalls, at the end of the street there were live animals (ducks, chickens, and pigeons), and on the other side of the street there were butcher shops. There were no flies and, even though the day's steady drizzle had momentarily ceased, the cool and moist air seemed to suppress the smell. The guide said that the market is open everyday, because the mildness of the Sichuan climate allows vegetables to be harvested all year long.



Farms upriver from Wanxian

Our last stop was at the Wanxian Acrobatic School. Some of the more advanced students gave us a performance. The acrobatic training is in addition to the standard academic courses required of all students. The graduates perform all over the world. The star of the show was a unicyclist who flipped bowls off the toe of his shoe and caught them in a stack on his head.

We got back to the boat in time for lunch and resumed our journey towards Chongqing. Although we were through the gorges, there were still one-way sections on the river and more than once we had to wait our turn.



Wanxian street market, ground mystery meat



Acrobatic School juggler, Wanxian



River traffic controller stopping upstream traffic



Fishing boats in morning fog

Jeff gave a lecture on the Buddhist caves of Dazu that I will relate when we get to Dazu.

Wednesday, June 2nd, 1999, our 13th day in China:

We woke up to the mist and fog that Sichuan and Chongqing are famous for. We were

five hours from Chongqing and had plenty of time to pack, breakfast, and watch the river glide by. Lunch began at 11:30 and we docked in Chongqing shortly after. The all-girl, crewmember band again serenaded us as we left the boat.

The Yangzi and the Jialing Rivers divide Chongqing into three parts. The city clings to the cliffs carved by the two rivers. Although the Three Gorges Dam will raise the water level by seven or eight meters at

Chongqing, we were told that there are no plans to relocate people. However, it is following the pattern of other industrial cities in China, and is replacing all of its older buildings with new ones.



Logs from Tibet, near Chongqing

Chongqing is the largest city in Sichuan province with a population of 6 million. Chongqing and

environs recently became China's fourth autonomous region long with Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin (the seaport nearest Beijing). The region, which includes the downriver parts of Sichuan province, has a total population of 30 million people. Sichuan province is rich in mineral resources and Chongqing is China's largest auto manufacturer: the military has a joint venture with Suzuki. On the cruise, we passed a few barges loaded with very-mini vans that were going downstream to markets nearer the coast. Other military factories in the city make appliances like refrigerators. Chongqing was the wartime capital of China after 1937, and it was chosen partly because its constant fog and rainy weather made it difficult to attack from the air.

The fog, which averages 100 days a year, only hides the smog that covers the city the rest of the time. We were told that they had shut down a steel mill, which was in the center of town, to reduce the pollution. We couldn't tell. It was hard to make out details of the boats on the river below, from the road on the hillside above.

Chongqing's history goes back at least 3,000 years. During the Warring States period (402-221 BC) it was the center of the Ba Kingdom. Chongqing was given its name by a Southern Song Emperor (c. 1200 AD)—“city of double jubilation”: first for his subjugation of the area and second because his control of Chongqing hastened his ascension to the throne.

Before heading for our hotel in Dazu, we toured Chongqing's convention center (People's Great Hall). It is modeled on the



Sampan upriver from Wanxian



Gross air and water polluter, Chongqing



Princess Jeannie's band "piping" us off the boat at Chongqing

Temple of Heaven in Beijing. Big, impressive, with a 65-meter high dome, and with such poor acoustics it cannot be used for theater or musical performances. The Sichuan Fine Arts Institute is housed in one of its wings and we were taken there for a print and painting shopping opportunity. Virginia bought some post cards.

Across the parking lot and down the street was an indoor food market. At the entrance we were greeted with live frogs, turtles, eels, and snakes. There were vegetables that Virginia was unable to recognize (it would have been no big deal if I had said that). A huge area was set aside for butcher shops. There were stalls with seasoned meats and vegetables ready to be cooked in a "hot pot." The hot pot is in a hole in the center of a small round or square table. The pot contains spicy oil and broth kept hot by a small gas stove. The meat and vegetables are brought to the table and each person cooks his own food.



Children at indoor market, Chongqing

We returned to the bus at 2:30 and started the approximately 100-mile drive to Dazu. A new turnpike

is being built to connect Dazu to Chongqing and is scheduled to be finished this October. We were told the trip takes three hours, but, with the new road, our overly aggressive bus driver was able to halve the time. The road was four-lane, limited-access up until the last fifteen or twenty miles.



Rice paddies near Dazu



Farmers walking home near Dazu

At that point the turnpike ended and we had to follow a narrow, winding two-lane road through the lush countryside. It was the best part of the trip.

We drove through small villages and past intensely cultivated areas with rice paddies covering every available square inch of land. Dirt dikes, all of which have beans, herbs, or other vegetables planted along their edges, separate the rice paddy terraces. There was every shade of green imaginable, and the fields were immaculate. That can't be said for the few pieces of land that seem to be worthless for some reason. These are filled with trash. That's always so startling, when everything else is so tidy. They go to the trouble of sweeping the roads and sidewalks, but apparently don't have any real trash collection system.

Dazu is the local administrative center for all of the farming villages in the area and has a population of 50,000. The government is trying to make Dazu a tourist destination because of the Buddhist caves, and has built a big hotel (the local guide apologized that it was only three stars) as well as the new road. It must not have been high-tourist season, because there was only one other small tour group staying at the almost empty hotel.



Dazu street scene from hotel

We checked the TV in our room for CNN or something similar. We didn't find it or any news in English, but we did find a broadcast of Peking Opera shown with Chinese subtitles. They must have as much trouble with the story and words as we do with European Opera.

Before dinner, Jeff gave a lecture on Chinese Cosmology:

The Chinese have no written mythology. There are hints of an oral tradition found in philosophical writings that are often critical of myths. From the philosophical texts we have found out who invented agriculture, sericulture, medicine, etc. A lot of imagination was expended on who created what, but the world always existed. There was no creation myth, but they believed that the world had changed over time. One of the earliest accounts was Zhuangzi, a 4th century BC Daoist text. In this version, the world was a primordial soup—wonton soup was what chiefs thought the world looked like. The soup separated into two parts—heaven and earth, yang and yin. No one powerful being caused this; it was just a natural process.

The yin/yang duality applied to almost everything: female and male, south and north, shadow and brightness. Geography was interpreted in terms of yin and yang. The south side of the mountain had more sun so was yang, the north side, yin. Hence, you always climbed the south side of a mountain. Rivers divided the land in two—the north yang, the south yin (remember that the major rivers in China run west to east). Cities were situated where they would get the most yang—north of rivers and south of mountains. The first Imperial capital, Chang’an—“confluence of forces”, was sited north of the Wei River and south of a mountain range.

The earliest cosmologies envisioned the world as a chariot with a parasol—earth is the square box of the chariot and the heavens were the parasol. As the wheels of the chariot moved, the pole of the parasol turned, rotating the stars in the sky. Mount Hua was considered the mountain that held the pole of the parasol. Hua means flower. (The name of modern China is the People’s Republic of the Central Flowering.) The Big Dipper is where the pole meets the parasol. A god lived there who was worshipped as the master of destiny or fate. Traditional architecture in the Imperial capital attempted to emulate the square chariot box with the pole and parasol. The square base and the circular second story design is reflected in the shape of the Shanghai Museum.



Square and circle architecture of Shanghai Museum

Around 300 BC the cosmology becomes more complicated. A five-sequence numerology is superimposed upon the dualistic system; for example, earth, wood, fire, metal, and water. There were two ways to view the sequences. In the “productive” way, one element would produce the next. Earth produces wood; wood produces fire; fire produces metal; and metal produces water (through condensation). In the “conquest” way, one element would conquer the next. Water destroys metal; metal can put out fire; fire destroys wood; wood can move earth; earth can cover water.

These five elements had positions and colors attached to them as follows:

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|-------|--------|--------|
| Earth | Center | Yellow |
| Wood | East | Green |
| Fire | South | Red |
| Metal | West | White |
| Water | North | Black |

The first Emperor believed that he had succeeded because water was the ascending force, and he was from the North, so he chose black as his color and clothed all of his soldiers in black. The last Emperor’s color was yellow because the earth was the ascending element. The next dynasty should have been green and wood, but Mao, to break tradition, declared that the East was now Red.

After dinner we had time on our hands so a large group of us decided to walk the street that passed in front of the hotel. After three blocks we had pretty much exhausted the sights. The street was lined with multi-story buildings with shops at street level and apartments higher up. Instead of being accosted by every vender, the people in the shops and on the street stared at us as if we were something new and novel. The children, practicing their English, all said “Hello” as we passed.

Thursday, June 3rd, 1999, our 14th day in China:

At breakfast we had a choice of going to the Chinese or foreigner’s dining room. Expecting the usual croissants and eggs cooked to order (and not being able to face Chinese for breakfast) I chose foreign. The meal was foreign all right: cold fried eggs with Spam, french fries, orange juice that tasted like Tang, honey sweetened, watery porridge, watermelon, dry toast, something similar to a chocolate shake, and last night’s pound cake for dessert.

Before we left to tour the caves I went back to one of the shops that we had looked into the night before and bought some bottled water. I priced the bottles using finger signals and then the proprietor counted out my change in English.

The weather was intermittent showers, just like it had been ever since we left Wanxian. We were set to visit the Beishan (North Hill) caves in the morning and the Baodingshan (Precious Summit) caves in the afternoon. This is what Jeff had said about them:

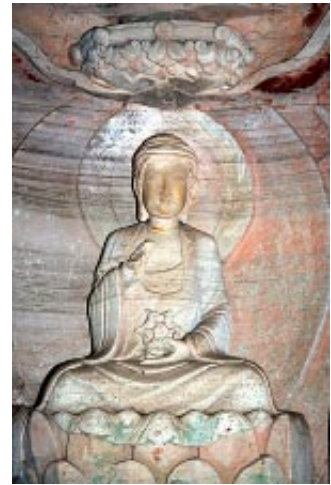
The caves date to the Tang and Song dynasties, 10th to 13th centuries AD. There are approximately 100 cave sites in Sichuan province. Many were once on a pilgrim’s trail, but most are now inaccessible. Dazu’s name has a couple of meanings: Big Foot, for the footprint of Buddha; “zu” also means enough and the name may refer to the richness of the area’s well-kept farms and the rare plants and animal species. Approximately 150 Buddhist temples still exist in the area. Twice, in 756 and 881 AD, the Tang emperor had to flee his capital at Chang’an. The second time, he came to Sichuan. The locals did not appreciate an invasion by the emperor and the Imperial court, and the disruption it would cause to their way of life. A local hero, Wei Junjing, dispatched provincial troops to keep the Imperial forces at bay. A battle was fought and the Imperials retired. Sichuan became the independent Kingdom of Shu in 907 as the Tang dynasty began to crumble.

Wei Junjing began the carvings at Beishan in 892 as an act of thanksgiving. One of the first figures carved was an image of Wei Junjing placed next to a tablet and a stele explaining why the carvings were started and asking the deities for continued protection. Funds were collected from wealthy landowners, Buddhist monks and nuns for 250 years to support the work, resulting in some 10,000 carvings.

The caves at Baodingshan were the results of the efforts of just one man. A local Buddhist monk, Zhao Zhifeng, returned to Dazu after spending years studying Tantric Buddhism. (Tantric or Esoteric Buddhism promises the quickest release from reincarnation, if you know the right magic incantation.) Zhao Zhifeng spent the next 70 years (1179-1249)



Statue of Wei Junjing, Beishan, 895 AD



Buddha at Beishan, 1116-1122 AD



Comparing the taming of water buffalo to the taming of the human spirit, Baodingshan 1179-1249 AD



Alice Lengers, Michael, Jeff Riegel, and Buddha, Baodingshan



Recumbent Buddha (Buddha entering Nirvana) with attendant Bodhisattvas, Baodingshan



Curly headed Bodhisattva attending the Recumbent Buddha, Baodingshan

directing the carvings at Baodingshan.

The main theme of the Baodingshan carvings is a reconciliation of Buddhist beliefs with those of Daoism. One of the major panels shows how Buddha (who as a young man renounced all worldly attachments and lived the rest of his life as a hermit) personally took care of his aging parents as any good ancestor worshipping Daoist would have done. The panels attempt to give a visual presentation of Buddhist beliefs in such a way that illiterate people could be taught their virtues without having to read the sutras.

The weather cleared as we arrived back at the hotel for a two and a half-hour lunch break. I asked if we might shorten the break and take advantage of the momentary good weather. Lunch was cut back to two hours. We wanted to take pictures of the lush countryside, but the bus took us instead to a shopping opportunity near Baodingshan.



Daoist leader Daoza (Lao-Tze, on right) riding goat to India to investigate Buddhism, Baodingshan, Qing dynasty addition c. 1800 AD



Minature lions purchased at Baodingshan

We wandered among the Baodingshan carvings for a couple of hours and then went back to the parking lot—another shopping opportunity. Virginia wanted to purchase some carved lions and water buffalo. We went from booth to booth until we had bargained a reasonable price for four small pieces. As



Rice paddies in rain near Dazu

we got ready to leave, the merchants surrounded the bus trying to make one last sale. Before the bus pulled out of the parking lot, the statuettes were selling for half of what we paid!



Villagers outside of Dazu, the man is carrying flour in the basket

As the bus left Baodingshan, it started raining again. On the way back to Dazu, the bus stopped a couple of times for photos, but the day got drearier and darker as we got closer to Dazu. At each stop we attracted a crowd of villagers who were as interested in us as we were in them.

Friday, June 4th, 1999, our 15th day in China:

We left Dazu right after breakfast, returning to Chongqing. Our last stop before the Chongqing airport was an Artists' Village overlooking the Jialing River. There were 17 artists in residence with their families. They were selected after passing a stiff competition and are supported for life by the government. Most of the

artists do woodcuts, but some do oils, watercolors, and prints. They have exhibited nationally and internationally. There were some interesting pieces, but they seemed to be struggling, searching for a style that isn't a derivative of classical landscapes or another image of the virtuous, heroic peasant.

After lunch we headed for the airport. Ten minutes down the road we discovered that we had left one of our members at the restaurant. We parked the bus next to a tollbooth and, after a series of cell phone calls, a taxi made our group whole again. Given all of the places that we had visited and the diverse interests in our group, it seemed like a miracle that this was the first and only time that someone got left behind.



Wu Qiangorian at work, Artists' Village, Chongqing

The flight to Shanghai was uneventful. Riley was at the airport to meet us, and we all felt like old hands coming back to Shanghai. The city was at its clearest. It had rained hard the previous two days and flushed the atmosphere. We had hoped to be able to go back to the Shanghai Museum, but our time was too short. Instead, we went to the Friendship Store next to the Peace Hotel and spent all of our excess local currency (mainly on chocolate). We kept just enough to pay the airport tax in the morning.

We had a fabulous farewell dinner at the Green Wave Restaurant next to the Yu Garden (the first garden we visited when we arrived in China). We ate in the same room where President Clinton and family ate last year. There were big, mural sized pictures of the event on the walls and we could even recognize some of the people who waited on us in the pictures. The food was delicious.

Saturday, June 5th, 1999, our 16th day in China:

We left for the airport at 8 am. The first step was having our to-be-checked luggage x-rayed and given a security sticker. Then we carried them to check-in. The next stop was immigration to have our passports, boarding passes, and arrival/departure cards checked. They kept the arrival/departure card. Twenty minutes later we started to board. Our boarding pass was read by a machine that swallowed the pass, verified that we had permission to leave, signaled to the baggage handlers to load our luggage onto the plane, and delivered the pass to the attendant. I got the strong



Virginia surrounded by shopping opportunities, Artists' Village, Chongqing



Dick at Artists' Village, Chongqing

impression that if the machine didn't like you it kept the boarding pass.

We started taxiing at 10 and were in the air at 10:30. We changed planes in Tokyo after a three-hour layover. By this time, those of us who were hit by the Dazu flu were either coughing or worse. Virginia and I dozed through a couple movies as we crossed the Pacific. The plane landed in San Francisco forty minutes early. We were relieved that that gave us a much better chance of getting through customs and making our connecting flight to LAX.

U.S. Customs was a breeze, almost a pleasure. We were able to give our luggage to United agents as we exited Customs and they checked the bags on to LAX. We called the girls and told them that we were in the US and that they could leave for the airport, as we would be there in a couple of hours. We went upstairs to find our boarding gate only to discover that United had again cancelled our flight. This time at least they had booked us on the next available flight. We rushed to find a phone and caught the girls before they had left home and told them our new flight numbers. They were waiting for us when we got off the plane in LA.

We were exhausted, slightly under the weather, and extremely pleased with ourselves. It had been a wonderful vacation, with interesting people, beautifully managed by Alice Lengers and Archaeological Tours, and made intellectually stimulating by Jeff Riegel. We cannot wait to go on another one.