

14 YANGTZE RIVER CRUISING

On our way to the Yangtze River for our cruise, we had a 200-mile bus ride through the Yangtze River Plain, one of the three most important agricultural regions of China. Our guide had engaged a local university expert to join our bus ride. I was thrilled. Not only was it my turn to have the window seat, but we would hear lots of great information about this important fertile area we were passing. I settled down happily with my trusty pen and journal.

“When Sun Yat-Sen overthrew the Qin (Manchu) Dynasty in 1911, the Chinese feudal system came to an end. Now, seven farmers share one acre of land. The rice grown here will feed half of China. The rice harvest is in September. Now the farmers are planting the second crop – sesame seeds. Women in China like black sesame seeds more than white ones because black ones are supposed to keep your hair black. And right now the farmers are getting ready to harvest all the cabbage you see.” We did indeed drive through miles and miles of fields of cabbage and other vegetables. We also saw a lot of fish ponds.

“The fishponds with cement walls raise turtles for turtle soup,” said our guide. “Other ponds grow eels, crabs, and grass carp, which will be our dinner tonight. Someone always stands guard on the ponds 24 hours a day, because turtles are very expensive. These ponds also grow lotus roots. There is a sweet soup made of dried lotus seeds, served in the middle of a meal that is said to be healthy for women. There are also freshwater chestnuts. In the green boxes the people raise tiger shrimp. Those are very expensive.

There are 325 lakes in this region, so water is plentiful, and there are a lot of ducks raised in this province. You see some water buffalo. The flavor of water buffalo is not delicious, and the buffalo does not give milk, so the water buffalo is for heavy work. Because this is a humid climate, there are many snakes, including poisonous ones. There are also wild pigs that can be aggressive, and there are lots of mosquitoes and flies. Thankfully there is no malaria. This province is considered a land of rice and fish. Local farmers do have electricity, but no heat, so the farmers burn coal for warmth. There is no drinking water. Wells pump water to a central tower for several hours daily. The Yangtze River is on our left about 1 km. Local farmers are always fearful of floods. They do not fear war, but they do fear floods. In 1931 there was a big flood and in 1954 there was another big flood here. This plain is now considered the agricultural center of China. Since installation of a good water irrigation system, the farmers here live a better life. There is cotton growing here also. In northeast China on the border of Russia there are large farms where machines are used for farming, but not in this plain. This area is very hot in the summer. As you can see, there are a lot of water buffalo and rice paddies. People here like fish and spicy food. They farm oysters and harvest a lot of pearls. The area we are passing through to get to the Yangtze River, primarily Hubei Province, is considered the breadbasket of China.”

Suddenly Myrtle stopped writing and searched madly in her purse for her little tablets. I never knew exactly what was in those tablets, but when she felt extremely agitated, she would turn to them. So now I was sure that her mad little brain was furiously working on a strategy she could use if our bus broke down in this snake infested region and we were asked to get out of the bus, and she would be imagining ten or twelve poisonous snakes making a beeline for her. “Wasn’t there a People’s Commune here at one time?” asked someone in the group. “That is true,” the expert responded. “That happened in 1966 to 1976.” And then there was a sort of generalized discussion about the history of this famous plain and how it has been featured in books that westerners read, like the novels, *The Journey to the West*, and

the popular *Wild Goose Pagoda*. Since I had not taken the time to read those recommended books, I sort of tuned out and scrolled through my photos. Soon it seemed that ObOff was dominating the conversation, and Myrtle made a rude little gagging motion before sitting back in her seat and closing her eyes. Myrtle can be such a child.

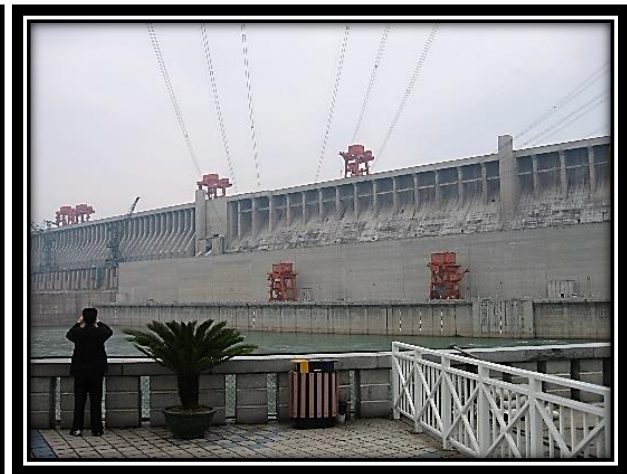
Then our guide took the microphone and told us about our upcoming cruise. I am sure Myrtle did not hear anything because her mind was still tied up in snakes. So, I took notes to tell her later.

“The cruise we will have will be the best one. It is brand new, just started, and it even has an elevator. It holds 300 passengers, but it is low season now, so there are only 100 passengers and we will have lots of room. There is an In-room TV. They provide one bottle of water per day. If you want hot water, call for a thermos. Breakfast and lunch are buffet style and we have assigned tables for dinner, which is a set menu. Alcoholic beverages are extra. Tomorrow at 8:30 am we will meet in the lounge and every day we will be given an itinerary showing what parts of the river we will visit. Tomorrow we will visit the Three Gorges Dam, the largest dam. Our boat will not go through the ship lock. We will get on a bus to see the dam and be back on our boat for lunch. Then in the afternoon we sail into the first Gorge.”

We arrived at the boat by 8:30 pm that evening and saw the Three Gorges Dam all lit up – a most impressive sight! But that paled in importance to what we found in our cabin - a REAL BATHTUB (squeal squeal!), small but perfectly suitable for a BATH, praise be. Myrtle and I fought over who got to use it first, of course, but how we luxuriated in that hot bath! It had rained earlier in the day, and we were cold and wet from sitting in water on the cable car that brought us down to the boat.



This wonderful dragon boat was moored next to our riverboat, and of course Myrtle and I were wishing we could travel on that! But when I found that our stateroom would have not only a real bathtub but a soft bed, I completely lost enthusiasm for the dragon boat. And, dear gentle reader, I had my first good night's sleep since we started our journey through China! Not only was I off that bus, and had a hot bath, and a soft bed, and fried lotus root for dinner, but Myrtle and I had evaded the head cold that plagued four in our group. Ahhhh, bliss.



The next morning we saw the Three Gorges Dam. Our guide lectured during our breakfast, with PowerPoint slides, no less! So I can tell you all about this dam.

“This dam is not the biggest in the world, Hoover is, but this will have the greatest output of electricity. 10,000 people work on this dam project. The most difficult part of the project is relocating the people. More than 80% of the people are now relocated. The young people like moving because it brings them opportunities, but the old people get very upset about having to move. About 20% of those who have to move are relocated to other provinces. That is especially hard because of different dialects.

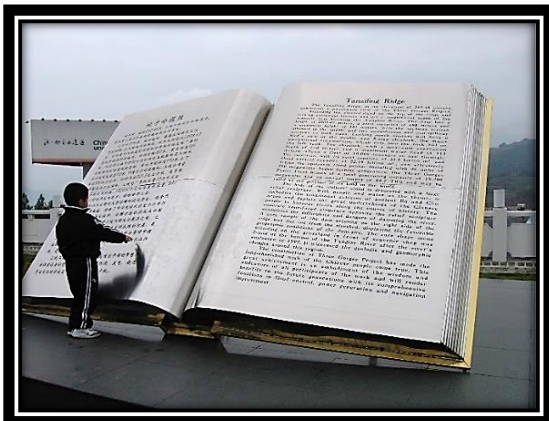
The Aswan Dam in Egypt is four times bigger than the Three Gorges. \$25 billion is the projected cost for the Three Gorges Dam, and 1.3 million people will be relocated. The granite mountains here are the reason the dam was built here. Many countries contributed technology to help build this dam. The Hoover Dam is higher than the Three Gorges, but narrower. Because of extreme temperature fluctuations in this area, they need to control the concrete for cracks, which is very difficult. This place will be the center of China, the hydroelectric capital of the entire country. So many cities will receive electricity from this dam. 70% of the energy in China is coal-based, only 5% solar and nuclear.

The total building duration of the dam will be 17 years, 1993-2009. It will have an 84.7 billion KW output when finished, 5% of China’s need. Only one lock is open right now, going upstream in the morning and downstream in the afternoon. There are five levels. The dry lock is under construction. It takes three

hours to go through the locks, but they are free to use. The ship lift will hold up to 3000 tons. It takes a half hour to use this ship elevator, which will be finished in 2023, the biggest ship elevator in the world at the time of construction. About 60 boats go through these locks every day.” Later we saw a huge barge going through Level Two, going upstream.

“The dam is 185 meters wide at the base. Fourteen electric turbines are already put into use here. The flooded area of the Yangtze River will extend from the dam site to Chongqing City. There are Chinese sturgeon in the water here, which grow up to 5 meters, very large. Chinese sturgeon cannot, unfortunately, be raised in ponds. They say the Chinese sturgeon is the most valuable sturgeon in the world, surviving from dinosaur times. Since the start of the dam, the sturgeon can no longer swim upstream to spawn, and now the sturgeon are endangered, as are other Yangtze fish and mammals like the white dolphin, of which there are less than 100 left. The Chinese government is taking steps to preserve these animals and has now introduced many baby sturgeon into various sections of the Yangtze. About forty people have died so far to build the dam. No one knows the life span of the dam because concrete has only a 200-year history. There is a Nature Park above the dam where the motor is, where they grow loquats and Spanish bayonets.”

When we walked to the upper level of the dam area, which is a park honoring people and water, the traditional themes of the ancient Ba and Chu cultures, we learned that the stone here was found at the bottom of the Yangtze River. Myrtle got carried away by the sign below, of course, and started to mime sitting on the railing and falling over backward, which I thought pretty juvenile.



But I had found something that captivated me – the world’s largest book! And then Myrtle had to argue with me, of course, telling me the world’s largest book was in Texas. And then a man nearby informed her that was false, that the world’s largest book was in Japan. And I’m thinking, guys, grow up! I just wanted to read this book. The page on the left was in Chinese, and that young boy was doing a great job reading that. The page on the right side was in English, and I stepped back far enough that I could start at the top, and I took so long reading the whole thing, that Myrtle got huffy and left.

The page I read was all about the Tanziling Ridge. From up here we had a panoramic view of the Three Gorges Project. Southwest is a view of the dam and spillway, and the north view is the five step ship lock. I caught up with Myrtle in the Model Room, which indeed explained and showed very well the size and scope of the Three Gorges Dam. In 1998 the cost of lives and property lost in the big flood was the same cost as the cost of building the Reservoir from the dam site to Chongqing.



When we returned to the riverboat, our guide gave us a PowerPoint lecture on the Yangtze River itself.

“The Chinese people consider themselves sons of the dragon because the rivers look like dragons. Nearly 1/3 of the population of China lives in the Yangtze River Valley, one out of every 12 people in the world. The Yangtze River is called the golden waterway. It starts in the ‘Roof of the World,’ at an elevation of 20,000 feet in Tibet, and it empties into the East China Sea in Shanghai. At 6380 km, 3900 miles, it is the third longest river in the world. The Nile is the longest, followed by the Amazon, then the Yangtze, and then the Mississippi. Beijing and Xian are cities on the Yellow River that do not have enough water.

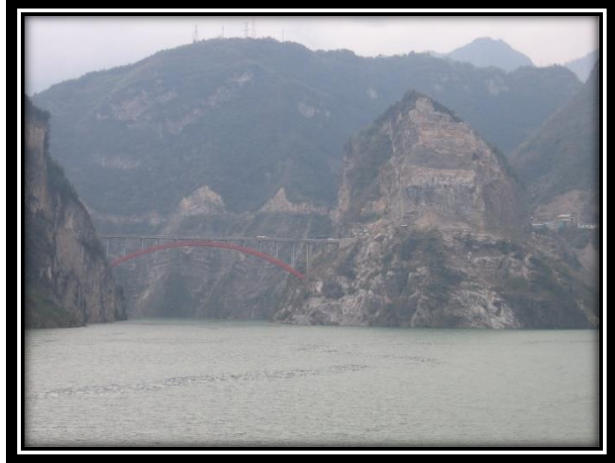
Our captain has been on the Yangtze for 32 years, 16 as a captain. The correct name for our cruise ship is riverboat. It is not called a ship. There will be very few waves on the Yangtze. The only waves we will have were those we had last night when the captain navigated the shallows. We have this year the lowest water level on the Yangtze in 50 years.

Our cruise will cover 400 miles, nearly 1/10 of the total Yangtze. During the rainy season in June, July and August the Yangtze can carry 500,000,000 tons of silt. The riverbed is getting higher and higher. There were 200 major floods in the last 2000 years. The highest flood risk is in the Jing River section. The Yangtze flows through the breadbasket of China. In China only the last section of the river is known as the Yangtze River. The rest of the sections have their own names. The name Yangtze came from the Sui Dynasty 1400 years ago. Emperor Yang ruled from 605-616, and he changed the name to River of the Emperor Yang. Before that it was 'the long river.' The source of the Yangtze River was not determined until 1976. Even today this river in China is called by many people 'the long river.'"

As our riverboat left the dock and began our cruise, we found that the day was very overcast with smog. Our guide had told us that today was actually a relatively clear day, that it is always overcast and humid, and they rarely see sunshine. I suspect that some of the fog we had is due to pollution from the coal the people burn. 70% of China's energy currently comes from coal, which is a high sulfur coal and puts out a lot of pollution when burned.

But the smog did not detract from the enjoyment Myrtle and I found on this serene cruise. We giggled when we spotted the dragon boat chugging along slowly. It had left dock several hours before we did and we passed it about a half hour after we left dock. But it was a highly scenic boat and to me it fit in perfectly with the beautiful and peaceful scenery we passed.





We saw about five hydrofoils on our cruise, the 'flying boats.' They are fascinating to watch as they suddenly lift from the water and take off so fast, going 60 km per hour.

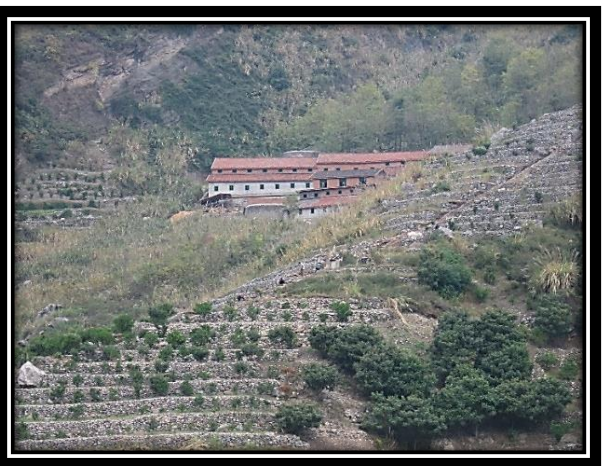
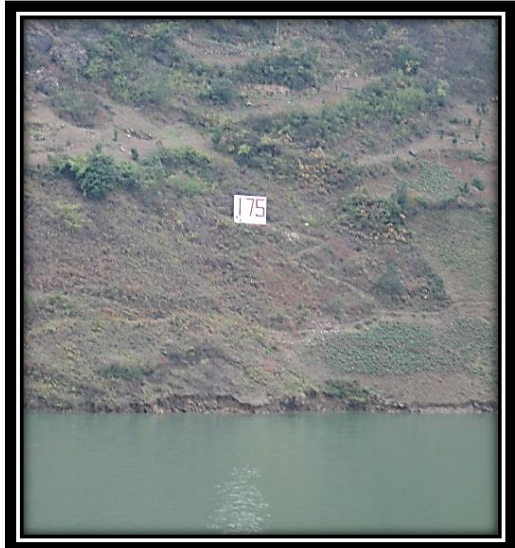
We saw a lot of agricultural activity on the banks of the Yangtze. The guide said this area around the Yangtze never experiences a freeze, so they grow several different kinds of oranges, including the blood orange, and they grow lots of loquats.



These massive u-shaped containers on the hillside are coal storage bins for deposits to be shipped on a river barge. The coal from this region is high sulfur coal, generating lots of pollution. We saw wild pigs on the mountainside, and we saw many people working on the terraces. Oranges are a big cash crop in the Yangtze valley because there is never a freeze in the valley. As we passed through the narrowest part of the gorge between very high mountains, our guide reminded us of the high danger of landslides in this area for the people who live and work here. There are many truck ferries here because the highway is so dangerous. We also

saw the paths close to the water for the human “mules” who used to pull the truck ferries through these waters. “That was an extremely dangerous job,” said our guide, “and many of those workers fell to their deaths.” It was sobering for us to watch trees and buildings being swallowed by water even as we sailed the river. People who had lived in these areas for generations could now no longer live in their ancestral

lands. We watched the markers and understood what vast amounts of hillside and mountainside would soon be under water. Houses above the markers would not be affected, and those people could remain. Sometimes villages would be cut in half; sometimes extended family members would be separated.





We watched people walking up and down long paths in the mountains, and we marveled at their stamina. They might walk four or five miles or more to get to a ferry stop on the river. We were able to see more of village life as we sailed through the beautiful gorges on ferryboat and then sampan, as recounted in the next blog post. There are now 100 bridges built across the Yangtze.



After we finished sailing the gorges, we reboarded the riverboat for the last 105 miles upstream to Chongqing, our port of debarkation. The Yangtze River grew shallower, and the green water of the gorges became brown with silt. We encountered heavy boat traffic, especially coal barges going downstream. Myrtle and I left our perpetual spots at the railing to go back to our cabin and pack. I watched her carefully cushion her cardboard gallon of wine among her clothes, and I sighed.

Now, a word about that gallon of wine. Yes, it was a full gallon in a cardboard box. I had been wondering why all the porters who lifted her suitcase registered surprise when they hefted her suitcase, but I figured she probably had an industrial sized lead pipe or something in there, for muggings, of course. I did not learn about the wine until our first night in a hotel, when I heard Myrtle grunting and straining to get something out of her suitcase. Sure enough, that turned out to be that gallon of wine. When I asked her why she had to bring her own wine along, she said snippily, “Well, I don’t think I like rice wine.”



Well, as you probably know, dear gentle reader, the Chinese are savvy to tourist tastes; and whenever we were served wine and beer with our meals, it was imported. So, Myrtle was left to decide what to do with her gallon of wine. Usually, it ended up being an aperitif, which put her into an expansive mood at mealtimes, so of course she was always the life of the party. I felt like suggesting she take a bath in that blasted wine. She did offer me some, I will admit, but she knew I did not like white wine, so her offer was fatuous. At any rate, I decided on the spot that I would not allow myself to be roped into carrying her suitcase. Famous last words, of course.

On our last day on the river our guide told us about Fengdu, a displaced village we would visit in Chongqing.

“Fengdu moved from the north bank to the south bank in 1992-2003, and at that time it was separated from the part of it that had been associated with what is commonly called the Ghost City, a complex of shrines dedicated to the dead. The new Fengdu took eleven years to build for the refugees displaced by the building of the dam. There are already 70,000 people in the city, and it is expected to grow to over 100,000. Fengdu means harvest city. There is usually good weather for farming, but this year was very dry and hot, the hottest in over 100 years. So the harvest is poor. The farmers got help from the government. Surprisingly, despite the heat, there is so little sun here that there is a local saying ‘Dog of Shu (Fengdu) Bark at Sun.’

We will visit a village of 600 people, about 200 who have been relocated. This village was built in 1994 and later. In the family we visit there is a grandma, daughter-in-law, son, and grandchild.”

On the last afternoon of our cruise, as our ship headed for our port of debarkation Chongqing, our guide arranged for a half hour lecture on Chinese medicine, given by the Chinese doctor on board. Both Myrtle and I were excited about this opportunity to learn about Chinese medicine, and we took copious notes. Unfortunately, we later argued about our notes. What we did seem to agree about is that there are two basic treatments: the Chinese Purple Treatment of herbs to balance the Yin and Yang in the body, and the physical treatments of acupuncture and acupressure based on the theory of energy channels, along with the suction cup treatment, also called the fire cup treatment, and the scraping treatment.

During the lecture, a cabin boy who had been standing at the back of the room came forward carrying a chair upon which he sat with perfect posture. The doctor then demonstrated on the boy how he would work on neck and shoulder problems. He spoke while working, “In China some family members now have Fire Suction Treatment and Scraping Treatment utensils to help cure family members. It is completely safe. A scraper is made of the horn of the water buffalo. You use it with a special oil. By working the muscles correctly, you dredge and clean the energy channels. Always use a downward movement. Acupressure is also called therapeutic massage, which is different from regular massage. To do acupressure correctly, you need to know the theories of the energy channels. Use your fingers and your elbows. In China we have a long history of healing in this way, more than 2000 years.”

“There are 14 major energy channels,” continued the doctor. “The Ren channel is in the back, the Du channel in the front, two on the four limbs, the inner and outer sides of the arm, and located in the deep body connected to the organs. For example, for a stomachache I will treat a point on the leg, because the leg acupoint is located on the major stomach channel. Always use Chinese physical treatment as the first option. For nerves and muscles this will give very good results: migraine, sciatica, back pain, arthritis, swollen feet, etc. Also quit smoking and lose weight.”

I noticed that ObOff seemed to be getting more and more agitated as the lecture went on. When the doctor elaborated on the 14 major energy channels, she huffed in a good imitation of a steam locomotive, or maybe a dragon, since we were in China, you know. She sort of hissed at the room in general, “There are 12 major energy channels!”

The doctor stopped mid-sentence, looking around in confusion. Myrtle took that inopportune moment to commence a slight giggling fit, and when I saw the doctor’s eyes light upon her as the culprit for the disruption, I turned completely around in my seat and gave ObOff my best frown. She didn’t even see it because she was too busy writing in her notebook. But the doctor must have seen my frown because he looked at our guide, then at his watch, then bowed deeply three times to the room in general and made a quick exit.

I was so annoyed! We never did get to the part I really wanted to learn: the herbal treatments. I wanted to slap ObOff! I almost went running after the doctor, but luckily my rational mind was on the ball and talking to me, “Danger, danger! Lurid headline looms again: ‘Deranged American woman batters Chinese doctor trying to prove that she knows more about Chinese medicine than he does.’” Ugh, ugh.

Our so-wise guide spoke up immediately, “Special foods and treats in the library, and I will tell you my story of the cultural revolution.” And that, dear friends, is when our guide told us more about her youth under Chairman Mao.

To be continued . . .