

## Letter #10 - Yunnan, Hawaii of China, and Final Reflections

The recent murder of some Chinese sailors by Thai and Burmese drug dealers led China to close its Mekong waters to foreign traffic. Although I had hoped to continue upriver from Laos to Jinghong in Yunnan province, I still want to checkout the area for my novel's big escape scene.

Also known as Xishuangbanna, Jinghong is tucked in China's deep southwest near Myanmar and I had expected a funky border town. Instead it is a cheery place with tropical foliage and weather: a Chinese tourist Mecca, where the "nationalities"—related to peoples in Laos and Thailand—are promoted for local color. Crossing an elegant suspension bridge to the river road, we note the east bank being razed for new development.



*Jinghong, Yunnan Province, China*

Needing to "find" the kidnapper's jungle compound, we head south through lush landscape similar to the lower Mekong, only the river is much greener here (possibly from nitrogen in fertilizer runoff). The houses are of brick or thatched bamboo, many with satellite dishes and solar panels, and the hillsides terraced with tea. Rubber trees are everywhere. The world's top tire exporter, China also leases rubber acreage in Myanmar and Laos, including the home

of our Mekong river guide. (So lucrative is this crop that farmers are replacing poppy opium fields.)

Not only tropical, Yunnan is also a land of remote peaks and gorges, skyscraping trees. Struck by its raw beauty, we continue on to the next town, passing through mountainous jungle with wild elephant crossings, bougainvillea, banana palms and velvety slopes of tea: the new high road to China. Off the sleek tollway, I spot a line of black cars with red ribbons, a grand wedding procession in a tiny village spared the march of progress. And later, a man and his daughter walking along the highway, maybe their old fields. We traverse tunnel after tunnel blasted through once-impenetrable mountains accessible perhaps only by rough tracks. (This is the devilish "over the hump" region that took the lives of many pilots in WW2.) As I have seen out west in Xinjiang and Tibet, the government has poured vast resources in integrating its outlying territories.

Known for rare tea and pristine air, Pu'er is another city with a five-year plan: vast empty construction surrounding the old town, waiting to be populated. In search of a special gift, we visit a tea shop, its shelves and bins stocked with every "vintage"—from loose leaves



*Tea Shop, Pu'er, China*

## *Letter from Asia #10*

to aged cakes, rows of tins and canisters. A tiny, smiling woman prepares steaming tea and I leave with a round pressed cake of good quality (hoping to pass through customs).

It is here we realize that it was not bad wifi that prevented us getting online in Jinghong, but the Great Firewall of China. Although we had no trouble accessing Facebook, Twitter, Google or the New York Times in socialist Vietnam and Laos, here they are as Lisa Brackmann says, “hard-blocked” (at least in part by technology supplied by Cisco, et. al.). The tech-savvy have VPNs—virtual private networks—but like the majority of Chinese people we do not. After a

five-hour drive through more mountainous and terraced terrain, we descend past rows of corn and greenhouses to Yunnan’s capital, Kunming, where the mother of one of my characters flees her triad father. It is a shock to emerge from this lush countryside into the Big City. Once a small provincial town (and OSS base for Julia and Paul Child), Kunming is sleek and sophisticated with black Audis, Gucci and Hermes, as well as Starbucks and a hip university area with a retro-Cultural Revolution coffeehouse.

The new revolution of modernity has struck. Hard. In traditional China, you might have a personal name “chop,” which would be stamped in red ink for signature purposes. On previous trips I had had some carved as gifts, but when inquiring at the hotel, I am met only by blank looks. After two desk clerks confer, it is suggested,

“Walmart.” When I stare back, stunned, one says, “Do you know this place? You can get everything there!”

As throughout Asia, the old and new coexist in both tension and harmony; tradition and world culture jockeying for space. While an Internet-savvy Laotian monk might friend you on Facebook, he continues to honor his ancient Buddhist ways. And while Siberian seagulls continue to flock to Kunming each winter, the rest of the world will soon be arriving via the beautiful new airport. Hello, China. And goodbye, for this is our last stop in Asia.



*Kafka Bookstore & Cafe, Kunming, China*

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