

# FINDING THE HEART OF CHINA

By DOMINICK A. MERLE

**HUBEI, China---What's this! Brand-spanking-new escalators running up and down a mountain---with floor stops, no less.**



Author (front right) on longboat

And on the other side---buck naked men pulling boats by ropes through shallow streams.

There's nothing wrong with that

picture. This is simply China today, where the future and the past often meet in the present.

The escalators, recently completed in the spring, lead to a viewing area of the Three Gorges Dam Project, the world's largest water conservation project, constructed to control flooding and provide electrical power

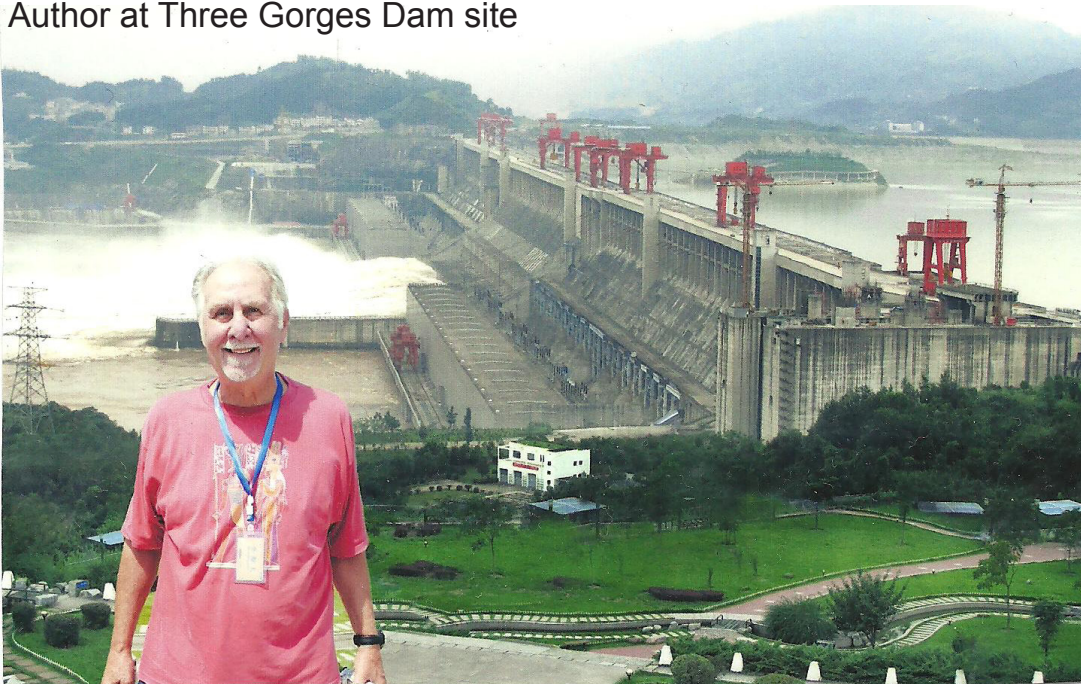
The men in the buff on the other side provide power for the small boats when the water level is too low for the engines to operate. With ropes slung over their shoulders, they chant and pull the crafts to deeper waters. Since wet clothing would only hamper their job, they show up for work

naked during the low season.

During a 12-day Central China tour, we experienced wild contradictions like this several times. Like at our hotel breakfast a few days later. No more lifting the lids on those warming trays --- they opened and closed automatically with a touch, and the temperatures were computerized according to the exposure.

“We don't even have these in Beijing,” said our tour guide, Annalie.

Author at Three Gorges Dam site



Tujia tribesmen  
pulling boats.



Tujia tribesmen  
pulling boats



Beneath balloons is  
man on a motorbike



Yet just outside our breakfast window, we observed men carrying 250-kilo (500-plus pounds) concrete blocks with makeshift wood and rope shoulder harnesses---chanting just like those naked boat pullers---with each block they took away.

Another group of men were squatting and hand chiseling designs in small squares that would be used for a sidewalk. They were squatting when we

arrived and still in that position an hour later when we left.

Escalators scaling mountains, buffet trays that practically serve you automatically, so why all the punishing labor?

“Yes, we can do that work by machines, too,” said Annalie, “but then they would have no jobs at all.”

Hubei Province, often called the

“Heart of China,” is a bit off the usual tourist trail, but not exactly in the sticks. Its population is about 32 million (roughly Canada’s) and it contains several cities you probably never heard of in the 6-to-10 million bracket.

Its capital of Wuhan, for example, is the biggest city in central China (about 10 million) and contains 82 universities serving a million students. Wuhan is also known as “China’s Furnace” as

temperatures at sunrise often begin at 30C (90F) and inch upwards from there.

But it is the city of Jingzhou (population 4-million) in central Hubei that is banking on becoming China’s No. 4 tourist attraction after the Great Wall, Forbidden City and Terracotta Warriors. An underground sacrificial and ceremonial burial site was recently discovered near Jingzhou and early indications are that it will rival



Mountain escalator



or surpass the Terracotta Warriors site in Xian.

If this is so---and it will take several years to find out---then Jingzhou can boast of being the entry point to the newly-discovered burial grounds, the Three Gorges area and the Yangtze River cruises, which would be the next part of our program.

We boarded the 6-deck M.S. Yangtze 2 at nearby Yichang. Part

of the Changjiang Cruise Line, the Yangtze 2 is its largest luxury cruiser and can accommodate about 400 guests. Standard rooms were more than adequate, service was excellent but the food could use a little help.

One of our first stops was at those mountain escalators to view the massive Three Gorges Dam. The X-rated boat pullers on the other side were not on our family-oriented itinerary.

However, two days later, we disembarked for a “dress rehearsal” at a place called Shennong Stream. We boarded typical long riverboats known as “sampan,” about 15 to a boat, propelled by oarsmen. It was a narrow stream and the waters had become rough because of heavy rain.

Traditionally, members of a minority tribe known as the Tujia help guide the boats upstream.

Using heavy ropes slung over their shoulders, they literally pull the boats up the narrow channel, their bodies (clothed for our demonstration) at times almost perpendicular with the ground.

But the performance didn't continue on cue. Because of the rough waters and huge boulders lining the banks, the Tujia were pressed into more heroic measures. Chanting cries of encouragement to one another,



Portion of Great Wall

## Rowers awaiting tourists



they kept us from crashing into the rocks, falling themselves at times but quickly picking themselves up to continue this tug of war. The strain and excitement was clearly etched on their faces.

It was nearly 2 hours until we reached the turnaround point on our wild ride, and the Tujia tribesmen could rest and attend to their minor cuts and bruises. Going downstream was a breeze after that unscripted adventure.

Members of the 800,000 Tujia tribe have no written language and speak a dialect that is unknown in other parts of China. They also have 2 strange customs---they mourn at weddings and dance at funerals.

Hired, professional mourners attend weddings and shed tears for the bride because she will be leaving her family. Similarly, dancers are invited to funerals to celebrate the belief that the



deceased is headed for a better place.

After a 4-day cruise, we spent a day in neighboring Chongqing, or Yu for short. The urban center of Yu is about 8 million. It's another of those megalopolis you never heard of.

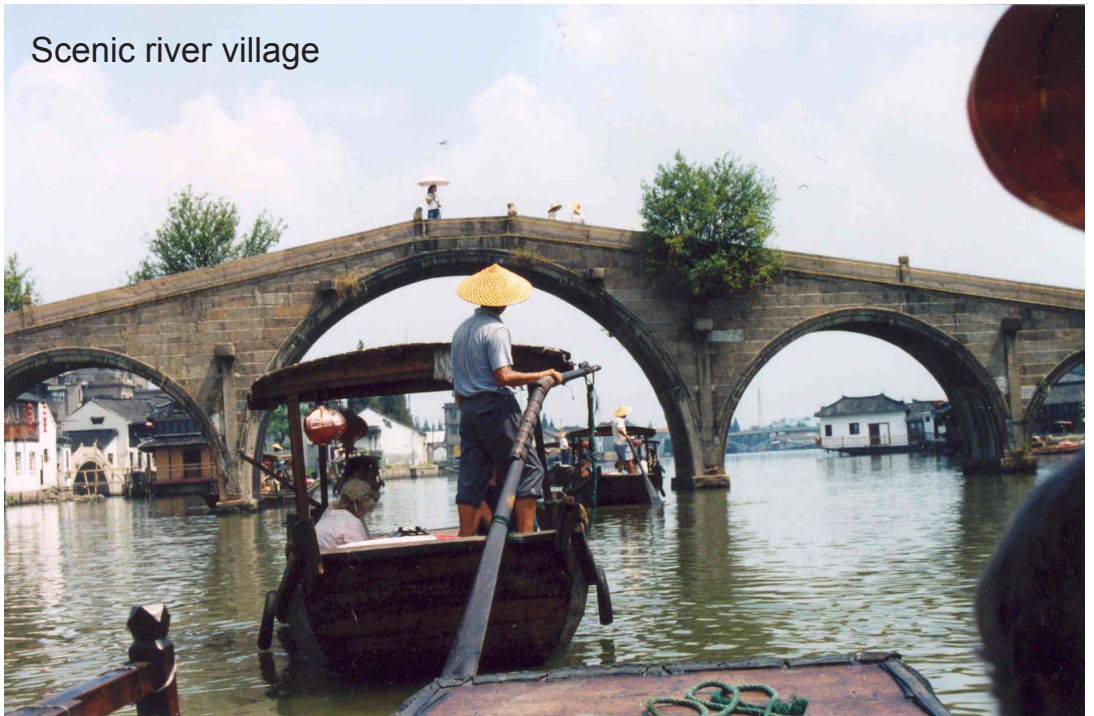
Yu is one of four municipalities designated as one of China's new cities and is under direct control of the Peoples Republic of China, the others being Shanghai, Beijing and Tianjin. It is perhaps the fastest

growing area on the planet and its boundries now extend a whopping 82,000 square kilometers, contain more than 30-million residents, with more than 750,000 new arrivals each year in search of a better life.

Heavy rain turned to floods during our 24 hours in Yu so we left with more staggering statistics than memories.

Back in Beijing for our final day, we headed for the infamous Silk Street Market which happened to

Scenic river village



## Silk Street Market



be a five-minute walk from our hotel, the Jinguo. It is neither a market nor does it deal exclusively in silk. But it is the world's largest outlet containing both shoddy and quality imitations of just about every designer product .

It actually started as an alley market selling only silk about 30 years ago, but today is a 6-story building with over 2,000 businesses. All of the big names are here in copycat form---Rolex, Louis Vuitton, Hermes, Cartier, Prada etc.

One must bargain boldly. I purchased a pair of prescription eyeglasses, progressive and transitional, with fancy frames for about \$100, including the examination, roughly one seventh the price I would pay for a comparable pair back home in Montreal. They were ready to wear within 2 hours.

About 25,000 shoppers visit the market weekdays and twice that number on weekends.

“They’re all tourists,” said Annalie the guide. “We can do better

online with the Chinese version of E-Bay.”

(Dominick A. Merle is Canadian Director of the International Food & Travel Writers Assn. and is based in Montreal).

## IF YOU GO

We flew Hainan Airlines (hnair.com) nonstop from Toronto to Beijing, continuing to Central

China.  
For info on Hubei, Wuhan, Jingzhou, Three Gorges and Chongqing, try cnto.org and follow the links.

For Changjiang Cruises, try cotc.com.

For the Silk Street Market, ask any tourist.

## Singing lake lady

