

I DEPARTURE

November 19, 1994

After two weeks undertaking a first descent of the Yangbi River, a tributary to the mighty Mekong in western Yunnan Province of China, it's time for two of the expedition members to embark on a secondary reconnaissance. Foster's and Downs' intention is to circumnavigate the Great Snowy Mountains in western Sichuan Province to evaluate 225 million-year-old Triassic rocks for potential future field work relating to the evolution of mammals from mammal-like reptiles. They will also make observations to glean any information about the timing and uplift of the Tibetan Plateau. Concurrently, they propose to explore alternate routes to the mountain-climbing base camp of 24,800-foot Mt. Gongga Shan* for future climbing expeditions. To their knowledge, no foreigner has ever attempted access to the base camp via the eastern route of the Bushu River Canyon. En route, Downs also aspires to visit a minor Mecca for him, the famous chain-link bridge at Luding, which is a historic site of heroic actions during World War II.

It is also time for some apprehension, as these two Americans are unsure about the true status of restricted areas in China. Rumors in Peking insinuate that China is now completely open to travel, and as such, foreigners and natives may now roam the country with impunity (with the obvious exception of military areas). However, if the rumors are false, and if local authorities detain and expel Foster and Downs, they would simply be forced to travel elsewhere, perhaps to other wilderness areas in a different province where they may find potential scientific endeavors, such as Tiger Leap Gorge in Yunnan. It is important that travelers in China realize that when in a restricted area, they absolutely should not become detained for a second time in the same region for this could lead to serious complications such as deportation or incarceration. Provisionally, the two hikers will apply Stewart's Law of Retroaction: "It is easier to be granted forgiveness than permission." After all, the Chinese authorities do have a sense of humor, right? ...Right?

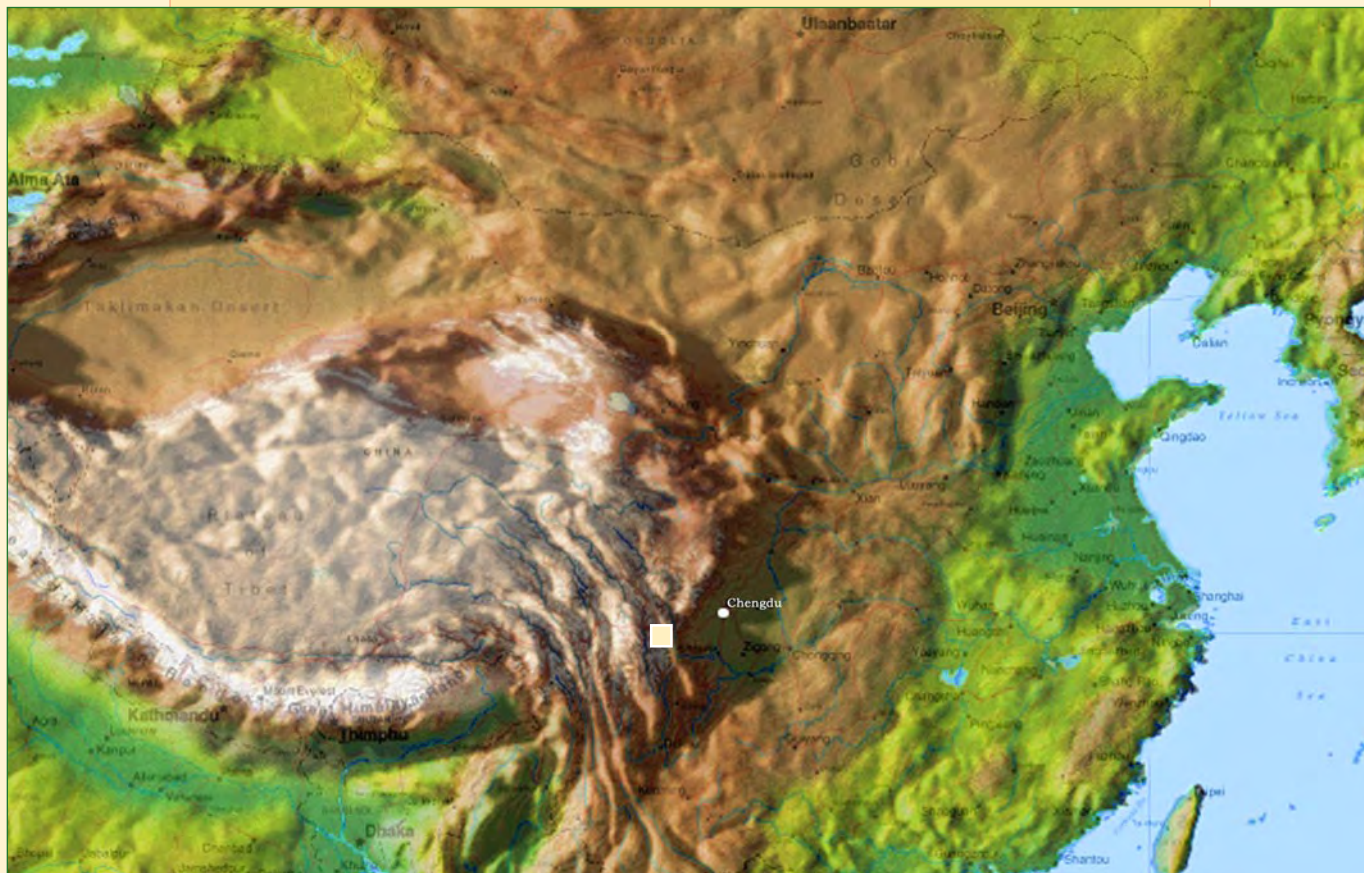
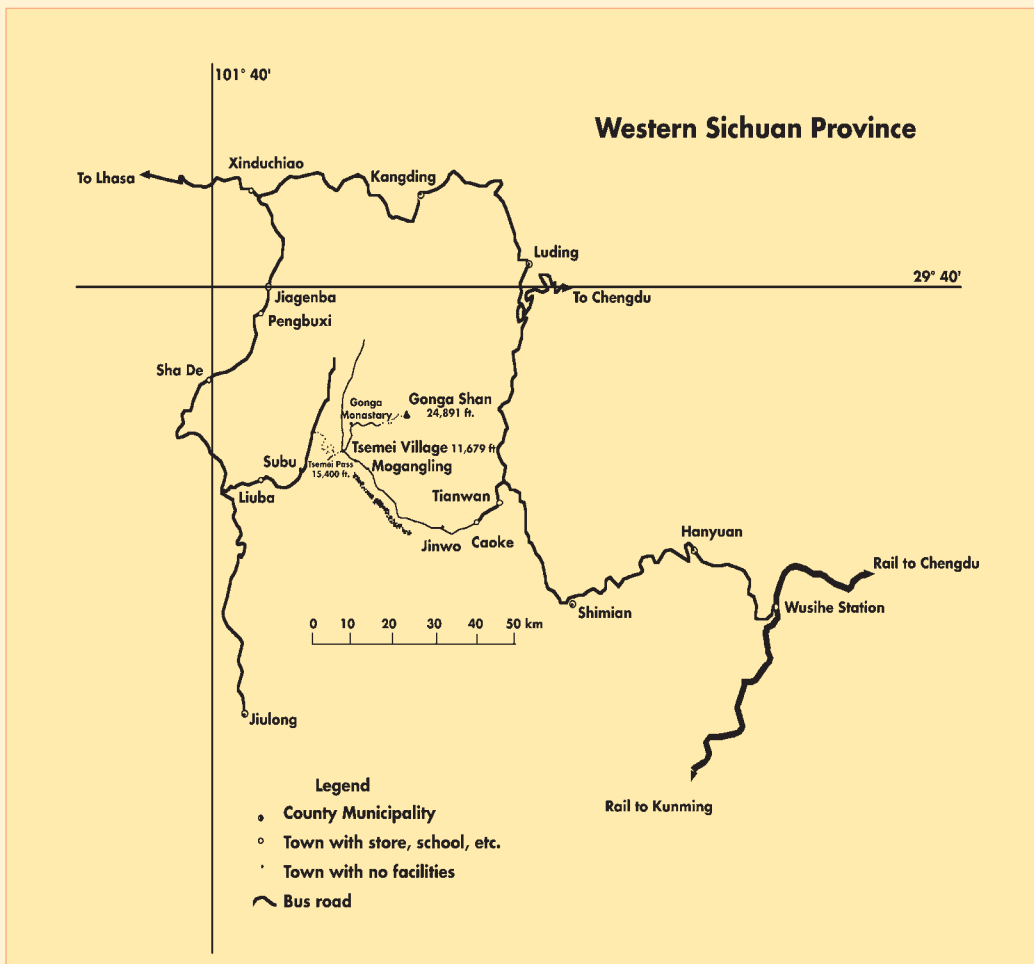
After spending the day in the Yunnan provincial capital of Kunming cleaning and storing river equipment, buying food, and packing the same for their reconnaissance, Foster and Downs finally board the northbound train for Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province. They acquired their tickets yesterday at the train station, since China International Travel Service would provide them this service only seven

days in advance. Downs' previous travel arrangements within the country had been provided by his colleagues in the government, and consequently this was his first experience undertaking business at a Chinese train station, which produced results that were much easier than either his federal colleagues related or tourist guidebook descriptions suggest. Cost for a soft sleeper is 706 Chinese yuan (Y706.00 = approximately \$80.00 American @ Y8.30 = \$1.00) to a railway station designated Wusihe southwest of Chengdu. Foster and Downs are being decadent by riding first class, but it's worth it for the long train ride. Wusihe is not on any of the maps, including the official Chinese map of Sichuan province, but with the aid of China International Travel Service, they selected the station, and after being questioned, the ticket agent was able to provide the travelers with an approximate location of the station, which confirms it to be the station most proximal to Gongga Shan. Downs is still a bit unnerved about disembarking a train at an unknown destination at midnight for the first encounter with the local authorities.

Yesterday they were told they would arrive at midnight, but the elder of two Chinese men sharing the four-berth cabin informs the Americans that the train arrives Wusihe at 10:20 pm according to his train schedule. It is unfortunate that the latter half of the trip through the mountainous region of Sichuan will be in the dark. The young and middle-aged Chinese in the cabin are refrigerator salesmen from Shaanxi (pronounced Shensi) Province, who will travel a lengthy 40-hour ride to Xian, the ancient capital of China. There one of the greatest archeological finds in human history is represented by terra-cotta soldiers in front of the tomb of Chin Shih Huang, the first emperor of China. The tomb is still unexcavated although it has reportedly been penetrated but the government is keeping its contents classified. More armies surrounding the burial require excavation.

The salesmen are smoking heavily, providing Foster with a strong dose of secondary smoke, but the bed is comfortable which allows him some solace. The American hikers possess heavy packs loaded with perhaps five to seven days' worth of provisions, which will allow them to camp with impunity anywhere in the wilderness, or if necessary in an empty field on a farm.

The train has just started rolling: 17:03 exactly on time. It is both exciting and liberating to begin Phase II of the six-week exploration of southwestern China. Downs and Foster have left behind the first



descent of the Yangbi River expedition, and their American, Chinese, and Australian colleagues, to explore the inner reaches of China at their presumed liberty. The conductress informs them that the actual scheduled arrival at Wusihe is 10:30 am the next morning, turning this segment into a 17 1/2-hour ride. The toilet is a hole in the floor with two ceramic steps on each side of it and is not as hygienic as it could be.

The hikers move to the dining car to order two beers, a plate of bean sprouts, and a plate of green beans for a light repast. The price of the food is equivalent to a near liter Y4.00 bottle of beer. The beer is more expensive than usual due to its purchase aboard the train. In other parts of the world, Foster and Downs would hesitate to leave their full packs unguarded in the sleeping berth, but this is China. Of course things are still stolen, but not with the frequency or severity of other parts of the world. There is a girl in a pink sweater asleep in the dining car with her head down nestled in the crook of her elbow on the table. She has been sleeping as such since the train departed and appears to be an ornament of the dining car's decor.

Returning from the dining car, the Americans encounter two German women who are traveling alone in the three-foot-wide hallway outside the berths. The ladies speak perfect English to provide a pleasant opportunity for someone to talk with. Their husbands work for a Chinese-French-Italian joint venture constructing the largest dam in China on the Yalong Jiang River. This is the same project a gentleman told Foster about yesterday during a casual conversation in the train station. The dam jeopardizes future plans to run that section of the river, but it will not be completed for another eight years. The dam site is south of the great bend of the Yalong Jiang near the city of Dukou.

The Germans live at the site with their families in European quarters, apparently in accommodations that are rather reminiscent of the European concessions prior to the founding of the People's Republic. The ladies describe their living conditions as a comfortable segment of European society, complete with a movie

theater, that is isolated in the middle of the Chinese countryside. They also sound a bit fatigued and bored at first, but they are friendly. The four travelers decide to move to the dining car to drink tea, beer, and talk. Everyone has nothing but honorable intentions.

Irene and Manuella are returning from Kunming where they have been Christmas shopping. Irene, an attractive blonde, wears pink-rimmed glasses, smokes Marlboros, and has a 17-year-old daughter and an 11-year-old son. Manuella, apparently a bit younger, is a very attractive brunette with an eight-year-old son. Foster presents pictures of his 8- and 12-year-old daughters Catie and Liz to the ladies, who admire them lovingly. The ladies turn an expectant gaze to

Downs who informs them that he has a cat but doesn't have a picture of her. The girl in the pink sweater lifts her head with sleepy swollen eyes to peruse the scene around her, and with a languid expression of "fuck this" returns to her former position. The Germans claim that they like to get behind the scenes; that it's better to live in a country rather than take a whirlwind two-week tour living in tourist hotels. Nevertheless, it appears to Downs to be a bit hypocritical to dwell in a European-styled community in the heart of a foreign country. He has observed this type of cultural isolation in American foreign-service personnel elsewhere and is not impressed. Why bother living in a foreign country just to be culturally isolated by one's own social artifacts? The ladies have

misgivings about some of the Chinese living habits, such as spitting. They do not realize that within the past eight years, the government has been vigorously promoting the incremental decrease in spitting in China. It used to be rather revolting.

The travelers talk until 10:30. The ladies are due to disembark the train at midnight. Foster and Downs bid them a safe journey, retire to their own bunks, and soon fall comfortably asleep to the rhythm of the train. Downs left the ladies infatuated with Manuella.



Shimian boy