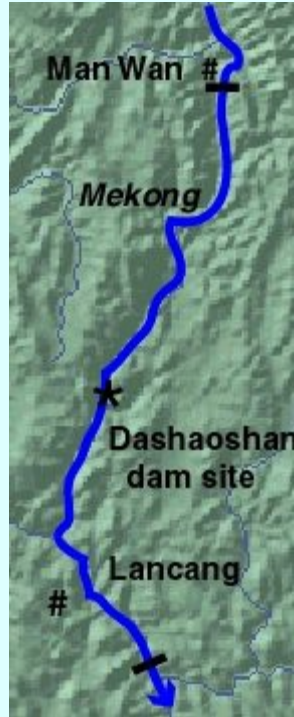


First (and probably last) Descent of the Man Wan and Da Xiao Shan Gorges Mekong River, Yunnan, China, April 1997

by Pete Winn



Summary

Dates: April-May, 1997 (10 full river days)

Nearest major airport: Kunming, Yunnan

Round trip driving time: 3 days

Put-in: Below Manwan Dam, about 200 miles southwest of Kunming, elevation 3000', flow about 30,000 cfs

Take-out: Jinggu-Lincang Bridge, elevation 3300', about 30,000 cfs

Total distance: 100 miles (10 miles per day)

Average gradient: 7 feet/mile

Participants: 9 total using two 16' catarafts and 4 hardshell kayaks

Grade: Class V bigwater (Class 10+ on Grand Canyon scale)

OVERVIEW

Earth Science Expeditions is a non-profit research organization which conducts geological reconnaissance expeditions on roadless/trailess stretches of rivers in China. We field check geological maps prepared by the Chinese Academy of Sciences with the cooperation of the Center for International Scientific Exchange (CISE) in Beijing.

The April 1997 expedition was the third first descent ESE has organized in China. Each has been a success - no serious injuries, no serious illnesses, no lost or damaged equipment, relatively smooth logistical support, and great participants. Although it's just as much work to organize each expedition, my level of confidence in CISE, has increased with each expedition. Once you've made friends in China, they're as trustworthy as any friend you can make.

The first expedition took ten years to plan. Mike Connelly and I originally planned to raft the Yong-Bao Gorge of the Mekong west of Dali in western Yunnan in November, 1989. We started planning in 1984, with the encouragement of National Geographic Magazine, and would have succeeded if the Tiananmen Square Event hadn't happened in June of 1989. We gave up indefinitely at that time, and finally completed our first expedition in 1994. If you're interested in more info about this process, use your "Back" button and click on First Descent of the Yangbi River, 1994.

CHOOSING A RIVER TO RUN

It takes a lot of research. Getting the information is very difficult at first. Running a river with a road along it diminishes the wilderness experience too much, so our first priority was a current road map so we could find river stretches without roads. Since the Chinese are building roads all the time, this is not easy. You need a good contact in China. The second priority is a river that is not flooded with a reservoir. Fortunately, most major dams are in the news, so it's possible to find out about them. Unfortunately, they're often not located where the news says they are (more on this later). On smaller rivers, it may be very difficult to determine if dams exist, if they are being built, and on larger rivers the dams may be on sidestreams and not the main stream. Be prepared for surprises.

Of course, it's also important to know the flow and gradient as these determine the grade or difficulty. If it's too flat for the flow, participants will be disappointed, if it's too steep for the flow, you run a high risk of loss of equipment, serious injury, or death. A flow of 3000 cubic feet per second (cfs) with a gradient of 40 feet per mile or a flow of 30,000 cfs with a gradient of 15' per mile might be safe challenges, but 30,000 cfs at 40 feet per mile might be the toilet bowl to hell.

We found out on our first trip in 1994 that the US Army maps from WWII are worthless. The Russian maps from the 1960's aren't too bad for distances or "on river" use, but they're difficult to use for determining gradients, and are worthless for roads and dams. These maps are available at many major university libraries, including Stanford. The best maps are Chinese 1:100,000 scale, which you can't get in the US, but if you have a knowledgeable contact in China they can get the maps and tell you the gradient of the stretch you are thinking of running. They can also give you flow and climate information, so you can guesstimate probable difficulty and the best time of year to do it. Generally, April-May (before the summer floods) and October-November (after the summer floods) are the best months for undammed rivers.



I had asked Han Chunyu, a geographer, to check his maps for the gradient of the Mekong for the 100 miles below the Man Wan Dam. He faxed me the info - about 7 feet per mile. The Colorado in the Grand Canyon is 9' per mile, so the Mekong below the dam should be a little easier. The Mekong above the Man Wan dam has a gradient of 11' per mile, and it was pushing our limit at the estimated flows of 25,000 to 30,000 cfs. In October, the flows below the dam were about the same as the inflow, and I assumed the dam releases were similar in April, as the Chinese seemed to keep the reservoir full and the April inflows were similar to the October inflows. The weather was also comparable - fairly dry.

The Participants:

Han Chunyu, my contact in CISE, came to the US in January, 1997 to visit his sister in the Bay Area, and ended up staying for an English class so he couldn't make the trip in April. In February, he put me in contact with Ma Da, an associate of his in CISE. I was pretty nervous at first - Chunyu and I had become good friends. It's not a good idea to bring novices on a first descent, and Chunyu was no longer a novice. He'd run three trips in China with me, and I'd brought him to the US in June, 1995 to raft the Delores River in western Colorado with my family, who really enjoyed him. After a few expensive long distance phone calls to Ma Da, I decided he would be OK - he knew how to swim and had a great sense of humor, even on the phone talking to a foreign stranger. By the end of the trip, he wasn't just OK, he was a great addition to the group - his new nick name is "High Side," and he's become a good friend of mine.

David Hettig rowed one of the catarafts, and Steve Van Beek and Ralf Buckley kayaked - three folks who had been on previous expeditions. My brother Mike (NYC, NY, a "retired" Grand Canyon river guide) rowed the other catraft. Tuckey Fone (San Mateo, CA) kayaked along

with Ralf, Steve and I. Kym Gentry (Redwood City, CA), Mark Halliday (San Antonio, TX) and Ma Da (CISE, Beijing) rode on the rafts.

So who decides to join a first descent expedition in a remote part of China on a major river? I've had a lot of people tell me it's a crazy idea, yet the folks who've joined me aren't crazy. None of them have been suicidal, yet they all have a sense of adventure and a desire to explore that's strong enough to overcome the potential for disaster. Having experience on a stretch of river of similar size and gradient (a requirement) gives most of them some feel for the potential for problems. Certainly, an oarsman or a kayaker wouldn't consider joining a first descent of a major river that costs a small fortune and takes three weeks if they weren't fairly competent. So far that assumption has been a good one.

Both Mike Connelly and I are former professional river guides, having worked for one of the larger river touring companies in the 1970's on most major western rivers (ARTA, now called AZRA). We're also expert kayakers, especially Mike. We've both learned from experience that kayaking requires a great degree of confidence that the river won't harm us, and that rafting requires a great degree of the ability to accept responsibility for the safety of passengers and equipment. On a first descent, it's necessary to have both expert kayakers as probes or safety boats for the rafts, and expert oarsmen to row the rafts to safely carry passengers as well as food and gear for everyone. Teamwork is essential for success.



On the 1997 expedition, it rapidly became apparent that Ralf and Tuckey were the best kayakers, so they went first through major rapids. In a few cases, where the chance of a death defying swim was too high, Tuckey, who had a family, would let Ralf go first. Ralf only had a revolving girlfriend account (mostly non-Australian women, you know how women fall for that Aussie accent, not to mention his jockstrap type swim suit). Steve and I would follow the first raft (just to make sure they had a good run, of course).

Ralf is a professor of ecotourism at the Gold Coast Campus of Griffith University. He's got the knack of glibness, which enables him to say almost anything and most people will believe him, including both his students and the people who pay him. Recently, however, he gave a lecture to the government of Quebec (which is the only French speaking province of Canada) in which he told them that if they wanted to increase their tourism base, they should learn English. As he tells the story, it was a "tail" between legs exit. Fortunately, the audience didn't have eggs to throw at him.



David Hettig, an attorney in Palo Alto who can tell a lot of dirty physican jokes, has never worked as a professional guide, but he's got the knack for rowing big water. He's run his own private trip in the Grand Canyon, a challenging feat, plus lots of technical runs on mountain streams in California and Idaho. David has developed a good combination of rowing skills and serendipity. He only flips if it's a really short big rapid. I used to work with the son of one of his clients. Small world. He's a good, solid guy to have around on a first descent, especially since he's good at talking others into joining him.

Steve Van Beek is an author and photographer who's lived in Bangkok for many years. Some of the best photos from the expeditions I've seen are his. He's also the only kayaker who has won a game a Chinese checkers against a professional Chinawoman (really - she and her husband owned a store in a small town that sold oodles of toothpaste and batteries but wouldn't sell their Chinese checkers game to Steve). Steve is in his second childhood. I'm amazed that he can kayak as well as he does, considering he didn't pick it up until his mid forties. He's gutsy, yet doesn't hesitate to portage or to scare the shit out of the rest of us when necessary. I'm a survival boater - I hate to roll (I might not make it), and I really hate to swim (the water is cold and I'm too cheap to fix my drysuit). So I've developed a really good brace - I'm the only kayaker who didn't have to roll on any of the expeditions. So Steve asked me several times how to brace. He finally got the hang of bracing, but unless you know where you are in the big rapids, you still get beat up. Steve needs to get windshield wipers for his glasses so he can orient himself in the

big water.

My brother Mike was the other oarsman. He'd worked with me as a river guide in the Grand Canyon in the 1970's, and had done a few private trips since then. He was a bit rusty, but knew how to row and was in good shape. He's traveled in China before -lead an expedition on the northern Silk Road. He's also a photographer and writer, and has lead many tours in the Middle East and Africa. He's a Taoist, and would "meditate" with the river before running major rapids. More on this technique later.



Kym Gentry, the only woman on the expedition, was (is) a big surprise. David Hettig talked her into joining us. She markets computer software for companies (our "intranet" specialist). She kept all of us in stitches - she tells the best jokes, and has an endless supply of them. I was a bit concerned at first because she didn't have big water experience, but that turned out not to be a problem - she and Ma Da and Serendipity helped David keep his boat right side up. Kym also reads, writes and speaks Mandarin and loves kids, so when local folks would visit us in camp, she was a big hit - a blond, blue eyed woman they could talk to (sometimes, depending on dialects). We called her our Princess - I'd take her on another trip anytime, anywhere.

Mark Halliday is a geophysicist who has travelled in China on business several times. He's done some rafting, and is a beer connoisseur. On a trip to Beijing, he saw a beer label for Mekong River Beer and wondered where it was made. On a whim, he checked the internet for the Mekong River, and found the Earth Science Expeditions web site. Being a geophysicist, he read the geology story and found that he and I had the same professor at the University of Utah, Ron Bruhn. He managed to add the expedition to a business trip to China and Southeast Asia, but never found the Mekong River Beer brewery. I guess he'll have to come back to China. He rode on Mike's boat, but Taoists don't drink beer, so Mark will probably never become one.

Tuckey Fone was the first to sign up. He saw an article Steve Van Beek wrote for the San Francisco Examiner about the 1995 expedition. He's a strong kayaker and a great cook. His family is originally from Hong Kong, so he reads, writes and speaks Cantonese. He visited some cousins there on the way back from China. He also shot some really good video footage of the expedition. He markets cleaning products in the Bay Area to hotel chains and other large

businesses. Also turns out he knows a good friend of mine, Bob Center, a boater from Lotus, CA. Small world.

Expedition Logistics:

Getting around in China a bit more challenging than getting around in the US. I use Cathay Travel for hotels reservations in Hong Kong (a very expensive city if you don't plan ahead) and for air travel from Hong Kong into mainland China. Although the fares are pretty standard, seating can be a problem, and Cathay is pretty reliable. Once we arrived at the airport in Kunming, CISE handles the permit fees, hotels, meals, bus, truck and equipment storage according to a contract. Foreigners pay double the local rates, but we eat very well and stay in the best hotels available (sometimes there's no hot water, however).

We buy food for the river trip in China. Each year, the stores carry more and more packaged items like those we're accustomed to in the US, so the amount I need to bring from the US is minimal. No single store carries everything, so we have to shop around, especially for produce. Ice or dry ice are not available, so all the meat is canned or packaged. The Chinese rarely eat cheese, so it's hard to find - I bring hard cheeses from the US (parmesan, etc). We buy all the produce and eggs at local street markets (actually a lot of fun), and pack all the food in big coolers that are used as the rowing and passenger seats on the rafts.

The worst part of the expedition is the drive to and from the river from the main city we fly to from Hong Kong (Kunming). China is rapidly building new roads (including freeways) to keep up with increasing traffic, but the further you get from a big city, the worse the roads are. China is a mountainous country, so the roads are winding and narrow, which means lots of accidents and traffic jams. It's difficult to justify an expedition that requires more than two days of driving on such roads - the highway hazard becomes greater than the river hazard. CISE has provided good vehicles and excellent drivers for both participants and the equipment, so the drive has been OK so far.

Uncertainty is a major part of the attraction of a first descent, but it can cause a bit of stress as well. The Chinese wouldn't provide the Man Wan Dam discharge data, but since the reservoir seemed to be full every time I saw it ('94, '95 & '96), the flows below the dam should be the same as the inflow, and they would provide this data. The April in flow was 25,000 cfs, more or less, and I assumed this would also be the outflow, which is fine for the 7' per mile gradient we calculated. Of course, this is an average, and it could be higher or lower on a mile by mile basis. More on this later.

The Mekong floods in the summer, as much as 250,000 cfs, 10 times its non-flood average flow. That should mean lots of sandbars at low water for camping. However, a major dam holds back sediment, and a river without sediment will scour beaches. So I was a bit worried that there'd be no camps on the stretch below the Man Wan dam. Turns out I had another worry - no shortage of beaches for camping, but occasionally the dam would release 200,000 cfs, inundating the beaches and washing away the campers. Fortunately, this only occurred in the late summer, when the inflows were that high and the reservoir was full, so we didn't have to worry in May, but it took a few days to find this out. You just have to ask the right questions.

I was also worried about the put-it and takeout. I'd never been to either, but Han Chunyu had assured me there were good places for each. The put-in was easy to find, we could drive right to the river. From newspaper reports Steve Van Beek had sent me from Bangkok, I knew the Chinese were building a second major dam (Da Xiao Shan) on the Mekong below the Man Wan Dam. Maps with the articles indicated the dam was being built at our planned takeout, the

Jinggu - Lincang bridge, and the diversion tunnels had been completed in 1996, so it was not going to be long before they'd shut down the flow to pour the foundation. This was the reason we planned a Spring trip, rather than an October trip. One of my big worries was that we'd get to the dam site and have a big hassle taking out. Turns out the dam site wasn't located at the takeout bridge (more about this later). The takeout was quite easy, a beach with a trail up to the bridge. We hired some locals to carry our gear to the truck, a really painless takeout. Had lunch there too. The only problem was the goat pen, which smelled a lot worse than we did after 10 days on the river.

After a few riffles the first day, the river flattened out and stayed that way for the next three days. Ma Da had brought the maps Chunyu used to calculate the gradient, but the elevation data was too sparse to figure gradients over short distances. We only knew the average for the 100 miles from putin to takeout. I kept telling Ralf, who was anxious to see some big water, that there had to be some - if the gradient was below average for the upper part, it would be above average for the lower part, hopefully not too high. We kept asking locals who visited us in camp, or ferry boatmen when we floated by them, if there were any rapids. In the flat water, there were lots of ferries - usually a long wooden "canoe" with oars that crossed - your right hand worked the left oar, and vice versa. Ralf and I rowed a big one with a rudder across a fast stretch - hard work.

About the third day some farmers told us about a big rapid downstream, with a huge waterfall. Each farmer had a different concept of size, but the consensus was about 10 meters (30'). That kept Ralf happy. I just hoped it wasn't so big we'd have to portage. We also heard there was a big rapid just below the dam site, and that the dam site was not at the takeout. Ma Da was learning to be really good at getting meaningful answers to questions. After ten minutes of increasingly loud conversation, Ma Da would tell me he couldn't understand their dialect. Then after another 10 minutes of increasingly loud conversation combined with sky writing (I don't know how they can read complicated Chinese characters written in the air - I can hardly read my handwriting on paper), he'd tell me the answer to my question, which took about 10 seconds. Ma Da is really a character.

Campsites, Visitors and Wildlife:

All of our campsites were big, beautiful beaches (well, some were cozy, especially if you didn't snore). About half the time we'd have visitors, local folks who were curious about the boats and foreigners. A few had seen foreigners on TV (yes, as soon as they get electricity they get TV) but never in person, and two had seen a rubber raft before. One of them had even ridden on a motorized one, probably a Zodiac. He'd been a guide for Chinese engineers who were scouting the river for a damsite about 10 years ago. So our trip wasn't quite a first descent - but the Chinese engineers portaged all the rapids. He told us about the big rapid at the damsite, and one about 10 miles upstream from the damsite, but he had never been below the damsite.



At one camp, an entire school came to visit, about 50 kids, plus their teacher and many parents. We gave them rides on the rafts and on the back of our kayaks, until the two on the back of mine fell off, into 2' of water, and panicked. Apparently few of the locals know how to swim so the river is considered very dangerous. Many of them have never been across it, even on a ferry boat, though they are beginning to travel more as they gain wealth.

We went up to the village where some of the school kids live. The school could be seen from the river, but it was too far up the hill to visit in the time we had. It was a huge, brightly painted two story building with big windows, located between three villages. In the village, we ran into the census officer, who was checking family sizes. If a farmer has more than two kids he pays a fine of about a year's income. The farmer we visited had photos of his family posted by the door - apparently a photographer walks three hours from the nearest town with a road to take pictures for a fee. I'd brought along a Polaroid, and had taken pics of he and his family on the rafts and kayaks for them, a big hit. I almost ran out of film taking pics of all the school kids. Kym really had a lot of fun, couldn't even go off to pee without a troop of kids following her.

We were socially exhausted when we finally left camp. Fortunately, that night we got a break - no visitors. There are stretches of the river with a trail along it, usually up high (1000' or more). These stretches are usually open valleys, not tight canyons. Here, where ever it's not too steep to farm, there are corn fields, and if there's a creek there's rice paddies. The villages are also up high, usually on a ridge where the slope is not too steep, often 1000' or more above the river. So when the dam Da Xiao Shan dam is filled in the next several years, few people will need to be relocated, though some farmland will be inundated. The farmers raise chickens and pigs, plus they have gardens for fruit and veggies. Everyone we met seemed healthy and happy, and they had plenty of time to socialize.

When we bought food we made the mistake of buying too much Spam (yes, you can buy it in China too - one can was too much). When we had visitors, we'd give it away to anyone who

would take it. The Chinese are very polite, and most would take it even if they didn't want it. They don't like to receive gifts without giving one, so we'd often get fruit or vegies (or even corn or rice moonshine) in return (a good deal for us). They'd even take all of our empty cans and bottles, so we didn't have any trash to carry out. We burned everything else, often buying firewood from them if we couldn't find any. We really enjoyed the cultural interaction.

There were a few long stretches where the canyon walls were too steep for farming, so no one lived there. In these stretches, the rain forest was so thick it was impenetrable. We even saw monkeys in the tree tops one day. There was a surprising amount of wildlife, especially birds. On the Mekong above the Man Wan dam and on the Yangbi, we saw very little wildlife in comparison. At lunch one day, we saw some teenagers with a rifle shoot a squirrel. The gun they had looked like an old muzzle loader - they even had a powder horn. The kids told us it was less than 10 years old, but in the US you could probably sell it as a Civil War musket. Might be a good source of extra income.

The Da Xiao Shan Damsite:



Huge intakes are on left.

I'm not a fan of dams, but I can see why China needs them. Their population density is four times greater than ours, and their current source of energy is coal and wood. Burning them is causing serious air pollution and deforestation. With the exception of dams such as the Three Gorges dam on the Yangtze, most of the dams being built are in remote river canyons where few people will be displaced and where riparian habitats are not extensive. The tradeoffs favor big dams, and the Mekong is a high priority for development.

When Mike and I planned our first trip for 1989, we knew the Man Wan dam was under construction, but were told it wouldn't fill until 1995. When the trip was canceled due to the Tiananmen Square incident, I forgot about the dam. When we planned the 1994 Yangbi Expedition, I just assumed the reservoir wouldn't be full - it took twenty years to fill Lake Powell on the Colorado. I didn't figure the Chinese would just shut the gates and fill the reservoir in two years. So when I heard the Da Xiao Shan (Big Dynasty) dam was under construction, I figured I didn't have much time to float the stretch that would be inundated.

I first planned the trip for April, 1996, but the political situation between the US and China over Taiwan was too tense - everyone was worried about a real war. So I postponed the trip for a year, based on Chunyu's assurance that the dam would not be completed by then. He was right, but the dam wasn't located at the takeout. I also assumed he (and later Ma Da) would get permission from the proper authorities for us to take out at the dam, but somehow no one did anything. Ma Da later explained that it was better not to ask - they might say no, or charge a fee. As it was, we lucked out. The dam was located about halfway between the putin and takeout, and we floated through the construction site on a Sunday.

There were huge dump trucks, cranes, excavators, and hundreds (thousands?) of Chinese workers. We could see them from about a mile upstream. We hid our cameras and agreed not to

land no matter what - just float through as if we had permission. About a quarter of the water was going through the diversion tunnels - we actually had to paddle or row away from them to keep from being sucked into the tunnels. The left side, where the tunnels were, had been scoured and grouted, they were about half way done scouring and grouting the right side, and huge excavators were beginning to scour loose boulders from both river banks. It was really weird - all that noise after five days of Chinese wilderness. As we floated by, a Chinese engineer (wearing a hard hat, dressed nicely), walked down to the river bank waved and took a picture. One other guy waved at us to land, but didn't seem upset when we didn't, so we figured he was just curious.

The Rapids:



At the end of the construction zone, we came to a big rapid, 10 on the big water 10 scale. Real long, with numerous big holes, fair chance of flipping a raft. After all that paranoia about being forced ashore at the construction site, we were forced by common sense to stop and scout. We had hundreds of spectators too, quite a zoo. It took a long time to walk down the bank and scout. There was a big creek coming in from the right, dumping huge granite boulders into the river, forcing the current to the left side. The diversion tunnels exited on the left side at the top of the rapid, and a construction road cut into the cliff dumped huge boulders in the river, creating a series of about five big holes on the left that were difficult to avoid.

Ralf, Tuckey and I managed to cut right of the holes, but Steve and the two rafts ran them all. The rafts managed to stay right side up, but Steve went for a long swim. I towed him to shore, and Tuckey and Ralf caught his kayak and paddle. Steve had to walk a long way along a construction road to a new bridge, where Kym met him with big hug and escorted him to the rafts which were parked in an eddy under the bridge. Good old Steve, he wanted a ride down to his kayak. The large number of spectators was a kayaker's dream (unless you're swimming, of course). We called the rapid Big Dynasty, after the dam. Surprisingly, no one questioned us about permission to float through the construction zone. We assumed the big wigs were home

relaxing on a Sunday, and would hear about us the next day, when we'd be long gone. Ma Da was right - don't ask if you don't want to be told "no."

We'd planned to buy beer at the damsite - there had to be a store because construction workers won't work without beer. Mark was still on the search for Mekong River beer, and we thought this would be a good place to look. Unfortunately, with Steve's swim we were spread out over a quarter mile and preoccupied, so we blew it off, hoping to find a village with access to the brewery down river. Well, we found one a day later that sold beer, but not what Mark was looking for. It was quite a hike up to the village. They even had a telephone, but Ma Da was unable to call his girlfriend in Beijing to tell her he was still alive. It only worked for local calls. We paid a put-put driver (three wheeled pickup without a muffler) to carry our purchases as close to the rafts as possible (a half mile or so). It was a worthwhile stop, especially for Mark, who had run out of beer.

We'd only encountered one other big rapid before the dam - "Red Button," according to the locals, really a pretty rapid. It was a 9, short but steep, with big holes on the right and foamy 10' waves on the left. Mike ran first, got too far left and was pounded by laterals coming off the left cliff, but his meditation technique worked - he should have flipped but didn't. No matter how much skill you have, it's nice to row a cataraft - they're really stable. Ma Da helped David avoid flipping by jumping on the high side, so we nicknamed him "High Side" after that. It's now his internet "handle."

After Big Dynasty, we entered a narrow gorge with a couple of class 7s. Ralf was in seventh heaven now - he was proving his worth as a probe, and we appreciated it. On the 9th day, we came to the rapid with the 10 meter waterfall. The Chinese called it Horse and Pig, and the rock that made the water fall (White Rock Foot, according to the locals) stood 10 meters high. At 200,00 cfs, there really would be a 30 foot water fall. Fortunately, the flow was about 25,000 cfs, and there was only an 8' waterfall, which was mostly avoidable. However, to avoid it meant kissing the right bank, and even then it was impossible to miss the 12' foamy waves and boils that ran for the next quarter mile. Steve wisely decided to portage, rather than give me another heart attack. Ralf, Tuckey and I got beat up, but managed to avoid swimming. Mike got stuck on the first big boil, and we thought (he probably did too) he was going to swim the whole (hole) way (maybe even swim forever), but he managed to pull out, probably due to Mark's weight and that extra minute of meditation. David did a last minute change of plans after watching Mike and Ralf, and avoided the boil that got them. Foresight, Hindsight, Serendipity, High Side and the Princess combined to help him through.

By now no one was worried about not enough whitewater, even Ralf. I was even beginning to worry about too much whitewater. Mike had been pressing for a layover day, but was beginning to agree with me that we should wait until we were closer to the takeout, in case we had to line or portage a big rapid, which can very time consuming. We were in a black (hard) rock gorge, with lots of rapids. Sure enough, right below the beach we stopped at for lunch after Horse and Pig rapid, there was an 11 on a 10 scale. If you ate lunch before scouting it, you'd lose your lunch, and if you scouted it first, you'd lose your appetite. It was a Catch 22 lunch stop that turned into a campsite. It was too late to portage or line, and it sure looked like that was the best option.



The next morning we ferried over to the other side and asked a local farmer and his family to help us portage. The rapid wasn't that long, just really steep. We carried all of the dry bags to a huge eddy at the end of the rapid, plus Steve's, Tuckey's and my kayaks. Steve has a girlfriend, and Tuckey and I have families, good excuses for portaging. Ralf, who's in between girlfriends, decided to go for it. The rapid had a 12' keeper hole with a forever eddy at the lower left, so I paddled over and walked up to the hole with a throw rope so I could (hopefully) pull Ralf out if he went into it. He had a good run, must have meditated (not with Mike, however, see below), or maybe his next girlfriend will be named Serendipity. We lined David's raft halfway down, to where the run was only a class 10, and he had a good run from there, after a long, long, long wait in the eddy (he said he got stuck on a rock in the eddy, and since I portaged I'll believe him).

Then, with a raft and two kayaks for support, Mike and Mark decided to run the far right in the second cataract, where, if they were lucky, they'd catch the eddy where David started from and probably be OK. I gave them kayak helmets just in case they needed them. The sight from below was impressive - Mike missed the eddy, caught a huge lateral (10' high by 75' long, at least) that surfed him out to the middle of the rapid, where he flipped. Not just a flip, though - the river threw his boat completely out of the water, up into the air. Mike and Mark had no choice but to grab a big breath and jump into the river, so they didn't get carried to far left. So much for the meditation technique. Fortunately, they didn't get carried into the keeper hole, and both managed to swim into the big eddy on the right. Also, very fortunately, one of the last big holes, right next to the keeper hole, flipped the raft right side up. Mike had tied the oars to the boat, so they were both there when I paddled over and climbed aboard. It was the easiest flipped raft I've ever had to catch. Maybe Mike meditated for me. Too bad he didn't hang on after the first flip, he would really have a story to tell. The locals hadn't named the rapid, so Mike named it No Entrance, No Exit.

Before we could catch our breath, we came to another big rapid, a class 8. No big deal after Red

Button, Big Dynasty, Horse & Pig and No Exit. Or so we thought. There was a huge, foamy wave way down at the end of the rapid, past the tail waves, that looked like it would be easy to avoid. Both rafts, however, managed to hit it dead on, and got surfed to the side before exiting right side up. Quite a rush. We called it Sudden Surprise.

After such an intense day, we stopped for a late lunch, a few miles before the takeout according to the maps. Good thing we decided to camp there (except for the biting no-see-ums), it was the last camp before the bridge. The next morning there were several medium sized rapids, some with great surfing waves. Just as I rounded the bend and saw the takeout bridge, the CISE van drove across it. A perfect end to an incredible trip.

China, Hong Kong and Beyond:

I'm not familiar with the local politics in Beijing, but in Kunming, Chengdu, Guanzhou (formerly Canton), and throughout southern and central China, it's glorious to get rich. Everyone is learning English, Americans are welcome, business is booming - everything is under construction. We all know that wherever Chinese people who've left China settle down, they're successful hard working folks who take care of themselves and don't rely on welfare. Mao and communism temporarily subdued this quality, but Deng and then Jiang have let the Chinese Dragon loose. Watch out, world, as China becomes the major economic power during the next generation.

You'll read in the news about China's poor human rights ethic, and worries about China's takeover of Hong Kong. There may be some reason for concern, but the trend is strongly towards joining the developed world, and the more exposure to foreigners, the faster this trend will progress. Major cities in China look just like Hong Kong - businesses all have signs in English and Chinese, and foreign products are more and more available. Cell phones are more common China than in the US (because it's cheaper to use them than to rewire the whole country). China wants to emulate Hong Kong, not destroy it.

So what's next? We're planning another first descent, probably in Sichuan, probably in Oct 1998. We need to scout a bit first, to find an undammed, roadless river with a reasonable gradient for the flow, and good put in and takeout. We hope to decide by early 1998, and will everyone know.

Ganbai (bottoms up), Pete Winn
