

First Descent of the Mekong (Lancang) River in Tibet

April, 2004

by Pete Winn

Photos by Travis Winn

Summary

Dates: April 8 - 18, 2004

Nearest major airport: Chengdu, Sichuan (minor airport at Bangda, Tibet)

Round trip driving time: 8 days minimum

Put-in: near Changdu (Qamdo or Chamdo on Tibetan maps, not to be confused with Chengdu, Sichuan), elevation 10,560', flow about 5,000 cfs

Take-out: near Xilong, about 30 21 N latitude, elevation est 9,500', flow about 10,000 cfs

Total distance: 85 miles (original plan was 220 miles)

Average gradient: 12 feet/mile, with few really steep rapids

Participants: 13 total using three 16' catarafts and four hardshell kayaks

Grade: Bigwater Class 6 for rafts, Class 5+ for kayaks

The original plan was to raft and kayak the Mekong (Lancang in China) from Changdu in northeast Tibet (Xizang) to Yangjing near the border with Yunnan. However, after two portages in the first 85 miles and scouting at least two more in the next few miles, we decided that this section is not raftable, aborted the expedition and hiked out of the canyon with all of our equipment. The section from about 30 21 N latitude to below Yangjing should be completed by a team of Class 5+ bigwater boaters (experience with 10,000 -15,000 cfs and gradients up to 30 feet per mile over twenty miles or more). There are several gorges without trails that will require self supported kayakers who may face unportageable and unrunnable rapids. To complicate matters, the Chinese may not issue a permit to any group that does not include Chinese kayakers. As of April, 2004, it is apparent that Chinese boaters will need extensive

training to achieve this level of experience.

Earth Science Expeditions completed first descents of the Mekong in western and southwestern Yunnan, and the Japanese team completed first descents of the Mekong in Qinghai and northwestern Yunnan. The Japanese team was unable to get permits to raft the Mekong in Tibet in 2002 or 2003, and Earth Science Expeditions suggested they apply for a joint permit for 2004. With the exception of a few roadside stretches in northwest Yunnan, this expedition should have completed the exploration of the Mekong in China. French and Australian teams apparently also applied for permits to explore the Mekong in Tibet, but the permit was given to the US-Japanese team because it included several Chinese rafters in their group and the Chinese organization applying for permits has a history of organizing safe and successful expeditions. This seems to be the trend for permits for exploration of rivers in China.



The team at the confluence of the Da Qu and Ji Qu. Chinese photographer.

Trip was co-led by Pete Winn (USA) and Masauki Kitamura (Japan) and Liu Li (China). Oarsmen for the three sixteen foot catarafts were Pete Winn, Masauki Kitamura and Aoki Ryosuki (Japan). In addition, there were two passengers per raft for a total of nine on the rafts, plus there were four kayakers. These included Ralf Buckley (Australia), Steve Van Beek (Thailand & USA), John Mattson (USA) and Travis Winn (USA). Other participants included Feng Chun (China), Mu Zhengpeng (or Xiao Mu, China, the only woman), Song Yipin (China), Ishi Konihito (Japan) and Masata Kamedo (Japan). Kayakers boated ahead of the rafts and signalled the best run, or if necessary, which side of the river was best for scouting.

Pete Winn has led eight river expeditions in Tibet and western China, including first descents of the Mekong in western and southwestern Yunnan and the Salween in Tibet. Masauki Kitamura has led two river expeditions in western China, including first descents of the Mekong headwaters in Qinghai and Moon Gorge in northwest Yunnan, and Liu Li has helped organize six river expeditions in western China, including two all-Chinese expeditions. This was the fourth river expedition on the Mekong in China for Steve Van Beek, who is an author/photographer and plans to write a book about the Mekong. It was the third expedition on the Mekong in China for Ralf Buckley, who is a professor of ecotourism at the Gold Coast campus of Griffith University in Australia and is interested in the progress of ecotourism in

China. It was Travis Winn's fifth river expedition in China, including two first descent kayak expeditions he led on tributaries to the Yangtze in Sichuan, but his first expedition on the Mekong. It was John Mattson's first river expedition in China, but he has extensive experience on first descents in the USA, South America and Nepal. Feng Chun participated in three all-Chinese first descents - 4000 miles on the Yangtze in 1986, 600 miles on the upper Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet 1998 and several hundred miles on the Han in central China in 2003. Aoki Ryosuki, Ishi Konihito and Masata Kameda participated in the first descent of the Mekong in northwest Yunnan in 2002. Song Yipin owns an adventure travel company in Kunming, Yunnan that operates paddle raft trips on seven river segments, including the Pearl River headwaters (Nanpan and Zhu) in eastern Yunnan and the Yangtze, Mekong, Salween in northwest Yunnan. It was Xiao Mu's first experience rafting, but she spent 50 days hiking and videoing the rugged canyon of the Great Bend of the Yarlung Tsangpo in 1998. She's a TV producer from Dragon TV in Shanghai and, along with Ishi, she videoed the expedition.



Geography and Geology of the Lancang Gorge in Tibet

Eastern Tibet and western Sichuan are known for their rugged mountain ranges. This is the western "edge" of the Tibetan Plateau, where the mountains are nearly as high as those on the plateau (17,000'+), but the rivers are cutting 10,000' to 15,000' deep gorges on their way to the Indochina lowlands. The Lancang begins at the town of Changdu, where the An Chu joins the Za Chu, and the Chinese have recently built a plaza commemorating the origin of the river at this location. The river here is still small, less than 5,000 cfs at pre snow melt flows, with numerous Class 2 to 3 gravel bar riffles. The volume doubles about fifty miles downstream where the Chaya Jiang and Jing He join it. The gradient is about 12 feet per mile for the first 75 miles, then it doubles to about 24 feet per mile and the river becomes more obviously capable of cutting a two mile deep gorge.

The river initially flows through intensely folded and faulted sandstones and shales with spectacular near vertical ridges of quartzite. Near the end of the road about sixty miles below Changdu, it begins to enter into marble gorges interspersed with diorite and granitic intrusives. Eventually it cuts deep into schists and gneisses with narrow, steep side canyons that remind one of the inner gorge of the Grand Canyon. Clearly this is a terrain of massive tectonics and huge intrusives, with fractured and faulted low grade metamorphic sediments draped over them. Views of glaciated peaks over 20,000' are common, as are sheer walled cliffs with abundant avalanches, some rising a mile above the river. See the link at the end for more detailed

discussion of the geology and geography of the region.

Regional Culture

There are six counties in Tibet: Ngari (west), Nakchu (northcentral), Shigatze (southwest), Lhoka (south central), Lhasa (eastcentral), Nyingtri (southeast) and Changdu (east). The Lancang flows through the county of Changdu. We met the governor of Changdu and learned that the population of about 500,000 is almost entirely dependent on grazing yaks, goats, sheep and growing barley. The only airport is at Bangda, an hour south of Changdu, which has service four days a week, weather permitting (elev. 12,500).

About 100,000 tourists visit the province annually, of which only a few hundred are non-Chinese. Most arrive by bus because air service is unreliable and it will be years before rail service is available (though it's currently under construction). Most visit the famous Galden Jampaling Monastery in Changdu. The Chinese are building a new resort at Zoka Bridge, where the main highway from Chengdu (Sichuan) to Lhasa crosses the Lancang. The salt mines and hot springs at Yangjing are another popular destination. The Chinese have been reluctant to open this area to foreign tourists due to the large population of Tibetan Khampas (warriors), who were the first line of defence (and occasional offense) against the Chinese over the centuries. The Chinese don't want to expose them to Westerners too quickly, particularly considering the very effective anti-Chinese media released by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile in India.



Local hotel. Photo by Liu Li.

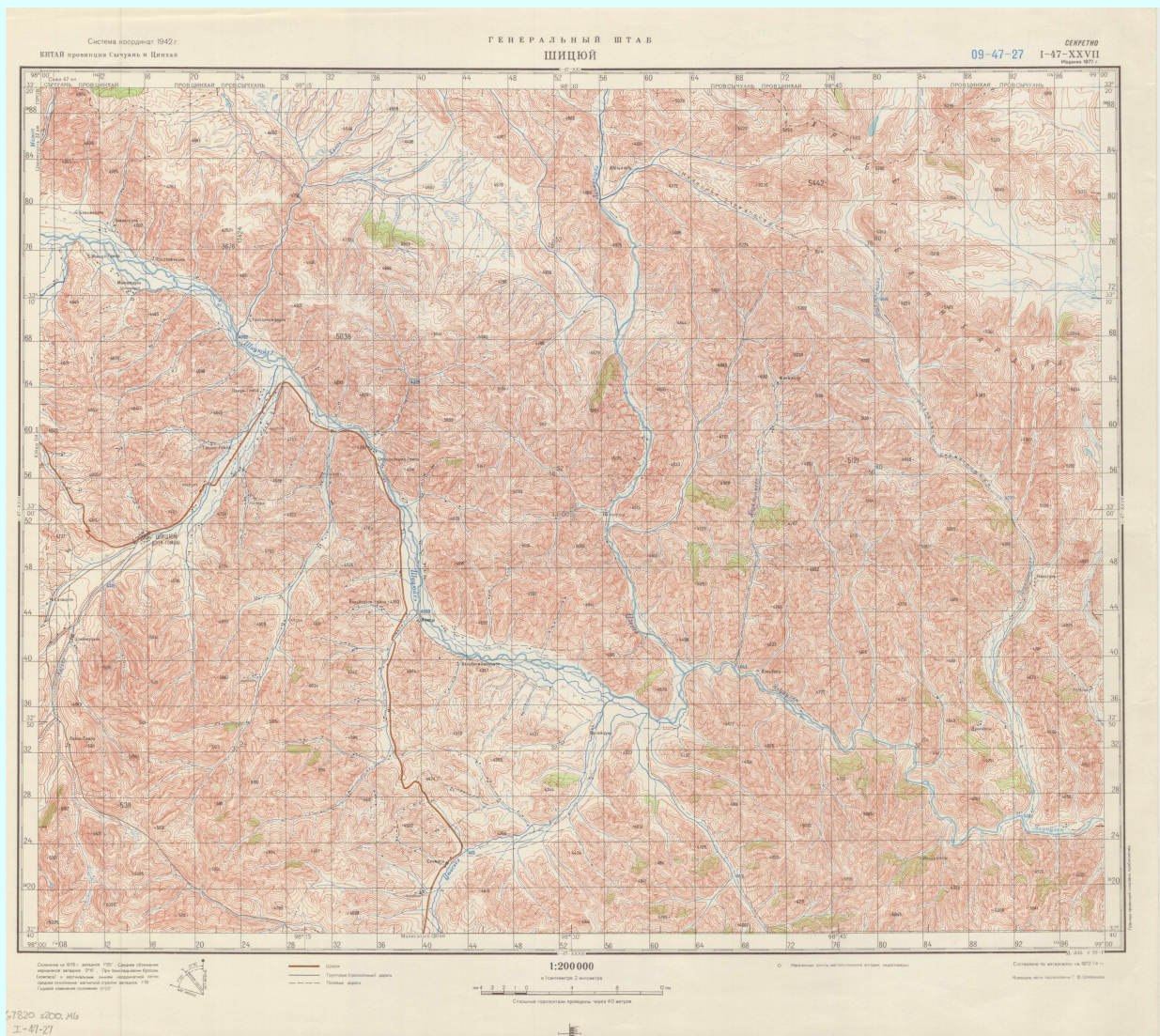
Other than Chinese retail and industrial businesses in the towns, the population is Tibetan. The Chinese have not yet limited Tibetan family size, resulting in a doubling of the Tibetan population in the past decade. Because the Tibetans are largely herders, the population of grazing animals has also doubled, and, along with increased firewood and tundra harvesting for fuel, overgrazing is causing serious erosion of the Lancang watershed. This is a high desert environment that is very sensitive to erosion and the Chinese have tried to implement ecological controls, but without population control they have not had any success. Trampling of vegetation and multiple trailing on hillsides is often apparent, as is widespread landslide activity. The

A typical riverside village consists of five to ten houses, each with an extended family of three generations totalling eight to ten people. Each village has irrigated barley fields with at least one water mill and large herds of yak, goats and sheep. Villages closer to roads often have electricity, with lights, TVs and occasionally jeeps, motorcycles or trucks, and a few further from roads have solar powered TV's with VCDs of Chinese movies, history and news. Although we saw many youth being trained as monks, the only monastery along the stretch we floated was in Changdu. This was unusual - in other areas of Tibet, we often visited remote monasteries in riverside villages.

The Expedition

I have been leading expeditions in the US for 35 years and in China for 10 years. In January, 1976 I had to abort a Cataract Canyon trip due to ice on Lake Powell, but this is the first expedition in China I have had to abort. It was not an easy decision - there were several people who wanted to continue, but after hiking up the river canyon near Yangjing (our projected take-out) a couple of days after we left the canyon, everyone agreed it was a good decision. It might be possible to raft the Mekong in Tibet, but it could require dozens of portages, a more experienced team and significantly more time and food than we had available.

Nature Conservancy is working with the Yunnan government in the Lancang, Jinsha (Yangtze) and Nu (Salween) canyons of northwestern Yunnan to provide alternative income and energy sources with some success. Hopefully this program will expand into Tibet.



It's about 225 miles from Changdu to Yangjing. There is a road along the upper 60 miles, then a trail for the next 25 miles, and possibly short sections of trail further downstream. Originally we planned the expedition based on Russian 1:200,000 topo maps available in the US (above). These maps indicated the average gradient was only 12 feet per mile for the first 150 miles, then 24 feet per mile for the last 75 miles. We planned an average of 14 miles per day in the low gradient section (five hours floating plus an hour for lunch, giving us at least two hours a day for scouting and tourism), and an average of 10 miles a day in the high gradient section. Based on this plan, we were taking four days to drive the northern route from Chengdu to Changdu, rafting 18 days to Yangjing, then taking four days to drive back to Chengdu.

The Chinese military would not allow us access to the largest scale maps available - Chinese 1:100,000 topos - until our arrival in Chengdu from the USA and Japan. These maps showed numerous sheer walled gorges which were not obvious from the Russian maps, but the gradient information on the Russian maps was much more detailed. We were rafting the river in April, before the spring snowmelt, so we thought we'd have enough non-cliff river bank for portaging and scouting. The presence of so many miles of cliff bordered gorges with potentially no river bank for portaging or scouting was very disconcerting. One of the gorge sections was below the Zoca Highway Bridge, about 175 miles below Changdu, so we decided to change our plans and drive the southern route so we could scout this gorge. Upon scouting, we found that all of the rapids were caused by side stream discharge or by landslides. All of them were runnable, but if they hadn't been they could have been scouted or portaged on at least one side at the low April

flows. This gave us the confidence to continue our plan to raft the entire stretch in Tibet, but it added two days driving. We'd originally planned two days in Changdu, one for tourism, the other for rigging, so we decided to skip the day of tourism, thus cutting our floating days by only one day and upping the average number of miles to 15 per day in the low gradient section. We'd easily averaged this on the Salween in Tibet in 2000, where the gradient and flow were similar.

We didn't expect permit problems, but got them anyway, resulting in another day's delay. Li had gotten permits from the military headquarters in Lhasa, but they hadn't informed the military in Changdu. As a result, we were put under "hotel arrest" for half a day so we could watch soldiers jog through town, reducing our time to at most 12 days to float 175 miles to the Zoca Bridge, where we would pick up food for the last 50 miles to Yangjing. We figured at worst we'd get to the bridge a couple of days late and might have to take out there if we thought it would take more than 4 days to float the last canyon, so the delay didn't affect our plans for the upper section too much. We'd just make the best time possible.

We had the the usual minor problems associated with a large group of rafters and kayakers who had never boated together, but in general things went really well. Aoki had never rigged the cataraft he was rowing, so the kayakers helped him for the first few days, getting rope burns on their hands which refused to heal because they were always wet from paddling. The new stoves brought by the Japanese failed after a few days so we shared stoves. Each nationality had bought, packed and planned to cook food separately. At first the loss of their stoves meant each meal took longer to cook - especially a problem at breakfast, but after a while we started sharing food, and the concoctions were great. Song Yipin, Xiao Mu and the Japanese were imaginative cooks, and, surprisingly, everyone wanted good old American coffee for breakfast (we almost ran out) and PB&J on crackers at lunch.

The first two days we had extra participants - Dr. Zhang Wenjing, who had helped get our permits, and two TV videographers from Kunming, one of who drove along and videod from the road. We had an inflatable kayak ("ducky") for Song Yipin and Feng Chun to use for the first two days, but on the second day Song Yipin wanted to learn to row and Xiao Mu, an adventurous novice, decided to get in the ducky with Feng Chun. The water temperature was about 50 F, but everyone had dry suits and life jackets donated by Kokatat and helmets donated by Necky, and the kayakers knew to stay near the ducky in case someone swam. Well, the ducky soon flipped, sending its inhabitants for an easy fifty yard swim before they were reunited with their boat, smiles and all. Ren Zhong, the Kunming videographer following us on the road, got it all on film, and that evening he drove to Changdu with Xiao Mu to edit the film and send it off for broadcast on national TV. Although Xiao Mu had brought a satellite phone, we were pretty sure it wouldn't work in the deep gorges after the road left the river, so this might be her last chance for some coverage of the expedition for a couple of weeks.

Originally, Chong Dak, a Tibetan interpreter, was scheduled to join the expedition, but had to cancel on short notice due to a guide training class in Lhasa, so Xiao Mu was a last minute replacement. When I first met her in Chengdu, I was pretty nervous - she was a complete river novice and looked like a city girl who'd be a liability on a potentially stressful expedition. We quickly learned she'd had a lot of camping and hiking experience, was a strong swimmer and could take care of herself, so when she got in the ducky none of us were concerned. We didn't know that Zhang Wenjing would be so concerned about her swim, and even more upset about broadcasting it on national TV. He was worried about negative publicity for tourism. When he found out about the plan to broadcast the footage, he promptly cancelled it and told the Kunming TV videographers and Song Yipin, who had brought them with him from Kunming, to leave Tibet and go back home. Needless to say, this was a big blow to Song Yipin, who

someday hoped to raft the Mekong from source to sea and really wanted to see if the stretch in Tibet was raftable. Fortunately for Song Yipin, Dr. Zhang had to return to Lhasa, so he wasn't around to enforce his edict. Song Yipin and the KMTV guys followed us downriver to the end of the road (Camp 4) but didn't air the footage of the ducking flipping until we returned to Kunming two weeks later (see below for more on this subject).



By the time we left the road, we'd averaged 15 miles a day. We had eight to ten days of food left and 115 miles to the Zoka Bridge, and if we could make it in seven or eight days, we might be able to go all the way to Yangjing as originally planned. The locals has told us about a major rapid caused by a landslide just downstream from the end of the road, and sure enough we had to stop and portage. Even our most experienced kayaker, Travis, concurred that it was a killer riverwide hole. A large landslide had blocked the river, probably within the past few years. While scouting we noticed sand, gravel and small rocks were still falling, so we took turns watching the slide so we could warn everyone to hide if larger rocks came flying down the steep slope. It took us three hours to portage about 50 yards over some large boulders, and we only made 8 miles that day as a result. The sixth day we made 15 miles, and decided we could make it to the Zoka bridge if there weren't too many portages.

The seventh day we stopped, scouted and filmed our run in the first Class 4 rapid, then had lunch. By the time we reached the next major rapid, a Class 4 with a Class 3 cheat on the left, we'd only gone 5 miles. There was a sketchy camp above it (Yak Dung Hotel), and by the time we'd finished scouting it was late enough in the day that we were worried we might have trouble finding a camp before dark if we had problems, plus it was windy and about to rain. The next morning, we cheated the rapid without incident, then floated another mile before encountering a half a mile long Class 5, like Crystal in the Grand Canyon, only a killer hole extended across the middle of the river at the end of the rapid. It was caused by large side streams flowing in from both sides of the river. The kayakers were able to cheat it, but if an oarsman made a mistake in the upper section, he was going for a death defying swim. I was the most experienced oarsman, with over 50 Grand Canyon trips and 35 years of experience. Kitamura and Aoki had only been rowing for a few years and had limited big water experience - in fact they'd never flipped a raft before. I didn't think I could row all three rafts through without making a mistake, so we had no choice but to portage. We called it Tibetan Terminator. Fortunately, there was a village nearby and they hadn't yet planted a barley field about half way down the rapid, so we hired them to carry all our rafting gear to a campsite there. The next morning, they returned to help up carry the gear down to the end of the rapid. We rigged up and were underway by noon, after taking Polaroids of the villagers on the rafts, hoping to make

some miles. We were falling further and further behind schedule.



The Decision to Abort

While we were making the long portage, the kayakers had hiked downstream to scout, only to find another Class 5 about a mile away. They thought we might be able to cheat it in the rafts, so we floated down, only to discover running it safely in a raft was real iffy - another rapid with multiple riverwide ledges and no room for error. There was a possibility of lining down the left bank, but as we scouted, rain caused rocks to fall from one of the avalanches that caused the rapid, right where we would be holding the ropes. By now we were two days behind schedule and we were going to lose another half day. It was becoming apparent to me that we'd need to decide within a day or two if we could make it to the Zoca Bridge before running out of food, or if we would have to abort before the trail left the river. We decided to hike down river that afternoon to scout. If we found additional portages or if the trail left the river (we didn't trust the maps anymore), aborting would be the best decision, though no one was ready to give up.

Sure enough, there were two more Class 5 rapids (for the rafts) in the next several miles, so after much anguish and even a few tears, we agreed to leave the river. At first, the kayakers considered going on without raft support, but they really weren't prepared for self support in Class 5+ bigwater, so we compromised and agreed that six people - Feng Chun, Song Yipin, Travis, John, Kitamura and Ishi would hike down the river to scout for a kayak expedition next year. That evening Feng Chun hiked back up to Xilong village and asked them to come down and help us portage. We cooked dinner and camped inside some large stone huts in a cold rain. During the night a donkey walked into one of the huts and caused quite a ruckus, so we called it Donkey Hut Rapid.

Travis was the lead kayaker on the expedition and seriously considered continuing without raft

support. See the link below for his reflections on the decision to leave the canyon with the rafters.



Climbing out of the Mekong Canyon

The next morning the hikers took off, we derigged the rafts into portagable packages, and negotiated a deal with the village chief, Gandenba. He recommended we go three miles back to his village and then climb about 20 miles up a side creek to another village with truck access, rather than hiking 25 miles upstream to the end of the road along the river. They carried the gear back to their village where we spent the night in tents on the chief's roof and patio. The trail climbed several hundred feet above the river between Donkey Hut Rapid and their village. In some places, it had been hand cut out of near vertical cliffs and it was difficult and dangerous for the porters and donkeys to carry the equipment, so progress was slow - sometimes less than a mile an hour. Near the highest point, the chief's youngest son (about 15), put the kayak he was carrying down on the trail and was just sitting down in it when we realized he was about to go for a death defying ride. We blocked the boat and got him out just before he and the kayak would have careened off the trail and over the cliff. The trail was getting to be as dangerous as the river. Fortunately, the trail along the creek was in much better condition than the trail up the river.



Gandenba's 7500 square foot house had incredible views of green barley fields with an 18,000 foot snow covered peak on the skyline and a major rapid in the river. If his house had had a flush toilet, it would have been worth millions. Perhaps to him it was priceless. We sure enjoyed our stay there. While we were cooking dinner on his patio, the hikers walked in the village. The trail left the river a few miles downstream, so they had climbed to a village at snow level (over 12,000 ft), spent the night and found out that the trail did not return to the river - it only went up and over a 16,000' snow covered pass. Rather than risk getting lost, they decided to rejoin the group. We succeeded in getting Xiao Mu's satellite phone to work - the village was a couple hundred feet above the river in a wide part of the canyon - and informed the Yunnan TV crew that we were on our way out and to meet us on the road to the village of Chala Shan. That night, Gandenba, who claimed to be 180 years old, wanted to party. It was a good idea, but those who went to bed early had trouble getting to sleep.

The next day, we hiked several miles up the river to the village of Jing Duo. Again we camped on the roof of the chief's house. The chief of Jing Duo was only 35. He had been given a solar powered TV and VCD player by the government. There was no TV reception, but he had 300 VCDs of Chinese movies, music and news which dozens of villagers (mostly children) watched every night. The next day the Xilong villagers returned home and the Jing Duo villagers loaded our gear on donkeys and yaks for the seven mile, two thousand foot vertical climb to the village of Chala Shan, which had a truck we could use to haul our gear over two high passes to the main road. We climbed out of the steep gorge into a beautiful U shaped glacial valley, passing several barley mills plus acres and acres of barley fields, mostly being tended by women while children played near by. One boy about eight or ten years old tried to take Travis' camera box, and when Travis took it back, the boy pulled a huge knife out of a scabbard and threatened Travis. Thinking the boy was just playing, Travis chased him away. When we reached Chala Shan, we found out the boy had also threatened Xiao Mu, who lost her favorite water bottle while running away. Maybe the boy figured he could get a camera too.



We set up camp in an old walled compound in Chala Shan, where we repacked gear and loaded it into a truck for an early departure. The rain we'd experienced at Donkey Hut Rapid was new snow on the passes, so the truck driver picked up 20 Tibetans with shovels as we drove out of town in the dark. The plan was to get over the passes while the snow was still frozen. We made over the first pass (about 16,000 ft), but got hopelessly stuck in the mud near an ice covered creek on the way to the second pass and had to camp at about 14,500 ft. Song Yipin hiked over the second pass that evening, found the Yunnan TV guys (who Xiao Mu had called on her satellite phone), and arranged for another truck to meet us at the top of the pass the next day. The mud was partially frozen by 5 am and we were able to free the truck. It managed to go a couple of miles before again becoming hopelessly stuck about 500 feet below the pass (the pass was about 15,500 ft). We unloaded the truck and carried the gear to the top of the pass, a few hundred yards straight up in the snow. We loaded the new truck with all our gear, and after a late lunch and a few more Polaroids, we headed down the dry side of the pass and made it to a hotel in Zogong with hot showers, in time for dinner with officials from Changdu who had driven down to make sure we were OK. Whew!

Return to Civilization

At this point, we realized it was faster to drive to Kunming, Yunnan than it was to drive back to Chengdu in Sichuan. Then we could spend a day at the hot springs and salt mines in Yangjing, visit Tiger Leaping Gorge on the Yangtze and spend a day being tourists in Dali, a famous town on the shore of Lake Er in northwest Yunnan. That might make up for some of disappointment resulting from our decision to abort the expedition.

We made it to Yangjing the next evening. The kayakers decided they wanted to boat the last ten miles of river that we had originally planned to float, the Japanese decided they wanted to hike upstream into the gorge to scout the rapids, and the rest of us decided we wanted to visit the salt mines, then meet the kayakers at the takeout. So, our first leisure day ended up being pretty busy, but everyone was happy with their decision. Both the kayakers and the hikers found more rapids that required portaging, further supporting the decision to abort the expedition, and the TV videographers got some great footage of the kayakers passing the salt mines along the river. Salty water from wells is hauled up to small man-made evaporation ponds perched on logs on the side of the canyon. As the water evaporates, it turns different hues from brown to green to blue to white. The women who haul the water in buckets from the wells to the evaporation ponds enjoyed going down to the river to check out the kayakers.



After picking up the kayakers, we returned to Yangjing and called home - it was our first chance since leaving the river. Travis and I called Cindy at 4 am Grand Junction time to let her know we were off the river and everyone was safe. It was good timing - the next evening, in Dali, Xiao Mu received a phone call from a Chinese friend in Denmark who had read an internet news article that we were missing and presumed dead. We later found out that Ma Da, who had helped organize our 1997 and 1999 expeditions on the Mekong in China and was studying computer science at CCNY in Manhattan, had read the same news and had called Cindy the same evening to express his condolences. If she hadn't known we were OK, she'd have freaked out. Although we never found out the source of the news, we're pretty sure it was Song Yipin and the KMTV guys, paying Zhang Wenjing back for trying to kick them out of Tibet because they wanted to air the ducky flip at the beginning of the expedition. They benefited the most from the bogus report. When we arrived in Kunming a couple of days later, a news story described Song Yipin as our savior and KMTV as having helped arrange our transportation to safety. As a result of the report of our deaths, they got good coverage of their TV news. So goes politics in China (and in the USA).

Yangjing is an odd town. It's perched on a large terrace several hundred feet above the river with a large, century-old Catholic Church. Most of the Tibetans are Catholic and have Christian names, and most of the other minority people, the Nakchi, have Tibetan names and are Buddhists. That evening, we taught the Japanese and some of the Chinese Eskimo rolls in the hot springs pool, and afterward the owner of the hot springs resort threw a party for us, complete with Chinese MTV and live Tibetan banjo players. The resort employees taught us Tibetan line dances, then began group dancing to American Rock 'N Roll. Quite a scene.

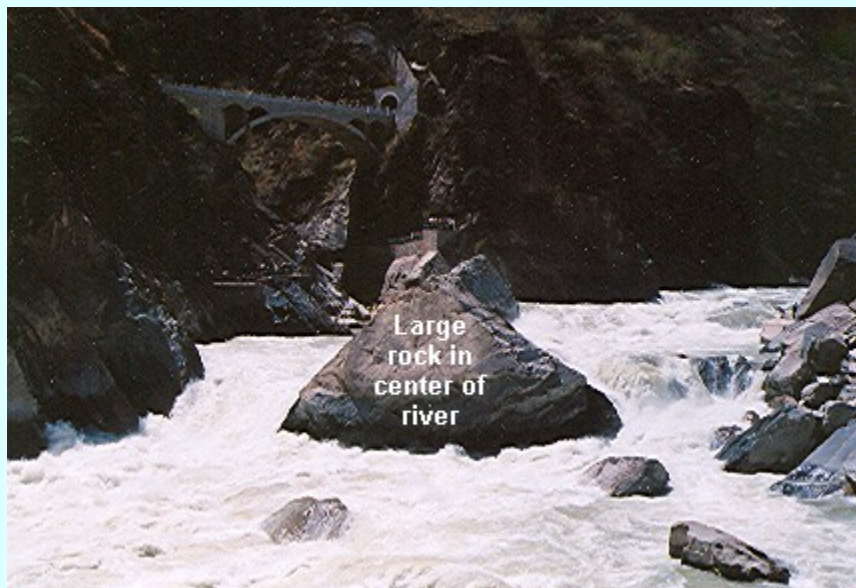


The next day we drove 12 hours to Zhongdian, a Chinese-Tibetan town that has renamed itself "Shangri La" to promote tourism to the area. On the way we crossed a high pass with a view to the west of Meili Snow Mountain, a sacred 20,000 foot peak which is just west of Deqen (about half way to Shangri La). On the night of Dec 31, 1990, 17 Japanese mountain climbers were killed by an avalanche on this mountain. Over the past four or five years, their bodies and equipment have been deposited at the base of the glacier and recovered by Japanese climbers. Some of the climbers were friends of Masauki Kitamura, who burned cedar branches at the pass in their honor. According to Tomatsu Nakamura, editor of Japan Alpine News, Meili Snow Mountain, along with dozens of other peaks in eastern Tibet that are over 20,000 feet, has not yet been climbed.

The Yunnan government has built a jet airport and paved roads in Shangri La, which is on a high plateau east of the Yangtze River. We didn't realize how heavily developed the tourism business was until we visited the famous first shoal of Tiger Leaping Gorge the next morning. A Chinese team had completed the only run of it in 1986 at high water in a race to beat an American team led by Ken Warren, not knowing that Warren's expedition, which was at least couple of weeks behind them, had been aborted, and that even if it had been able to reach Tiger Leaping Gorge, they would never have considered rafting it. All told, ten Chinese rafters died trying to beat Warren down the river on the summer flood, and as a result the Chinese have built a memorial museum near the first shoal and a trail down to the rapid, complete with a gift shop and beautiful girls in Bai dresses that you can have your picture taken with and porters who for a small fee will carry you the 200 feet back up to a parking lot full of large tourist buses.



Capsule raft running First Shoal at high water in July 1986. Photo from Chinese TV program.



Tourists on new bridge in background at First Shoal, low water in April 2004.

We were fortunate to have Feng Chun along as a guide. He was part of the Chinese team (though not one of those who ran it in the rubber ball), and regaled us with tales (now nearly 20 years old, and we all know how this goes). We also found a book about the expedition (in Chinese, of course), which happened to include pictures and a description of the all Chinese first descent of the Yellow River in 1987. There were two Chinese teams competing to raft the Yangtze - the Chinese Academy of Sciences team from Sichuan and the Luoyang team from Henan in east central China. The teams occasionally joined together, and both lost members to the river. After the Yangtze, the Luoyang team regrouped and ran 2900 miles from near the source of the Yellow to the Yellow sea. Another four of them drowned. I've been trying to get information about the first descent of Yellow for years, and now I know. I just need to learn to read Chinese so I can get the details...

Whitewater Boating in China - the Big Picture

In North America, it wasn't until the 1930s that river running was initially attempted for

recreational purposes, but it didn't catch on until the 1950s and 60s. By the mid 1970s, river managers were beginning to cope with crowd management, and today river running is so popular in the US that commercial licenses are so limited they are worth millions, and it's very difficult to get non-commercial permits for boating many rivers.

Recreation boating didn't begin in China until the mid 1980s, and today China is where the US was in the 1950s. Although the main stream of most rivers have been run, most sections are too remote, too difficult, they're in the process of being dammed, and permit fees are too high, so it's not worth trying to commercialize them. A few of their major tributaries have been run and people continue to explore them, but it's a slow process.

Although there really aren't many Chinese whitewater kayakers yet, they are beginning to set up commercial raft trips. There are several companies running rivers near Chengdu, Kunming and Lhasa, and at least one that runs rivers as part of longer road tours of western Yunnan (Song Yipin's). Currently, these are mostly one day trips, but multi-day trips aren't far from becoming a bigger attraction. Also, since the late 1990s, there have been whitewater festivals with raft and occasionally kayak races in several provinces. As these festivals and major expeditions like ours gain media attention, and as the income level of the average Chinese citizen increases, the interest level will undoubtedly increase dramatically. My guess is that whitewater rafting and possibly kayaking will be quite popular by the time the Olympics come to China in 2008. Fees for foreigners have already dropped in Yunnan, Sichuan and Qinghai and should drop in Tibet by 2008, further encouraging the growth of non-domestic raft and kayak tourism, but the big market will be for Chinese tourists. Liu Li in Sichuan, Song Yipin in Yunnan and Wind Horse Adventures in Tibet are currently developing rafting and kayaking opportunities for Chinese and foreigners and will be the first to benefit. However, as in the US and other areas where commercial river touring is well developed, some of their employees will split off to form new companies, and the industry will expand.

In Kunming, Ralf, Steve, Travis and I spent a couple of hours with Ed Norton, the Nature Conservancy's director of Great Rivers National Park. His son Jim and several other boaters had explored the Mekong, Salween, Yangtze and a Yangtze tributary in northwest Yunnan in 2002 and produced a very educational video about the Nature Conservancy's efforts to replace firewood as an energy source and logging as a source of income in this fragile landscape. They had installed over 600 biogas generators to reduce reliance on firewood and logging had been outlawed, but their choice of alternative income sources, ecotourism, was taking a long time to develop. We discussed the possibility of river touring, but that is going to take experienced outsiders willing to make a long term investment in developing the industry. Initially, guides would come from outside the area, and it would be years before the locals, who see the rivers as obstacles or hazards, began to participate in this industry. The Nature Conservancy hopes their biogas program will expand into Tibet, but the rivers in eastern Tibet are even more hazardous, so development of whitewater ecotourism as an industry is not likely except roadside trips near larger towns like Changdu or less challenging whitewater stretches of the Yangtze before it turns northeast and flows into Tiger Leap Gorge. River tourism is being developed near Lhasa by a Tibetan organization, Wind Horse Adventures, and may eventually spread to other towns on the Plateau, but these are high elevation trips (11,000 -14,000 feet).



Travis teaching kayaking to the youngest member of the Sichuan Kayak Club in Chengdu, May 2004.

Photo by Liu Li.

Whitewater kayaking was an event in 1972 and in every summer Olympics since 1992, but whether it's included in the 2008 Olympics in China depends partly on whether there is a Chinese whitewater kayaking team. Currently there is not a team. Hopefully the efforts of Shangri La River Expeditions and the kayaks and gear donated by Necky, Kokatat, Stohlquist, other equipment vendors and individuals will result in the development of a Chinese team. And, hopefully, publicity about this team will encourage development of the sport, and as it spreads so will its influence on environmental politics in China.