

The Tourist's Dream, A Modern Shangri-la

By William R. Polk

“Here in Lijiang, “ said Mayor He Zixing, “we believe we have the tourist’s dream. This is an undiscovered place. It is not even in most guide books. But look around you. It is what remains of the Buddhist Western Paradise, a little piece of heaven on earth.”

Lijiang is truly reality copying art: the town thinks of itself as Shangri-la from James Hilton’s novel *Lost Horizons*. And Lijiang has good reason. For centuries, it was isolated from its Chinese, Burmese, Vietnamese and Tibetan neighbors. Towering more than 5,596 meters over its lush valleys are the glacier-covered Jade Dragon Snow mountains and nearby is one of the world’s most spectacular river gorges, “Leaping Tiger,” where rushing waters tumble down 3,600 meters toward the Yangtze river. Many of the most beautiful sites where springs and streams have cut ponds into the mountains are occupied by Buddhist monasteries and antique villages. Everywhere, the countryside is ablaze in the springtime with over 50 varieties of wild azaleas—some with trunks up to 40 centimeters in diameter -- and rhododendrons, 5 species of camellias and 4 species of peony; they flourish amid dwarf pines, flowering crabapple and over 400 other varieties of trees and shrubs.

Although far to the south in China’s Yunnan province, Lijiang is given a mild climate by being 2,400 meters above sea level. Rarely are the days hot, almost never is there snow in the valley and the evenings are only bracingly cool. Rainfall is plentiful, but most days are sunny and dry. High along the mountains there is a nearly perpetual mist that accounts for the luxurious plant life. Flowing through the valley is the Jinsha river which is noted for the gold mixed into its sands. If one stands on one of the many hills or mountains, he peers down onto countless terraces, marching like stair-steps down the valley walls. Each the product of thousands of man-hours of labor, the terraces are constantly tended and planted with rice paddies.

The area around Lijiang was discovered and inhabited already millions of years ago in Paleolithic times and proudly preserves its own skeleton of a remote ancestor, the “Lijiang Man.” The first historical records date to the period of China’s “Warring States” -- roughly contemporary with Classical Greece -- but Lijiang was only sporadically affected by the march of events in Chinese history. In recent centuries, it was a separate kingdom whose *wang* (king) showed his independence by building a replica here of the Chinese emperor’s palace at Beijing. The palace, which was destroyed by the “Red Guards” during the decade-long cultural revolution (1966-1976), has recently been lovingly restored to its former gaudy grandure.

All around the palace is “Old town,” which has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its nearly four square kilometers are laced with rushing canals, spanned by stone bridges and occasional precarious wooden plank walkways.

Cobblestone lanes weave past hundreds of tiny shops and scores of restaurants, tea houses and inns. Washed by the Yu river, a tributary of the Yangtze, Old Town is impeccably clean. Street-sweepers must number in the hundreds; many are armed with what amount to long tweezers with which they search out the occasional scraps of paper. Automobiles, motorbikes and even bicycles are banned. Yet it is a functioning town with about 5,000 inhabitants and is far from the pollution that mars so much of modern China.

Unlike many old Chinese cities, Lijiang was not walled. The probable reason is that it was protected by its isolation, but, like many things Chinese, this sober explanation is embroidered by a legend rooted in the written Chinese language. The early city was made largely of wood, for which the Chinese character resembles a snowflake . When this character was combined with the character for city wall, a square, 阝 the resulting meaning was to be “besieged” 卽. The citizens apparently thought it best not to tempt the gods!

Hit by a terrible earthquake in 1996, much of the new city was destroyed. The drama of the event brought international attention on a scale never before experienced. That started a rush toward modernization that figures most startlingly in the tourist industry. Ten years ago, according to Mayor He, Lijiang had only one more or less modern hotel; today, there are over 100. Tourists now arrive at the modern airport 24 kilometers outside the city. Last year, they numbered nearly four million, of whom about 8 in each 10 were Chinese. The others are mainly Japanese. The number of Europeans and Americans who have “discovered” Lijiang is tiny. Walking around Old Town, sitting in tea houses and restaurants and attending a brilliant concert of Naxi and Chinese music, I saw less than a dozen.

The town population contains some 26 of China’s 56 nationalities. Although China’s record of treatment of minorities has occasioned much criticism, the “minority peoples” as they are called here have the unique privilege of having more than one child for each couple. Most of them aggressively keep their national customs and continue to wear their native dress. Because of their value to the promotion of tourism, the provincial government encourages them by subsidizing music and dance performances in the town’s many entertainment centers.

Probably the most interesting of Lijiang’s nationalities are the Naxi (pronounced Nakh-si). Who the Naxi are, where they came from and much about their past are still unknown. A gentle, friendly people, they number today less than 300,000 and would, undoubtedly, have long since disappeared into the ethnic maw of China had they and their distinctive culture not been protected by China’s vast distances. Lijiang is 3,780 kilometers from Beijing and 600 kilometers from the more accessible provincial capital, Kunming. Even more important, all around the town and its valley are high mountain barriers.

The Naxi follow a religion known as Dongba. Dongba has neither priesthood, temples nor elaborate doctrine. Its followers believe in a pantheism in which all natural objects and forces are held to have “spirits.” Thus, the Naxi venerate nature in all its

variegated forms. Their ancient culture was recorded in pictographics which had no relationship to Chinese characters. A surprisingly well-preserved but nearly dead literature can today be interpreted only by Dongba shamans. In government schools, the modern inhabitants still study their language along side of the dominant Han Chinese language, Mandarin.

The Naxi are the anthropologist's dream. Their society claims to be matriarchal. Young women become free at age 13 to *mi rou huo* (experiment with love) and at 16 begin to take lovers but do not marry. Since their children do not know who their fathers are, they are cared for by their mothers' brothers.

The Naxi have a particularly strong musical tradition which gives rise in Lijiang to the Dongba Ensemble. Its performers, wearing traditional dress, are as captivating for their faces and antique instruments as for what they sing and play. Like many Chinese of his age, the conductor, Xuan Ke, is a victim of the Cultural Revolution. After years in prison where he underwent "re-education," he reconstructed his orchestra, strictly devoted to classical Chinese music and now performed by a vanishing generation of men in their late 70s and 80s. The ensemble, like much of traditional China hovers on the brink of modernization. How long it – and Shangri-la – can survive is in doubt.

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