

VI CURRENCY

December 1, 1994

A morning cup of tea stimulates Downs and Foster while they sit in the barren field under a cold cloudy sky. The duo breaks camp to walk down the road at 8:30 am, bearing north and downstream where they believe they will encounter warmer temperatures. In addition, as they do not want to miss the bus, they are compelled to walk awhile and then wait along the side of the road, continuing this behavior repeatedly.

Both Burdsall's and La bon's maps are inaccurate in this region as they depict the river running southward into the Yalong Jiang. To the contrary, and as illustrated on the Sichuan map, it runs northward to converge with the Liqiu River, which then flows west and southwest into the Yalong River.

The winter vegetation consists completely of spruce, fir, pine, and leafless poplar, to compose a scene that closely resembles a mountain scene in Colorado, with steep canyon walls, high ridges, and peaks overhead. During one of their waits several runny nosed children approach the travelers and stare at them for several minutes before continuing on their way to school.

The sky is overcast until 11:00 am, yet with the exception of an occasional bicycle, there is still no traffic on the dirt road. Numerous large piles of prayer rocks line the route one consisting of a four-foot high and five-foot wide stack that is at least 100 yards long. Every well-rounded cobble is intricately carved with a multitude of Tibetan characters. (The effort expended to create this is incredible.)

At approximately noon, a passing motorcyclist stops to converse with the walkers and confirm that a bus truly travels this road, but he can not remember on which days of the week. Downs had the feeling this could happen, for penetrating deep into the outback of China has been too easy, and now they have to extract themselves with a limited amount of time.

Still, the time factor is irrelevant, for a worst case scenario would be to arrive Kunming several days late which would then merely require a change of the return dates on their air tickets (though Foster's wife would be fit to be tied, while Downs' cat expected him back weeks ago). This time of year the flights are not fully booked as they are during peak travel seasons.

Finally as they are again walking, a truck with a canvas canopy over the bed that shields a passenger riding on a load of pulpwood rounds the bend heading north. The hikers flag down the vehicle, explain their monetary predicament, and negotiate a price of Y40.00 to reach the bank at Sha De.



Pilgrims on the road to Xinduqiao

Their packs are placed on the truck's load with assurances of their security from the driver, who sports a shoulder length pompadour, broad sunglasses, and a knee-length heavy sheepskin coat with a large collar. A cigarette hangs off his lower lip.

Two riders from the crew-cab are shifted rearward to make room for the hitchhikers, despite the Americans' protestations to be seated in the rear.

*Towers on the road
to Xinduqiao*



*Buddhist disciple and fellow
hitchhiker, with prayer beads.*



(Since they are paying passengers they are preferentially treated.) The driver's two colleagues in the front also don heavy sheepskin coats, but have close-cut haircuts.

A portly gray-haired Buddhist disciple with a conical silken wool hat sits next to the hikers on the rear cab seat fingering his prayer beads and continuously chanting "Omani-

Bomani." The small and dense beads are strung in a loop with three bead strands radiating from the circumference, which are interspersed with tiny silver or copper rings as markers. A bead is passed for every Omani-Bomani and when a circumference is lapped, either a marker bead or silver ring is shifted to enumerate the prayers. The beads are designed to register tens of thousands of prayers.

Traveling downstream at a good pace now, the vegetation becomes a deciduous forest. The sunshine warms the atmosphere, and soon they reach the

confluence with the larger Liqiu River running directly westward, where the truck crosses a cement bridge in an unanticipated turn upstream. Lebon inaccurately transliterates the river's name as the Litchi.

The riders in the front offer Tibetan beer to the hikers, who graciously accept (it would be an insult to refuse). Again, with the ascension of altitude it becomes cold, particularly when the sun is blocked by the steep canyon walls, and the wind streams through the broken windows of the truck.

The truck arrives at the town of Sha De, and finally they have reached a legitimate bank. It takes several minutes to locate the establishment, only to be informed from an employee on the second floor balcony that this is an agricultural bank which conducts business with the local populace only. They have no facilities for foreign exchange.

Now what to do? The truck driver mollifies the hitchhikers' anxiety by informing them there is a genuine bank with tellers at the town of Xinduqiao on the Tibetan highway, which is his home and destination for the day. The Americans accept the truck driver's offer for a ride to the Tibetan highway, and are so relieved to be able to continue their journey that they neglect to inquire about a possible increase in fare, since the previous rate only extended to this village.

Sha De contains a very nice outdoor market where daggers in dragon embossed silver scabbards, lacquered bowls, and numerous local handicrafts would make superb Christmas gifts. It is regrettable they don't have any Chinese money to purchase anything.



again departs with a now uncovered bed minus two passengers, but it continuously stops to pick up more individuals who carry heavy bags of food, walk bicycles up long inclines, or haul heavy implements. Omani-Bomani continues his litany.

As the truck's starter is broken, after each stop the driver restarts the vehicle by either coasting and engaging the clutch, or one of his colleagues hand cranks the engine from the front in the old-fashioned method.

They once again continue to ascend in elevation as the canyon opens into a broad treeless valley. Here are towns with gigantic stone towers that appear to attain 200 ft. in height. The hikers are informed that these are Tibetan ramparts. There are so many of these massive structures within the canyon it is obvious the region was war torn for a lengthy period.

It is now mid-afternoon, and the sun continues to shine. Now there is commotion in the road ahead.

The truck stops to observe a small group of women



wearing leather aprons and wooden mittens, who conduct a ritual of clapping their wooden mittens three times along the vertical plane of their bodies, and then dive face-forward skidding on the apron and mittens. Where they come to rest they then stand in place and repeat the performance.

Downs is absolutely flabbergasted to see ladies performing "swan dives for god," with clothes and faces that match the color of the dirt road, but Foster has read of this occurring in western Tibet, where the ritual is performed circumscribing Mt. Kailas. Nevertheless, this approaches the self-abuse performed by Islamic flagellants who whip themselves with bladed chains.*

The truck discharges its load of wood while next door Foster observes a game of Chinese chess. Nearly all the moves are identical with its western counterpart, including the angled course of the knight-like figure, however a few of the pieces move differently and the board differs by portraying a river bisecting the battlefield which only certain pieces can cross. The game may have been introduced from India thousands of years ago, or introduced from China to India at that time. The origin of the game is unknown.

The driver then generously treats his riders to a very good lunch of meat, potatoes, and greens at a small but quaint local restaurant. After this, the truck

* Upon his death, Sir Richard Burton's body (the scholar not actor) was reportedly scar-covered from conducting this same ritual.

This group will travel as such for the next 30 miles before returning to their village under the same ritual. (When diving down hill how far could they glide? Do they ever slide too fast, miss a corner, and plunge off a cliff?) Sometimes organized religion is just too insane for words.

Noticing the truck and foreigners, the ladies take a rest and laugh at Foster when he tries on the mittens, conducts the ritual clapping, and attempts a dive. He is not very successful with the diving procedure and merely slides a foot or so as compared to the ten-foot slides the pilgrims accomplish. The driver makes a monetary contribution to the troupe and socializes for awhile before the truck is again on its way.

Public Security check-posts are now occasionally encountered, which are simple reminders that this journey would have been obstructed a year prior, but the posts are now devoid of police and the barricades are permanently lifted, allowing all traffic to pass unimpeded.

The river valley widens and flattens further to form a frigid plane. Approaching the Tibetan highway at 14,000 feet, widely spaced barren hills dot the landscape under a cold overcast sky.

The truck becomes stalled in a mud hole for fifteen minutes despite the now louder chants of Omani-Bomani.

The vehicle is restarted but then continues to intermittently break down for the next hour with the driver and his cohorts priming the carburetor, switching gas tank lines, and suffering a torn tire. It

is starting to become late as they pull into a rural petrol station, but the attendant refuses service as the station is closed. Finally, the truck limps onto the main highway, where there is a large sixty-foot Buddhist stupa ornamented with Tibetan Buddha eyes. A group of people tend a bonfire that emits a large plume of black smoke which is either a ritual offering, or they are simply burning tires.

Omani-Bomani stops fingering his beads and chanting, and begins singing in an off pitch wail before resuming his regular invocation. Downs rolls his eyes as this elder fat gentleman is beginning to get on his nerves. Praise the lord!

After a fuel refill and the change of a fan belt, the truck heads west approximately three miles to the town of Xinduchiao (which of course is not on any of the maps). Entering town, the driver stops at a mechanic's shop to drop off a dead battery and miscellaneous auto-parts that require repairs.

As it is too late in the day for government or financial establishments, the truck rolls to its destination in

town and unloads its passengers, who are then informed that the fare will be Y200.00 which can be paid tomorrow after the travelers have changed their money (cheated again!). Tomorrow they will find a real bank and try to renegotiate the truck fare.

This town displays different women's fashions with the trend of tight leather with spiked heels (sexy). One of the driver's colleagues accompanies the hikers to the government rest house where they check into a narrow room with two beds, electric blankets, and a single light bulb hanging from a chord. The room is a bit rustic, but clean, and is merely Y18.00.



Pilgrims with leather aprons and wooden mittens

Downs again begins shivering but ceases after drinking a half thermos of boiled water and a couple of shots of ginseng rocket fuel that he has just purchased with his last Y6.00. Foster has Y10.00 left that will hopefully provide them with a meal for the evening.

That evening, with the equivalent of \$1.25 between them, they attend the rest house restaurant, which is a small, quaint, and clean establishment with massive black lacquered furniture. Inquires are made to the waitress whether it would be



Pilgrim's wooden mittens

treated with contempt by women with much more class and beauty than this bitch!

The two return to their room, and Downs attempts to acquire more boiled water from the floor attendant, but she is too preoccupied with television to respond to his request. This signifies the official return to the technological world. TV is the main source for the disintegration of modern civilization. You HAVE to watch TV. Take a plane anywhere: "Close your window-shade and watch last night's newscast!"

There may be inconceivable thousand-foot high sand dunes burying whole mountain ranges in the Sahara Desert below, but you must "Close your window! You are disturbing others who prefer TV." You may be flying over Greece where dazzling golden islands are sprinkled in a contrasting setting with the azure Mediterranean. "Close your window! Watch TV!"

in hijacking: Threaten to disconnect the monitors. They'll take you anywhere. And as for the programming itself, one does not have to

be a dinosaur paleontologist to realize that "Barney" requires the attention of a disgruntled postal worker. This media is currently transforming human beings into violent and vacuous sex motivated automatons.

The hikers are now completely out of Chinese money, but are confident they will change some in the morning, negotiate the overcharge with the truck driver, and take a bus to Kangding or Luding.

Foster is beginning to cough and believes he has contracted something from Tsemei. This day has been cold and a little discouraging but at least they are sheltered for the evening, though they remain in high elevations. Tomorrow looks promising.



Full-length prostration

possible to charge the meal to their room, or to be provided with some credit until the bank opens in the morning? Absolutely not! Does she take American Express? Straight cash only!

Fine, what can they order for Y10.00? The waitress sneers at them while pointing to the menu on a chalkboard. As they are eating their delicious and satisfying meal of Kung Pao chicken, rice, and tea, a group of four enters and orders a meal of ten dishes, wine, and beer. They are treated with courtesy and respect while the two foreigners are regarded with scorn.

Who the hell does this waitress think she is? She doesn't phase Downs in the least as he has been

At approximately 3:00 am, truck drivers and dogs make a tremendous racket. How much sheet metal can be pounded by four truck drivers with a kennel of barking dogs in an hour?

December 2:

A dusting of snow coats the streets under a bright cloudless sky. The truck driver and his associates arrive at the rest house at 8:00 am while the hikers enjoy a morning cup of tea. The group ambles down the cold and icy streets in the bright sunshine to a small restaurant where the driver again provides them with a meal of baozis, tea, and a shot of rocket fuel at a small local restaurant. After this, the truckers shoot a few balls of pool on the open-air pool tables that line the streets.*

The Americans also participate as they reminisce about the days of their youth when they were hot pool sharks capable of flaunting shots such as a triple bank to sink the eight-ball. Downs certainly cannot perform this maneuver any more as he is currently half blind from over masturbating.**

It is finally 9:00 when the troupe enters the newest three story tile building in town. There are two teller's windows, and Downs announces the nature of his business only to observe the tellers' negatively shaking heads as they inform the customer that they are not authorized for foreign exchange.

Downs and the truckers vehemently attempt to persuade the tellers to the contrary with a request that an exception be made, and with a final request to see the manager. All protestations are denied and further arguments go unheard.

The teller informs the American that the bank at the county capitol of Kangding would certainly accommodate him. This, however, does not alleviate the Americans' debt to the truck driver who is now standing outside the bank with his friends and Foster. Why doesn't anyone in this region want to buy hard currency? This is ridiculous!

Downs suggests that the only recourse lies in the driver accepting American dollars, and it appears that he has already pondered this alternative. Regarding the hitchhiker with a supercilious gaze, the driver replies that he will provide the Americans with Y100.00 change, and consider payment for his services rendered for the price of two American twenty dollar bills. This is a total rip-off,*** but the hikers have no alternative and are in no position to negotiate.

As the Americans begrudgingly thank and bid farewell to the truckers, they notice the driver fingering his two \$20.00 bills in admiration. He will probably sell one for twice its value and keep the other as a trophy.

Oh well. At least they have Y100.00 to travel with. They return to the rest house, check out, and wait in the vicinity of the bus stop where local Tibetans are sight-seeing (i.e. the Americans are the sights).

One traditionally dressed gentleman approaches the duo wearing an impressive full length Tibetan sword with a dragon embossed silver scabbard. Downs quite admires this, but the Tibetan will not part with it for under Y1,000.00. Foster shows the Tibetans his Leatherman (whoopie!).



* Open air pool tables have become ubiquitous in China.

** A famous philosopher once stated "there is nothing wrong with masturbation. At least you are performing it with someone you love." [3]

*** Downs is an old hand at being ripped off: On one occasion in his youth he lost \$200.00 in a hash deal, while on another occasion a thief stole a grocery sack full of cat food from the front seat of his car, which really infuriated him. The Triborough Bridge is the biggest rip-off, with the exception of private medical insurance in the U.S.

Within an hour the bus arrives and passengers disembark, with one young Chinese gentleman proffering an American dollar bill to Downs asking if he'd like to exchange it. Downs can sympathize with this individual.

They purchase tickets to Kangding for Y13.00 each and depart eastward upon the highway to traverse the 15,600 ft. Xindushan Pass. Regional architecture is still Tibetan, but with larger windows than in the Tsemei area. An occasional fortress and older generation houses are set into the cliffs of broad valleys, yaks graze on barren hills, and eagles soar amidst the occasional white stupa.

Prior to the logging industry these people must have used Yak dung for fuel, but now putt-putts service the region with firewood such as milkmen used to provide their services in the United States.

The bright sunshine beams down through the thin air onto the lumbering full-size bus under the control of a competent and steady driver, who guides the vehicle through barren icy switch backs while overtaking logging trucks. A young Tibetan pilgrim with long hair cascading over his heavy sheepskin coat sits in front of the Americans and turns to offer his prayer beads. Foster, who is now conversant in Chinese numbers and has a limited knowledge of bargaining vocabulary begins to negotiate for the prayer beads, but has no idea what a fair price would be. A gentleman behind the two interrupts to inform them that Y300.00 would be a fair price.

Foster is worried that a purchase of prayer beads may be a cultural insult, but nobody seems to mind. The pilgrim is not attached to them as a valuable material object, and he can later purchase more, while the money he makes from selling them will aid him on his journey. The negotiation is superfluous as the Americans are essentially penniless and frustrated.

As the bus approaches the summit the driver plays a pleasant violin melody from "The East is Red" over the bus's speakers. Downs catches himself beginning to doze off and a perusal of his surroundings reveals that nearly all the passengers are asleep. This is a becoming quite a civilized ride, and as he drifts off into a nap he reflects upon the nature of civilization.

This is a quite refined country compared to places where he has been shot at (including the U.S.).* He also recalls an account about Voltaire's visit to China during the reign of the mostly benevolent Qing (formerly written Ching) Dynasty emperor Qianlong, who was rather xenophobic but occasionally tolerant of Westerners. The Frenchman was reputedly so



** Once in Baluchistan the project he accompanied was provided with a border guard armed with an old Lee-Enfield. At one point bullets began raining down upon the group of six geologists, and as a reaction the border guard lay on his back with hands in prayer, beseeching Allah not to kill him. Great protection! As it turned out, the shots originated from target practicing tribesmen in the next canyon which, made the bullets twice as dangerous because in Asia, projectiles directed by God are frequently lethal, although one is relatively safe as long as they are aiming at you. A confrontation with AK-47 wielding Kabili in Yemen was very nearly fatal, but still not as serious as driving on Central Expressway in Dallas where everyone is a rude cowboy with a gun in his car.*

impressed by Chinese civilization that he henceforth wore his hair in a queue to emulate Chinese society,** a fashion which later spread to England and eventually the gentry of the English colonies in North America, including Jefferson, Washington, and the like. The story may be accurate, but is probably apocryphal.

Chinese civilization differs from its western counterpart by evolving in a single locale, whereas western civilization developed through a series of advances which were followed by a migration of the political center (i.e. Mesopotamia, to Egypt, to Greece, to Rome, to Europe, etc.).

The United States has taken this concept of mobility to the extreme as it is reputed that the majority of its population does not stay in a single location for over five years before moving their home.

Seemingly, China's continuity would allow it to learn from its mistakes of the past while

western civilization would lose its historical thread. But this is not the case, for the Chinese, like their western counterparts repeat history time and again. This must be the result of a biological or social software program that motivates the human race to entropy. Where are the leaders for the impending millennium? Why is Sonny Bono a national leader?

The summit of the pass is traversed and a steep descent ensues to reveal an immediate transformation to Han Chinese architectural style. This is amazing, as it appears the cultural division line between Tibet and China can be drawn with a razor blade.

Now descending into a steep-walled canyon, the metropolis of Kangding reveals itself with a city-

center much larger than each of the Americans imagined from reading the guidebooks and other literature. Half the inhabitants are in Tibetan apparel, some who stroll by a brand new five-story golden glass and pink granite structure that resembles a Dallas bank. With the exception of the new glass architecture, the setting is exclusively Chinese.

Disembarking the bus at approximately 2:30 pm they walk to the nearest cab station where the transportation consists of motorcycles with side-cars piloted by drivers clothed in black leather (including the cap). Downs

leaves Foster with the packs, requests the driver take him to the largest bank, and shoots off amidst the sound of an unmuffled Harley down the icy streets, with his turban trailing in the wind.

It is none other than the Dallas building itself that the driver and his passenger enter to witness a large



Tibetan home

** The queue was the official sign of subjugation to the Qing who were not Chinese but Manchurian and who prior to 1644 were considered members of a different Country such as Mongolia.



financial establishment with over 25 teller's booths that are all queued with customers. Kangding is doing very well economically. Now, where is Foreign Exchange? Downs does not observe it immediately, and the cab driver, comprehending the American's dilemma, breaks into a line to inquire where a foreigner can exchange funds.

The teller informs him that this bank has no facilities for that function and suggests the bank across the street may be able to help.

This is unbelievable.

Across the street they meet another negative. Try another bank. No! Another, No! Downs needs to return to the bus station to either think, or get drunk.

Foster sits between the packs on the sidewalk eating oranges and peanuts, and Downs informs him of the news, while fingering Sunao's ring on his finger and thinking that perhaps he should simply return to Tsemei to spend the rest of his life with the Tibetan princess. But then she wouldn't want him, as he realizes her attraction is to the prosperity of the American Dream and not to Downs himself.

Foster suggests trying a tourist hotel for assistance.

Downs replies in rapid hysterics "Tourist Hotel?! This is Kangding, fucking middle of nowhere, China!" But he then notices a plethora of tourist information on a billboard map in Chinese just above Foster's head.

Downs clears his throat in acknowledgment while commending Foster with a "good idea," and returns to the cab to be taken to the best hotel in Kangding.

The cab driver is definitely appreciating the problem now, and appears to be enjoying this day of racing the streets to solve it (not to mention making Y5.00 per trip). Downs jives with the driver ... they will crack this problem.

The newest Kangding hotel is palatial, with thick pile carpeting and marble columns in the lobby. It is not quite the

Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong, which boasts the largest selection of Rolls Royces in the world to accommodate its patrons, but after all this is Kangding. A double room for foreigners is Y100.00 (such a deal!). Why not say the hell with it for the day, stay in an opulent room and relax in a new city while enjoying the new sights? Do they accept credit cards?

"Sorry cash payment only."

Good, then they can exchange foreign money.

"Sorry, you must go to a bank."

The cab driver interrupts to explain the predicament to the cute desk-clerkstresses, who suggest that perhaps one of the government offices down the street could be of assistance.

Hurriedly, the two now mount the cab, speed down the street, and make a sharp left turn into a large courtyard surrounded by a complex of buildings, when an armed guard steps in front of their vehicle.

The cab driver explains their circumstance in a rapid Sichuan accent, but the guard adamantly refuses to allow entrance, and suggests that they try the local offices back up the street. Downs feigns ignorant tourist before the authority figure.

A quick acknowledgment followed by screaming tires announces their departure. Then a hard right, a left, a right into another courtyard, out of the

vehicle, and up the stairs into a building to the left where, after a quick exchange of words, an elderly man in a blue Mao suit informs them that they should try the office across the courtyard.

The driver strides rapidly across the courtyard with Downs at his heels. They then enter the opposite building, quickly ascend two flights of stairs, jog down a long dark hallway, and pass through a dark curtain to the left. Here, in a large rectangular office embellished with beautiful Chinese character scrolls amidst the strong aroma of garlic, three old ladies sit knitting.

The smell of garlic is always an auspicious sign.

After the cab driver explains their problem in Sichuanese, the eldest of the three stands to address Downs, stating that of course she would be happy to assist the American. How much money would he like to exchange? Downs meekly requests \$250.00, and the sweet old lady replies that she can't remember exactly, but she thinks she heard on television last night that the current exchange rate is 8.5.

Downs replies that this is perfectly suitable while another matron yells into the hallway for their young assistant, Meimei to go to the bank and return with Y2,000.00.

While Meimei is retrieving the funds, Downs inquires into which federal office this might be. The three gentle women try to be concise and distinct but Downs is forced to resort to his pocket dictionary: "Tibetan Office for Foreign Nationals"

What the....

"He's not Tibetan you realize," remarks one of the ladies knitting.

"But he is foreign," responds a second also knitting.

"And since that is part of our title, we should certainly help him," comments the standing one smiling at the foreigner.

Downs nearly falls over. He has finally, after so many years traveling and working in China, been out-Chineseed by the Chinese. It had to be knitting old ladies to accomplish this. He now sits with his forehead in his palm, his mind completely blown.

Meimei returns warmly dressed in a heavy bright red overcoat, from which she extracts a large package of bills. Downs exchanges an assortment of his legal tender with the ladies who comment on the exquisite detail and beauty of American money compared to their own, as they have never seen American currency before. Downs admits he has never appreciated the attractiveness of American money. He can't even remember whose portrait is on the ten dollar bill.

The cab returns to Foster, who is suspicious about the story of the old ladies. Downs then attempts to present the driver with a heavy gratuity, but the driver refuses repeatedly. He has enjoyed simply doing his job.

Why is he being polite to strangers he knows have money? Other incidents similar to this have been experienced: In Malawi three Americans stopped for a Coke and peanuts at a dirt-poor ramshackle store. Upon departing, the travelers attempted to pay, but the proprietor refused the money with the remark that he was honored to provision the first Americans to enter his store. (Would an American provide the same courtesy to a Malawian?)

As always, it is the poorest who are the most generous. Is this generosity altruistic? Is altruism real or imagined? More than several entomologists and animal behaviorists claim that all behavior is based upon retribution and that altruism does not exist. In contrast to the generosity of the poor, the Herald Tribune once reported that a survey of the wealthiest people on earth revealed that 99% of them do nothing with their fortunes but hoard it.



It is still cold, as Kangding is at 10,000 or 12,000 ft. and the precipitous canyon that encloses the city allows only a few hours of sunlight a day to strike the streets. The two now solvent travelers decide to ride the bus to Luding, which is lower in elevation and which will provide them a visit to the famous chain-link bridge across the Dadu River.

As they turn and walk back to the bus station, the cab driver informs them that the vehicles at this station do not travel south to Luding but travel east on the Tibetan highway to the provincial capitol of Chengdu.

Bus service to Luding is provided by a small private company downtown, where the driver and another colleague propose to deliver them. Foster throws his pack in a side-car and mounts the bike behind the driver. This time each of them rides a cab, and it becomes a steeplechase through the icy streets of the city. Foster whips his hat around his head as if riding a bucking bronco, while his lead cab careens around corners with a side-car that goes airborne at one point.

The minibus (Y14.00 for two) disembarks Kangding via the highway that parallels the river, which drops rapidly in nearly continuous cascades. The gorge is very narrow and impressive, with a gradient that is much too steep for standard erosional processes and consequently must follow a major structural lineament. Numerous small hydroelectric stations have been built along its course.

So, China is now totally open to travel, but there still are no financial institutions facilitating foreign travelers. However, at the tumultuous rate that China is changing, it won't be long before all tourist services and amenities are provided throughout the country.

The road eventually intersects the confluence with the immense Dadu River gorge at the much lower and warmer elevation of 5,000 ft. and travels south to the county capitol of Luding, one of the famous historical sites from the "Long March."

Luding is a smaller town that has obviously seen better days, for there is no new construction the likes of which was observed in Hanyuan, Shimian, and Kangding. Many of the faded and cracked "modern" Soviet-style buildings were built in the 1960's. Apparently, the best hotel in town is the large four-story government rest house, with the price for foreigners of Y100.00, which provides a suite with two double-bedded bedrooms, a studio with a television, and what used to be a functional bathroom.

The toilet is sinking into the floor with a seat that is broken off the hinges and propped against the wall. The bathtub is rust encrusted with spigot handles that fall off the plumbing when touched. Hot water is provided at 9:30 pm.

That evening the two travelers prefer to walk around town to find a more pleasant restaurant than the large, overcrowded, raucous rest-house dining hall. The back street scenes abound with food stalls, small shops selling clothing or utensils, and local inhabitants contented idle socializing among traditional Chinese architecture. It appears to be a satisfactory and comfortable life here.

A small and clean restaurant provides excellent fare and local beer, but the Sichuan vegetables are much too hot as one third of the plate consists of red chili peppers. A large group of customers in the front room plays the Chinese finger game, which is the equivalent to "rock, paper, scissors," but instead is gestured with ten hand signals that are associated with vociferous expletives.

This is a real mind-reading game: The numbers one through ten are represented in a single hand gesture, and as each contestant simultaneously flings a hand signal he screams the number he estimates will be the sum of both party's hands. The loser of each round takes a shot of rocket fuel and this continues until one of the contestants falls over drunk.

The beds that night are warm and comfortable but once again Downs shivers and sweats.



Yi woman