River Trackers

Tales of men who make a living from China's Yangtze River

By Beth Parks
Special to the NEWS

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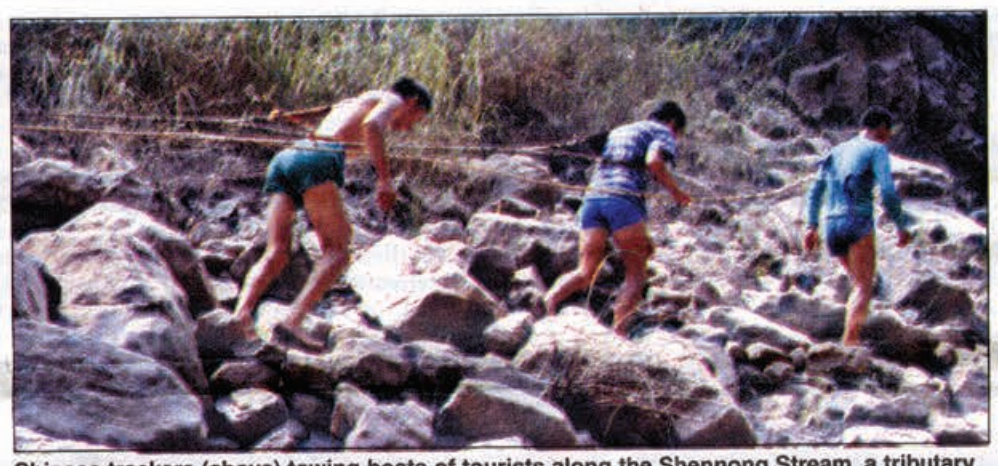
BETH PARKS PHOTOS



Chinese trackers (above) towing boats of tourists along the Shennong Stream, a tributary of the Yangtze River, earn the equivalent of about $4 per day.
As trackers (right) scramble along the shore, the men at the bow and stern guide the boat with steel-tipped wooden poles.

I thought those guys were supposed to be naked!" lamented the plump blond woman from West Virginia.

She was right, if one could believe the vivid postcards being hawked to tourists on the Yangtze River cruise ship. The men in the pictures were trackers, human beasts of burden who once towed Chinese junks through the Yangtze's treacherous rapids and whirling eddies.

On this day, the trackers towing pea boats full of tourists on the Shennong Stream wore gym-style silk shorts. Only a few were bare above the waist.

It's clear that times have changed along the Yangtze. In fact, the Chinese will tell you that the Yangtze doesn't even exist. The name is a mispronunciation of Changjiang, the waterway's true name, which means Long River.

Uncoiled, the Yangtze stretches nearly 4,000 miles eastward from its frigid source on the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau to its mouth on the East China Sea, just north of the fabled port of Shanghai. Only the Nile and the Amazon surpass it in length.

While the Three Gorges of the Yangtze's Upper Reaches — Qutang, Wu and Xiling — continue to thrill tourists and pique their imaginations, they too have changed. Vicious currents still slice through the bold cliffs and soaring peaks, but the massive boulders and rocky projections that once rendered the gorges virtually impassable have been blasted away, their remnants dredged from the riverbed.

It was in the days before the blasting that the trackers reigned. These were men who pulled steamships and massive wooden sailing vessels through rapids and roiling whirlpools with nothing more than bamboo hawsers and their own brute strength.

The trackers were indeed naked or half-naked then, lashed together, muscles bulging in their backs and buttocks. Some labored in the water. Others, bent over so their fingertips nearly touched the surface upon which they trudged, hauled the huge ships forward from suspended walkways or from frighteningly narrow towpaths gouged from the faces of sheer cliffs at the mighty river's edge.

A 120-ton loaded cargo junk required 70 or 80 trackers to drag it through a gorge's fierce current. The men inched forward to the beat of a drum, chanting or singing laments as the cadence told them when and how fast to pull.

A single misstep, a snapped hawser or a pilot's faulty judgment could yank a line of trackers from their precarious footing and hurl them into a maelstrom or the jagged rocks below. An unleashed vessel could whirl out of control, running aground or smashing into other ships waiting to be hauled up to safer waters upstream.

The trackers were mostly a poor and transient lot, often the sons of farming families who had neither room nor food for them. Competition for jobs could be fierce. Most men persevered despite regular lashings and living conditions better suited to dogs and donkeys. They persisted, too, despite the risk of drowning and of hernias and broken bones for which little or no treatment was at hand.

Today's Chinese trackers are mere vestiges of what once was. They now serve tourists on the jade-green crystalline waters of the Shennong Stream, a tributary that flows into the cafe-au-lait Yangtze near the mouth of Wu Gorge.

A crew of six or seven accompanies up to 10 passengers in each of the wooden pea-pod boats, so named for their shape. One man positions himself in the bow while another works the rudder in the stern. The remaining trackers stand close to the ends, one foot braced behind the other, thrusting forward on the oars.

These men are small and wiry, their backs heavily muscled. Their calves bulge like Popeye's forearms. Varicose veins protrude like knots of purple worms from the legs of the older men.

When a pea pod reaches shoals or rapids, the rowers swiftly loop the harnesses of their bamboo towlines over their shoulders and jump into the water. As they scramble along the shore or leap from boulder to boulder, the men at the bow and stern guide the boat with steel-tipped wooden poles.

Every so often a tracker initiates a traditional song. Trackers from other boats join in the chant, and their haunting melody echoes off the palisades and loses itself amid the lush greenery of the mountains that rise from the V-shaped valley.

As with anything related to tourists, there's a quick buck (or in this case, yuan) to be made. The shoal where the pea pods turn for home is crammed with tables laden with trinkets, homemade twinelike sandals and green translucent eggs. Fake fossils of baby plesiosaurs, their necks intertwined, can be purchased by the dozen. The items lend a whole new meaning to the term "Chinese junk."

Although the trackers' pay has increased dramatically, up to about $4 a day from the pennies their forebears made in the gorges as late as the 1940s, their work can still be risky. A few years ago the rapids proved to be more treacherous than expected. Eleven tourists drowned on the Shennong Stream when trackers lost control of their boat.

The gorges and the river are in for additional changes. The Three Gorges Dam at Wuhan, the world's largest hydroelectric project, will raise the Yangtze's level to 135 meters (442 feet) in 2002 and to a final height of 175 meters (574 feet) in 2009. Somewhere between 1.3 million and 1.9 million people are being displaced along the Yangtze to make way for the resulting 320-mile-long reservoir.

The dam promises to modernize China with electricity, flood control and improved navigation, and the old ways of life will be lost forever. More than a dozen large cities and nearly a thousand towns and villages are already being dynamited, their fragments hauled away.

But the trackers will survive along the Shennong Stream. The woman from West Virginia will probably be glad, despite their lack of nakedness.

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