

First Descent of the Yongbao Gorge of the Mekong River Yunnan, China, October 1995

Pete Winn



This is a long journal, but worth reading if you're planning on joining a first descent in China. Download it and read it at your leisure. Three rules: Patience, Patience and Patience. The Chinese have a different perspective on time compared to Americans and Europeans.

Summary

Dates: October, 1995 (10 full river days)

Nearest major airport: Kunming, Yunnan

Round trip driving time: 3 days

Put-in: Yongbao Bridge, about 100 miles west of Dali, elevation 4500', flow about 30,000 cfs

Take-out: Man Wan Dam, elevation 3400', about 30,000 cfs

Total distance: 100 miles (10 miles per day)

Average gradient: 11 feet/mile

Participants: 8 total using two 16' catarafts, one 9' two person paddlecat and 2 hardshell kayaks

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

Friday, October 13

Bad luck or good luck? Very good, in retrospect. I was leaving for China the fourth time in a year, fifth time all in all. I was headed for my second river expedition in China, a first descent of the Mekong River in western Yunnan. It was hard on my family - logistically, financially, and emotionally. You never know when an airplane is going to fall from the sky, whether due to Mother Nature, mechanical problems or terrorists, and it's natural for loved ones to worry about the worst happening, especially on

Friday the 13th. On the other hand, as a geologist I'm not terribly superstitious. However, I believe that Mother Nature, the airplane mechanics and the terrorists probably are, and they'll be especially careful on Friday the 13th. So it's really a good day to begin a wild adventure.

I met one of the other trip participants, Ryon Swann, from Boise, at the Salt Lake airport. His grandfather, Gordon Swann, a well known astrogeologist in Flagstaff, Arizona, had convinced me his 18 year old grandson was capable of making the trip. Gordon had helped me finance my Master's degree in geology and we had run several rivers together, including the Colorado in the Grand Canyon.

My bags were late arriving in Los Angeles, causing minor panic that interrupted my reading of *The Shanghai Surprise*, a comedy about sex, drugs and taxis in Shanghai, China just before WWII. It's a good read, better than the movie by far. My bags contained all of the dry and canned food for the 10 days we planned to be on the Mekong. They arrived just in time to check them for the flight to Hong Kong on Cathay Pacific. Whew! What a hassle it would have been if I'd flown Continental (it just filed for bankruptcy) instead of Delta.

During the 15 hour flight, I had lots of time to reflect on how I'd gotten to be here. It began in 1985, when Mike Connelly and I had taken group of geologists on a raft trip down the Green River in the Uinta Mountains in Dinosaur National Monument in northeastern Utah, sponsored by National Geographic Magazine. Both of us had worked as professional river guides in the Grand Canyon in the 1970's and had received our Master's Degrees in geology at the University of Utah. The NGS folks suggested we plan a raft trip to study mountain building in the Himalayas, so we did, thinking they'd fund it.

We immediately contacted Peter Molnar from MIT, who was unquestionably the most prolific Himalayan tectonic researcher and writer, and with his enthusiastic support we began to organize a trip along a roadless stretch of the Mekong in western Yunnan. We hoped to study the faults along which southeast Asia was being extruded into the Pacific Ocean as a result of India's northward movement into Asia, forming the Himalayas.

In 1986, a horribly egotistic river outfitter from Oregon named Ken Warren had a disastrous trip on the Yangtze, which put a big damper on our plans. In spite of the bad feelings he had caused among the Chinese, we decided to go on an exploratory trip in 1987 to check out the put-in and take-out on the Mekong. After a week of frustration with the Chinese sense of time (due to 5000 years of Chinese history compared to our 500) and too many banquets taking turns playing "Ganbei" (bottoms up) with the Beijing variety of jet fuel (Bacardi 151 is tame compared to Mao Tai), we managed to achieve our objectives. It turned out to be a wonderful experience. By pure chance, we met SOBEK's Big Bend of the Yangtze expedition in Chuxiong, near Kunming, the night they took out. Several of our friends were guides; it was great to hear their stories.

Things accelerated from there. We ended up inviting our Chinese hosts, Qu Yinhua, Ma Tie and Luo Sixiang from China International Sports Travel, to the US for a 10 day visit, raising the money to bring them over (from Bud Wilson of Los Altos, Rob Elliott of Arizona Raft Adventures, Mike's sister, and several other river friends). Qu was one of the first Chinese to climb Everest, a quite famous Chinese citizen. Ma was the interpreter, caught between East and West (he told us that 40 years of communism did not diminish 2500 years of capitalism by very much). Luo was like a puppy dog, walking three times as far as we did, always getting lost and causing us to worry. We took them to the Grand Canyon (they saw the IMAX film), on a tour through Glen Canyon dam, on a one day inflatable kayak trip on the Verde River in Arizona, to lunch Chinatown and to a Project Raft party with Russian rafters in San Francisco. Good PR.

In 1988, we hired a professional fund raiser in New York, Wendy Davis, to get donations for the expedition. With her help and help from Rob Elliott from Arizona Raft Adventures (formerly ARTA,

which Mike and I had worked for), we convinced Bruce Babbitt (at the time a US Presidential Candidate, currently US Secretary of the Interior, and a former governor of Arizona) to endorse our efforts. We even took the Babbitts on a Taos Box (Rio Grande) river trip in the Spring of 1989. He knew the chairman of the board of Coca Cola, and Coke was in the process of negotiating funding with us when the Tienenmen Square disaster happened in June. A big time bummer.

Sorry to carry on like this about the background (I had 15 hours to review it). You can skip to the next day (or the last day) if you want. Anyway, we gave up. Then in 1992, a guy named Han Chunyu from the Chinese Academy of Sciences sent me a letter suggesting we should begin new negotiations to do geological research in western Yunnan along the Mekong. The China Sports folks had not been able to get permission for us to take rock samples, so they had contacted the Institute of Geology, which had passed the request to Han Chunyu.

It took until summer 1994 to find five other people willing to pay the permit fees and travel costs. These included Peter Molnar from MIT and his wife, Sara Neustadt, an anthropologist, Ben Foster from Boulder, a geologist and oarsman, Will Downs from Flagstaff, a paleontologist and oarsman who spoke, read and wrote Mandarin Chinese, and Ralf Buckley, a kayaker and professor of ecotourism from Gold Coast, Australia.

Due to financial considerations regarding the cost of permits, we decided to change our plans and raft the Yangbi, a major tributary to the Mekong that enters it within the stretch we planned to float in 1989. The trip was a big success logistically, culturally and in terms of whitewater, and a moderate success geologically, but is not a good repeat run due to paper mill effluent pollution near the put-in. Also, the Man Wan Dam on the Mekong filled its reservoir two years ahead of schedule, backing up to the Yangbi's confluence with the Mekong, another bad surprise. But now we know the reservoir is there and easily crossed.

After the 1994 trip, Han Chunyu was hooked. He hinted that he thought he could obtain a fair permit fee for the main stream Mekong in October, 1995 if we would arrange a visit to the US for him during the summer. So Mike and I raised some money and brought him over to raft the Dolores River in western Colorado with family and friends in June.

Everyone loved him, especially my six year old daughter, Carmen, who wanted to marry him. Fortunately for Chunyu (this is hard to admit), he was already married (historically, children could marry in China, but I doubt Chunyu's mother would have agreed to his marrying a six year old). Chunyu had a wonderful time on the river and in the US, and we cemented a friendship that had begun by international fax. He's really a great guy.

Knowing I could get a reasonable permit fee, I began to market the mainstream Mekong expedition we had planned for 1989. It had about the same flow and gradient as the Colorado in the Grand Canyon, so it had the potential to be pretty exciting. I knew how to deal with the reservoir, and Chunyu convinced me the river was not polluted. To keep costs low, I advertised on the Internet, using river runner bulletin boards. I also sent about 50 copies of my journal out to friends.

Between June and September, I managed to get six experienced rafters and kayakers to join the expedition, just the perfect number. They were all guys, and although I had met two of them years ago, I really didn't know anyone. Besides the risks involved in foreign travel and first descents, I had added the risk of personality conflicts. I had no idea how the group would hold up under stress if we had problems.

Saturday, October 14



David Hettig, Robert Rabkin, Han Chunyu,

Fred St. Goar, Steve Van Beek, Pete Winn, David Daboll, Ryon Swann

Whew! The 13th was an incredibly long day. Hope you're still with me. Ryon and I made it through Hong Kong customs quickly, and were waiting for our bags when Fred St. Goar walked up and introduced himself. He must have a knack for identifying river runners in foreign airports, as we had never met. See the links at the end of this journal for Fred's description of this expedition. He and David Hettig had arrived from San Francisco less than an hour earlier. After forking over a big sum of money for the trip, I'm sure they were really relieved to see me. My credibility was on the rise.

David, a Palo Alto attorney, had heard of the expedition via the Internet, and through a common friend had met Fred, a Menlo Park physician, and helped me persuade him to join the expedition. David was a rafter, Fred a kayaker. I had insisted that everyone have Grand Canyon experience; David had organized and run his own private trip through the Grand, and Fred had both kayaked it and rowed a raft down it. They both knew old river guides that were friends or acquaintances of mine, Don Briggs and Nat Cobb respectively, so some credibility was established early on.

After getting to our hotel, the four of us decided to go for a walk, and ended up having noodle soup in a little Chinese restaurant at midnight. The owners didn't speak English and none of us spoke Cantonese, so ordering was a point and hope affair. When we had trouble eating the long noodles with chopsticks, the waitress found a pair of scissors to cut them for us. It was an entertaining beginning.

Sunday, October 15

The four of us met David Daboll for breakfast. He was a physician assistant from Alamosa, Colorado with a lot of international travel experience. He had also heard of the expedition via the Internet. He had brought with him a Russian made 9' two man paddlecat which he had taken on lots of small but technical rivers. Although he had rowed a cataraft through the Grand Canyon, he hadn't taken his paddlecat, the "Da", through big water yet.

Since David D. and I had no common friends to give either of us credibility, he contacted members of the 1994 Yangbi expedition and I called his references. I was stretching six year old memories from my own experience with a paddlecat in moderately big water (Bruce Babbitt and I had paddled 6-7' waves on the Rio Grande in one) when I believed that David could do it. Needless to say, when I called him in his room after arriving in the hotel in Hong Kong, he let out a big sigh of relief. I hadn't taken his

money and run off to Mexico, a concern he had expressed. I had responded, why run off to Mexico when you can run off to China.

After arriving at the airport for our flight to Kunming, we met Robert Rabkin, a retired physician from Sausalito with a lot of international rafting experience. I had met him in the early 1970's in the Grand Canyon. We had a common friend, Al Wilson, a retired, effete (exhausted, I had look it up in the dictionary) Grand Canyon river guide (or so says his business card, which has a sketch of old Converse basketball shoes on it, not Texas).

Robert had been looking for an apartment in New York City, and a friend of his was a friend of my brother Michael, who owns an apartment building in Manhattan. Small world, they made the connection, Michael told Robert about the Mekong Expedition, and Robert decided he wanted to row one of the boats. Robert had dinner with Fred and Dave in Palo Alto before leaving the US to tell some old, possibly partly true stories about Al and I in the Grand Canyon in the 1970's (I was a little worried about negative credibility when he mentioned some of the stories he told them).

Well, that afternoon the six of us made it to Kunming, the 2 million pop. capital city of Yunnan, China, all luggage accounted for. Sometimes I have trouble believing how competent people are, especially the pilots, air controllers and baggage handlers at foreign airports. We really take a lot for granted. That includes fax transmissions from strangers - at least that's how I got to know Chunyu.

Chunyu was waiting for us at the exit gate and was clearly happy to see us. Wang Shide was waiting too; he was the local Academy of Science travel coordinator that had helped us out in 1994. He didn't speak English, but had a great smile. A woman named Wang Jui (Chinese put their family name first, but she was not related to Wang Shide) was also waiting. She was a very pleasant woman who spoke fair English. Her job was to help us buy food and get to the put-in and then back from the take-out.

At the Kunming Hotel we met Steve Van Beek, the other foreign (alien?) member of our group, a U.S. citizen living in Bangkok, Thailand. He is a writer, photographer and kayaker who had joined up at the last minute, hoping to get a perspective on how the locals regard the Mekong for a book he was writing on the river. He had seen some literature I had circulated to commercial rafting companies. Although he had Grand Canyon kayaking experience, he was quite concerned about high water, as Bangkok was experiencing the worst floods in decades. He had been kayaking the streets of Bangkok while waiting for his visa. See the links at the end of this journal for Steve's description of this expedition.

It was quite a group. Although there was potential for nasty games of one-up-manship and for egotistic conflicts, everyone seemed to realize the importance of getting along. The docs avoided lawyer jokes and vice versa, etc, until we all knew each other well enough to get away with being politically incorrect. I think the culture shock we were going through was dominating our behavior - we were clearly a minority, and it was natural to stick together. With the exception of Steve, who had been in Kunming doing research for his book for several days already, it took a few days before group members began to venture out on their own, especially since none of us spoke Chinese.

At first I had been concerned about the fact that it was an all male group, but as time passed I realized it was going to work out just fine. The youngest, Ryon, was 18, Robert was the oldest at 62, and the average age including Chunyu was 44. We were a pretty mature group of professionals plus a high school baseball star.

Monday, October 16

Food buying, packing and truck loading day. At the warehouse where we had left the equipment in 1994, we spread all the gear out. Only a tiny bit of damage to one of the tarps had been done by rats. We broke into two groups, one to repack equipment and load the truck, the other to go with Wang Jui to buy food. By late afternoon we had most of the food bought and had the truck packed. We lacked eggs,

fruit and some vegetables, which we decided to buy in Dali on our way to the put-in. The food buying group had found that Wang Jui enjoyed bargaining so much that it took a lot longer to buy food than I had expected.

It was becoming evident to everyone that China was no longer a dreadful communist country. There were even billboards announcing that it was glorious to become rich! It was rapidly becoming a country of entrepreneurs.

After returning to the hotel to cleanup, we headed out to the Great World Restaurant for our welcoming banquet. We had paid for it as part of the permit fee, but it's such a great show we felt we had been treated royally. The food was magnificent, as tasty as any great restaurant, and the minority nationality dances and songs were mesmerizing. It's the Kunming equivalent of a Las Vegas night show in many ways.

After the banquet, the seven round-eyes walked back to the hotel. On the way we passed a city park where the fountains were all lit up by multicolored lights. A commercial photographer offered to take our picture, but we had several cameras among us and decided to take our own. I asked a young lady standing nearby to take one of all of us, which she was glad to do. Then her boyfriend wanted to take one too, so we posed again. Just after he clicked the shutter, the lights went out. It was phenomenal luck, a good omen of things to come.

Tuesday, October 17

After a good night's rest, we headed to Dali, an old town on Lake Er (ear). We had fried crickets for lunch, actually a delicacy, which even Ryon tried. Chunyu, who ordered the food, was having fun with us. We got to Xiaguan safely, where we got rooms at the Er Hai Hotel, after a wild nine hour ride in a quite comfortable bus. Fortunately, the driver was really good, so we only saw the accidents and didn't participate in them. The Chinese like to play chicken when they drive.

We arrived at the hotel in time to take a short walk along the canal that drains Er Hai and stretch our legs after the long drive. Along the park like path we noticed numerous college age students studying diligently. We stopped to talk to three guys, to ask them what there were studying. Chunyu hadn't joined us, but it didn't matter. They were studying for an English exam and we could understand them. They even took turns reading out loud to us a few paragraphs from their text about how important it was for all Chinese to learn English - the language of international business. This occurred in a small town three thousand miles from Beijing. Watch out, America!

We drove up the lake to the old walled town of Dali for dinner. I've never been to Kathmandu before, but Steve and Robert had and they both remarked on how similar Dali was to Kathmandu twenty years ago. There was even a foreigner's street, with lots of tourist shops. We had a delicious traditional Bai (the local minority nationality) dinner, then went "window" shopping. Some of the street peddlers can be very persistent, almost obnoxiously so, and eventually we were glad to leave. Dali is famous for marble furniture; it would be fun to spend more time there someday.

Wednesday, October 18

The days really aren't getting shorter, I just didn't reflect much on the drive, so my summary of yesterday doesn't have a lot of keyboard free association diarrhea to it (like the day of the 15 hour flight did). The drive was a lot like the one last year, only more comfortable; we had a bigger, better bus. I had brought along several novels about China, and between watching the fascinating country side fly by, reading and talking, I didn't have time to think about the fact that a 10 year dream was about to come true.

After breakfast, we went shopping for fruit, eggs and veggies at a local market. We had a great time,

finding everything we wanted and paying full prices for it (Wang Jui couldn't be everywhere at once). Total food costs in China for eight of us for 10 days for all of the fresh food, rice, noodles and tea were less than \$200, even paying full price for much of it. Can't complain about that. Then we headed down the canyon towards the Yangbi.

Just like last year, the paper mill foam floating on the reservoirs on the tributary from Er Hai to the Yangbi was revolting. The Yangbi was also just as filthy. You have to be there to really appreciate the contrast with a clean river. Fortunately, we weren't putting in on the Yangbi, and it joined the Mekong at the end of our trip, so it wouldn't affect us much.

We stopped in Yong Ping for a snack, then headed over the mountains to the Mekong. David Hettig gave the driver a tape to play, and so we listened to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as we descended the last 4000' down to the river. It was classic, pardon the pun (Steve was the punmaster). As we approached the river, everyone became silent, and not because the music was so good. This was the moment we had all been waiting for - the first view of the Mekong. It was really happening.

The bridge over the river was called the Yong-Bao Bridge. The road was a new alternative to the old Burma Road. Mike and I had gotten within sight of the bridge on our 1987 reconnaissance trip, so I knew there would be a put-in beach, but couldn't remember just where. We stopped at the bridge to buy beer for the trip and to take pictures of a small rapid just downstream. Needless to say, energy levels were high.

We crossed the bridge and drove a couple of miles upstream to a great beach for a put-in. Within an hour we had unloaded the truck and bus and had all our gear on the beach. Just before saying good bye to Wang Jui and the two drivers, someone found a Hong Kong \$10 coin, with a shiny gold colored center surrounded by a silver colored ring. Another good omen. It was mid-afternoon, sunny and at least 75F, great weather for rigging. What a fantastic put-in. Night temps dropped to about 55, great for sleeping. The only negative was the noisy truck traffic on the roads on both sides of the river.

Day 1, Mekong River.



In the morning, we noticed one of the 16' cataraft tubes was pretty soft. David H. found a seep leak caused by an abrasion that must have happened in the truck on the way back to Kunming in 1994 or on the way to our put-in. He patched it, and we finished rigging after breakfast. He had bought some small Chinese and American flags in Kunming, which he attached to his raft. The guys decided Chunyu and I

should pose for pictures holding the appropriate flag. After all, it was a cooperative Chinese - American effort.

The river was running about 30,000 cubic feet per second, about the same the Colorado in the Grand Canyon runs at high water (excluding 1983-84). Water temp was about 65F, just right. It was too silty to filter, so we got water from side streams for drinking. As we pushed off, I got an incredible adrenalin rush. Sometimes dreams come true.

The small rapid below the bridge was bigger than we expected, maybe a 5 on a 10 scale, with sloppy 5-6' waves. Everyone was excited, hoping there'd be more like it. We called it Happy Thrilling Beginning, an English translation of imaginary Chinese words. One of my biggest fears, that the river would have a constant gradient and there wouldn't be any rapids, was dissipating. I'd represented the river as being the same flow and gradient as the Colorado in the Grand Canyon, which has some big rapids (three of ten biggest runnable ones in the US), and didn't want anyone to be disappointed. They'd paid a lot and come a long way.

At lunch the first day, we were still across from the new road. A big fault crossed the river near here, causing it to make dramatic changes in direction, with the result that it left its several hundred mile southward trend and struck off to the southeast. We had started the trip in gneiss, a high grade metamorphic rock, but had lunch in marble and slate. The rocks were highly fractured and iron stained, but did not appear to be mineralized. While we ate, a local farmer with his sons and pigs came to visit. Goats on the hill slope above us occasionally knocked rocks onto the beach, one of the hazards of having lunch at a Chinese fault zone. The photographers had a field day with the contrast between cultures.

We made about 12 miles that day, just what we needed on average to float the 90 miles of river in eight days (plus one more on the lake). My other fears began to evaporate as the day progressed. We had made it to the put-in, no accidents on the road, and no bad washouts to cause a multiday delay, although we had seen many mud slides from recent rains. Based on my Yangbi experience in 1994 and our success in getting to the put-in with all of the equipment, I was no longer worried about trusting the Chinese, and it looked like there would be an abundance of great beaches for camping. The river was slightly silty but wasn't blatantly polluted, like the Yangbi, plus everyone got along well, no obvious personality conflicts.

There was the usual banter about no women on the trip (not because of hormones, but because women tend to keep men from telling too many dirty jokes, and, according to my wife, Cindy, vice versa). I had tried to talk Wang Jui into joining us, but she claimed she couldn't swim (plus I don't think she knew any dirty jokes).

The only other fear I had was that someone else had beat us to the river. When I was planning the expedition, a guy named Eric Hertz from an organization named Earth River Expeditions called me. He had bought Steve Currey's rafts, which were stored in northern China, and was looking for a river to run. He wanted to run the Great Bend of the Yangtze, which Sobek had run in 1987, but just in case he couldn't get a permit he was looking for another river and had gotten info from me on the stretch we planned to run.

Steve Van Beek had met a couple of Eric's guides in Kunming the day before we arrived, and I was worried that Eric had already left to run the Mekong. Chunyu had assured me that was not possible, but in China the hands usually don't know what the feet are doing (with four times the population of the US, this may be true of the head also). I had represented to the guys that this was a first descent, and was concerned that they might be upset if Eric was a few days ahead of us on the river. So I had Chunyu ask our lunch visitors if they had recently seen other rafts with foreigners. Chunyu was mildly irritated that I didn't believe him, but asked anyway. Fortunately, the answer was no (or so Chunyu

translated).

We camped on a big beach on river left, just barely in sight of the new road as it climbed a side canyon up the 10,000' deep Mekong River Gorge towards Burma. We could occasionally hear a big truck honk its horn or see its head lights, but basically we were well on our way to making the transition from the world of the internal combustion engine and the telephone (no one brought a mobile phone, thank Buddha) to the world of Chinese wilderness.

Day 2

On the Yangbi Expedition, I had brought topo maps made by the US Army in WWII. They were absolutely worthless, but fortunately Chunyu had brought some top secret Chinese topos made in 1968 that were quite usable. For the Mekong expedition, I had found some Russian maps made in 1964, but I had no idea how accurate they were. Since Chunyu's maps were top secret, I didn't want to rely on them, so I needed some way to confirm our position as we progressed down the river. Dave H. was a shareholder of Trimble Navigation, which makes a global positioning system (GPS) mobile unit that uses military satellites to calculate locations to less than 100' of error. So with his help I arranged to borrow one for the trip.

It reported a location about 1/3 of a mile different than 1927 topos did for my home in Grand Junction, but Trimble told me this was not uncommon for such old maps. Maps produced after 1954, or even better after 1984, should be close to the GPS calculated location. At the put-in I couldn't get a fixed reading, probably due to the narrow north-south orientation of the canyon, but at breakfast on Day 2 I got a good location from both the maps and the GPS. Chunyu was too curious about the GPS to keep his maps secret. Unfortunately, the GPS location was three miles different from the map locations. Fortunately, the Russian map pretty much matched the Chinese map, and we had no trouble keeping track of where we were and how far we had to go.



There was a heavy dew in the morning, so we waited for the sun to dry out our tents. We were late getting on the river, but the current was fast so we made good time. We visited some local fishermen who used large wooden canoes with crossed oars to fish the eddies. I tried rowing one; it was difficult

to make the left-right switch. We stopped at a big creek on the left at lunch to hike up to a village away from the river. Several locals stopped to check us out. Since we had had no problems with theft in 1994, I assumed it was OK to leave the boats unattended while we hiked.

There was a small hydropower station a short ways up, past some small rice paddies. If it's flat enough to grow something, some one lives there. The farmer was plowing the paddies with a water buffalo when we passed. The hydropower station provided power for a village up the creek. On the way up the creek, we noticed a massive stone bridge that had been partially washed out. It looked like a fairly recent flood, maybe less than two weeks ago.



When we got to the village, we crossed a swinging bridge over the creek and wandered up to a house with an open courtyard. The residents invited us in, and gave us sunflower seeds while we watched them grind dried corn off of husks. They were quite friendly, but spoke a dialect Chunyu couldn't understand, so we had trouble talking to them. Several of their neighbors came to watch the spectacle, Channel 3, As The River Flows, the first round eyes to visit Daxichai. We learned that the flood had occurred ten days before our visit.

On the way back down we saw a Pagoda on a pointed mountain top, the first evidence we'd seen of religious behavior. Not that it meant anything, however, because when we reached the rafts we found two life jackets and a wet suit missing. Big Bummer, not just the loss of valuable equipment, but the

loss of trust. Fortunately we started with four spare jackets, and the river was warm. We called it Robbers Creek.



David Hettig and Han Chunyu in Dragon's Teeth

Photo by Steve Van Beek

In late afternoon, about 12 miles from last night's camp, we came to a huge rapid, one of the worst I had ever seen in almost 30 years of river running. It was like Ishi Pishi Falls on the Klamath, or Selway Falls, but runnable. A giant landslide had come down a steep tributary on the right, creating a three part rapid. The majority of flow went left, forming a series of huge "V" waves with a big hole at the end, like Lava Falls in the Grand Canyon. On the right, it was like Hance at low water, lots of rocks and smaller holes.

Down below, behind a huge boulder, there were more big holes and what appeared to be a ledge across the left half of the river. It reminded me of the Big Drops in Cataract Canyon (Satan's Gut and Satan's Seat). We couldn't scout it because of cliffs, but it looked like the only route was far right. It was one of those rapids where you say to yourself "I've got a family back home - I sure hope I get to see them again." Given the time of day and the possibility of a flip, we decided to row up a long eddy and camp at a big beach on the right upstream. Needless to say, it wasn't easy to sleep that night.

Day 3

We knew exactly where camp was on the maps, so I tried the GPS again. After replacing the batteries (they were supposed to last two hours, not 15 minutes), I got another good fix. The difference from the maps was not the same as it had been for Camp #1, so I gave up on it. The unit was causing the batteries to go dead anyway, probably due to the high humidity and resulting fog forming inside it, and the difference from our map positions wasn't constant.

We didn't need it anyway as the maps were just fine. I learned when I got home to Grand Junction and replotted the GPS positions that I had been using the wrong scales, and the GPS locations nearly matched the map locations, so I was really glad the maps had been useful. Otherwise, my misplotted GPS positions would have had us rafting mountains and not the river.



Robert Rapkin and Steve Van Beek flipping in Dragon's Teeth

Photo by David Daboll

We were procrastinating; it was time to run the rapid. Steve decided he wasn't up to kayaking it, so we carried his kayak down the upper part and I used it as a safety boat. Fred ran left, down the right side of the big waves, and it was a lot bigger than he expected. He couldn't get as far right as he planned, and couldn't catch the right eddy before the cliffs. Fortunately, he caught one along the right cliff, and managed to climb back up to watch the rafts. David D. and Ryon had a good run far right on the Da, and caught the eddy above the cliff so they could take pics of the rafts. David H., with Chunyu on the first cataraft, ran right center, but couldn't get a right ferry and ended up going through the left side of a big hole. He lost an oar, but managed to put on a spare and got to the right hand chute at the end.

Now that we had a safety raft, I was beginning to feel better. Steve and I carried his kayak back up to the top of the rapid so I could kayak the whole thing, although I had my doubts about the wisdom of this decision. I hadn't paddled big water since 1982, but had the philosophy that once you've learned, you don't forget, kind of like riding a bicycle. I stood on the bank to watch Robert line up, then cursed as he did an unplanned corkscrew flip in the first wave. He popped an oar on a submerged rock so raft didn't hit it quite straight, it turned sideways, then over and sent them both for a very long swim. In a flash, I was in Steve's kayak and through the upper part of the rapid, following Robert's run. Ryon and David D. were still taking pics while Fred and David H. chased after Robert and the raft.

Steve, after hitting a rock and getting a huge Charlie horse on his thigh, had managed to climb on the bottom of the raft. He grabbed Robert but he couldn't hold him and Robert was carried away. Robert saw more of the bottom of a river than he had ever seen in thirty years. Fortunately, both he and the raft were carried far right, because as I looked upstream at the lower left half of the end of the rapid, the part we couldn't scout, it looked like a bad place to spend the rest of your life. Everything was

recirculating.

As I paddled down to the raft, I found both of Robert's oars, balanced them across the kayak and gave them to Chunyu when I caught up. Robert and Steve were on the bottom of their raft, and David H. had it tied to his raft. We got it positioned so he could push it into an eddy, and he managed to do that within a few hundred yards. Robert was exhausted and had a bad cut on his knee, but was mostly upset about being the first to flip. It didn't matter that he'd flipped before, or that it could have happened to anyone (I'd flipped twice before). After fooling around a bit, we got the boat righted, and headed for the first beach we could find, not far downstream. We decided to call the rapid Dragon's Teeth.

I was still kayaking - Steve had such a bad bruise on his thigh that it hurt too much to get into his kayak. Fred realized that in the rush to help Robert and Steve that he hadn't seen my run through Dragon's Teeth. I'd been so worried about them that I hadn't had time to worry about myself or, maybe even worse, to enjoy the run. When Fred asked me about it, I realized no one had seen it, and there weren't any pictures of it. Talk about a blow to a kayaker's ego! Fortunately, Fred believed me when I said it had gone just fine. He'd make a good politician.

Everything on Robert's raft was soaked, so we spread it all out to dry on hot rocks. We were still in marble, but there were lots of dark metamorphic rocks along the bank below camp. An old couple lived near a creek downstream, and sold us some firewood. After a filling dinner, Chunyu and some of the guys went up to their house to visit.

While they were gone, another local came into camp to visit. Since neither Fred, David H. nor I could speak his language, we had to resort to hand signals. We figured out that he wanted us to row him across the river (it was now dark, the river was 100 yards across, and it was flowing 5 miles an hour). We signaled back that it was impossible, and asked if he knew how to swim. That got a laugh out of him, so we made some tea and pretended to understand each other. Finally the others came back, laughing and carrying two pumpkin sized squash. Chunyu told our visitor he would have to wait until morning, and the old man would take him across. It seemed like a really long day, but we only made two miles.

Day 4



Sure enough, at the crack of dawn, the old man gave the guy a ride across, then came to visit us. Chunyu tried out his crossed oar canoe and got the hang of it (your right hand moves the left oar, etc.). Then we talked the old man into trying one of our rafts (with uncrossed oars), and right off the bat he crossed his arms so he could row as if he had crossed oars. David H. got him squared away, and soon he was cruising around the eddy like a pro. By now we'd almost forgotten the traumatic events of yesterday.

As we pushed off I began to realize how lucky I was. In fact, we were all lucky. In a stressful situation, we had worked together quite well, and no one had been seriously injured. Even though we had two docs and a talented physician's assistant, it would have been a real bummer if we had to evacuate someone. I hoped that we didn't come across another rapid as bad as Dragon's Teeth, just the opposite of my original fear of no rapids. One like that was enough.

The gradient picked up, with lots of gravel bar riffles, fast water and squirrely eddies (now where did that adjective come from?). Ryon got in Steve's kayak, I got on the Da. He did great for quite a few miles, then tipped over and swam the biggest rapid - Class 5 on a 10 scale) we'd seen other than Dragon's Teeth and the Yong-Bao bridge rapid. We called it Rickshaw, I can't remember why. Robert picked him up, but didn't have time to get him up front with the kayak before we entered a Class 6 rapid.

It had a helicopter eddy on the left, like the one below Tapeats in the Grand Canyon. A potential keeper, not death defying, but could be a hassle getting out of it. With the weight of Ryon and the water logged kayak behind him, Robert almost didn't make it to the right. On the Da, we followed close behind, ready to follow him into the eddy if necessary. First Robert, then the Da hit a huge cushion, dropping to the right into a large, boiling wave train as we passed the eddy.

I was really impressed by the Da. Fred, a merman in his kayak, was a good choice for first safety boat, and I began to think of the Da as a good #2 safety boat, especially since David D. was so skilled with it

and Ryon was a good match for him, and since it's easy to do a self rescue (climb back on after a flip and paddle the upside down raft to shore).

We had lunch on an island, then put Chunyu in the kayak. A few miles down river he went for a swim on a boiling eddy fence just before we came to a big, open area with five villages scattered above extensive rice paddies. We caught Chunyu (he has learned to trust his life jacket) and found out that one of the villages, Juluwa, had a store that sold beer (packed in by mule), so we walked up to buy some. We were led by a well dressed couple with a baby under an umbrella, real nice folks.

A big fault must cross the river here because the rocks immediately below changed from marble to gneiss as we entered a narrow gorge without any beaches. I got in Steve's kayak since he was still feeling a little sore and Ryon and Chunyu were a bit gun shy. The rapids got bigger, lots of 5-8's, some of which we had to scout. It was lots of fun, not too difficult for a rusty middle aged (who said that?) kayaker. There was rain forest on both sides with very few cleared areas for corn, in contrast to the corn terraces and scrub oak we had seen so far. We camped early yet made 20 miles. It was a big beach on the right, first we had seen in 10 miles. We were making up for the day before.

I had time to check out the rocks and reminisce a bit (don't worry, I won't take three pages this time). Our water filters were failing, probably because the side streams we were getting water from were silty due to recent rains. We had lots of iodine tablets, so we were OK, a relief to David D., who was our water master. We heard birds for the first time, and saw a variety of insects, including a giant praying mantis and a giant green cicada. Since the locals hadn't cleared the rainforest, maybe they hadn't eaten all the insects here (deep fried, of course), and that's why there were birds.

The appearance of the gneiss, granite and migmatite (partially melted then recrystallized rock) was significant. It was harder than the slate and marble, so the river made a more narrow gorge. Boulders carried down during side canyon floods were bigger, so the river had more trouble moving them, resulting in pool and drop rapids. It reminded me of John Wesley Powell when he described his first descent of the Colorado in the Grand Canyon, noting that the appearance of hard black rocks foretold of bigger rapids to come (impending doom?).

Day 5

We were only halfway through the 90 miles of river, yet it seemed like we'd been here for months. What an incredible escape. I kayaked until lunch, when I felt so guilty about depriving Steve of his boat that I let him have it back. One big one after another, Grand Canyon style but warm water. One like Hermit, with 20' rolling waves. One just like Upset, with a hole hungry for boats but a good cheat run on the left though big rollers. We called it Chinese Lunch (it could have eaten boat after boat and been hungry for more). We were all ecstatic.

At lunch, 10 villagers came down to visit. They sat on a log and watched us eat. To avoid the TV feeling, I grabbed a bag of chocolate mints (packaged individually for Halloween) and gave each of them one. One kid tried to eat it, package and all, so I took another one, and with great difficulty managed to get it open with my teeth. The chocolate fell in the sand. I picked it up and pretended to eat it while pretending to throw away the clean package. Needless to say, they cracked up. Crazy Round-Eyes (or in my case, Crazy Long Nose)!

There were three cute young women among the villagers (there really were, this is only Day 5). David H., a true ladies man, talked two of them into getting on his raft and tried to teach them how to row around the eddy. Fred got their Grandma to sit in his kayak. She insisted that it be on the beach, however, and not in the water. He got a good picture - if you're going to use the GPS to locate yourself while kayaking, you should do it on the beach where you can get a fixed position, especially if you're a rank beginner. Fred then pulled out his soap bubbles and entertained them. I'm not sure if they thought the bubbles were fun, or if they were laughing at a round eyes who liked to blow bubbles.





After lunch, there were more biggies. After one rapid, Fred was sponging silty water out of his kayak. I looked down from Robert's raft and asked him if that was diarrhea. Without missing a beat he said no, it was sperm! This response gives new meaning to the old saying, "Kayakers are rapid lovers". Fred was having multiple paddlegasms. So we called the sequence of rapids the Sexy Dozen. I think even an all women's trip would have named them that, although I doubt they could have laid a sponge full of eggs. We finally came to two really nice camps about 19 miles from the last one. It was tempting to stop, but the map showed a bridge another mile downstream, and I wanted to get past it.

At the bridge (Jing Qiao), they didn't sell beer (not that we needed any more). While talking to a guy who lived there, Chunyu found out there was a BFR downstream. He couldn't quite understand the guy's dialect, so the guy held his hands as far apart as possible, made the universal "finger" sign, moved his hand up and down like a sine wave, then pointed downstream. Fred witnessed this pantomime, and asked Chunyu what he meant. Chunyu said "Big bad word rapid downstream." Fred immediately repeated the pantomime for those of us on the beach below, and yelled "Big Fucking Rapid" ahead, thus the acronym. To add to our anxiety, it began to rain and almost never stopped for a day and a half.

There was a nice camp about 100 yards upstream from the eddy at the bridge. After some discussion, we decided to pull the rafts up a riffle to the camp rather than go on. The rain stopped long enough for us to set up tents, watch an incredible rainbow (another good omen), cook and eat dinner.

For river food, we had Chinese-American. For breakfasts, we had canned ham and either pancakes or eggs. For lunch, we had snack type food - fruit, nuts, kippers (etc), crackers, PB and J, candy or cookies, same old stuff we eat in the US. For dinner, we had 10 meals worth of various canned meats, rice or noodles, spices and sauce mixes (lots of fresh garlic and Chinese red peppers), and a variety of vegies to add to the hot dish and to make a salad. Basically there were no menus, we just grabbed what looked good and hoped there was enough for the meal and for the trip.

Each night, a couple of guys would volunteer to make dinner, and that night Robert and Ryon took their turn. We had a fantastic concoction, I wish I had written it down. I'd been worried at the beginning of

the trip about not having any women along to make sure we ate balanced meals (pardon my lack of faith in the typical American male's taste buds, I'm married), but by now I was really pleased with the group effort. We didn't even need to designate cooking crews and a schedule, it just happened.

Day 6

BFR day plus more. Six of us got up early and hiked a mile down river to look at BFR in the rain. It deserved its name. The whole river funneled down to half its width and made a 25' standing wave, with the top 10' breaking upwards and downstream like a rooster tail. It was probably runnable, but the next wave was a sure flipper. Fortunately there was a cheat run on the far left, but even there the waves were really big. We walked back to camp, glad to have scouted it, had breakfast and packed up wet tents during a break in the storm, and took off.

We did fine in BFR, starting a few feet off the left cliff, regrouping in a big eddy down below. However, 500 yards downstream, just around the bend, was another Class 10. It was as big as BFR but had a bus sized hole in the middle. Again, there was a cheat run, this time far right, boiling and wet but runnable. After getting soaked in BFR, and scouting both rapids in the rain, we were so wet it didn't matter. Fortunately, it wasn't cold, and we all had good runs. We called it Chinese Laundry because it was so foamy.

Ganbei was next. It means "bottoms up" in Chinese. Three Class 10's in less than a mile! It was just like BFR, but getting left was going to require some work. Two 10' high left laterals, the second one breaking, funneled everything into the middle, which would flip a raft for sure. We couldn't see around the bend, and we couldn't afford to flip both rafts at the same time. Robert suggested I row since it looked like the best run was a snout boat run, and I had a lot of snout boat (giant cataraft) experience.

The run was a down river left ferry busting over both laterals, then a hard pivot to hit the side of the huge wave train straight on. Fred had a good run, but the Da with David D. and Ryon flipped. They did a quick self rescue but the fact is that a Chinese river flipped a Russian boat run by Americans. The Chinese seem to have the upper hand over the Russians when it comes to the transition from communism to free markets; maybe this is true of their rivers as well.

I had a good run with Robert's boat but David H. didn't get quite far enough left and didn't have time to finish pivoting, so he and Chunyu went for a swim. Fortunately, we caught them immediately in a big eddy. Chunyu had immediately climbed on the bottom of the raft and helped David H. on, so they were in good spirits when we got to them. We righted the boat and were underway in record time. Chunyu, who claimed he could swim (but didn't have Grand Canyon experience), was rapidly gaining confidence in his life jacket. Secretly, everyone, including David, and especially Robert, felt better about his flip in Dragon's Teeth. This river definitely demanded respect, although we later learned that the entire section we're running will be flooded by the reservoir behind the Xiawan dam by 2007.

It was still raining, so there was no point in stopping to dry gear. I've got to do something about those river bags. We were still in a granite-gneiss gorge, no camps anywhere, so we kept going. There were more rapids, lots of 7-8's. We called one of them Mile Long because that's how far Steve said he swam before we could rescue him. By now we had dropped so many feet from the put-in that I was beginning to think we might encounter rapids going uphill to the Man Wan Reservoir. We finally came to a big beach on the left, after making 20 miles that day.

A good indication of how well the eight of us were getting along after several days of running huge rapids and righting flipped boats was the fact that we cooperated in a very efficient effort to set up tarps in a monsoon so we could cook and eat dinner. Dinner was good, it stopped raining just long enough to set up wet tents, and the folks with wet sleeping bags didn't turn into flaming assholes. I'm sure the fact that we were so high on the big water and the people and were absolutely ravenous helped, but I was

still really impressed.

Day 7

The river rose two feet that night, then dropped. The next morning it stopped raining, the river mellowed out (only 4-6's, and just at lunch time we found Beer Bridge (really Mang Jie Du). Nice camp that night too, got everything dried out and had a party. Our last night on the river, next day we would reach the Man Wan Reservoir. Day 7 wasn't really a short day (we made 20 miles), but it was way shorter than the several thousand miles we'd made on Friday the 13th. Plus, you and I need a breather from all this finger and eye hyperactivity (I decided to use a psychological rather than medical term this time). Take a potty break or grab a drink so you can go later.

Day 8

To my surprise, there was a Class 5 rapid a short ways upstream from the confluence with the Yangbi. I bet there were good rapids all the way to Man Wan, but the newly filled dam (it filled in 1994, two years ahead of schedule) had flooded them. When we reached the confluence after floating the Yangbi in 1994, we had camped on a huge sandbar on the upstream right side. It was gone, moved to downstream on the left side below the confluence. The lake was lower, and there was a small rapid at the confluence. The Yangbi was as muddy and foamy as in 1994, making the slightly silty Mekong seem clean in comparison.

We had seen a floating drill rig a mile below the confluence in 1994. It was gone, but numerous tunnels had been drilled into the canyon walls, probably for dam engineering purposes. The drillers and their beer store were gone, too (not that we needed any more). About 10 miles downstream we met a motor boat and after waiting a couple of hours for the driver to finish an errand, he towed us to the same logging town we had been to in 1994. There were a couple of pretty women (not withstanding the fact that this was day 8 of an all male trip) on the boat with a load of persimmons for sale. Fred had a great time entertaining them with soap bubbles. The wind generated by our five mile per hour progress meant he didn't have to blow, and that was a treat for him as well. I'm still not sure if I should tell his wife about his bubblephilia problem.

By the time we got to the village it was dark. We left the rafts tied up across the lake at the abandoned rice paddy we had camped on in '94, and motored across to the village for dinner. I found the restaurant where we had tea (they recognized me, or maybe all round eyes look alike), and Chunyu ordered dinner for us. Fresh chicken soup, they butchered the chickens in a corner of the restaurant while we watched, and Ryon, the star baseball catcher, caught the head. The Chinese don't debone meat, they just chop it up, feet, head, organs and all. It's a food lottery, and you just chew the meat off the bones and throw them on the table (don't read this if you're a veghead or have trouble with natural waste products).

After dinner we motored back to the rice paddy, laid out the tarps and set up the tents on them. I had noticed the characteristic smell of night soil (Chinese fertilizer, they recycle all organic products), and told everyone they'd be glad we set up camp in the dark. In the morning we'd completely understand Yin and Yang as it applied to campsites.

Day 9

The rice paddy was too gross to do a takeout on, so we towed the rafts out to the middle of the lake and took out on the motorboat, kind of fun, not difficult. We made it to the Man Wan dam by 3 pm, met Wang Jui with the bus and truck, and spent the night there. According to David H., we were experiencing retox, the transition back to motors and telephones. Wang Jui told us there had been a 6.5 quake 80 miles northwest of Kunming which killed 44 and left 20,000 homeless. It had occurred while we were scouting BFR, but we were 200 miles away and hadn't felt it.

Saturday, October 28

On the drive back to Kunming, David H. had the driver play the Beethoven's 9th Symphony tape (there's some politically correct jargon for this act, but I can't remember it, something like "coming full circle," ask Steve what he really meant). The quake had done serious damage to the road back to Kunming. It was slow going, but we made it in one day (no big truck traffic jams like last year). Knowing this was earthquake country, I had asked all participants to sign a release regarding river tsunamis; fortunately for us none of the major faults we crossed had been active. During the drive we decided to call the stretch of river we had run the Yong-Bao Gorge of the Mekong after the bridge near the put-in. Chunyu told us that the Chinese name for Mekong, "Lancang", means fast and turbulent, a good name for it.

Sunday, October 29

The days are getting shorter, cramps in my fingers. The truck wasn't going to arrive in the afternoon, so we went shopping. I had a great shaded relief map of Yunnan with rivers, mountains, roads, and towns that the others wanted to buy, so we went looking for it. We found it in the fourth book store we came to, our luck was holding out. Then we browsed, visited a pagoda and found a paint store that sold acetone for use in patching the rafts. Since we couldn't read the label, we convinced the shopkeeper to open the bottles for us. First bottle was methyl alcohol; I made like it was drinkable and she got all excited - no-no-no! David H. and Fred both sniffed the second one and agreed with me that it was acetone. I'm sure she thought we were glue sniffers when we bought it and walked away laughing.

Then we chanced on a big grocery store, where I was impressed by the variety of food that was available compared to 1994. We also found snake wine, a consumable liquor with snakes, lizards and frogs preserved in it. It's quite impressive unless you're a member of the Association for Prevention of Cruelty to Snake Lovers. Fred and Ryon bought some, Fred for his office so his cardiac patients would feel more comfortable, and Ryon to prove to his dad and grandfather that you didn't have to be 21 to drink like a man. The truck showed up at 4 pm, so we rushed over, unloaded it, cleaned everything and spread the tents and boats out to dry.

Monday, October 30

We had time for a trip to the Stone Forest, a Chinese tourist trap with unusual karst topography. Just before we left, Ryon decided to buy a hand carved chop (stamp) for his grandfather, Gordon. The lady didn't speak English, so we got Chunyu to tell her what Ryon wanted. You should have seen the look on her face when Chunyu drew the Chinese symbol for the Men's Room!

We had a very pleasant visit to the Stone Forest Provincial Park, along with a million Chinese. We took an end-of-trip group picture, noticed that the Chinese had respected the law about not eating the wildlife (large, beautiful green spiders were abundant) and I found some pretty Sun Yi minority nationality costumes for my kids, Travis and Carmen.

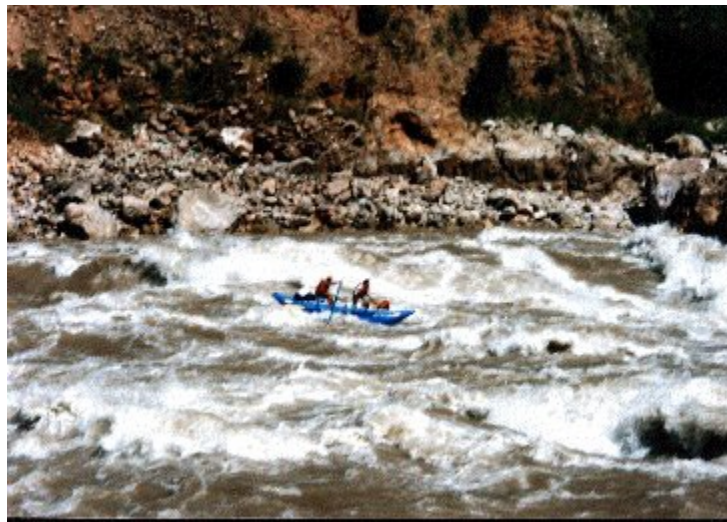
On our return, we repacked all the river gear and headed to the Yunnan Minority Restaurant for our farewell banquet. It seemed like we'd been feasting for weeks. It was a great show, and we bought Wang Jui a bouquet of flowers to show our appreciation for making sure the trip logistics were so well organized. During dinner, we met some of the Earth River passengers. They'd had a good trip on a tributary to the Yangtze that enters the Great Bend of the Yangtze, and Chunyu was right - we had made the first descent.

October 31, Halloween

Pagan holidays are catching on in China - the Holiday Inn in Kunming was advertising a Halloween Party for this evening. Unfortunately, we had to leave for Hong Kong. After saying our goodbyes to

Steve, who had more research to do, and to Chunyu, Wang Jui and Wang Shide, we flew away. After sailing through Hong Kong Customs, Robert left to visit a friend, and the rest of us decided to be tourists. We walked the riverfront, took the ferry to Hong Kong island, took the tram to the top of the hill, and watched the smog. Retox was nearly complete. We had our first non-Chinese meal in three weeks at an Indian restaurant, a nice change of pace.

Fred and David H. flew away to Singapore to visit some of David's relatives, and the next morning David D., Ryon and I flew to the US and home. Everyone has contacted me to let me know they and their equipment made it back safely. We all agree - China is definitely not what Hillary and the Press make it out to be. It's really an exhilarating experience (talk to my punstructor if you want lessons).



Dragon's Teeth

By Steve Van Beek

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Dragon's Teeth Rapid on The Mekong River. The wave in the background is about 20 feet high. The rapid was formed by a major landslide that occurred as a result of two M=7+ earthquakes that struck 13 minutes apart in 1988. Photo by Lori Golze.

The Han villagers won't venture near the Lancang. They say a dragon lives deep beneath its roiling surface. We believe them. We now believe that every landform in China--mountains, rivers, plateaus--is inhabited by dragons. Occasionally, they rear their backs and spill houses down mountain sides. Only 150 miles farther north, one did and scores died. Perhaps we were to blame. Perhaps a Subterranean dragon, wanting a closer look at the strangers in its midst raised its head. We'll never know. We were pre-occupied in trying to subdue by our own dragon and his teeth were very sharp.

The Chinese ideograph for "Lancang" translates as "turbulent". Its downstream neighbors know the river as the Mekong. The world's 11th longest river, it rises in Tibet and flows 2,800 miles through six countries before emptying into the South China Sea. It could one day rank among the world's premier boating rivers. If it doesn't eat all the rafters and kayakers first.

Our eight-man Sino-American expedition was to be the first to descend a 110-mile portion of the Lancang that cuts through deep marble and granite gorges in Yunnan, China's southernmost province. All of us were whitewater veterans. Han Chunyu, a Geography professor at Beijing University, represented the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The Earth Science Expeditions team led by Peter Winn included three Bay area men--David Hettig and Fred St. Goar of Menlo Park, and Robert Rabkin of Sausalito. David Daboll divides his time between Colorado and Africa, Ryon Swann hails from Idaho, and I shuttle between San Francisco and Bangkok.

After a two-day drive west from Kunming, Yunnan's capital, we put in just above the Baoshan bridge. It crosses the famed Burma Road, built during World War Two to link Kunming with Allied armies in the Burmese and Indian theaters. We rowed two two-person 16-ft catarafts and a two-person Russian-built paddlecat--two pontoons bound by a metal frame. Fred and I kayaked. Once below the bridge, we left all roads behind and entered a world devoid of mechanical sounds.

The mountains rose straight out of the water to a height of 3,000 feet, the mark of a young valley. Clinging to the hillsides, Han farmers, China's dominant race, stairstep their fields from the ridges to within 40 feet of the river, leaving the riparian trees to halt erosion. The region's principal minorities the Bai and Yi, shy away from large rivers, believing them to be filled with evil spirits. They prefer to live along the smaller tributaries that feed the Lancang.

The Han, too, give the river wide berth. During the monsoon season--Yunnan is sub-tropical, boasting half of China's plant species--the river can rise 40 feet. By late October, the monsoon had abated but the river was still running at 28,700 cubic feet per second (cfs), larger than the Colorado at full flow.

The first two days brought large rapids but nothing of major consequence. The river seemed to be testing us. It was near the end of the second day after we'd beached our boats and climbed half an hour up a steep ravine to Ta Xi Zhai village, that we learned about Dragon's Teeth, or so we would name it, the privilege accorded those making a first descent.

The trail climbed along a violent stream brown with silt. High up both banks, the earth was muddy and the grass had been steamrolled. The stench of dead animals was in the air. Farmers told us a huge flood had ripped through the village three weeks before. Such was its ferocity that it had torn away half of a very substantial stone bridge. The villagers had other surprises to report.

"It has also shifted the avalanche just downriver," they said.

"Avalanche?", we said when Chunyu had translated for us. No landslide appeared on our Chinese, Russian, or American maps.

"There was an earthquake six years ago. A landslide filled part of the river. Now, the floods have shifted it."

"You've seen this?"

"From upriver."

"No closer?"

Their faces creased. "The river is very big," they whispered. "Too big."

We hadn't seen a single boat in two days. Villagers fished from the river's banks and didn't challenge its dominion. "It's too swift. We can't even cross it." Farther downstream, we would find villagers on opposite banks speaking two different dialects.

We were just above the old Jihong Bridge dating from 105 B.C. and linking two portions of the Southern Silk Road. On crossing it, Marco Polo described the Lancang as "terrifying". In 1475, the bridge had been reinforced with 18 iron chains spanning the 280-foot-wide chasm. It remained China's

oldest bridge until a 1986 earthquake destroyed it. It hadn't been re-built. In 1988, a shrug of dragon shoulders had made the river even more turbulent.

The river dragon, we felt, would be more accommodating. After all, we were using high-tech equipment made of space-age plastic and hypalon. For us, it would be no problem to slip quietly across its back.

Our hubris lasted about 20 minutes. Back on the river, we could see that the entire northern face of the 2,000-foot mountain was gone. There was only one place for it to go. We were more than a mile away when we heard the roar. All talk ceased. Soon we could see a flat horizon line broken by a hump over which tons of water were pouring. No doubt the hump was a large boulder, perhaps it was our dragon. Behind it would be a large hole. Far beyond the sight line was a mid-river boulder the size of a three-story house. It would be dangerous to plummet into an abyss without a thorough scout of the terrain. Mooring on the right bank, we walked to its edge.

Reasonably flat up to this point, the Lancang accelerated sharply, 30,000 cfs of water funneling into a channel reduced to half width and running 5-6 miles an hour, very fast for a large river. The gradient had sharpened, dropping 18 feet in half a mile. The channel ran for 1,800 feet, its boiling surface white with foam.

A rock wall hemmed the left; a rock garden, the right. In the middle, below the elephantine boulder were two holes, three feet deep and 12 feet across. Holes are created when a river pours over an obstruction and its force literally digs a hole in the water. If it folds back on itself, it becomes a "keeper"; get in it and you don't get out. Fortunately, the water was moving out of the lower end so anyone caught in it would be tumbled and thrashed but would eventually be ejected.

Beyond it was a second set of problems. One third in from the right bank was the house-sized boulder and beyond it, another huge hole. We clambered along the cliff face until we were even with it but there were no footholds to allow us to move farther downriver. We would have worked out the final route blindly. As we were looking cross-river, someone said "uh oh".

Perhaps 200 feet downriver from the hole, a thin line ran about three-fifths of the way across the river from the opposite bank. A ledge, six feet high.

We watched it in silence, hoping it wasn't what we suspected it to be. Finally someone said it: "The water is re-circulating," i.e. a keeper. If one missed the upper eddy, he had to slip left around the huge boulder and hope he would be kicked to the right of the hole. With a hole, a miss is as good as a mile; one needs only an inch between it and himself to skirt it. Without the essential inch, he would be eaten by the hole. His boat out of control, he would be pulled over the ledge. Dragon's Teeth held every nightmare a river has ever dreamed up for a kayaker or rafter.

We weighed our options. And then rejected them one by one: the walls were too high to scale, there was no purchase for a portage, and no roads out. That left us one choice.

The sun dipped towards the canyon rim.

"Let's leave it for today," said Peter, breaking the silence. "If we have a flip, we'll have a hell of a time trying to sort ourselves out in the dark. Let's try it in the morning."

Camping on a small upstream beach we talked of new theories of evolution and the movements of mountains. We watched millions of brilliant stars in a black sky, and tried to ignore the roar that would fill our ears all night long, drowning out even the crickets.

After breakfast, we set off on another scout. The river had changed overnight, dropping slightly and revealing more rocks. We would have to re-plot our course.

Most rivers of the world come with maps sketched by previous rafters. A first decent means that one has to draw his maps as he goes. So we scouted, again, and each boat chose its route.

Fred, the group's best kayaker, decided to challenge the toughest part of the river, the laterals on the left. We watched with bated breath as he made a spectacular run, disappearing beneath the waves, being swallowed so we saw only the bottom of his kayak, making a miraculous recovery and slicing cleanly to the bottom of the wave train. The paddler ran far right and slipped between the rocks and the hole, pulling into the eddy before edging right around the boulder.

Then came time for the first raft. David Hettig and Han Chunyu lined up to run right but were pushed by the waves into the upper hole. The force of the water tore away an oar and spun the boat so it headed towards the huge boulder backwards. David reacted with lightning speed, pulling out his knife to cut loose a spare oar lashed to the pontoon. He regained control and pointed downstream moments before he would have hit the boulder. But again the river played with him, sucking him into the lower hole. Fortunately, the raft was large enough to plow through it. It then headed to the right and into a chute that slide him past the ledges. We never found the oar.

Peter had positioned my kayak in the lower eddy as a safety boat, so I rafted with Robert, veteran of major North and South American rivers. We fell off the lip and into the green tongue without a problem. But then something went wrong. Bounced off a rock, the rear of the left pontoon was sucked into the hole. Seeing the right pontoon rising into the air, I threw myself towards it, but too late. It shot upwards and I felt myself falling backwards into the water.

The raft came down on top of me upside down. With the churning water confounding my mental compass, instinct took over. I swam out of the blackness and scrambled to the top of the upturned boat.

Robert had disappeared. After long moments, he re-surfaced near the boat and I grabbed his wrist and he mine. Adrenaline is a powerful motivator but it can also exhaust one far quicker than ordinary exertion. Robert looked up at me and said "I've smashed my knee. I don't have the energy to get aboard."

I tried to pull him up but the pontoon was too big and he was too heavy. We were now out of control, upside down, and oarless. The eddy was beyond reach. The raging river now had us firmly in its thrall.

The boulder grew enormous and we slammed into it with an audible crunch. I felt Robert release his grip and slip beneath the waves. "Oh god," I thought, "where is he?"

The raft was pinned to the upstream face of the boulder but almost immediately began rolling across it to the left, headed for the hole and the ledges beyond. From my perch, I looked down into an enormous void, a black abyss in a raging white river, the dragon's mouth. What happened next I don't know but I felt the raft kick to the right and into calmer water. The dragon had spit me out.

But where was Robert? He could only have entered the maw. If he was still there, he'd be dead. Seven pairs of panicked eyes scanned up and down the river but there was no sign of him. Five seconds passed, then ten seconds, and beyond. Amazing quantities of thought can pass through the mind in a dozen seconds.

At last, his head broke the surface to the left of the raft. His eyes were rolling and it was obvious he had little strength. He was being swept towards the ledges when Fred kayaked in and gave him a solid purchase. With me grabbing his lifevest, and Fred pushing, we got him onto the upturned raft. To our relief, the raft slowly drifted towards the right bank, missing the ledges and taking a wild ride through the chute and into smooth water. Once in calm water, Robert recovered quickly.

After a long struggle, we muscled the boat into an eddy and righted it. The dry bags had leaked and several of us would spend the night in soggy sleeping bags. Because it was already mid-afternoon, we

decided to find a beach and dry out. From upstream, Dragon's Teeth seemed to purr. We had made one mile the entire day.

The remainder of the journey would be a series of sleigh rides through one huge rapid after another, six Class 10s on a portion one-third that of the Colorado which holds three of America's ten Class 10 rapids. We flipped rafts, kayaks and the paddle cat and only Fred completed the run unscathed.

It ended at the controversial Manwan Dam, the first of eight the Chinese plan to build on the Lancang. As we surveyed the mass of concrete blocking the river, we mused on what the dragons were thinking.

Five days into our journey, we had experienced the dragon's power. A solar eclipse that darkened Cambodia's Angkor Wat disturbed a Chinese dragon and the resultant earthquake killed 50 people in Wuding just to the north. In this fragile earth where the slightest shift could level mountains, the dam seemed an act of supreme hubris. Perhaps it would withstand the dragon's shrug. And then we remembered our own hubris on approaching Dragon's Teeth and wondered.

Thrills and Danger During First Expedition of the Lancang

By Fred St. Goar

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The Bai peasant woman and her husband expressed their condolences that our adventure on the Mekong River was heading towards an early end. The Bai are one of the many Chinese minority tribes living along the banks of the river as it runs through Yunnan Province parallel to the Burmese (Myanmar) border. The couple described a spot one day's journey downstream where a massive landslide had blocked the river gorge, causing a long, impassible "waterfall."

"How big?" we inquired. They didn't know. There were too intimidated to get near it. Being the first to navigate a remote river is an honor with a mixed blessing. There is the thrill of being first, coupled with the danger of having no idea what lies around the next bend. I was part of the pioneering Sino-American expedition hoping to descent by raft and kayak through the upper gorges of the Mekong, which the Chinese call the Lancang, or "wild and turbulent."

My first exposure to kayaking was in 1974 in Rennes. While I frequently spent weekends "studying" in the *Bar de la Poste* with the likes of David McKean, Corb Ardrey, Sylvia Wolf, Sam Rudman, Mary Sloane, Ian Wollen, Libby Isaacson, Bill Riordan and Cassy Gardner, fellow SYAer New Logan was touring the rivers of Brittany with the Rennes kayaking club. He would come in Monday mornings with tales of great adventures. I was inspired. I went to Dartmouth in part because of its tradition of peripatetic river runners.

I quickly took to the sport and I've been hooked ever since; and when Peter Winn, a geologist and former Grand Canyon river guide invited me to join the Lancang expedition, I jumped at the opportunity.

The eight members of the trip, all experienced river runners, gathered in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province. Peter had been in Kunming in 1989 on a previous, unsuccessful attempt to organize a trip on the Mekong. He was amazed how the city residents now sought eye contact with foreigners and smiled. Women wore makeup and brightly colored clothes - quite a change in six years.

We packed our gear into a truck and spent two epic days bouncing west along the original Burma road to the river. The inhabitants of the countryside and numerous small villages we passed through showed

no tendency towards leisure. Every available set of hands labored in the mile-after-mile of fields and rice paddies.

The Lancang River lived up to its name. We descended 110 miles through the 5000 foot deep Yong Bao Gorge into which there was no road access. The volume of water was twice the size of the Grand Canyon and the rapids too numerous to count or name. The lack of correlation between our WWII topo maps and the river left us often questioning the wisdom of our venture.

The poorly accessible banks of the gorge were inhabited primarily by minority tribes living on rice, corn and squash. Han, or mainstream Chinese, influence was limited. It was not uncommon to find families living across the river from each other speaking completely different dialects.

The locals were intrigued by the strange foreigners descending their river. Our interactions with them were the high point of the trip. Most questioned our sanity. Our synthetic rafts and kayaks were a novelty. Their bamboo rafts and dugout canoes were no match for all but a limited portion of the river. But we, too, had our work cut out for us. The rafts flipped on four separate occasions and the two of us kayaking were frequently called upon to pick up the pieces. Luckily, there was no bodily harm, just a few soggy sleeping bags.

We successfully navigated both the "waterfall," (a one mile stretch with house-sized boulders and fifteen foot waves) which we named "Dragon's Teeth," as well as the rest of the river. The "Dragon's Teeth" landslide was just upriver from the remnants of the Jihong Bridge which dates back to 128 BC, and was part of the Southern Silk Road, now only a footpath. Marco Polo had crossed it and described the river below as terrifying.

The nine-day voyage ended on the tranquil Manwan Dam Lake, the first and only dam built on the Lancang. The large hydropower plant associated with the dam was a rude return to civilization and impressed upon our group the vulnerability of this extremely remote area. Six more large dams are planned for the Lancang. Toxic wastes flowing into the river from unregulated paper mills are increasing.

China, the sleeping dragon, is waking. The Chinese are scouting for a new path, and the massive nation needs to be reckoned with. The opportunity to learn from the inside the subtleties of this challenging country is important for developing a stable and harmonious relationship. I congratulate SYA for taking advantage of such an opportunity with its Beijing program.