

Happy Chinese New Year 2003 “The Year of the Goat”

Leticia and I wish you and your family good health and happiness all year round and always. *Samran*

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A Long Road to Beijing

(8,668 words)

Samran Sombatpanit, WASWC President

As I had to go to Beijing to meet with the Chinese officials in connection with the hosting of the secretariat of the WASWC in the second quarter of December 2002, I planned the trip so that I could visit some other areas and people that I have known in China. My journey began in Kunming in the southwestern part of the country and ended in Beijing in the northeastern part, a distance of approximately 5,000 km, altogether taking 23 days. Though the journey was not a smooth one, the places and people I visited and things I saw are worth recording and passing on to friends and colleagues.

Attending an ethnic conference in Yunnan

I landed in Kunming, Yunnan Province, on December 1 with my two Thai friends, Paiboon and Chlit, who came to attend the same Fourth Conference on Hani/Akha Culture. Hani or Akha are a minority group living in the border areas of China, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos. The organizers had made an excellent conference program including taking participants to visit various hills and communities so that we could see how the Hani and related minority groups live in this country. What attracted me to this conference was the subject of rice terraces – a prominent soil conservation practice of the tribal people – in the program. Rice terraces are highly efficient and sustainable but they do need good and continual maintenance if they are to be long lasting. The organizing committee was composed of both Hani and Han Chinese, headed by Mr Li Qibo, a Hani. There were also several schoolteachers, geographers and anthropologists. Participants, about 100 in all, came from Europe, Australia, other Asian countries, as well as from within China.

During the 10 days of the conference, we had a chance to learn much about this Hani minority, which is also called Akha as well as E-kaw. Presentations were given about their cultural heritage, language, way of life, and their preservation of both culture and landscape. We were brought to various communities and received a warm welcome everywhere we went. Hani people, more than one million in China, live mainly in the prefecture of Honghe and Yuanyang in the southeastern part of Yunnan Province. Counting those living in neighboring countries, Hani total around 2 million people. We were brought to stay at the cities of Yuanyang, Honghe and Jianshui and visited several townships and villages where the minority people live, so we saw how they farm the land – mostly rice terraces, and some sugarcane and banana. Understandably, this conference that was heavily supported by local governments, was multipurpose: besides the cultural exchange among Hani people in various countries and foreign scholars, the event was to document the Hani rice terraces (133 sq km in this prefecture and said to be most spectacular in Asia) for Unesco to considering as a World Heritage Site. Another purpose was to promote tourism and the meeting was arranged to coincide with the local New Year where the traditional Hani Long Table Festival would take place on December 6 in Hani

townships and villages. We were brought to a township perched on a high hill overlooking Honghe City, to join the festival where around 600 dinner tables were aligned continuously along the main street, all being covered with traditional Hani food, with thousands of local people and guests enjoying their dinner. Hani and other ethnic minorities music was played as entertain.

The hospitality of people of China is legendary indeed and we were treated very well for these 10 days. At the end of the conference I gave a short talk about terraces. I mentioned that the terraces were presented at this meeting mostly as part of Hani culture, to be an important medium for tourism development. I mentioned the example of the rice terraces of Banaue in the Philippines and the effects of tourism – large number of farmers are now working to earn money from tourism and do not have time to maintain the structures. As a result, many terraces have crumbled. I recommended that they visit the Philippines and find out the pros and cons as the Philippines opened up their terraces for tourism more than 40 years ago. I also suggested that researchers from agricultural university should be invited to study the agronomic, pedologic and conservation aspects of these terraces.

This conference was very memorable and will be long remembered. All organizing committee members were very well informed and helpful. The sight that will remain with me for a long time came when we arrived at Yuanyang City on December 2. There were around 1,000 locals dressing in their colorful traditional costumes lining up from the city gate to the city proper to welcome us. Musicians played very lively tunes on traditional instruments and the rest danced, meanwhile several beautiful girls offered us rice wine from bamboo cups. Music and dance were performed on several occasions during the conference. As for the subject itself, I feel China has progressed well in the human rights. All 56 minority groups of China are considered 'citizens' of the country, unlike some adjoining countries, for example Thailand, that regard tribal people as 'illegal immigrants'. It will take a very long time for Hani/Akha in those countries to enjoy the privileges of legally being part of a country's population.

It was announced at the end that the Fifth Conference on Hani/Akha Culture will take place in Kengtung, Myanmar from December 27, 2005 to January 6, 2006.

Visiting Yunnan Agricultural University

My Thai colleagues and I were brought back to the city of Kunming on December 10 after having traveled in the hills of SE Yunnan for about 1,000 km. We said good bye to the organizers and other participants and went with Prof Wu Bo Zhi (a WASWC member) to Yunnan Agricultural University where he is teaching soil and water conservation while also holding the post of the Dean of the Academic Division. The main purpose of this short visit was to finish the WOCAT questionnaires on the interesting SWC measure called 'polythene mulch' that is now practiced by around one million Yunnan farmers, not counting those in other provinces. This practice involves the use of thin plastic sheets to cover the ground around the cash-generating crops. There are many benefits pertaining to it, so the government subsidizes its use, but farmers have to pay a part of the cost too. The use of it had attracted the attention of the EU and Prof Wu has been offered funding to carry out research on this subject.

We stayed at the guesthouse of the university for two days, during which time we had a chance to visit and discuss things with academics of the university including President Chen Hairu, about the possibility of some joint projects involving the exchange of scientists with Thailand, especially from Chiang Mai University, and other countries. And we went to visit Dr Huang Bizhi at the Yunnan Beef Cattle and Pasture Research Centre. Dr Huang, another WASWC member and a principal cooperator of Prof Wu in the EU polythene mulch project, explained to us the importance of the pastureland around the city of Kunming, located some 2,000 m asl, and which is considered the best in Yunnan. The Research Centre belongs to the Pasture Research Institute, one of the six of the Yunnan Agriculture Department. Nearby, there is one farm that raises pigeon for meat, a popular food in this Chinese province.

We had a chance to look around Kunming and found that this city of 3 million people has a lot to offer to visitors. This is the capital and is located near the center of the province of Yunnan. Yunnan is considered the most exotic province of China, with large number of minority ethnic groups (25 of the 56 groups of China). It has a diversity of landscapes with a karst topography. It has high mountains going up to 6,740 m with snow cover all year round. Interestingly, many important rivers in this region flow through Yunnan, such as the *Salween* flows to Myanmar, the *Mekong* to Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, the *Red River* to Vietnam, and the *Yangtze* to the East China Sea. Earlier in the year I came to Yunnan with some Thai friends and found the province to be very interesting in several aspects and thought that, with the present open-country policy of the Chinese government, there is a great opportunity for tourists and travelers alike to visit and learn about this great country. Kunming is the southwestern gateway of China. Yunnan has an area little more than three-fourths that of Thailand.

Visiting the Guizhou Academy of Agricultural Sciences

My two Thai friends departed for home but I continued my journey to Guiyang by train on the evening of December 12. Before Prof Wu saw me off at the Kunming railway station for an 11-hour train ride, he offered me a large bowl of the 'cross-bridge rice noodle', a kind of noodles with long history and one of the best-known dishes of Kunming and Yunnan.

On December 13, upon my arrival in Guiyang City, the capital of Guizhou Province, Prof Chen Xuhui, a professor emeritus of the Guizhou Academy of Agricultural Sciences (GAAS), drove me to Luodian, a county close to the border with Guangxi Autonomous Region. Along the 200-km distance we passed through the beautiful karst landscape, with streams flowing slowly through cone-shaped limestone mountains. One major stream from this area flows through Guangxi and Guangdong, to become the river *Pearl* that empties into the South China Sea after passing through Guangzhou, the third largest city of China.

We went to the soil conservation on sloping land site that the GAAS has developed for research with IBSRAM and IDRC over more than 10 years. All plots, tools and equipment were well kept, but as the growing season had just passed the experimental crops could not be seen. GAAS was an important partner in the *ASIALAND* Network that IBSRAM coordinated and the alley cropping technology has now become well adopted in many areas of Luodian County. Guizhou is considered one of the poorest provinces of China, so it has to preserve its land and water resources very well. Prof Chen has maintained a very good relationship with people living around the site.

Next day, December 14, Prof Chen took me to the GAAS, which is located in the northern suburb of Guiyang, to meet with several administrators including Prof Zuo-yi Liu, President, Prof Li Guilian, Vice President and Prof Sun Reifen, Director of Soil and Fertilizer Institute. The GAAS was established in 1905 during the time of the last emperor of China. Earlier, in the Qing Dynasty, it was an experimental station. The GAAS has an area close to 3 sq km. The Academy has several institutes, all dedicated to agricultural research. It has a large number of research projects run in cooperation with several domestic and foreign institutions. Mr Deng Xiaoping came to visit the Academy in July 1987. The Academy has a big plan of expanding its work and is now constructing one large laboratory building and will restructure the whole area. Prof Liu is a young academic who has spent some time in Western countries and who has a long-term vision of what the GAAS should do. We therefore had a very constructive talk about the entry of China into the WTO in particular and world community in general, and the country's attempt to follow the modern world in certain aspects such as sanitation (toilets, wastewater management), etc.

The Academy hosted a lunch for me at the scenic area of Ping-chow Bridge, near Huaxi, the site of the Guizhou Agricultural University, which I really enjoyed and appreciated. Before we said good bye, President Liu assured me that there would be several researchers who would apply for membership in WASWC through Prof Li Rui, our Vice President for China. WASWC

is considered here today as an institution that may provide knowledge and coordination in research with institutions in other countries.

After lunch Prof Chen left me with the family of Li Moulin in the eastern suburb of Guiyang, where I stayed for a short period.

Staying with a Chinese family in Guiyang

My fifth visit to China in six years coincided with my first ever visit to a Chinese home. Almost as a rule, your Chinese friends will host any function at a hotel, restaurant or at their work place. I therefore never had a chance to see how a Chinese family lived.

But my chance came as a surprise. While I was taking a train from Guiyang to Kunming on the night of September 11/12, 2001 (the time when the WTC in New York was attacked!) I met a small female train attendant, called Li Moulin, who was looking after the passengers in the car that I traveled in. She spoke some English and became curious to know what I was doing in China and travelling along with Chinese people in a hard-bed compartment. We had had good, but broken, conversation during that evening which turned out to be stimulus to know each other more. After I returned from China we exchanged news by e-mail, and upon knowing I was coming again her parents invited me to stay with them. To visit a family in Guizhou is special also in that this province is among the poorest and most backward in China. It meant that I would see people, tradition and landscape that had not changed much from the old times. Guizhou is approximately one-third of Thailand in size.

Moulin (pronounced 'Mow-leen') has two sisters, one older, Li Xiaoxia, already married, and the other younger, Li Jing, can speak English even better than her. The rest of the family, including Moulin's fiancée, cannot. They have two dogs, Alice and Huan Huan, as their constant companions. The family stays in a small government apartment, some 70 sq m in size, with two bedrooms, kitchen, bathroom, and one common room for all other activities. Her father works in a railway hospital in that vicinity but mother works at home to support everyone. They look happy and contented. Her parents sacrificed their bedroom for me and went to sleep in their daughters' room. They felt excited to have a foreigner staying with them and did everything to make their visitor happy. In the apartment they use coal and piped gas for cooking. In such a cold climate, at the time of my visit, staying close to the coal stove made me feel very comfortable. The apartment was clean and orderly, though I know from Jung that many other apartments in this building were not of this standard.

In the afternoon of December 14, after Prof Chen dropped me at the apartment the whole family went with me to the city center in the small Subaru car of their son-in-law. We enjoyed walking at the park in the center of the city, which occupies one whole block; there are many concrete and steel structures of different shapes and many people were posing for photos. Magnolia is a common roadside tree for this city, as well as in Kunming. Near the park there are a number of department stores where I could find some thicker clothes for my visit to Beijing. I am ashamed to say that the family did not allow me to pay for anything!

After a short stroll around the city center we went to the Qianling Park. It is a large park, with a 300-m high limestone mountain. It was a pleasant walk up the mountain and there is a 400-year-old Buddhist monastery at the top. It was foggy the whole day and it was very intense at the mountaintop; we could only see the tall buildings in the city as a faint outline. Photography was at its worse that day but it was a good exercise indeed, no one could argue about that!

The trip on December 15 was interesting. Earlier it was intended that we should go to the Huangguoshu waterfalls, the largest waterfalls in China. Since it is located some 4-5 hours away by car and I had to proceed to Chongqing in that evening we decided to go only to a closer area, somewhere less than 100 km away. It was difficult to locate in the map where I had been but I could see that the area is a rugged and the home to Miao (or H'mong), a minority ethnic group. We went up a high hill where widespread signs of erosion could be seen from stone and gravel mining. On top it becomes a plateau and there are several small towns and villages. One major

town is Gaopo and there was a ‘kanchang’, or Sunday market, on that day. Family members were excited to see it too, as they don’t come out there often.

People of Miao tribe dominated the market and they take whatever they have at home to sell there. Chicken, small sack of rice and rice bran, farm and home tools, fruit and meat were all available and at quite low prices. The local economy is interesting. I noted one vendor selling tangerines at 0.60 yuan/kg (around 8 US cents) but not many people bought them. A short distance away, another vendor sold the same kind of tangerines, but somewhat smaller, at 0.50 yuan/kg. This seller was totally surrounded by buyers who found the price to be right! There were two or three small casinos in the market also, but the only instruments they used were large dices some kg in weight each. Moulin bought a locally made hat for me.

We went to the top of the plateau and saw the area along the way, with gentle slopes, has been used as rainfed rice terraces. The area at the very top had been planned as a resort but this had not materialized and we could now see some of the unfinished structures. From the top one could see other mountains that looked quite wild and empty. A few bungalows were built at the precipice but not used and there were two rather old tombs.

After having a brief picnic lunch we came out of the planned resort. We stopped for a few minutes at one village that looked very poor and not orderly. After that we saw many colorfully dressed Miao people returning from the market, all with smiling face. True, the market place is an important institution for local people and it keeps them together as a vital society.

We continued further and arrived at the 600-year-old city of Qingyan where tourism has been promoted for some time. Its city gate, not so large, looks very well maintained. Many people, mostly Chinese, but also a few foreigners, come to stroll on its city wall and its streets. Along narrow streets many vendors sell food, especially delicacies like preserved pork and spices and other usual things like firework. I purchased some souvenirs (also not paid for by me) and we all went to have dinner at a local restaurant on the stream bank. It is a strict but unwritten rule in China that eating is a serious matter and you should not be late if invited. To request someone to skip a meal is entirely unthinkable. More about eating later in this short note!

Returning from the old city that evening – all were happy and satisfied – the family drove me to the train station to proceed to Chongqing. I was invited to return to Guiyang again when Moulin gets married sometime in 2003. The warm welcome I received was very impressive. Now I know I have ‘my’ family in Guiyang, Guizhou, China.

Visiting the Southwest Agricultural University in Chongqing

The train ride to Chongqing took almost nine hours for a distance of less than 500 km. In the morning of December 16 Prof Liu Lijun and Xu Xia, a postgraduate girl student, came to meet me at the train and drove me to the Southwest Agricultural University for a one-day visit as arranged.

Chongqing (or Chungking in old writing) is the name of a large city (used as the capital of China from 1938 to 1945) and also a ‘municipality’ of a size a little more than one-sixth of Thailand, the largest of its kind in the world. The whole municipality had, in fact, been a part of Sichuan Province but was separated to become something like a special administrative region. It is directly controlled by the central government like Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai.

Chongqing City is located at the point where the river *Jialing* joins the *Yangtze*, so this is the place that many people come to drift in boats along the famous Three Gorges to a destination downstream. I was no exception. Although the city is very crowded and has a lot of pollution, it is interesting in that its strategic position makes it important economically. I wished I could spend more time here later. I came to this city for only two purposes: visiting a university and boarding a boat down the *Yangtze* to see the Three Gorges.

The Southwest Agricultural University is located in the city of Beibei, approximately 40 km N of Chongqing where an expressway to Sichuan passes. China spends a lot of money on improving its infrastructure, particularly roads and railways. Its roads have been expanded and

built to make transportation quick and to cope with the long distance between cities. Tunnels and bridges have been constructed for shortening distances.

Prof He Binghui received me at the entrance of the University. I met him first when attending the 12th ISCO in Beijing last May and he wished to make closer contacts with the WASWC as he has been the principal lecturer in SWC here.

Before lunch Prof Liu Lijun and Xu Xia took me on a walk around the campus which is large and has many buildings, the recent ones being only 2-3 years old. Some buildings were built several decades ago when Soviet Russia sent engineers and architects to help China, its great ally, build the country. The library building is impressively large and four stories high. This is really the heart of an academic institution! At one empty space there is a monument of one highly respected academic, Prof Hou Guang Jiong (1905-1998), a pedology professor and the founder of the University.

Lunch was offered to me at a popular restaurant downtown with some nine or ten people attending. We had a good ‘hotpot’ – that is very typical of Chongqing. The pot was hot because of both temperature and spiciness. It is unique in that several kinds of meat are boiled together in hot soup mixed with large quantity of oil and red chili pepper. It includes beef, intestine, whole fish, fish heads, shrimps (tho’ being thousands of miles from the sea!) and some vegetables. It was explained to me that such a mixture made the food especially delicious. And I was also told no one who came to Chongqing could say he or she had reached Chongqing without having eaten this hotpot!

Around 15 lecturers and postgraduate students came to listen to my afternoon talk that was chaired by Prof Huang Jianguo, Dean of the College of Resources and Environment. I used an LCD projector to show the 18-minute WOCAT movie and it stirred great interest among lecturers. I informed them that the WOCAT program in China is now carried out by the Monitoring Center of Soil and Water Conservation, Ministry of Water Resources, in Beijing.

After that I introduced the subject of the World Association of Soil and Water Conservation and its role in the world’s management of natural resources and how they could and should come in to join us. With copies of the WASWC newsletter in hand, the audience was willing to know more as well as to participate in it, for which they could apply through our Regional Vice President Li Rui in Yangling.

I was driven back to Chongqing in time for the boat departure. It was useful for me to have some brief knowledge of a regional Chinese university and also good to inform its academics about the WASWC so they might subsequently join us.

On the Yangtze, the Three Gorges and the Dam Site

With helpful arrangement from Chinese friends I had a ticket bought for my boat trip on the *Yangtze*, the longest river in China (6,300 km) and 3rd longest in the world. Sadly, my health had deteriorated since going to Beibei and so the enjoyment and experience gained from this 48-hour 600-km boat cruise was much less than earlier expected. But after recalling the saying, “To be there is already half the fun”, I feel better.

The *Yangtze* flows from Qinghai Province in the west and snakes down through seven southwestern and central Chinese provinces before it empties into the East China Sea near Shanghai. Around the middle part, between Chongqing and Yichang, the river is narrow and the three gorges (Qutang, Wu and Xiling – from west to east, 8, 40 and 80 km in length respectively, in a stretch of less than 200 km) are found. The gorges vary from 300 m at their widest to less than 100 m at their narrowest, and the seasonal difference in water level is up to 50 m. This area has become very popular with tourists, both local and foreign. There are several comfy and safe boats plying between these two cities as well as running cruising down to lower reaches of the *Yangtze*. The ‘Three Gorges’ phrase has received increasing publicity since the early 1990s when the Chinese government started to build a huge hydroelectric dam across the *Yangtze* at the Xiling gorge that would result in the flooding of all these gorges. Environmentalists started to protest by showing the negative effects of building large dams, taking the Aswan in Egypt as an

example. Despite the protests, every phase of the project has proceeded as planned and the whole project will finish in 2009. Just before my departure from Bangkok I heard of a great advancement in its implementation: the river was successfully closed on November 6, 2002.

The boat that I traveled in was not a big one but even so it has four stories of cabins divided into Classes 1 to 4 or 5. I got a ticket for class 2 and was told that the cost of the trip included the boat ticket and tour ticket but did not include meals, which could be purchased in the boat's cafeteria.

Chongqing at night was beautiful. The boat left around 8.30 PM and cruised down river leisurely. After dinner I slept until dawn when I heard an announcement to prepare oneself to go to tour the town of Baidicheng, or White King Town. Though being sick at that time, I struggled to keep up with the group. But it proved that without normal strength I enjoyed just one-tenth of what other tourists did and during the two and a half hours longed to go back to the boat all the time. However, I am now glad that I did go or I would not have seen anything on this cruise at all.

The boat sailed for a few hours and stopped at different places, day and night, to let passengers embark and disembark. In guidebooks and tourist brochures there describe dozens of places of interest along this route. These places are sometime of natural importance, sometime of cultural importance, and sometime both. From the following place names mentioned in one brochure you may imagine how varying the attractions are: Three Gorges themselves, Lesser Three Gorges, Little Three Gorges, Ancient Plank Road (about 50 km long along the gorges), Whitewashed Wall, Ghost City, Hell Street, Baidicheng or White King Town, World's Largest Natural Pit, Fairy Maiden Peak, Hanging Coffins, Qu Yuan Memorial Temple, Dachang Ancient Town, Wang Zhoujun's Hometown, Huangling Temple, Sanyu Cave and Its Inscriptions, etc. But to go there to see them by oneself it is very difficult and time consuming. Normal tourist boats will take you to visit just 5-6 major spots, and you need to find the rest out from books by yourself, more or less as armchair traveler.

There are many people who live and farm on the slopes of the mountains along the *Yangtze*. Agricultural products include reddish yellow tangerine and boat is the only way to take their products out to the market. I heard that this fruit has been grown around here for 2,000 years. During the time of my visit it was the tangerine season and I could see a lot of them being sold on the way to travelers and each boat plying the *Yangtze* carried many of them in wooden boxes.

I did not go up to see the sights again but spent most of the time in my bed fighting the sickness. The kind tourist guide came to see me often and brought me hot water to take with medicine. He pitied me that I did not have a chance to tour around several historic and touristic sights with the others. His English was all right and we could communicate well. At last, before we reached Yichang, he said he had discussed my case with the company (by mobile phone) and they would refund the cost for the tour to me – something I never thought to ask for and never expected! So, this came to me as a surprise and I really appreciated this kindness from a person working as an ordinary guide. On the funny side, he pointed his finger to my hair and said I was the oldest passenger on the boat. I laughed but agreed.

Because of the sickness I had no mood to look outside, except now and then when the boat was passing strange looking rock formations along the gorges. Also, because there had been no sunlight at all since I left Kunming a week before, and the air was damp and cold, my sickness (pneumonia) became firmly established. Nevertheless, I noted that the traffic on the river was rather light; in summer time it would be much heavier as tourists want to come and see these beautiful and historically important places before they become entirely inundated within a few years. Anyhow I strongly recommend everyone who has a chance to come this way to take a tour of the Three Gorges. It is worth doing so, since you will be able to learn and appreciate the 2,000+ years history of this part of China and the way of life of Chinese people today within a short period of 2-3 days.

We arrived at the new pier for Yichang around 8.30 pm of December 18. My guide helped me carry my extra-large luggage from the boat and hired a coolie to carry it to the waiting bus. It took us almost one and one-half hours to get to the city. A colleague of Prof Li Rui, Mr Zhou Chunhua, deputy director of SWC Bureau of Yiling District, Yichang City, came to take me to the hotel where my day ended peacefully and comfortably.

Next morning (December 19) Mr Zhou came with a lady officer from the Foreign Affairs Office of the city of Yichang, Ms Zhang Yana, to take me to see the dam site, 40 km upriver but because of my poor health called for a doctor. Ms Zhang took me to a private hospital, still newly built, in the city. Here I had a new experience by making a visit to a Chinese hospital.

At this hospital a patient has to buy a record book for oneself and pay the fee for each visit depending on the kind of sickness he or she has. Both items are very cheap. We all went to see a doctor. In one of the rooms there were two doctors sitting face to face, with their sides against the wall. Some patients sat and stood around them. Luckily, we were rather early so I could be examined by one of the doctors almost immediately.

The doctor questioned me in Chinese, with some English words, and I explained through Ms Zhang the kind of sickness I had. The doctor became interested to know where I was from and why I was there in Yichang, so I had to explain about myself and the purposes of my travel to him. Later, when I described my sickness all patients became quiet and tried to hear what I said. Then they talked among themselves and expressed various opinions about my condition. I did not feel negative about this at all but felt a little strange that unknown people would become interested in someone else's health. Maybe they saw me as a total stranger to their community? After the doctor examined me thoroughly he prescribed some medicines, returned the record book written in pure Chinese and said I should keep it. So I have keep it to this day, as a memory to this visit!

On the way to the dam site Ms Zhang explained the ideas of dam construction from the early part of the last century in her very good English. We arrived at the visitors' center, where I bought a couple of picture books on "The Three Gorges on the Yangtze River", and "The Three Gorges Project on the Yangtze River" at exorbitant prices. But at the time of writing I am glad I did. After the reservoir behind the dam is filled up, all we could see now would become just history. We went up to the viewpoint; there were exhibited several objets d'art including a huge 800-million-year-old stone found lying at the bottom of the river. We could see the whole construction area very well and I had a feeling that the Chinese government has been very determined to have this dam project executed, as it has implemented every item according to plan, until they had closed the river just recently.

For the benefit of the readers who do not have a chance to visit the dam, I am copying its short description from one of the books that I bought for you to read:

"The Three Gorges Project (TGP), the largest water conservancy pivotal project in the world, is located at Sandouping in Yichang City in the middle part of Xiling Gorge. This project can fully exploit the hydraulic resources in the Three Gorges of Yangtze River. When finished it will be beneficial in ten aspects: flood control, power generation, navigation, aquaculture, tourism, ecological protection, environmental purification, developmental resettlement, transferring water from the South to the North, water supply and irrigation, which makes it a unique super power station worldwide.

"The TGP consists of three major structures including the dam, the powerhouses and the ship locks. The dam is 2,310 m long, with the crest at the elevation of 185 m. The normal pool level of the reservoir is 175 m and the total storage capacity 39.3 billion cu m, of which 22.15 billion cu m is for flood control. So the dam can effectively hold up the flood from the upper reach of the Yangtze River and improve the flood control capacity of the middle and lower reaches.

"The power houses have been equipped with 26 units of generators of 700,000 kw each, with a total capacity of 18.2 million kw and annual output of nearly 84.7 billion kwh.

“The dam has been equipped with twin 5-flight ship locks, which can adequately handle tows up to 10,000 tons, and one-step vertical shiplift, which can provide immediate service for any vessel under 3,000 tons. When completed the dam will elevate the water level of the upper reach of the Yangtze River 80 m in the flood season and 110 m in the dry season. So it can improve the navigating route in Sichuan Province of 660 km and increase the shipping capacity from 10 million tons to 50 million tons.”

Planning of the dam site is strategic in another sense: in Lonely Planet’s *China* (2000), it is mentioned, “When the back-waters build up behind the dam wall, the great inland port of Chongqing will become the world’s first metropolis situated on the banks of a major artificial lake.” It also mentioned the total cost of the project would be ca. \$20 billion.

Actually this Three Gorges Dam is not the first one on this great river. The first one is the Gezhouba Dam (70 m high and 2.6 km long), which is a regulating dam located just north of the city of Yichang, built during 1970-1988, and regarded as one of the first stages of the Three Gorges Water Conservancy Pivotal Project. This dam can generate electricity up to 15.7 billion kwh/year as the maximum, about one-fifth of the Three Gorges Dam. Boats up to 10,000 tons can pass through the single ship lock of this dam.

China has exploited so much of its hydroelectric power resources, as it is running forward quickly towards economic development in the style used by most countries now but within the warm embrace of Communism. There are two nuclear power stations in the country, one in the northeast and one in the south but with the previous negative experience elsewhere, like at Chernobyl almost 20 years ago, China does not seem very enthusiastic in developing its energy resource in this direction.

Returning from the dam site Ms Zhang brought us to a roadside restaurant where we all enjoyed lunch of local taste. She said it might be better for me to try something local. In big restaurants in town they serve mainly so and so famous dishes. I requested that not too much food was ordered as I came from the culture where people do not waste a lot of food by leaving it uneaten. Otherwise I would feel uneasy. In this connection I must say it is a Chinese custom or tradition that the host orders much, much more than diners can eat, and that several dishes that come late are rarely touched. One estimate is that the Chinese waste enough food, especially at banquets, each year to adequately feed 100 million people (Insight Guide *China*, 2002).

After lunch I was brought to the Yichang railway station to board a 4 o’clock train to Beijing. I am very grateful to both Mr Zhou Chunhua and Ms Zhang Yana for their help and generosity in this one-day dam site trip.

Winter in Beijing

When I woke up in the morning of December 20 I saw snow falling on the land where the train was passing but it was still thin. It reminded me of the time when I was studying in Sweden more than three decades ago, where I traveled a little within the country and saw snow falling heavily in the winter, especially in the central and northern parts. The train ran for a few more hours through the countryside of Hebei Province towards Beijing.

It was now time to contact people in Beijing. I asked a fellow passenger to let me use his mobile phone and he was very pleased to dial and communicate at first and handed it to me. I got Henry Lu Shunguang of the Seabuckthorn Office on the line and he told me that a meeting was to be held that afternoon at his organization and I should make myself ready to be picked up from the hotel shortly before two o’clock. I found using a telephone in China to be easy. There are now 200 million mobile phones in use. It seems everyone has one; a person without a mobile phone could probably be regarded as strange or backward! And because of the low phone service charge due of the open competition, mobile phone owners don’t seem to mind if someone will borrow it for a while. I hope I am not wrong!

Upon arriving in Beijing I checked into the Yanjing Hotel on the Chang’an West Avenue. Before 2 o’clock Mr Zhong Yong, a colleague of Henry, picked me up and drove me to the office and I met several people including Prof Jiao Juren, former DG of the Department of

Soil and Water Conservation (DSWC), Prof Tai Yuanlin, Director of the China National Administration Center for Seabuckthorn Development, and Henry himself, as deputy of Prof Tai. We talked for about two hours and I got to know that the Chinese authority had been preparing to host the WASWC secretariat in one of the offices of the DSWC of the Ministry of Water Resources. Now they were collecting all documents to present to the Civil Ministry to approve the plan and requested me to explain about the establishment of the WASWC and the reasons for the move. Apart from that, the suggestion from our side about signing a MoU had received a good response and they were examining the contents and were determined to have it signed very soon and possibly before I left Beijing for home. An essential element in the MoU is that the Chinese authority will sponsor a secretariat and implement a number of important activities for three years. The agreement will be reviewed after that. The running of the secretariat will be independent, without interference from the government and will enjoy tax-free status. The important point is that either party can terminate the agreement by giving written notification six months in advance. They were speeding the process to make the new secretariat start its function by April 1, 2003, after our contract with the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS) terminates.

The proposed move of the WASWC secretariat from Iowa, USA to Beijing stemmed from the fact that, although the Association was established in America and had good support from the SWCS from the beginning, the situation has changed. The main problem has been finance. Being a global association, we have had a membership fee that people everywhere can afford but, unfortunately, operating from America is expensive and we have not been able to cover our expenses. As a result, we have not been able to do much more than publish four newsletters each year and the number of members dwindled year by year. During the 12th ISCO conference hosted and organized by the Chinese government in Beijing in May 2002, we had a chance to discuss matters with the organizers. The Chinese government has been very active in the field of SWC and indicated that they were interested in hosting the secretariat of our association. Communications afterward yielded a written offer from the DSWC/MWR that they were not only ready to host us, but that they also had many good plans for how they could help our program. A substantial round of discussion in August/September 2002 among WASWC Council members, Regional Vice Presidents and Country Representatives gave a positive response to the offer and we planned that I should visit Beijing to meet with the Chinese authority personally before the year's end, to discuss all details of the proposed move. On the invitation of Mr Liu Zhen, I came and I was able to come to a very satisfactory agreement.

That evening Zhong Yong and his wife, Zhang Fongxia, hosted a dinner for me at my hotel. I got to know that he had been assigned by the DSWC to assist Henry to work with the WASWC. I am glad of that because with his good understanding of the matter and good command of English the work of WASWC secretariat in China should proceed well. FYI: Peking duck was the main dish that we had together that evening.

Saturday, December 21 did not find my health to be much better than the day before, but I could not be a sick man in such a beautiful city as Beijing, especially when it was under snow. I went out to explore places that I have not seen before. The first place was the Hongqiao market, just close to the Temple of Heaven that I had visited the year before. I bought a few souvenirs to give to friends and relatives and returned to the Beijing Concert Hall to find out what cultural activities there would be in the city during this weekend. I chose to go to the concert in the Forbidden City in that evening. It was a New Year concert to be played by a local symphony orchestra.

In that evening, after having had dinner at a large underground eating place near the Xinhua Bookstore, I went to the Forbidden City. The performance was in the Concert Hall; they played theme songs from several popular movies including *Titanic*, *West Side Story*, *Elvira Madigan*, etc. This night the concert hall was full; the audiences were mostly Chinese and they seemed to enjoy it very much. Chinese people are very interested in classical music and opera these days. There are several distinguished musicians and conductors of Chinese origin that are

world renown and there are many schools and universities in China that are devoted to these modern forms of performing arts. Several years ago an Italian opera company came to perform Puccini's *Turandot* inside the Forbidden City, with Zubin Mehta as conductor, and the dancers group from Beijing Dance Academy. It has become popular now to perform new culture at old places. Last month (November 2002) the famous tenor Jose Carreras sang at the Angkor Wat Temple in Cambodia and attracted much interest among song lovers, regional celebrities and politicians.

After the performance I went for a walk along the Chang'an Avenue in the front part of the Forbidden City where the large picture of Chairman Mao has been displayed for several years. Many tourists walked in that area which is just opposite the frequently cited Tiananmen Square. Many foreign tourists came to walk there, all smiling and talking to each other happily. Then a young American tourist approached me and asked for a photo and very much enjoyed having posed with 'a Chinese man' in front of the picture of Mao Zedong. He said "xie xie" (thank you) to me when he left.

Sunday, December 22 found me a little better though I had been out in the falling snow for some time the night before. It snowed in Beijing for the first time this year on Dec 19 and people were happy, walking and sometime throwing snow to each other. Photographers tried to capture scenes under or with snow, as those pictures are quite beautiful, especially when combining elaborate and classic Chinese architecture with the white cover. Snow continued to fall every day that I was in Beijing.

During morning hours Prof Li Rui, VP of WASWC for Asia, presently Director of the Institute of Soil and Water Conservation, a joint institution of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Water Resources, located at Yangling, Shaanxi Province, came to see me and we discussed the strategies to recruit Chinese members. China has 1.2+ billion people, or about one-fifth of the world's population. There is much need for SWC work in this country as the land resources are very much degraded. Therefore, to have Chinese academics as member of the WASWC would help greatly in transferring technology from abroad to China. The SWC work in this country would be greatly facilitated once the WASWC secretariat moved to Beijing. The major obstacle seems to be the language problem. Though young Chinese today are learning more and more English, as we can often see on TV, but senior lecturers in highly learned institutions seem to find it very difficult. We shared the idea that, for the sake of technology transfer, which would go far into the future, we should encourage academic people to benefit from being WASWC members by reading our products – newsletter and special publication – in English, rather than to have them translated. At present we have very few members in this country, but we believe that after the secretariat's move to Beijing we will be able to launch some big programs to recruit Chinese members. We ended the talk with delicious lunch, the usual gesture to show the hospitality of Chinese hosts.

That evening Zhong Yong and his wife came to see me, informing me that the authorities had thoroughly checked the contents of the MoU that we earlier presented and were ready to sign. So he prepared two sets of the document, let me sign first and Mr Liu Zhen, DG of the DSWC would sign next week when he came back to the office. (FYI: Mr Liu Zhen signed it on December 30.) Again, we finished the day with a meal at a restaurant some distance away, where they serve several kinds of typical food from various provinces. This has enabled me to learn about some dishes that I did not know before. Someone once said to me that the Chinese hospitality is legendary, other cultures find it hard to compare or compete with it. I agree. I find that once they accept to host you they will do everything to make you happy throughout your stay.

December 23 was the day I was due to return. I went by subway along the Chang'an Avenue and got out at the corner of the historic Beijing Hotel, walk for a few minutes to a large department store, Xindongan Plaza. It was almost Christmas day already but the music for that period that was played through loudspeakers was not so lively and the way they displayed their merchandises was not particularly interesting. I also stopped at the Foreign Languages Bookstore

nearby to buy a couple of books but was not impressed with the service. However, I was able to purchase some souvenirs from smaller shops; sellers were friendly and the prices were right!

This was my fourth time in Beijing. During my previous visits I had been to some important sights of this great city already, such as the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, and the Temple of Heaven. So now I only wanted to go home after having finished this important WASWC secretariat mission. A good memory of this visit is the snow falling in Beijing (falling most of the time) for five days straight, a record never experienced for over one hundred years.

Someone asked me during my trip this time which Chinese city I liked best. I had visited several so it was hard to think about it immediately. But now after my trip was about to end, I realized that it was this very Beijing that I liked best, though whether ‘to love’ also or not remains to be seen. My reasons are its cultural, historic and artistic places and its streets are wide and reasonably orderly. And there are many entertainment venues, good shopping areas and their transportation systems are diverse and inexpensive.

I flew home that evening, physically tired from the long trip but mentally satisfied with the results of the mission and the whole experience. The road I journeyed from Kunming to Beijing was long and tiring, but it has led to an important milestone for the WASWC and its subsequent operations. The journey in time, however, for the WASWC, from 20 years ago until now, from its birthplace in America to its new home in China, involving so many famous and dedicated soil and water conservationists, can be considered as a long, long road to Beijing too.

I sincerely thank all my Chinese hosts for having facilitated my travel on the “long road to Beijing” this time. Hope to meet them again and repay their hospitality soon.

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Bangkok, January 24, 2003