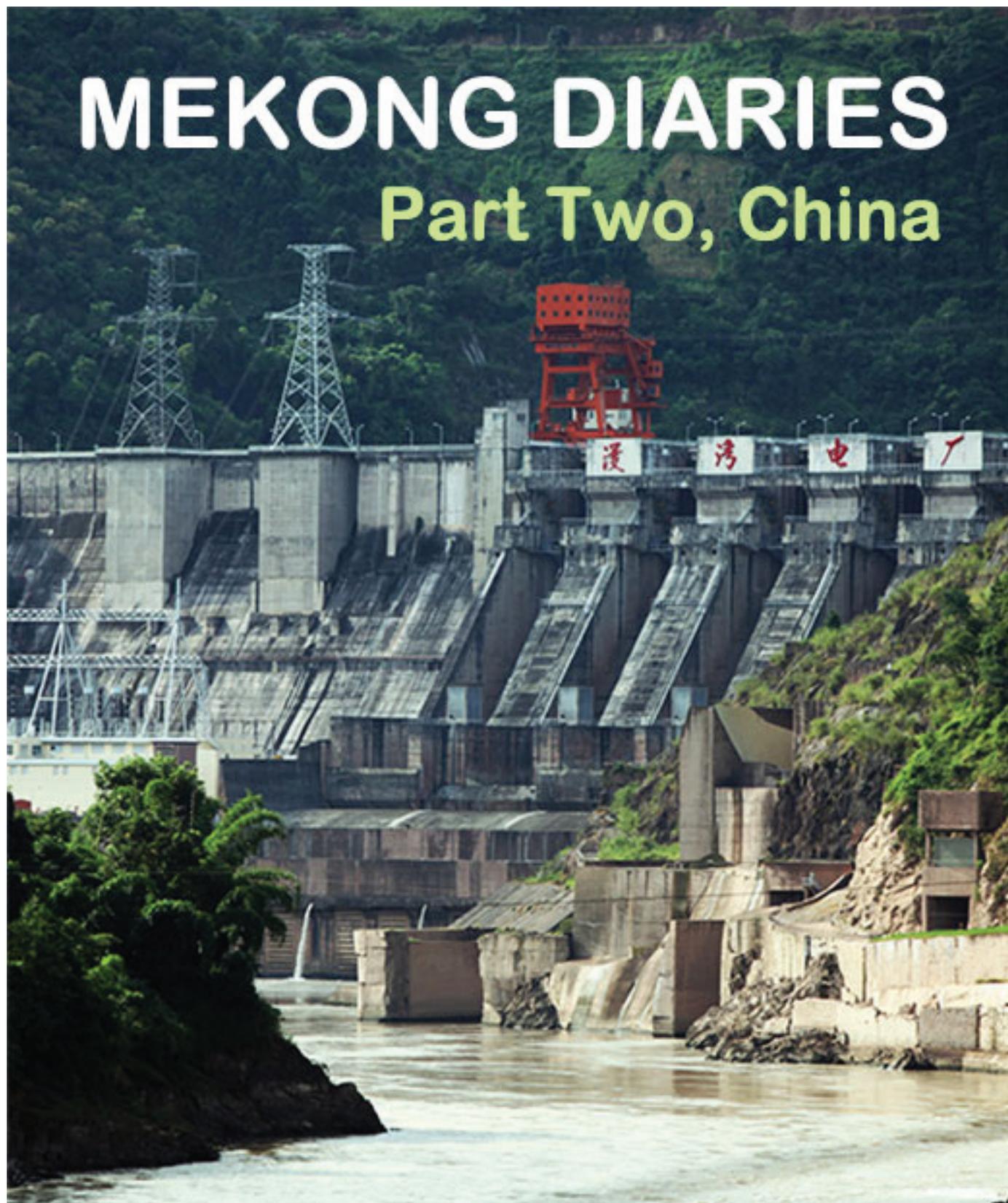


MEKONG DIARIES

Part Two, China



Day 12 – Maduo to Deqin

It's 9:20 a.m. and we are on a minibus about to leave for Deqin. We have been in a car for most of the last eight days, contending with the scale of China. The last 24 hours have been especially messed up.

Now we have a six-hour, 180-kilometer crawl around sheer mountain roads to get to Deqin. Tomorrow we sleep in!

On the bus we meet a French expatriate who lives in Shanghai with his Han Chinese wife. Until recently they lived in Lhasa, but left after the pre-Olympic riots when the general atmosphere became unfriendly for Han people.

Emile is a hobbyist hiker and has been to Deqin several times. This time his plans are to circle the base of the Meili Mountains together with the pilgrims coming there to perform one of the great Tibetan rituals.

Emile is full of advice. He recommends going to Y'beng, which is a small town surrounded by great walks and excellent views of the mountains and glaciers. It also has a wonderful hot spring. He also suggests skipping our intended destination, Deqin, and moving just a few kilometers on to a town called Fellasi, from where the full face of the Baima glacier can be seen.

We leave Emile in Deqin and catch a bus to Fellasi, where a short road of hotels waits in a line facing the towering peaks, falling into shadow at the end of the day.

In front of the hotels, the development of tourism has gripped the old temple that sits on the opposite face of the valley. It is the destination of the devotees who come here to walk around the bases of these mountains.

However, although these beautiful towering peaks must beckon to climbers, the law has prohibited climbing them ever since an expedition of Chinese and Japanese climbers disappeared without a trace in a blizzard while crossing one of the many glaciers that feed the rivers below.

Day 13 – Selling Ethnicity

At dinner, we meet a Norwegian master's degree student who is staying in Fellasi for a few weeks with a Chinese fellow researcher from the University of Kunming. Currently studying the impact of tourism on the minority cultures of the area, he introduces a new phrase into our vocabulary: the commercialization of ethnicity.

This phrase describes a process evident in the bus tours that take Chinese tourists to visit the sites of restricted sky burials, where fences contain what is presented as a strange, primitive, and dying ritual. The phrase also explains the rash of tourism development that we have found at every turn of the river's course through China.

Our student friend outlines the principles guiding China's tourist boom, which is turning the Chinese into the largest group of tourists in the world.

Tourist destinations are ranked according to a five-star rating system. Great prestige attaches to a four or five-star tourist spot, and tourists set out for these with the sole aim of getting a photograph of the location. They then return home to exhibit the picture and receive the acclaim of their relatives and friends.



A fence built by the Chinese government to discourage vultures, the “spirit eagles” of Tibetan sky burials. A central part of the Buddhist faith in Tibet, the practice has been banned at this monastery, and most of the birds are shot by Chinese soldiers.

For the tourists, development is about providing platforms for getting the best shots of these locations. And development sometimes goes beyond just building five-star viewing platforms, cable cars, and roads. In many minority villages, walk-through tours are arranged to guide tourists through a pre-arranged experience of the minority culture. The villagers themselves are culturally flash-frozen in their archaic costumes and habitations.

Day 14 – Viewing a Glacier

We settle into a hotel opposite the Ming Yong glacier, a 12-kilometer sheet of ice.

Today we will climb the hills beside this glacier to the highest point we can find. We drive down the narrow road that hangs onto the side of the Mekong River’s sheer canyon, some two or more kilometers deep. The road is often just wide enough for two cars, and in many places the mountains have sent showers of boulders over the road. These peaks are made from the loosest soil and shale.

At the bottom of the road we reach a small tiered village set a few hundred meters above the churning, muddy Mekong River. We come to a ticket booth set in a small strand of towering conifers, the first substantial trees we have seen since starting our journey.

Tickets in hand, we stop a few moments later to photograph the bridge spanning the gorge, below which the river gnaws at the earth, roiling and twisting with the violence of gritty flood waters.

Crossing the bridge, the road continues back upstream for a few minutes, a thin ribbon of dust

lined with crumbling piles of rocks and soil that fall at an almost 90-degree angle into the river. Then, as we turn into the narrow, high canyon carved by the Ming Yong glacier's melt-water stream, the road is again bituminized and well-kept.

Driving upward for a while, we enter a village of large white-walled farmhouses. At the end of the village we cross a footbridge over the white waters of an icy glacial stream, and we begin to climb toward the glacier, which hangs onto the mountain above our heads.

The path is well-kept and never too steep, and yet I am nearly fainting before long. After spending some time at nearly 5,000 meters above sea level in Tibet, I was sure I had earned some aerobic brownie points. But the reality of my fitness is soon stripped bare, and the climb soon becomes an arduous, panting, desperate ordeal.

Yet the paths are beautiful as they pass through pygmy forests of conifers decorated with the rainbow colors of flags bearing prayers to the compassionate goddess Tara. Finally we reach a staging post where the horses are tied, while those who wish to can continue to climb up the side of the valley to get close to the glacier.



The Mingyong Glacier is shown in the Baima Mountain Range in far northern Yunnan Province. This 12-km long melting ribbon of dirty ice feeds a stream that then flows into the Mekong River.

The glacier end is a mass of broken dirty ice melting into numerous rivulets. The stream itself is surprisingly large and is swollen with water stained dark grey, the color of the rocks and ground beneath the ice. A series of stepped platforms has been built to give safe access to the many thousands of Chinese tourists who come here each year for a good photo opportunity.

At the first stage, we meet an old lady and a young monk. They sing for us a song in Tibetan about the glacier.

Gathering our shredded resolve, we continue to climb. At the top we are alone, and we spend an hour or so photographing the glacier. The peaks of the mountains here are so grand that the clouds are strung between them, casting impermanent shadows like torn prayer flags.

The day is too quickly starting to wane, so we start down again. All the early-rising Chinese tour groups are long gone, and our guide is clearly impatient to return. We make our way to the riverbed, photographing its rapid fall from the ice down the steep hill toward the Mekong.

As the sun disappears behind the ice-white cap of Meili Mountain, we again reach the village, driving before us a nervous herd of assorted ponies and small horses. On the way back to the hotel, we stop to photograph the meeting with the river. It was a beautiful walk.

Day 15 – Polluted Water

We have found a car big enough to contain our oversized European bodies and all our luggage. Backpacking, Ha!

We leave Fellasi and drive south along the Mekong. Our first stop is a strange little tourist spot where some hot springs have been captured in a shallow wading pool. Only one of us dares the not-sweet-smelling waters to try a cure for his aching legs.

Glancing over the edge of the pool's decking, we discover a thick pile of rubbish from the restaurant that is attached to the tiny resort: smashed beer bottles and wrappers all ignorantly thrown over the edge to tumble down into the small gully of a seasonal creek flowing into the Mekong.

This is just a few days away from the river's source, where we drank the translucent water to slake our thirst, and now I would not feel clean if I were to swim in its violent currents. A million untreated toilets, a million restaurants, and even more houses all empty their waste daily into the opaque river's forgiving flow.

No wonder the dolphins in Cambodia have not given birth to a surviving pup for years. The river is being poisoned from the moment it starts its journey to the sea.

Crossing back to the road side of the river, we stop again to walk through a village. The people here are mostly Tibetan farmers, and we have arrived during the harvest of corn and just as the heads of rice are turning gold. A fast-flowing stream has been channeled through the village's lanes, a cold and clear disposal service passing beneath the cobblestones between the earthen walls.

These homes with high thick walls and fine hardwood beams supporting their tiled roofs are the most substantial farmhouses we have seen yet. In a courtyard outside their decorative wooden door, two middle-aged women bake and pound corn for storage through the winter. Corn here is intended mostly as feed for pigs.

Walking in the patterned shadows cast by ancient trees, we meet an old man carrying an infant boy. The man's hair is braided and wound around his head in a red scarf in the traditional style of Tibetan warriors, where their long black hair is woven with wire to make it a virtual helmet for battle. The man tells us he is a great-grandfather and that his family has lived for six generations in the house he is now entering.

He says that Tibetans here do eat fish unlike their northern nomadic countrymen, but that now is harvest time and no one has time for fishing. Their relationship with the Mekong seems tenuous, as

the river is too violent for boating and too low in its course for irrigation. Instead, they divert mountain streams through a series of channels to feed their crops.



The river has many roles for the people who share its course, one being a way to dispose of rubbish and refuse. Here, a small restaurant throws its nightly waste into the dry riverbed of a tributary and waits for the rains to wash it away downstream.

He tells us about a village a few miles downstream, Ruda, which will soon be relocated across the river.

A few hundred kilometers from Weixi, we stop to photograph some half-completed buildings that Emile told us are the first parts of a dam-building project across the river's main channel. This is the first we have heard of this, though we will learn later that this will be the Lidi Dam.

Aida, a small village we pass, has the distinction of being the place where we see our first boat on the river. As we continue, the signs of construction become more apparent until we find ourselves following a chain of big dump trucks along a dirt road, with piles of metal and concrete lying strewn along each side.

By nightfall, our four-hour day trip has turned into an 11-hour minibus nightmare of death-defying

cliffside roads descending by stages on the side of vertical faces that fall into the seething torrent of mud and stones that the locals call the Lancang Jiang. It puts our little team in a frayed state.

Finally we arrive at our day's destination, Weixi. This little town immediately assaults you with its chaotic ugliness and neon depravity—a crude step out of an agrarian past and into a cheap and flashy future.

After descending from the elevated plains and mountain ranges that were forged when two continents collided with each other millions of years ago, we feel today that we have begun to descend into the contemporary Southeast Asian world of greed and poverty, of unbridled consumerism and the pointless destruction of the “old” and construction of a disposable “new.”

Here, the miraculous natural beauty of the world is being defiled and poisoned by its development into an industrial site, and the stains are leaching down every gully and streambed. At the head of China's share of the Mekong River, the glare of brothel lights opens a doorway to a parallel journey—this one down the intestines of a ruthless and insatiable body of humanity.

Now, in the first Chinese city of our Mekong travels, we find that menus include fish. The streets are steep and filled with outlandish farm vehicles, three-wheeled carts, and trucks with exposed engine blocks spluttering through the glistening twilight.

The dust of the mountains, ground down to make roads, shrouds a disappearing world of ornate wooden houses with polychromatic carved wooden eaves and blond wooden shutters decorated with dragons, tigers, and winged aquatic creatures.

Impossibly graceful footbridges perched on unlikely granite blocks span icy streams. Grasses sprout from ancient oven-fired roof tiles across sparkling voids where the atmosphere is drained between the teeth of ancient frozen mountain peaks.

This is the world being replaced by cars, undrinkable water, polluted cities, and the poverty of all nations.

Day 16 – A Fragile Connection

The next day we drive out of Weixi and soon reach a small village.

Most of the villagers are in the fields, harvesting corn. In the middle of the stream, a bridge is anchored on a huge square boulder. It is over a hundred years old and has a name, Feng Yu (Wind and Rain), that celebrates its endurance.

This village of around a hundred families has no memory of having existed anywhere else, and one woman says that even if they want to leave, there is nowhere else for them to go.

She also says that though many people stop to look at their beautiful bridge, the villagers intend to upgrade the road and replace the bridge with one that can support vehicles. When we point to its historical and aesthetic value, she kindly suggests that they may preserve it and build around it.

But the logic of change in China that we have witnessed so far seems to be that nothing will divert its course. It begs the question: What would the villagers here and elsewhere in this shifting land beside the river choose if they could compare the future promised in the glow of Weixi's neon lights with the life of a villager in a clean and limitless world.



A farmer walks through his field of corn. The people of this town below the Lidi dam construction site know they will soon have to relocate.

Or is this just First World romanticism?

At the junction of the river and our road from Weixi, we stop in a village to investigate the life of people on the Mekong in northern Yunnan. They say that things are changing, that people are richer and better off. But with a dam already under construction, the people are aware that their unbroken connection to the lands of their village and farms is about to come to a sudden, flooding end.

After a short, nervous stop in the village, we return to Weixi with a confused sense of how best to proceed through Yunnan, given the slowness of our progress so far.

Day 17 – Moving On

We drive from Weixi to Dali under a growing cloud of suspicion that our driver is either lost or is avoiding new road tolls by taking the longest and least comfortable route available. We continue on, following increasingly difficult roads and often interrupted by significant falls of stones from the high cliffs beside us. Eventually we arrive in Dali, with a much-needed day off planned. Look out, mindless shopping on the horizon!

Day 18 – ‘Practical, Resourceful’

Our travels through Yunnan so far have not revealed much of a local connection with the Mekong. Indeed, it has become a kind of discovery to realize that the Chinese here do not entertain a metaphysical bond with their world. They seem to have a purely pragmatic and material assessment of the natural world.



Still in its initial stages, the Lidi Dam is already transforming the landscape. We drove for hours through numerous work sites beside the river, while the air fill with the sounds of trucks and heavy machinery, and our mouths filled with dust.

I have a long conversation with a local expat. He explains that there are two “black societies” that have a long and enduring pervasiveness in China. These mafias are a part of every economy, skimming from the top of all profit streams from cigarettes to infrastructure projects such as dams.

He claims that to understand how China is governed, one must appreciate the importance of *guanxi*—the role played by influence and friendship—as a way of doing deals and making one’s way in Chinese society that is more consequential than contract laws or facts and figures.

His final grain of wisdom is an observation about the character of the Chinese people. In his estimation as a long-time resident and student of China, the Chinese people are strong, brave, and resourceful—and have suffered throughout their long history from being saddled with heartless and nepotistic leaders.

We will be back on the road tomorrow, heading south.

Day 19 – A Slower World

Leaving Dali well-rested and with a brand-new car, we expect a long drive before reaching the Mekong again.

This morning we are heading for Nanjiang as a lunch stop. A brand-new four-lane highway leads us into a wide flood plain filled with farms.

On the new road, the traffic is almost all from a slower, more pastoral world: plump farmers' wives on scooters, young boys crowded four to a bike, weathered old men carrying geese and chickens in cages on the backs of their old motorbikes and pony-powered carts, and wagons carrying passengers or piled to overflowing with corn cobs.

Yellowing plots of sweet corn and burnished, rippling carpets of tobacco make a patchwork of the earth between the white walls of small towns.

Families, with the children perhaps back from university to help with the labor, transform the rice fields by hand from a uniform green into rows of inverted golden bushels. Others use the flat hot road, raking the winnowed grain out to dry on the black bitumen.

After lunch in Nanjiang, the road climbs a mountain into the tea fields of Wu Laing. The temperature falls quickly, and a mist hangs between the dark green forests still standing between the ordered ledges of tea plantations.

The road quickly disintegrates, though regular stone markers attest to a once important role in regional travel for this now lonely route up the sides of a lush mountain range. What is shown as a bold red line on the map is in reality an inconstant track through wet mossy forests cloaking cloud-capped peaks.

We pass groups of low-roofed homes perched mostly beside the road with their backs facing the valleys below. In their eaves, the haunches of pigs—reminiscent of Italian prosciutto—are left hanging to dry, while around them, terraces of deep green tea bushels mark the mountainsides.

Everywhere on the steps and verandas, corncobs are piled to dry next to rain jackets and sodden shoes. At one point we see a man working on the roadside wearing what appears to be a coat made of thick brown hair. A local explains that this is a traditional raincoat, a huge waistcoat made from tree bark.

As the road crests the mountains and we begin our jolting way downhill again, the first tropical cicadas of our journey begin to hum from the shadows in the trees. It is a sound from the tropical forests of the south and our first evidence of a new ecology on the river's descent to the sea.

With each twist of the road, and accompanied by increasing humidity, the vegetation begins to change. Coming around a corner, we see the first buffalo of our trip, and moments later someone says, "Look, you can see the river!"

Below us, still far away and only barely visible in the chaos of valleys, a tiny glimpse of a mirror of water is indeed the Mekong. More telling, however, are the huge power lines strung between giant steel towers spanning the valleys and all leading down toward the river.

We follow these like a trail into the hot afternoon and soon come upon the small town of Manwan, which gives its name to the Manwan Dam, the first dam to be built across the main channel of the Mekong River.

We are both excited and anxious at the thought of coming face to face with our first Mekong dam, the site of one of the biggest relocations for a dam project of its time. The Manwan Dam provides electricity for the Guangdong region, which includes Hong Kong and is one of China's most affluent areas, and is closely protected from outside scrutiny.

With China's 60th anniversary of Communist Party control only a couple of weeks away, there are heightened security concerns over issues like dams, and we know that our trip could end here if we attract the attention of the authorities.

A few kilometers later, we see the dam from a distance and stop to take some furtive pictures in the heavy heat and yellow light. We drive on, taking more photos out of the window. Crossing the river that flows out of the dam's outlets, we are struck by how broad and strong the river is just a few hundred meters after being captured in a reservoir.

Past the guard post that stops the curious at the dam's wall, we reach a cul-de-sac where a few hundred shops and houses offer a limited range of tourist services. There are a dock and some basic watercraft designed for short tours, which we decide to take at 60 yuan for one hour.



The Manwan Dam, filmed from a distance to avoid attracting attention. China's policy of damming its rivers is a sensitive state issue, and pictures of the three dams already built on the Mekong proved hard to get.

The lady who we buy our tickets from confirms our initial impression that the combined waters of northern Yunnan result in a particularly nasty soup of refuse and waste. She says that she eats fish, but that she will never swim in the dam. We don't point out the contradiction in these decisions.

The dam's man-made lake is filled with plastic, and the water is topped with bubbles and scum. There are few farms on the shores, and only one boat—a ferry—while we are there. It is a lifeless and industrial break in the Mekong.

We drive for many hours upstream on a tributary of the Mekong toward the regional center of Yun Xian. We drive until after dark through small industrial and farming communities and through a heavy rainfall—our first since leaving Tibet—beside dripping and crumbling cliffs and through gorges of tumbling rapids, until suddenly we arrive in a valley of neon lights.

The town of Yun Xian is an unexpected urban spread in the middle of Yunnan's endless rural valleys and mountains.

At dinner, we sit in a small noodle restaurant, amusing passersby with our very presence. The chicken meat is blue but surprisingly delicious. Our habit of taking big bottles of local beer with dinner is now thoroughly cemented and helps ease our entry into the kingdom of slumber, while karaoke throbs and offends the night sky.

Day 20 – Glimpses of a Dam

As we leave Yun Xian, the scenery quickly reverts to farms and industry. Amazingly, the town is only two years old, but it already fills the bowl of its valley with an ocean of low-rise buildings, including what seem like a thousand mobile-phone stores.

We follow the tributary toward the Mekong and start to notice sugar cane fields. Gravel-extraction machinery is hard at work in every bend and shallow of the river bed.

It is definitely a different kind of exploration we find ourselves undertaking today, as we spend hours searching on tracks and back roads for the Mekong River. Only in China can one lose one of the world's great rivers. Our goal for today is to reach the Mekong at the Daoshaoshan Dam and then follow the river for as long as the road allows before heading east again to find a hotel on the road to Jinghong.

As we start downhill again, the towering alien-invader-shaped power lines appear again, hanging like links of silver chain around a giant's neck. Once again, our first clue that we are getting close to the Mekong comes in the form of the infrastructure required to transport huge volumes of electricity across China.

Suddenly we are in the pocket of a thin valley. We drive through manicured lawns and rockeries and past shining new institutional buildings, and on every street post a sign proclaims the name of the company managing the Daoshaoshan Dam.

Turning a corner on this road, we come across about two dozen men in identical overalls who all stare back at us with an unfamiliar directness. We learn that this is a forced-labor detail of prisoners.

As we drive on, the dam wall can be seen in occasional flashes, but the dam has been built in a bend of the river, perhaps to aid its obscurity. It passes quickly without giving us a safe opportunity for a photograph, and so we pause at a bridge just around the corner from where the dam wall stops the Mekong.

As we look into the churning water, it becomes clear that the water is being released here through underground pipes, and not through a gate at the dam.

At a kind of office perhaps intended for monitoring the dam's output of water, we ask some men if we can get any closer to the dam or if there is a tour of the reservoir, as at Manwan. They firmly quash this idea. From their disinterest and the disarray of their quarters, it seems clear that this is a very out-of-the-way place.

It occurs to us that four Westerners with lots of cameras asking about the dam in a place that can be reached only after hours spent on terrible back roads could quickly seem suspicious, so we leave and continue to try to follow the river.

At another guardhouse a few moments farther down the road, an officer becomes increasingly curious about how we might have arrived here in the middle of nowhere next to a dam. We make

excuses and leave.

The Mekong is now far below us and is impossible to see but for glimpses through the thickly forested slopes. The road is terrible and our progress in the brand-new car is agonizing, both because of the constant 20 km-per-hour that we manage and because the car's suspension is making the most unhealthy noises.



The Manwan Dam reservoir is a foul and lifeless artificial lake on which one can take an hour-long tour by boat. Three dams are in operation on the river in Yunnan, with 12 more mainstream dams already in construction in this province alone.

The road and the river diverge, and we spend the next few hours focusing on getting somewhere before we have a mechanical breakdown in the dark. Then the road breaks through the trees, and we are presented with one last vast image of the Mekong as it winds south in ever-shallower and less severe valleys, with the afternoon sun reflecting from its face straight into our eyes.

It is clear that we cannot afford the time it will take to follow the river through these many valleys and dangerous roads. It is also clear that China does not live by this river in the way that other nations do farther downstream. Instead, the river courses for many hundreds of kilometers through impenetrable canyons where the government chooses not to maintain roads, and where few venture.

Finally, at 9:00 p.m. after a 14-hour day in the car, we make out the friendly neon glow of Jinghong, and our day of driving draws to an end.

Day 21 – A Tourist Town

We spend our first night in Jinghong, which on first impression seems to be all Southeast Asia and

very little China. The city has a small but very clean and modern center complete with malls, fast food restaurants, and an abundance of tourist-oriented stores that sell tea and the elaborate jade carvings so prized by Han tourists. There is also a small street with just a couple of restaurants serving Western food. It is apparent that the city's target market is not European or English-speaking.

It is for an authentic indigenous experience that most come to Jinghong, as the surrounding hills are home to many hill tribes, with the Dai forming the largest group.

In conversation with the owners of a café, we learn that Jinghong has only recently been transformed. The tourist area itself is only three years old, and just year an ancient tea market was repurposed as a karaoke-and-bar street when the price of tea collapsed. This café used to be located in an old, traditional Dai-styled house until the owner was offered 600,000 yuan for the property and the café had to start looking for a new home.

Now, on the temporary fencing surrounding the building site where the café once stood, large red and white signs announce the coming of the town's first KPC franchise—just part of a multistory shopping arcade that will add to the broad and rubbish-free shopping precinct.

After dinner we take a walk through one of the most ordinary night markets we have ever seen, an epitome of mass production and cultural commoditization featuring artificially aged little red books, fake jade ornaments, and strange wooden figurines. Not a single item is original or unique. This town begins to appear as a garish stereotype—a jumble of invented public spirit and crass ethnic appropriation, a bright plastic world of nihilism.

Day 22 – Visiting the ‘Dai Court’

Today we cast around for the best way to approach being in a tourist town at the edge of China and Southeast Asia. We have here to find out about the Jinghong Dam and the fate of the Dai people, but there is no quick or easy way to engage a subject as immense as China.

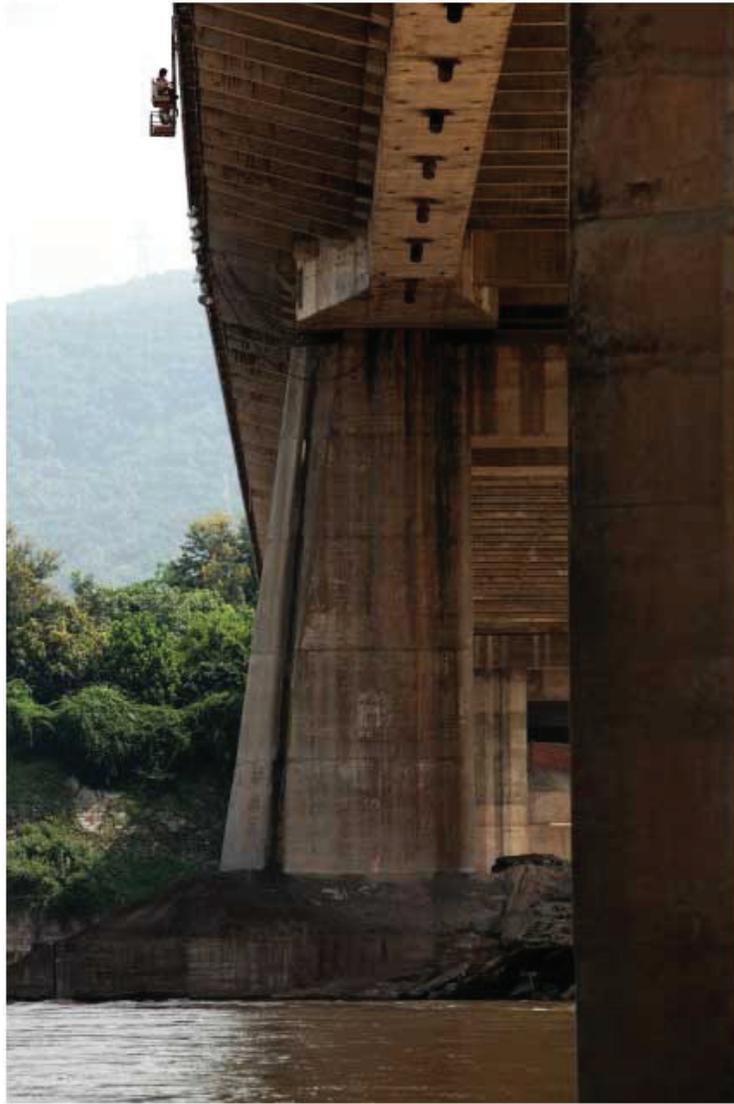
So we decide to take a tour—something classily called the Mekong Impressions Boat Tour—to the ancient Dai Palace.

We discovered the tour yesterday while researching how to catch a boat to Thailand from Jinghong. So as the day starts to heat up, we catch a taxi across the Jinghong Bridge to the River Harbor Port, where a minibus filled with middle-aged Chinese tourists collects us for a short drive to another boat ramp.

At the ramp we follow our tiny guide, a young woman wearing a bright red floral dress and carrying an umbrella printed with purple daisies, onto a triple-storied riverboat called the Gold Peacock No. 1. But our little line of tourists passes through this first vessel and onto a second, much more humble craft belonging to the same Gold Peacock line.

Inside the long cabin with bus seats, the air conditioning is set to Icelandic, and a small TV is screening a tourism promotional video highlighting the sights of the region. The tour guide reappears, this time with a microphone in hand, and begins narrating in Mandarin as the boat pulls into the currents of the river and heads downstream. Notably, the boat flies a Burmese flag.

After a ride lasting 10 minutes, we arrive at a small hill locked between the Mekong and the mouth of a small tributary. We disembark and walk up a steep hillside through manicured gardens to a waiting trolley train. We get on and a new tour guide—this time dressed in a pale blue uniform with beaded irises embroidered on her parasol, joins us and immediately begins reciting her spiel on a crackly loudspeaker as the cars lurch into motion.



The Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge spans the Lancang Jiang, a clear indication of Chinese hopes for a significant increase in visitors to Jinghong.

We drive past palm trees, verdant tropical plants, and a small temple until we arrive at the top of the hill, from which the unfinished sprawl of Jinghong can be seen laid out before us. Pulling to a stop, we find ourselves in an open square where other tourists are already waiting among a group of faux traditional buildings.

A stage fills with girls dressed in impossibly loud and glittery costumes that look most like those seen on women attending a Khmer wedding. The performers guide the tourist crowd down a set of stairs into a small clearing, where a sign announces that here is a sacred spring from which no one but the ancient Dai king was permitted to drink.

One by one, the tourists drink from the water that brims in a small pool beneath a little wooden hut. To one side, an old and pale village man sits cross-legged in the costume of a seer. For a few coins he blesses each tourist's incense before they place it, together with a few prayers and wishes, at an altar next to him. Behind the old man, a sign explains that this was a ritual place for the divine instruction of the Dai kings.

The tourists fill the air with the sound of camera shutters snapping and their own loud laughter.

After a few minutes the performance begins, involving a large half-broken drum, a couple of dozen female dancers, and a magnificently atonal singer and a way-too-enthusiastic MC. After the singing section, a recording of chanting monks fills the space with mysterious humming, cymbals, horns, and bells.

The audience is divided into groups among the recreated village huts, the setting is a village square. Suddenly, the soundtrack changes into a “natives are restless” cacophony of drums and bass baritone chanting, much like the climactic scenes in a Johnny Weissmuller Tarzan film. A gold-and-saffron bathtub is wheeled out and, partially hidden behind a large golden fan, the Dai monarch steps into his bath and performs a stylized dance of washing.

Meanwhile, six water nymphs wave a blue cloth around the scene. This must refer to a traditional rite in which the king would bathe in the river.

By now the Chinese tourists are checking their watches or snoozing quietly, holding their chins in their hands. The performance can't be faulted for costume changes, and no amount of glitz or chiffon has been spared to render the ancient Dai monarch and his court in vivid hues of fuchsia, tangering, cherry, and cobalt blue. But we can't help but wonder whether anything we have seen here actually represents Dai culture.

The performance draws to a close when the MC encourages people to join them on stage for a ring-around-the-rosie, with each tourist interpreting the simple dance steps in a unique and strange way.

The performers leave the stage, begin dragging the audience out into the square, and hand out metal bowls. A huge water fight ensues. Once everyone is drenched, we are led across a footbridge and begin winding our way downhill on what soon becomes a shocking tour of exotic and endangered primates kept in tiny cages.

The first exhibit is a large, open-aired enclosure filled with around a hundred monkeys. But then we move on and encounter glass-fronted cages containing pig-tailed macaques, crab-eating macaques, stump-tailed and black-capped macaques, albino macaques, white-cheeked gibbons, and marmosets—a long and tragic list of animals staring woefully from their solitary confinement in 10-by-20-foot cages.

These creatures live for 20-40 years in the wild—a length of time that would be filled with incomprehensible despair if spent alone in a concrete jail cell, unable to hide, and maltreated for the pleasure of tourists.

The tourists file past the displays, spending just enough time to stare, shake the cells, or shout at the animals before being guided on to the next orchestrated stop on this increasingly eclectic tour of exoticisms.

The tour winds into a museum where a collection of Dai artifacts, knives, dresses, crafts, and photographs holds the attention of about half the group for about as long as it takes to walk through the galleries, sit down in a small courtyard, spread your legs wide, and fan yourself with a wide-brimmed sun hat.

The ride back from the King's mountain is short and quiet, and is fueled by a plate of whole fruit. At the boat ramp our guide leaves us, and we realize that we are to find our own way home. The minibus full of tourists notices our situation and takes us on. Their kindness and smiles undermine our sense of superiority and the harshness of our earlier judgments.

Another day in China.

Day 23 - Rubber

We catch a boat costing 640 yuan for the four of us for a trip of about 40 minutes and 12 kilometers downstream, only to be dropped in a car park where we find out we will have to wait 10 minutes for a local bus to take us to the next town, where the 'indigenous tour' will begin. On this super-expensive trip on a tiny boat, we again pass the small hill where our tour took place the day before just south of the city of Jinghong.



Small-scale fish farming is ubiquitous in Dai villages, with many families supplementing their other cultivation activities with small ponds filled with fresh-water fish.

Three hundred years ago, this place was indeed the site of the Dai King's palace. But 40 years ago, when the ruins of this former glory still remained, the Cultural Revolution happened and the ancient ruins were destroyed by the Communist government, as were all the temples in the villages.

For about one-tenth of the cost of our silly inflatable boat ride, we arrive in a nondescript town, where we get off and look around in vain for something slightly ethnic. Wandering around a food and haberdashery market, we take photos of the locals and their stock.

Coming out of the market, we find the Mekong wider, and we join a crowd of local people waiting at a landing for the ferries that work the crossing. On the other side of the river, we pass small concrete houses and enter the village life of the region for the first time.

We can't help but notice is that everyone we see is occupied in the same business—rubber. The whole community seems to have turned to cultivating, tapping, and processing rubber. We see motorbikes saddled with dark sap-stained plastic tanks, trucks loaded with the trunks of dried-up rubber

trees, and small factories where vehicles of all kinds wait while their owners exchange the white resin for cold cash.

We call at one family-size factory where a small tanker is slowly being filled by hand with a funnel. In a trailer's luggage rack, elastic seat-sized tablets of set rubber resin wait in line to be taken inside the processing plant, where a powerful smell of rubber and rancid sap rises from the wet-cleaning, rolling, and cooking process.

A thin and unfriendly man sharply forbids us from filming. State secrets, I'm sure.

A smiling village woman in knee-high gum boots tells us she can earn 13,000 yuan a month from the hardened rubber she collects from her farmland. In the yard, a young man and his wife on a motorbike deliver liquid rubber sap in two tubs, their clothes blackened from raw rubber.

People tell us that a year or so ago, the price of rubber suddenly fell by half. Their whole economy is a monocrop, and this seems a dangerously one-sided policy should factors further undermine the value of rubber at some future date.

We continue walking along the road and soon enter the outskirts of another village, its rustic limits already growing out beyond the old town walls, and its main street disappearing behind laminated signs and tiles. From the windows of one of the first wooden houses we pass, a family of women calls us over and asks us in. As soon as we sit down, they bring out sour bananas, pomello, and water.

We ask them about their lives and the changes they have seen. They explain that they used to have forests but had to cut them down to earn money. They used to live close to the river but had to move due to landslides. According to them, the Mekong is now bigger than it used to be. There was a huge flood in 1966. The dam came, and the rapids were blown up. In earlier times they would collect moss from the river when the water was clear, and the river used to provide them with water for drinking and fish.

But now it is too dirty. They call it the Nam Hong, like the people of the Lower Mekong Basin.

Walking farther on through the shadowy ranks of seemingly endless rubber tree plantations, we pass yet another community factory farm where many families live and work for a single corporation, which sets the price for their rubber crop.

We stop in a Dai village and eat some more pomello with the locals. They tell us that there are 148 families, all Dai, in this one village. Asked about the loss of the forest to rubber, they say that they still have a "spirit forest" where their ancestors are buried and worshiped. It was "fun" to have the old, wild forests, they say, but they were terribly poor and just worked all the time. Now they work less and have more money.

Everyone has electricity and solar-heated water, and the village is peaceful and pretty, with big wooden houses. As much as we search for some dissent, everyone pledges his or her satisfaction with the advent of rubber.

Following the road north through a banana plantation where blue-and-silver ripening bags litter the groves in huge clumps, we emerge soon after to the river's course just below the ferry crossing we had earlier made. An old man sits beside the Mekong with some long bamboo poles quietly watching the distance where, on the other side of the river, fields are being scorched at the end of the harvest.

He speaks to us willingly and tells us that he earned up to 1,000 yuan every day from his rubber trees. Although he seems wistful about the changes to the river resulting from the dams and the blasting of rapids, he is clearly not unhappy with the wealth he was earning from the monocropping of the

old-growth forests that sustained his ancestors.

We walk a few kilometers in the darkness while, overhead, fireworks light up the sky. The orange and red light helps us find our way through the rough back streets to a busy marketplace where a guesthouse offers showers and food.

We fall asleep to a soundtrack of Chinese anthems and pounding fireworks.

Day 24 – A Relocated Village

Today we are on motorbike. We leave early and head toward the Jinghong Dam's reservoir. Before long, we pull in at another community rubber factory and spend some time photographing the process of preparing the raw resin for shipment to a larger factory for the final manufacturing of tires, erasers, or something else.

The road soon leaves the narrower lands of villages and trees and enters the wide, flat plains that are typical of the course of a great river. Here, farmland spreads in every direction, with many clearing-fires burning at the end of the harvest. The road surface also worsens, until soon we are bumping merrily along on gravel and mud.

Twenty-five kilometers later, we reach a village that was relocated by the damming of the Mekong.

Below, the valley is flooded, with water lapping up to a point where two ridges meet in a fold. We first drive on as far as the increasingly muddy and potholed road will allow. After turning a few more corners, the road disappears into the widening face of the reservoir. We turn back to try to arrange a boat trip.

At the village, a young man agrees to take us out for an exorbitant fee, and we spend perhaps an hour motoring down the length of the flooded valley until we reach the river's main stream. Here, the reservoir spreads in both directions to about a few hundred meters wide, while rubber plantations line the hills. There is not much to see.

If you have visited many dam reservoirs, you will understand why tourism plans built on dams invariably end in deserted car parks and faded plastic furniture.

Returning to the village, which was moved to make way for the water catchment, we speak briefly with the locals. They express their concern that some of the compensation they were promised is not coming. But asked where they would prefer to live, they say they like their new homes with TV and electricity.

As we talk, a couple of men walk from the village across a suspended footbridge to the rubber plantations that line the hill on the other side of the valley. The land is officially a National Forest Reserve, one of the last remaining patches of forest in a region once famous for its huge jungles, complete with elephants and tigers.

But the villagers here are taking this land opposite their town, as in the overpopulated nation of China no one is making more land.

One of the younger men we speak to expresses regret that the old home and places of his childhood have been lost to the waters. But though the old house was "fun," the new house is "better." They reiterate that the provincial government and the company that built the dam have paid them only a portion of the compensation due them, and that they have lost land.



A young man in a community rubber factory feeds lengths of hardened resin into a machine that rolls the raw rubber into thin sheets.

But in China, they say, if something involves the government, there is nothing you can do.

We head to a nearby village to spend the night. Dinner is accompanied by rice wine, and we find ourselves rapidly becoming inebriated and deep in conversation with an elderly man. We learn that the village was small when he was a child and contained only about 10 families. He remembers the jungles, and remembers hunting the rich wildlife that used to thrive in the region.

Even then they felt the power of the Chinese central authorities, with Han Chinese students and teachers being sent out into every village to oversee the revolution's plans. The turning point came in 1984, when the commune policy ended and people were allowed to resume individual farming.

He answers our questions warmly and happily until we ask about earlier times, and then his demeanor changes. Memories of the old China clearly sit close to the surface of people's minds, and their fear of being persecuted for talking about these things is evident in their sudden silences and meaningful stares.

But when we ask him to compare these times of rubber and development with the older days, his answer is unambiguous: "In all of history, this is a good time for the Dai. We have lost something, but gained something else. We have lost the forest, but we don't really mind. We cut it down ourselves to plant more rubber."

Day 25 – Back to Jinghong

When we finally get out of the beds made for us in the center of the living room, the family has been gone for hours, having left to work in the fields.

After breakfast we walk slowly back to the town, taking the long way through rubber trees to photograph people collecting sap. We meet a woman who warns us against going to the dam reservoir, as there are monsters lurking the river. Like everyone we have spoken to in the Dai communities, she is unequivocal in saying that rubber is a boon. Her only wish is to be able to plant more trees and earn more money. Another man, who has even fewer trees, invites us to return to do business together and make lots of money.

We catch a bus to Jinghong, where we hire bicycles with the intention of riding cross-country to try to find the dam. Every road we take up the river is blocked until we come upon the offices of the regional national parks bureau. We walk blithely in and apply for permission to visit the small amount of pristine forest that is left.

Leaving without permission, but thankful that our cover story of being tourists is intact, we continue to look for ways to see the dam. Our venture takes us onto increasingly narrow paths through—you guessed it—rubber plantations cut into steep hills that completely conceal the river below. Eventually these paths disappear completely, and we find ourselves carrying our bikes on our backs as we scramble up and down slippery ridges completely given over to growing rubber, trying to find our way back to the roads.

Later, eating pizza at one of the few tourist haunts in Jinghong not designed to serve Han visitors, we wonder at the success of China's vision for this region. In place of poor villagers and abundant forests, we have found rich well-developed village communities, plantations, and monocrops, along with "ethnic tourism" that bears no relationship to reality.

Jinghong itself, clean and full of well-lit clothing and gift stores with scarcely a beggar to be found, bears no resemblance whatsoever to the sprawling cities of the rest of Southeast Asia, although the local people and their clothes and customs are definitely closely related to those of Thailand, Burma, and Laos.

Day 26 – A Distant View

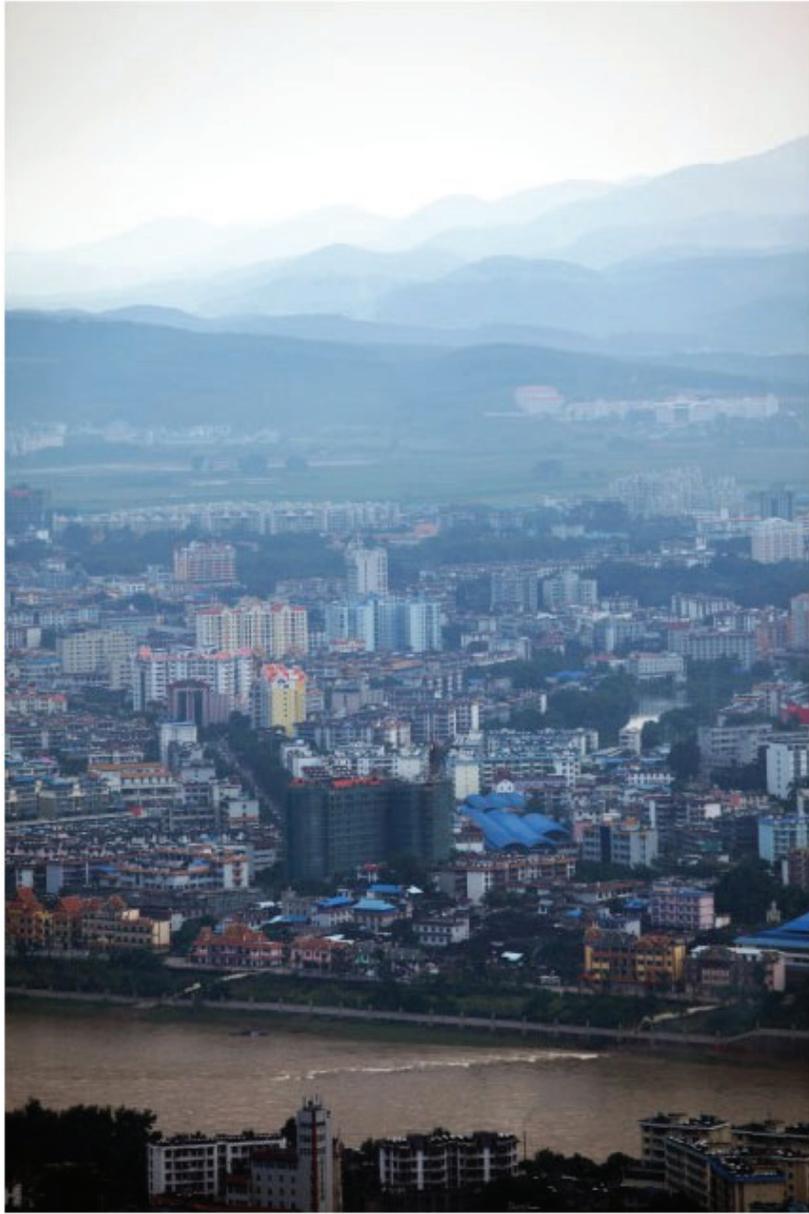
Today we decide to try to capture the essence of Jinghong's rapid rise from sleepy provincial backwater beside the Mekong to shiny beacon of consumerism and trade. Walking for hours around the city, we find that the future is being made here and that it involves lots of super-scale hotels, apartment blocks, and riverside development.

One wonders if the enthusiastic exploitation of every possible aspect of the city's potential as a tourist mecca will become a reality. Surely there are now enough newly affluent Han Chinese testing their traveling feet to suggest that any city presenting a reasonable attraction could bag a chunk of the 21st century's largest tourist market.

But stopping under the Friendship Bridge to photograph some locals trying to catch fish, we also see a side of life that is not flourishing under the development. These men using rudimentary equipment are clearly fishing for food, not just pleasure, and no one gets a bite during the time, almost an hour, that we spend watching.

Later, we make another attempt to get close to the dam. We drive up a mountain and through some villages on the other side of the river to a point overlooking the dam construction site. In the middle distance, mostly hidden by the afternoon mists rising from the rubber forests and by the haze of its own construction, we catch sight of the huge wall holding back the waters of the river.

Our best efforts to gain a real sense of the area's people or to reach the dam have amounted to this: a distant view of something mostly shrouded in a vague mist.



The growing metropolis of Jinghong has few reminders of its quieter ethnic past, as development and mass tourism transform the city into a centre for internal Chinese tourism.

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