

16 CHONGQING!

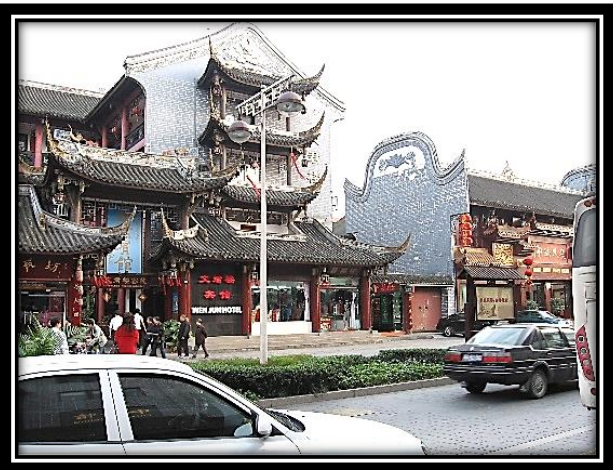
Our cruise ended in Chongqing. We spent the night on the ship, with a memorable farewell dinner during which I was mostly concerned with keeping Myrtle from leaping into the captain's lap. The champagne was flowing freely, and truth be told, I think half of it went down Myrtle's throat. Now that is unkind, dear reader. Forgive me. But I think it is true. I noticed two of our servers standing over by the bar cart eying Myrtle and snickering. I could image them saying something wise and profound, like, "Small pot hold big surprise."

But realistically, I knew that what they were probably saying was something along the lines of, "Yabba Dabba Do! That one can put it away! She could drink you under the table any day, little man." The Steward was watching Myrtle with an utterly forlorn look on his face. I just wanted to give him a hug and say, "Don't fret too much She is not a very good horse." Sigh.



I took this lovely photo of Chongqing from the top deck of our cruise ship as we came into the harbor. Myrtle said it looks like a spaceship or some place on an alien planet. But no worries, dear reader; I think she is just jealous.

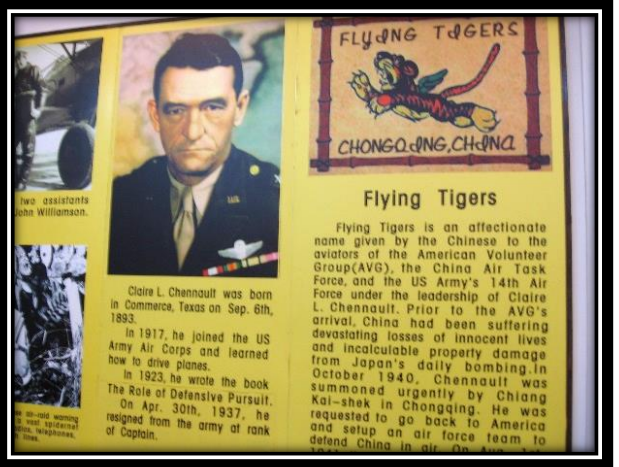
In fact, even the next day as we left the ship and our guide was giving us a brief walking tour of Chongqing, Myrtle seemed determined to be cantankerous. Our guide said that Chongqing is one of largest cities in the world, with a population of 33 million. Myrtle huffed sotto voce, "33 million my foot! Chongqing has 8 million people in the city proper and 18 million in the entire urban area. That 33 million includes all the farmers in the outlying areas." I hissed at her, "How do you know that?" She hissed back, "I just helped my grandson do a project on the largest cities of the world. So there!" Well truly, dear friends, all I could think was, "Who cares?" But I said nothing, which was a wise thing to do, I guess, because she shut up and lost some of her nasty attitude. Winning will do that every time, it seems. Whatever!





That morning in Chongqing was misty, foggy, and drizzling, “typical winter weather for Chongqing, the largest city in the world,” said our guide. Myrtle scoff-coughed. But our guide wisely ignored the cough and continued, “In China there are four municipalities: Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, alternately Romanized as Tientsin, and Chongqing, all directly under the control of the federal government. In China the cities are bigger than the counties. In Chongqing there are 40 counties and municipalities. Chongqing is a hot, spicy foods place. It also has a very hot climate in summer. And it is very humid, so humid and damp, in fact, that in winter your sheets feel wet and cold. Some of the apartment buildings here have as much as 14 floors, with no elevators. Their entrances are on a cliff in the middle of the building, so you walk 7 up or 7 down. The Bombom people make a living carrying things up and down for the people who live in the large buildings. The BomBom people, or Bo people, as they are mostly called now, are an ancient people from the Yunnan and Sichuan provinces of Southern China, famous for their hanging coffins.”

Our guide took us to the General Stilwell Museum to learn about the American Flying Tigers. This museum preserves the three-story house where General Joseph Stilwell lived when he was in Chongqing as the Allied Chief of Staff in the China Theater during World War II.



A staff member at the museum gave us a brief lecture, “General Stilwell came to China five times. In 1942 he was appointed by the United States President Franklin Roosevelt to be the leader in China. Chongqing was the capital of China then, so he lived here. He gave instructions to the Flying Tigers to

fight the Japanese invaders, who were invading Burma. He was a four-star general and graduated from West Point. He could read and write Chinese, as well as speak the language. President Roosevelt called him back to the United States when he began disagreeing with Chiang Kai-shek. General Stillwell, called 'Vinegar Joe' by his men, publicly called Chiang Kai-shek 'Peanut.'"

"Ooh," cooed, Myrtle, "That was not good."



The lecturer smiled at her and continued, "297 Japanese aircraft were destroyed, which made a great contribution to the war effort; and that is why the Chinese people are grateful to General Stillwell."

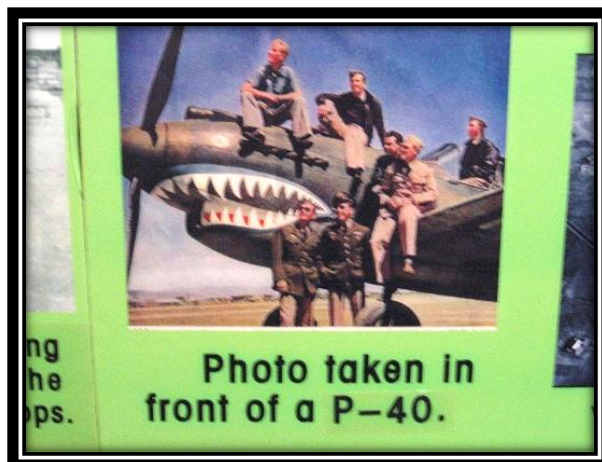
ObOff, probably emboldened by Myrtle's cooing, piped up, "But it isn't Stillwell who should get the credit. All he did was fight with the other General, Claire Lee Chennault, who was the guy who got the job done. Chennault is the one who brought 110 American fighter pilots and 100 air bombers here. That is how 297 Japanese aircraft were destroyed."

Stillwell tried to block him every step of the way because Stillwell wanted to support the ground war. It was Chennault who was certain China could win its war against Japan with air power, and he was the organizer and advisor of the Flying Tigers, not Stillwell."

She sniffed and finished with, "I know this because I am a Cantonese Scholar."

The baffled lecturer looked helplessly at our guide, saying, "Um, the Chinese people extend their condolences to the American people for the great General Stillwell, who died of cancer in 1945."

ObOff sniffed again and I swear she stuck her nose in the air. Myrtle could not resist, of course, and she started booing. Yikes. Our guide stood up quickly and clapped her hands, thanking the lecturer for his time and expertise and inviting our applause, which we gave extra freely, simply to spite old ObOff.



As we left the museum, I was walking next to one of the men in our group and he whispered to me, "She's right, you know. General Chennault is the one who advised and trained the Flying Tigers."

The woman on his right piped up, “What I think is so interesting is that Walt Disney created the logo for the Flying Tigers. I really like that Logo, and personally, I think the logo is the reason the Japanese lost so many planes. They are afraid of tigers.”

Well, I thought, who knew? But Myrtle just scoffed her famous scoff.



We went to a teahouse where we saw performances of the Chinese Opera and Changing Faces.



We were allowed to go behind the scenes to watch the actors paint their elaborate faces for the opera, and once again Myrtle was in seventh heaven. This time she did find one obliging young man who allowed her to take up his paint brush and paint part of his face. She literally cooed, and her movements with the brush were so sensual I saw the other actors discretely eyeing the young man with envy. Yikes! Myrtle, tone it down! I was glad when our guide told us the opera was about to begin.



The opera we saw in Chongqing was the Sichuan Opera, one of China's oldest and most popular. It began at the end of the Ming dynasty and came into its own during the Qing dynasty, when local dialect and customs were blended with different traditional dramas and stories. "Today's Sichuan Opera is a blend of five historic melodic styles," said our guide.

The famous Changing Faces performance followed the opera. Our guide had told us this show is a unique art form of this province, like the Peking Opera is in Beijing. Actors put layers of thin masks on their faces, and the artist strips a mask off so skillfully that the observer cannot figure out how he does it. It is said that the ancient people developed this art form to drive away wild animals. This skill is taught only to boys and is

considered a closely guarded national secret. Our guide told us that the national hero of face changing right now is a young man who can change 24 masks in 14 seconds. The actor we saw had a cape and costume and changed his masks in what seemed like a fraction of a second. He danced around, flicking his head and his hands up and down. While we watched mesmerized, there would be a new mask on his face, like magic. I think part of his skill was the old magician skill of directing the viewer's attention to one thing and then pulling off his magic change. Our actor changed masks ten times.

We also watched a performance of Chinese traditional dancing, comedy, and Chinese Shadow Dancing. My favorite entertainment of the evening was the performance by a lone man playing the two-stringed musical instrument called the erhu. That haunting sound has always entranced me.

The next day we visited a family in the new city of Fengdu, which, we remember, was built for people who needed to be relocated when the dam flooded the Yangtze valley. There was a grandmother, son, daughter-in-law and baby in the family. I loved the little cart in which the grandmother was pushing the baby, and I totally wanted one of those back baskets the young woman sported. "How absolutely handy that would be," I chortled to Myrtle, who registered a significant lack of interest.



The family owned a five-story building. The whole building belonged to this one family. They turned part of their building on the first floor into a small market, and they kept pigs in the basement area of the building. There were thirty large pigs in the basement, and they were very noisy. I noticed the cement floor was spotless, which accounted for the suspicious lack of odor. I whispered to Myrtle, "They must have just cleaned everything because we were coming." Her response was, "Maybe they have to keep it that clean all the time because they do have the market upstairs." She had a point. We visited the fourth-floor rooftop garden and looked out over a serene, beautiful, terraced landscape with a Yangtze tributary in the background. The whole scene looked like a picture postcard. Our guide says there is no pollution in the air here.



To me, it seemed this was an idyllic place to live. The son in the family told us that when the family moved here, all the land was taken, so they had to resort to raising pigs and having a small market. "But our family used to have farmland, and it is hard for us to now have no farmland. Now we have the pigs and the market and one son works in the city in a barbershop. Everybody in our family put our money together to build this building. Things are not perfect, but we are making it. I think if families have skills, they can survive in their own business. Others can't make it and are very unhappy with the dam. 40% of the cost of the dam is supposed to go to relocation, but sometimes that does not work good. I wish our family had land, because this is a very good place to grow things, many things. Here you can grow wheat, rice, corn, peanuts, tobacco, oranges, lychees, bananas, and many fruits. Rice is planted in March and harvested in June or July. Then you take in a second rice harvest in October from the same stalks, and this rice is used for porridge. That would be a good life, growing good food. But we are surviving. People go to the market every day, especially the old people."

As we visited their market on the ground floor of their building, I looked for that basket I had fallen in love with, the one the young woman was carrying on her back in the picture above. I was disappointed I could not find it. But I guess it was probably a good thing I could not find it because, as darling Myrtle reminded me, "How in holy heaven do you expect to put THAT THING in your suitcase?" Sigh.

On the way back to our hotel, our guide told us a little about the Ghost Culture in China. "In the Ghost Culture, people think the body disappears, but the spirit goes into the underworld and must pass three checkpoints to stand before the King of the Underworld. This King sends good people to heaven and others back to earth. Bad people are taken by Ghost Generals for punishment. Those who need to be punished in the afterlife must go through eighteen layers of work. The Ghost City used to be part of

Fengdu before the dam relocation split the city and the new Fengdu was built. The Ghost City remains where it has always been for over 2000 years, a complex of temples, monasteries, shrines, statues, ghosts, and demons all dedicated to the afterlife.



When we returned to Chongqing to have lunch and pack up for our trip to Chengdu, we walked to our bus. We passed these burial wreaths and Myrtle commented, “Ah, for the Ghost City, no doubt.” I could not help my rejoinder, “I am afraid not, dear Myrtle. These wreaths are most assuredly destined for the new dearly departed who must still pass the review of the King of the Underworld. My guess is that if the dearly departed’s family tucks a few yuan into these wreaths and makes sure those yuan get into the paws of the King, the dearly departed will be sent straight to heaven.” Then I started giggling, but

Myrtle was trying to figure out how the wreath could get into the hands of the King. Sigh. I was glad when we got to the hotel.

As we drove the 188 miles from Chongqing to Chengdu through the Sichuan Province, our guide stood at her favorite spot next to our driver and held her trusty microphone with one hand while gripping the seat back with the other.

“We will drive through the inland area of China. Here they make good use of farming fields. There is also a prosperous motorcycle and auto industry business here. Their number one export is motorcycles. They also support the ship building industry. Girls in Sichuan are considered very beautiful because the moist air makes for a pretty complexion. Males are short and pampered. Women often work hard in the fields while men stay home and take care of the baby.”

That statement, of course, generated some giggling and comments from our group.

Our guide continued, “Chongqing developed rapidly once it became a municipality, with families from abroad and other provinces. The elder generation here does not like the Japanese, but the younger generation don’t care. The Sichuan people in Chongqing speak a unique dialect.” At that point I think I fell asleep, dear reader, so I cannot tell you more about that.

To be continued . . .