

First descent

Rafting a wild whitewater river in China -- where no human has ever been before.

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Tossed down stone steps from an icy, 16,400-foot plateau, the swift river has tumbled to our feet, heaped and holed, churning violently as it folds back on itself, its din horrific. We're calling the rapid "No Exit" -- naming it being the privilege of the first group to run it. It is huge: Class 10, maybe higher. Thirty-thousand cubic feet of water per second -- equal to the Colorado River's flow -- is being constricted by a marble canyon, funneling left at 15 miles an hour into five enormous holes that can munch, even mulch, boats. Little wonder the locals call it a "waterfall" and don't venture near it.

Nine days of paddling have brought us through remote gorges of southwest China, down the Lancang River, which downstream neighbors will call the "Mekong" when it reaches them. Our Sino-American team of nine -- officially the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Earth Science Expedition -- includes four kayakers and five oarsmen in two 16-foot Hyside catarafts. We are attempting to descend 100 treacherous miles of one of the world's wildest rivers, pitting plastic and neoprene against stone and furious water.

The river's journey began in Tibet. Ours started in Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province. The city gained fame in World War II as the terminus of the Burma Road, which supplied Chiang Kaishek's army in its effort to keep the Japanese out of British colonial Burma and India. In October 1995, we had

put in where the road crossed the Lancang, and descended 110 miles of ferocious rapids to the Manwan Dam, the first ever built on the river. Now, 18 months later, a day's journey south from Kunming has taken us over cobbled roads to a new put-in below the Manwan. We're attempting another first descent, this one south to the Linzhong Bridge. But first, we have to maneuver through this roiling rapid. We walk its edge, scouting a route through the crashing water; it's like standing next to a passing freight train. We yell, barely able to hear each other. Fingers trace potential paths past obstacles. Privately, we're realizing it may be impassable, and ask ourselves if the allure of being No. 1 may have gotten us into trouble.

Being first is an elusive concept. To some, it means triumphing over a physical obstacle, reaching a goal ahead of other questers. It is fired by the realization that humankind remembers only the first who succeed. Who was the second man to set foot on the moon? Or follow Lindbergh across the Atlantic? Who was the second to summit Everest, or swim the English Channel?

For us, it is more subtle. It has to do with being the first to experience an area as it is, untouched by anyone. We know that our descent is related to stationary objects: the shore, the river bottom. The river has already experienced us, or others like us, flowing in its eternal cycle of evaporation and rainfall. Only it knows what lies beneath, the bed over which it slides. We cannot see beneath its surface. We can only witness surface manifestations of its inner turmoil, guess at the deep rocks that cause it to erupt and foam.

When we began this journey, the Lancang seemed a minor challenge. It was April, the dry season, with the cusp of a monsoon still a month away. Winter rainfall had been light. Our greatest worry was: Would the river be big enough to run?

At the end of a day's drive from Kunming, we topped the 6,000-foot ridge hemming the Lancang's eastern edge, apprehensive of what we would find in the canyon far below. From the rim, we could see ruffled water. As we zigzagged down the rough road, the picture became more encouraging. On a bluff just above the canyon floor, we watched the Lancang coursing, white-capped, through the canyon. We had a river.

Our joy lasted a day. The maps had told us the river's drop averaged seven feet per mile, two feet less than the Grand Canyon's flow and four feet less than that of the 1992 run that included the enormous Dragon's Teeth and Chinese Lunch -- so named because it ate boats and, moments later, was hungry again. Nonetheless, it could still provide plenty of challenges. Once we put in, however, it was a different story. The Lancang gave us little but ruffles the first day. And it didn't improve the second. The only excitement came from the sand flies; we were likely the first outsiders they had seen and they feasted with a vengeance. And then it rained -- making life unpleasant for us, but barely raising the river level. Where small tributaries emptied into it, the dark green river was marked by dun patches, soil being carried to the sea.

We spent two soggy days drifting down a flat river, watching slanting rain mist mountains like those in a brush painting. Perhaps our maps were wrong; they'd been wrong before. The Russian maps were based on late 1960s surveys, the American maps well before then. The more recent Chinese maps had been enhanced by ground surveys but were drawn for land, not river, use and neglected to note rapids or precipitous drops.

It was entirely possible that some rapids had been erased and others created by the waters hurtling down the canyons. Huge walls of water -- perhaps 200,000 cubic feet per second -- had swept through here in earlier years. Scours 40 feet up the canyon walls hinted at their ferocity. Nonetheless, it was clear we were descending only four or five feet per mile, barely perceptible in the rippling water. If the maps weren't wrong, then huge water must be lurking around some distant bend. The uncertainty added spice to the journey. Being first means traveling without road marks, without knowing what lies beyond

a boulder, unable to tell if distant thunder is a creek cascading into the river, or a mainstream waterfall plummeting to the rocks. Being first means using your wits to survive.

We were discovering other facets of "firstness." Below the dam, we passed beyond the reach of road and, in the evening, nudged the boats onto a virgin beach. It is easier to be first when one travels by river; most sites are otherwise inaccessible, and the Chinese do not use boats on this portion. This beach was walled in by cliffs. Dozens of broken, rotting branches, driftwood jammed between rocks by high water, told us no one had ever built a campfire here. Ours were the first feet to imprint its sands.

Such a realization engenders awe, the recognition of an honor bestowed: to experience an area virtually unaltered for eons. How often can one stand in a spot where no other humans have been? Why this was important is difficult to explain. It was like attending the birth of the earth, a link with primordial creation, untrammelled by millennia of human impact. Early on the second day, we crossed wakes with the first Chinese boats we had seen, bulky wooden vessels with high gunwales, defense against tall waves. Late in the afternoon, while setting up camp, we were hailed by a pair of boatmen. Their craft, a long bamboo raft, worked the waters high above the rapids, ferrying passengers and goods to the opposite shore. I boarded one to see how it negotiated the fast-flowing water.



One man walked along the shore, hunched over by a long line, towing the boat against a strong current. The second man pushed a bamboo pole against the shore to keep the bow pointed upriver. The pair tugged the raft nearly half a mile upriver, until they were sure the current wouldn't pull it far downstream before it reached the other side, 200 yards away. Cross-river propulsion came from two "hoes," wide slabs of wood bound to bamboo poles. Once they pushed off, the crew began "hoeing" the water rapidly, "ferry angling" the bow 45 degrees to the river, gradually working their way across without being swept downstream. Few ferrymen work as hard. These were lathered in sweat by the time they reached the far bank, directly across from their starting point. For us, the discovery of a new way to travel provided a wider understanding of how remote river people perceive the world, how they

tackle the same challenges that confront us, despite the difference in technology.

The third day brought more pouring rain and ruffled water. Dark clouds hampered visibility, ending the day around 4 p.m. near a banana grove. Banana trees are a sure sign of habitation since, like palms, they seldom grow in the wild. The grove held the remains of a house: posts, beams and a leaky roof of rotting thatch. We huddled in the cold, waiting for the rain to break. Eventually, the sky cleared, the sun came out. We erected tents on a soggy, sandy slope. As we worked, we became aware of tiny figures hiding in the brush. Gradually, they ventured to the edge of the wide beach to watch us. These brave pioneers were augmented by the arrival of more and more children, flowing down the hillside from a village, previously obscured by rain clouds. They were the shyest children we'd ever seen. The moment we spoke to them or pointed a camera their direction, they fled. Eventually they realized that two of our group -- Ma Da, from the Academy, and Kym Gentry, our linguist -- spoke Mandarin, and they edged closer.

Thousands of miles from Beijing, they spoke a barely discernible dialect. Soon, word of our arrival filtered up the hill to their village, Sha-ba, and equally shy adults descended on us. It has become almost axiomatic in stories of remote regions to read, "We were the first white people they had ever seen." It is a lame cliché, but in this instance, true. They told us we were the first outsiders, white or Chinese, they had met. It revealed another wonderful aspect of "firstness": to meet people untouched by the outside world, living as they have been for centuries. We watched their encounter with a new world. Once they deduced that we weren't a threat, however strange we looked in lifejackets, helmets and sprayskirts, they poked tentatively at the plastic of the kayaks, the neoprene of the catarafts. They watched us cook on a low, rectangular metal box that hissed blue flames. They ran their hands over the gleaming raft frames, the strange pyramids in which we slept, the rubber coatings on the dry bags, whispering their discoveries to each other.

New rain ended our meeting; at night it pelted down for hours, a cold wind chilling us. But the morning dawned clear, and the villagers descended, their shyness gone, inviting us to see Sha-ba, a first for them and for us. The village sat half a mile up a steep slope, past fields of newly planted rice and corn through which the previous night's rain coursed. It comprised 30 houses built of sun-dried adobe blocks compacted with a crude wooden press. Wooden plows and harrows hung on the walls, pigs and chickens competed for scraps in the house courtyards. Lacking electricity, the farmers huddled on a dirt floor around kitchen fires that provided illumination and heat. Only their pants and shirts betrayed the 20th century. Otherwise, we had stumbled into another era. "First" meant stripping away the veneers of our own civilization, seeing ourselves in a simpler age.



On Day 4, the phantom river we'd been pursuing appeared down a schist canyon. Cliffs and virgin forests replaced the farms. Our first rapid brought one of the most beautiful waves I've ever seen: a long wave, molten glass the green of a pop bottle standing on a thin wedge parallel to the banks and curling in an endless succession of delicate arcs. Its mesmerizing beauty could blind one to the fact that, like a poisonous flower, it was powerful and dangerous. In avoiding it, a raft could be pushed into a sharply angled wall, the five-foot laterals tilting, then tipping it as nearly happened to rafters Mike Winn and Mark Halliday. David Hettig, Kym Gentry and Ma Da survived only by "high-siding," throwing their weight onto the pontoons as they began to rise. Kayaks, seemingly a rapid's worst-positioned pawns, slipped left of the curling wave and through a quarter-mile wave train to reach open water.

A first descent entitles one to name the rapids -- but what is the intrigue in imprinting one's name on the planet? It's the same, though less destructive, impulse that drives one to carve his name on a tree, or a cactus plant, or to spray graffiti on a wall. It is a statement of ego, of shouting to the world: I was here. I exist. Immature and childish, yes, but beguiling. We called this one "High Side" because Ma Da, experiencing the thrill of his first major rapid, had been shouting the words all the way through it.

For the first time in days, the sun set in a cloudless sky. The night brought crystalline stars. Occasionally, the lights of planes crossed high overhead: in twos, in formation. What did a villager, having spent a lifetime watching the night sky, think when the first planes, and then the first satellites, passed through his eternal, changeless sky? On this day, we were the first outsiders to enter a prohibited area. The Chinese are touchy about outsiders seeing their dams; they've taken a lot of heat for building them. Two years ago, we had been stopped when we tried to take photos of Manwan Dam. This time, we rounded a bend and entered the construction site for the Da Xiao Shan Dam, the second to be built on the Lancang. Its 300-foot-high granite slopes had recently been cemented and a diversion tunnel was already operating. We anticipated being stopped and questioned. As we floated closer, we put away our cameras.

Halfway through, we saw a Land Cruiser pull away from the administration office high on the right

bank and race down the long, jagged road towards us. Reaching the riverbank, it slammed on its brakes and a uniformed man jumped out. Here it comes, we thought. But, running to the shore, the official pulled out a small Instamatic, snapped our photo, gave us a big smile and wave, and zipped back up the road again. So much for security. So much for paranoia. Just below the dam site was a greater cause for concern: the Da Xiao Shan Rapid. For the rest of the journey, the water would drop at 11 feet per mile. Raging water poured off its upper rim, becoming more ferocious as the river curved to the right and out of sight. Beaching the boats, we began walking the shoreline, climbing over huge boulders to scout it. The farther we walked, the longer the rapid grew, holes and folding waves appearing at intervals. After 10 minutes of walking it, we still hadn't reached the end. Having ascertained that it was Class 9 but runnable, we set off.

Ralf Buckley, Tucky Fone and Peter Winn made it through unscathed but I was butted to the right and upended by a huge lateral wave. Upside down, I set up for a roll but was suddenly hit by what seemed to be a 100-mph wind, a hole that ripped me out of the boat. Pushed through two enormous holes and acres of swirling, sucking water, I surfaced a dozen times, just long enough to grab a breath before the river crashed over my head again. I measured the half-mile rapid with my body and nearly became the first of the team to discover the meaning of mortality. Some firsts are better than others.

The river's pristine nature became more apparent as the days passed. Much of its beauty lay in river-polished stones: hematite, serpentine green and gray stones, black basalt gouged and grooved like meteorites. The shoreline schist was marked by vertical fluting. Peter, the geologist, described the scallops as potholes that stones, swirled by rushing water, had gradually bored deeper and deeper into the bedrock. When it had worn away the side wall, the rock escaped; succeeding swirling rocks continued to drill downwards.

The days also brought an amazing array of birdcalls. This subtropical region of Yunnan holds half of China's flora and fauna species. Rains seem to wake the birds from dormancy. Dozens of beautiful songs could be heard at a time, with new ones added each day. At night, it became possible to tell time by the bird songs, the most dramatic changes taking place as dawn neared. The sand flies were both a curse and a blessing. Their burning itch could only be quelled by standing neck-deep in the cold river, something I did four or five times each night. From that vantage point, I could watch the shard moon shattered on the river's choppy surface, could watch the stars in a sky unpolluted by city light, see the fireflies pulsating through the dipterocarps at the edge of the beach. Seldom can one enjoy such peace in a city.

Mid-morning, we came across a fisherman with unsettling news of a 30-foot waterfall just above our intended takeout point at the Linzhong Bridge. The map did not note its existence but it was days downstream and we had other challenges to decipher first, several days of rapids, none of them below Class 8. The river had been lying in wait and now loosed its pent-up energy. We ran one rapid after another, the boiling eddies as powerful as the mainstream.

Then came "White Rock Foot," aka "Horse and Pig." We called it "No Mercy," a mile-long rapid in three segments. An enormous boulder blocked our view of the treacherous downriver portions and it was only after the kayaks ran it that the rafters discovered that the most dangerous part was at the bottom. What at first had seemed benign water comprised several sharp drops that tossed the rafts. Oarsman Mike nearly lost Mark when the right pontoon bucked upwards, pitching him out to the left. Only his leg hooked over a tube kept him from a long swim through turbulent water.

But we were hardly out of trouble. With the roar of the next rapid, everyone involuntarily pulled to the left. Once beached, we clambered over boulders to scout the rapid. It was huge. It arced to the right, boulders along the right shore pushing all the water to the left and into five enormous holes. We stood silently, if only because we couldn't hear anything above the river's shout. Moving to the lee of a

boulder, we just looked at each other. Peter delivered the judgment we had all formed: "This is the worst yet. It may be unrunnable." This was the rapid the fisherman and other villagers had called a "waterfall." It was easy to see why. Class? "Ten," Peter said, "maybe 11." Ten is the top of the scale; anything beyond that is virtually beyond running.

It was only 3 p.m., but it would take hours to work our way safely through it. Everyone was exhausted by the adrenaline expended on the other rapids and an accident in the dark could end in tragedy. It was only five miles to the Linzhong Bridge, and we had two days before meeting the Academy of Sciences pick-up crew. Best to take our time and do it properly. We set up camp above the rapid.

Now, this morning, we stand on the bank, bathed in bright sunshine, the river a sheet of roiling whitewater without a hint of green or brown. After breaking camp, we have rowed to the opposite bank, the only side of the rapid we can run. Or not run. We've titled it "No Exit," but in fact there is an exit; it is a question of whether we can make it through untouched. The kayakers have all run the Colorado and other big rivers but this one looks tough. An hour goes by as we climb up and down boulders, looking at a possible route, discarding it when we spot a hole, scouting another and rejecting it when we realize there's a high chance we'll be dashed into the rocks. The river constricts from 200 feet to 60. In tandem with a sharp drop in gradient, 30,000 cubic feet per second of water are being funneled into the rapid at 20 mph. At that speed, there's not a lot of time to correct mistakes. We kayakers weigh our chances of getting through unharmed.

Maneuvering through big water is normally a matter of skirting holes and using a paddle as a brace against lateral waves. But the water here is moving too quickly, making it a technical run: a lot of quick, precise maneuvers, the type of run associated with smaller rivers. The overriding fact is that there is no escape route down the right side because cross-river motion is pushing everything left and into the holes. A small mistake and one can be swallowed, held down too long or pinned against the boulders. The only possible maneuver is to drop over the upper lip, ride up and over a four-foot wave and, while falling down its back, rotate counterclockwise 270 degrees, pointing upstream, then to the right bank, paddling like hell into a small eddy. From there, it is a short paddle to a rock garden extending 20 feet into the main river. Slice through a narrow channel between its point and the holes and into safe water. But there are half a dozen points at which to make a fatal error.

We scout it for an hour, from a dozen angles, from the tops of the boulders and at the water line. In the end, Tucky, Peter and I decide it is beyond our skills, a hell of an admission to make after traveling all this distance. Ralf thinks he can run it. We watch him launch well above "No Exit" and float slowly towards it, lining up a route. It is one thing to scout from the riverbank, another to sit three feet above the water, looking at a horizon line hiding a rapid that spits and roars. All the landmarks one has so carefully aligned as guideposts for a clean run have altered. It's a new river. With a pounding heart, one scrambles to re-orient his compass, the river inexorably drawing him toward the rapid's brink. It is tempting to alter the route to accord with what one is seeing, but the key to success is to coordinate what one is seeing with what was seen from the riverbank. We can feel what Ralf is experiencing.

Ralf watches, paddle held steady in front of him as he reads and re-reads the rapid. Realizing that the river is already pulling him to the left, he corrects, paddling to the right. As we hold our breath, he drops over the rim. Immediately, the river accelerates. He disappears beneath the wave, reappearing suddenly, thrust vertically to the crest of the wave, bow pointing at the sky. Angling his body, he drives his paddle to spin and face upriver. Then, as planned, he falls off the back of the wave and is pushed into the eddy. He has just enough time to recover before the eddy current carries him into the mainstream, pulling him into the wave train running through the holes. Twice, thrice, he disappears from view. Then, miraculously, a trough appears between two five-foot waves and he shoots through to the other side, below the holes and into open water. We release a collective breath of relief, cheering lustily.

The rafts are the next to go. Stripped of most of their gear to lighten them, we affix 100-foot nylon ropes and "line" David's empty raft along the right bank. While the downstream rope is tied between the stern and a boulder, the upstream rope is wrapped around a boulder and paid out slowly as the current catches the boat. Foot by foot, we ease it into the lower eddy. Once there, David decides to row it the remaining distance. Strapping on a helmet, he heads, bow first, into the mainstream. When the current begins pulling him toward the holes, he hauls back on the oars, straining with every muscle to break free. It seems a losing battle but, finally, his effort is sufficient to slide him along the outer edges of the wave train, away from the holes. He, too, wins our cheers.

After reading the rapid for another half hour, Mike decides he can make a straight run and avoid the holes. Mike weighs around 170 pounds, Mark, around 280, sufficient ballast to high-side if they get into trouble. With only a food cooler amidships, the raft weighs perhaps 250 pounds, a total of 700 pounds, light enough to row but heavy enough to cling to the waves. Mike plans a far right run, backing into the eddy into which we had lined David's raft.

The pair drifts toward the rapid and, once again, the current catches them, pulling them so the raft crosses the lip a bit too far to the left. As they drop in, Mike momentarily loses his grip on the oar. By the time he regains it, they are in trouble. He makes it to the eddy line but too slow to punch through into the eddy. Instead, the raft is carried into the middle of the river. Hitting a 10-foot-high lateral, the raft flips, exiting vertically like a missile, completely clearing the surface. Both oarsmen shoot out of the raft as it lands upside down. The boat is held momentarily in the next hole, long enough for the rafters, now swimmers, to pass it. It breaks loose and bears down, threatening to overrun them. They are washed through the hole but the raft is again stopped. To our astonishment, the hole rolls it upright -- a double flip -- seldom seen and welcome since it spares us the onerous task of righting it, a difficult job in any water.

Ralf and Peter have been watching from below the rapids. Now, as two heads surface again and again, they rapidly paddle toward them. The swimmers are washed into calm water, shaken and exhausted. Mike half lays himself over the back of Ralf's kayak and is towed to shore. Though out of breath, Mark refuses Peter's offer of a tow, preferring to swim in. Peter turns and quickly heads for the raft, now out of control and drifting downriver. Disembarking from a wobbling kayak, he climbs aboard the raft, pulling his kayak after him. Rowing hard against the current, he crosses the river to pick up Mike and Mark. Mike rows back up a large eddy to where we stand watching at the bottom of "No Exit."

We've been lucky. Had a rafter been thrown into the rocks and broken a bone, it would have been difficult to treat him. There are no roads out and no medical facilities -- even if we were able to climb out of the canyon. Being spared a tragedy is in itself a first. Surviving a major rapid is a rebirth.

Our final day should be an easy run to the bridge, but, just below camp, we encounter a Class 8 rapid. We no sooner clear it than another appears. Four major rapids in four miles, dashing our hope of reaching the take-out by mid-morning. Then, as the Linzhong Bridge looms high overhead just downstream, the Academy of Science's van drives across to meet us. After a day-and-a-half drive from Kunming, it has miraculously timed its arrival perfectly.

The take-out is uneventful. From here, the river will continue without us, flowing a total of 2,800 miles through six countries before exiting, spent, into the South China Sea at the Mekong Delta. We have a day and a half drive back to Kunming on a road as treacherous as the river. Chinese roads are notorious for reckless drivers. We see nine accidents: trucks overturned or piled into trees. If we considered ourselves unlucky to be beyond medical aid for several days, we realize that for the Chinese, it is a permanent condition. The body of one truck driver still hangs through the windshield and over the cab, hours after the accident. A few feet away, traffic speeds by, no one taking any notice of it.

The accident is sobering. We have long hours to consider the journey's meaning before we top the rim of the bowl and drop into Kunming. We've experienced numerous firsts and discovered that being first also means being last. We will be the last to travel an untrammelled river, the last to see it in a pristine state, perhaps the last ones to see it running wild and free before a dam reservoir muffles its ferocious roar. The power of one, the appeal of being the first, as strong as the pull of a river down a long, stone slope to the sea.