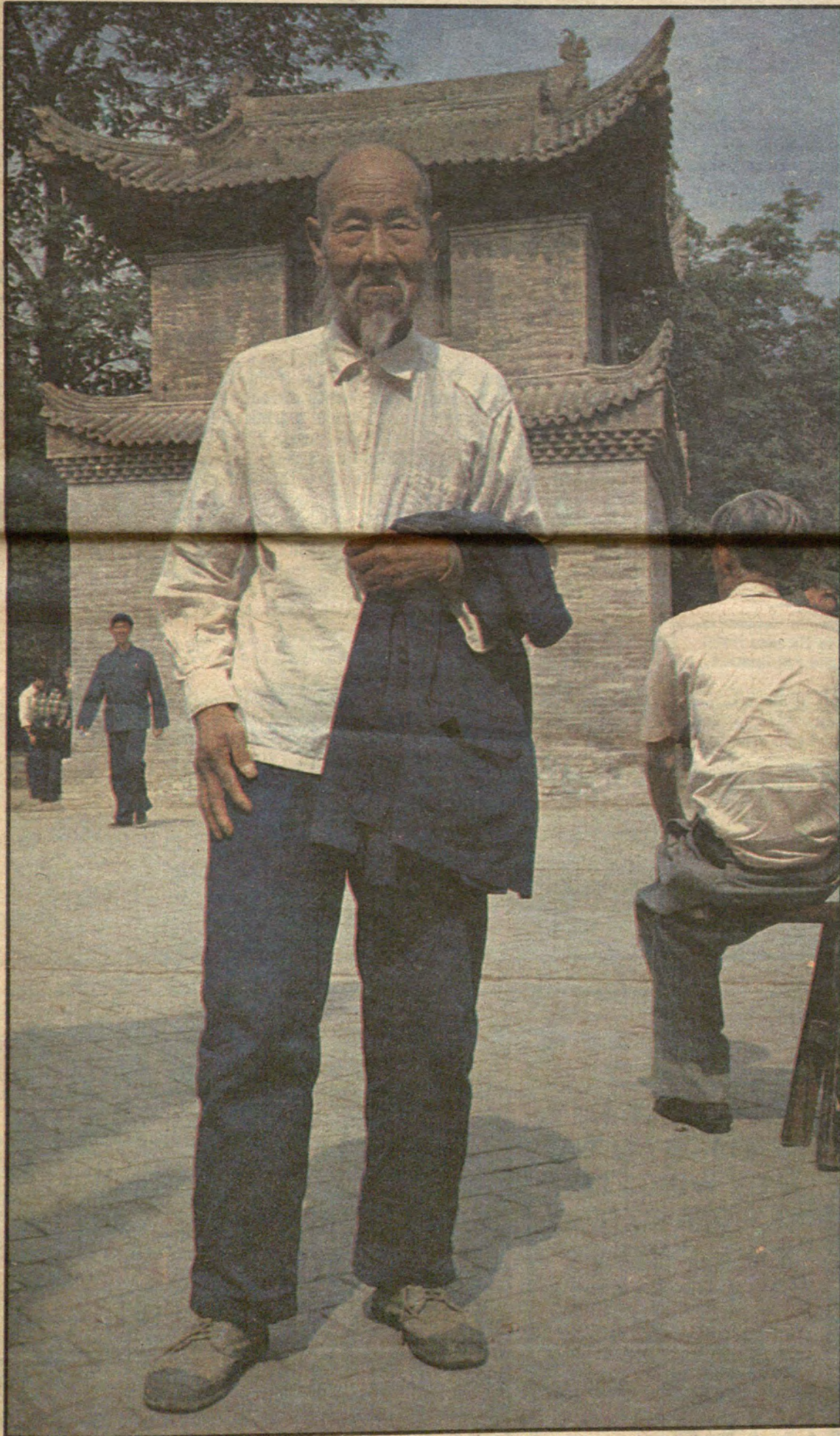


# impact



The Journal of a

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# Chicano in China

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New Mexico novelist  
Rudolfo Anaya searches for  
symbols of his Native  
American soul.





*"There is a friendly feeling to the masses of people who throng the streets."*

The Journal of a

# Chicano in China

**I**n May 1984, I embarked on a journey to China, a pilgrimage that turned out to be one of the most incredible journeys I have ever taken. I had traveled abroad before, but there was something singular about China, something special that prompted me to keep a journal of my daily impressions.

My response to China was highly personal. I felt that important answers would be revealed to me. What answers? I did not know exactly. But I would be a traveler in search of symbols that could speak the language of my soul. I would be a traveler in a country that was the birthplace of the Asiatic people who, thousands of years ago, wandered over the Bering Strait into the Americas. What were the symbols of those people? And what do they communicate to me across the millenium of time?

I call my notes the *Journal of a Chicano in China* for specific reasons. First, I am a native son of the Mexican community of the United States, and I proudly identify with that community. And, second, as a Chicano, I also take pride in that part of me that is a Native American. I seek out the history and thought of the Americas because by understanding that past I understand better my present.

My trip to China was sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The foundation fellowships encourage growth in new and multidisciplinary ways. Certainly, travel is one of the ways in which we gain knowledge about the integrated earth on which we live. So in mid-May, 19 Kellogg



*Anaya, wife Patricia, the Great Wall.*

Story and Photographs  
By RUDOLFO A. ANAYA



fellows — some of us accompanied by our spouses — set out for China. Our Chinese sponsor was the Chinese Athletic Association. Why the association? Our group was such a diverse mixture of scholars that it was the only agency that dared to sponsor us.

In China, I visited the holy mountains and temples, I prayed at ancient shrines, I walked the polluted streets of the cities, I mixed with the people, I pulled them into my dream. I walked in their factories, prisons and hospitals, I toured their markets and I sat in their homes. I went to communicate and these are my impressions of that communication.

*May 11, 1984, San Francisco*

I am going to China today. Where do I find the beginning, the desire, for this pilgrimage? A family story whispers that our grandfather, when he was a young man, visited China. I asked my mother, "Did Grampa go to China?"

She rapped my head. "Mind your manners, Boy. Don't speak ill of the dead. Yes, your grandfather could speak Chinese when he had a cup or two, but he never went to China."

I remember my grandfather, farmer of the Puerto de Luna valley, a landlocked Chicano in the llano of New Mexico. He never saw the sea; he never saw China.

So, I am going to China for Grampa and for myself. A visit to the origin. The origin that does not belong to Spain. I go to find an understanding of that other half of my nature.

My wife, Patricia, and I spend the day in San Francisco. All trips to China should begin in San Francisco, city of the Orient, city that gazes into the setting sun. The Spaniards came into your bay in the 16th century. But Chinese voices had lingered in your air centuries before. In Portsmouth's Square Park, the old Chinese men of the neighborhood gather to take the sun (as I imagine today in some village in Northern New Mexico, the old men gather in the chill of a spring morning to take the sun). The Chinese gentlemen play cards, gamble, play dominoes. Feisty old men. Brown like me. Wrinkled. In heaven, Grampa plays checkers with old Chinese gentlemen.

*May 14, Beijing*

*¡El Tercer Mundo! He llegado, con una canción en mi corazón.* Peking, land of my grandfather's dreams. I rush to embrace the Chinese. Brown brothers, Raza! Can you imagine a billion new souls for La Raza? We could rule the world.

Peking/Beijing does not surprise me. On the bus ride into the city, I have a vague feeling I have been here before. The streets are busy with construction, a new subway. It's like Mexico City, but with less color, fewer cars, more people. We pass the shops that line Beijing University, the gates of the Summer Palace, the Empresses' Pagoda on the hill and come to rest in northwest Beijing. Our hotel is a beautiful one in the foothills. The Fragrant Hills Hotel. A fitting name.

Our room has bathroom marble, a sliding glass door that looks down on a pond of the golden carp, grass, Chinese pine trees. There is a swimming pool where the hardy of the group swim before dinner. I drink Five-Star Beijing beer, make friends with the old pine trees outside my window and sleep. At night, the full moon of New Mexico peeks over the garden. The breeze through the open door is cool. The golden carp in the pool sleep.



*"All around us as far as I can see in the haze, farmers work the valley."*

*May 15*

Today we will tour the city, camera in hand. We are ready to see China. We are ready to see the reality of *El Tercer Mundo*.

The ride into Beijing is bucolic, with a hard edge. People on the way to work fill the narrow streets. Peach tree orchards line the roads. There are fields of tomatoes, onions, vegetables. Rice paddies. Farmers are at work everywhere. Grampa's folks. An occasional fisherman sits by the side of the canal, bamboo pole over the water. Lots of trucks are on the road. Chinese trucks loaded for work.

Our destination is the Forbidden City, the old Imperial city of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, now a museum. Gold Chinese roofs, pastel red

walls. The crowds are thick. The Chinese do not smile. And yet, there is an air of gaiety. Workers, families with their children, have come to see the glory of the old dynasties, the ancients who created such opulence and glory. This is an old civilization. Perhaps the oldest on earth. No wonder they have called outsiders barbarians. No wonder, throughout their history, they have been wary of the West. Modernism has just come to China.

In the palace grounds, the dragon abounds, carved into roofs, carved into bronze. Something about the vast courtyards between buildings reminds me of Teotihuacan in Mexico. The walls, the smell, the sprigs of grass and weeds on the grounds. The dragon is

AT



everywhere, the flaming Quetzalcoatl of Mexico. The face of the fierce dragon looks out at me from walls, from gargoyles, from decorative pieces, almost exactly as the serpent head in the pyramids of Mexico. This is my first clue. This is the door I seek.

The dragon means supreme power, the emperor's wisdom. Quetzalcoatl means supreme power. In what dream in Asia, millions of years ago, did he have his beginning?

In the faces of the people is written the migrations from Asia crossing the Bering Strait, down into the Americas, bringing their dragon dreams. On the face of our guide, Mrs. Wang, I see a woman from Laguna Pueblo.

I am reminded this is the Chinese Year of the Rat. The rat is well liked for its witty, crafty character. To be born under its sign is propitious. Rats are also a delicacy: a home deer. The rats, like the cucarachas of the Southwest, will survive. In the narrow street, surrounded by a billion brown faces lost in a rippling sea of Chinese bicyclists, I sing to my brothers, "*La Cucaracha, la Cucaracha, ya no quiere caminar.*"

May 16

A Chinese magpie lives in an old pine tree near our window. Early in the morning he awakens me with his complaints. He is a beautiful bird, large with shining black feathers and spots of white. He brings the gossip from the village below: The people do not know what to make of the members of our group who jog in the morning. These men with hairy legs are the barbarians of old. The women joggers: ladies of little decorum.

In the morning, our group tours a market where farmers sell their excess crops. It is nothing more than a good old-fashioned Mexican *mercado*. Patricia and I smile. We have probably been in every *mercado* in Mexico. I buy a small print of a buck and doe from an artist. Patricia also buys a print. Chinese themes for adobe walls in New Mexico.

Later, we tour Haichain, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Beijing. A wonderful place, quiet, clean. We see people at work, small-shop owners, a woman carrying mail on a bike, the local women washing clothes at the neighborhood water pump. If you have ever walked in a *colonia* in a Mexican city or a poor man's barrio in the Southwest, you know what a typical neighborhood in Beijing is like. Clean, swept barrio streets, some vendors, lots of people, a horse-drawn cart. Only the language is different.

In the afternoon, we tour the Summer Palace. There is a lake, and I imagine the old emperors in their colorful garb walking the breezeway along the lake, escorting their concubines. Outside the masses toiled. Of such things are revolutions made. One empress, the Empress Suchi spent a fortune building a marble boat. The boat still sits on the lake. It goes nowhere. Tourists clamber aboard.

During the Chicano movement of the '60s, a few of the more radical Chicanos thought they would go to war against the United States to make their grievances known. In California, a group of activists formed the Royal Chicano Air Force and built airplanes of adobe. The Royal Chicano Navy, when launched into a flood-swollen ravine in Los Angeles, sank. Adobe submarines. Let that be a lesson to you, Raza! Next time, we build the fleet of marble.

May 20

When I was a child in school in Santa Rosa, we studied China. We read about the Great Wall of China. We looked at the huge globe of the world Mr. Gold had in his room. We knew that China was on the other side of the world. Later, in the dusty playground of the school, I scooped out a small hole. Better watch out, somebody said, you'll fall into China.

Each village here is composed of communes. So was the village of Puerto de Luna, my grandfather's home. In Puerto de Luna, the farmers owned their land, they nourished their families from the earth, they sold their produce, but they led a communal life. At the heart of the village was the family, but at the heart of the commune was the church. Other

*'How simple it is to relate to these brown men and women bent over rice fields or vegetable gardens.'*

aspects of village life created the sense of community. The system of irrigation that the farmers used, for example. The main irrigation ditch, *la acequia madre*, brought water from the river. Caring for that ditch was a communal responsibility. The most friendly feelings of community and the most vociferous arguments took place around the delegation of cleaning crews and the choosing of the ditch rider, *el mayordomo*. Was *el mayordomo* the cadre's leader? A leader in the commune, a man on horseback who rode the ditch and saw that the source of life was kept clean. He assigned watering days. The men of the village gathered in the evenings or around the post office and made rules for governing themselves and decided who to give power to. How simple it is for me to relate to these brown men and women I see here, bent over rice fields or vegetable gardens. I have seen them before, there where I began to dig my hole to China.

Today, on the road north to the Great Wall, we pass through farmland. Small ditches are everywhere, carrying water from the main canal. Water pumps rush the water to the fields. Men and women stand by the pumps, working and talking. *Mayordomos* of the water. The life spirit of the commune flows into the fields, and all around us, as far as I can see in the haze, the farmers work the valley.

About an hour and a half north of Beijing, we come to the Great Wall, the tourist part of the Great Wall. I feel awe at my first sight of the massive wall. Built on the back of a mountain slope, it is like a serpent that crawls up and down the hogbacks.

I am reminded that when the Anglo-Americans first swept into New Mexico, the Great Wall of resistance was the Hispanic culture they found there. That wall of culture has been battered and bruised, but it's still in

place. Will it disappear or will it always be there, like the Great Wall of China?

A month ago, Reagan was at the Great Wall, our guide says. He promised to build 10 nuclear plants in China. Will they become the new symbols of China? Dragon breath, dragon fire. Does the new dragon feed on plutonium-U32? Along the wall, Chinese families pause to eat their lunches: boiled eggs, bread, cakes, soft drinks and beer. In the future, will Chinese families visit the nuclear reactors? Will they sit in the shade of the nuclear power plants to eat their picnic lunches?

May 21

This morning, Patricia and I do not join our tour. One group is going to the site where Peking Man was discovered, the other to a steel factory. But my bones are still weary from yesterday's excursion. I sleep, and in my fitful sleep, a dragon enters my body. China is entering me. The dragon settles itself in me, its eyes breathing fire through my eyes, its breath the life in my lungs, its serpentine body settled along my spine and heart and liver and stomach. The tail of the dragon spreads to my feet. Finally, it has entered me completely. Finally, I have made my peace with this giant country and its billion people.

When I awaken, I feel refreshed, a new man. A dragon man. Or a man carrying the potential of the dragon within. The Yin and Yang. The opposites, the polar forces waiting for me to use them as I wish. Patricia serves me hot Chinese tea. I say something in Chinese, a language I do not understand. My Oriental eyes look out the window. The pine trees are wet. It is raining again. Looking at the pines, I do not know whether I am in the western hills of Beijing or in Taos. Some of my happier moments have been spent in Taos.

I had a friend at Taos Pueblo, the commune of the Taos Indians. Cruz, an old man, taught me to hunt. Cruz, old man of the pueblo, governor, hunter, farmer, communal man, man of power. Now I know the power he carried within him. He was a dragon man. He knew how to balance his energies. Those thousands of years separated from the Orient, thousands of years since the migration from Asia, and still he carried the supreme sense of the dragon in his soul.

Now, I hear him call from the forest. He calls in the language of Taos Pueblo, but to me, it sounds like Chinese. So now I have Cruz and my grandfather to guide through China. I am a new man. A Chicano Chinaman.

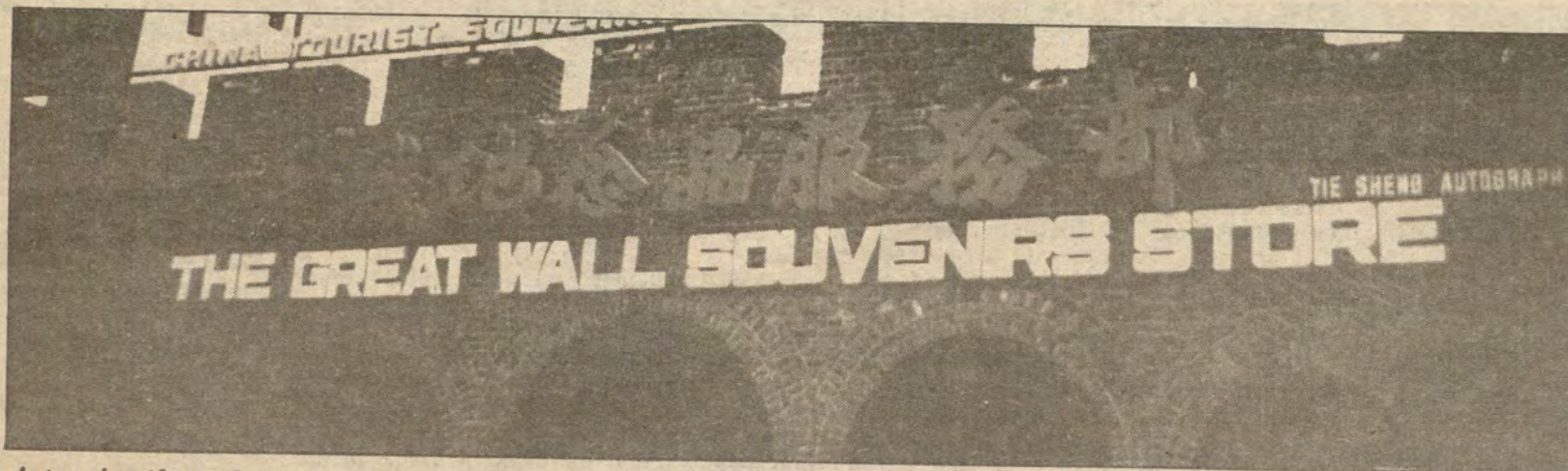
May 22

This evening is our last in Beijing. Earlier in the day, we visited the Mao Dedong Memorial, the central prison at Beijing and Beijing University. Now, we gather at a hotel restaurant for a feast of Peking duck. What a fiesta. Mai tais flow freely. Toasts are made. Patricia toasts Chairman Mao. I toast my grandfather. We all toast the beautiful Chinese people. Peking duck is broiled whole, then sliced. The slices are put into thick, round, rice tortillas, garnished with plum sauce and green onions. Delicious. Peking Duck Taco. I could make a million dollars selling them at sidewalk stands in Albuquerque. Forgive me, Mao.

May 24, Xi'an

Our first day in Xi'an, the countryside is bewitching. Fields of rice spread into the morning mists. The country is alive with





### A tourist shop along the Great Wall.

people. There is color to their dress. There are small shops, family operations. *Mercados*. A sense of excitement. How unlike Beijing. Policemen wear white jackets and salute smartly. The dull blues and grays of Beijing have disappeared.

Before dinner, I set out alone to walk the streets of Xi'an. The boulevard is packed with people. My walk up the street is rewarded. I discover the small shops. Here a man sits in a cubbyhole and mends shoes. The bicycle repair shops are numerous. There is a toilet and plumbing supply shop, groceries, clothes. Most are hole-in-the-wall entrepreneurs, but happy and thriving. All greet me with awkward stares and some surprise. I pause to talk to a man at work repairing a bike. He speaks Chinese. I speak the Spanish of New Mexico. We part on good terms.

I disappear in the crowd, I flow, become one with the crowd, dare to lose my identity. I join the flow of the masses and for a while, I am no longer a Chicano in China, I am no longer American. I am a dark man walking in twilight in the streets of Xi'an. There are no lights, no garish neon, no loud music blasting, only the sound of the people. China is people. A sea of people, a sea rippling against the shore of the world, a wave bursting with energy on our dreams. I start — become me again, find myself again — leave the sea, a strange piece of driftwood from the llano of New Mexico, cast on the shore of Xi'an. The faces smile again, watch as I pass, do double takes; I am a Chicano in China again. Alone.

#### May 25

This afternoon we visit a commune with about 20,000 members. It is larger than most of the towns I know in New Mexico. We visit a small factory and a nursery, where the children sang songs for us. But the real treat is being taken to the house of a woman who volunteered to speak to us. Her courtyard is small, but spotless; plain, but cool. Two trees shade it. She invites us into her house. The floor is brick. Sprinkled and swept, it resembles a packed-dirt floor of the old village homes of New Mexico. She lives with her son and daughter, takes care of the grandchild. She has a television set and a sewing machine. Her early life was full of poverty and suffering; so she now praises the liberation of 1949. I look at the wrinkled face of the woman and feel at home. I am back in my childhood and the woman is a neighbor who has come to visit my mother. Only this woman's kitchen is different. A clay oven with two hot plates for

cooking. *Comales*. Plain and primitive. I remember the cast-iron, wood-burning stoves of the ranches I knew as a child. Tortillas browning on the *comales*.

#### May 26, Chengdu

Our plane to Chengdu is an old prop model, a dragon sans jet power, but smooth and reliable. Below us spreads the most fertile valley in China, the rice bowl of the country. From the air we can see miles of rice paddies.

Each new region produces surprises. On the ride into town, we see the peasants winnowing wheat along the road. They use the pavement to beat the wheat. Then they stack the dry wheat stalks, all cut by hand, by the sides of the road. I see my first water buffalo, a huge animal used to plow the rice fields. Everywhere the farmers are at work, planting new fields, knee-deep in water and muck.

The Chengdu Hotel is new, the young attendants eager. We taste our first Szechuan food, hot and spicy rice, pork tongue, cucumbers baked in a spicy sauce, seaweed soup, other tidbits. For the first time in weeks, my tongue burns. "More chile," I say, a pleasant smile on my face, my forehead sweating.

After dinner, Patricia and I walk down the street to a free market to buy oranges. The crowds turn to watch us walk by. Everywhere we go, we draw the attention of the people. After all, how many Chicanos have walked the streets of Chengdu on a June evening? How many have argued over the price of six oranges. The salesman calls the price in Chinese, and I answer in Spanish, then in English, enjoying the bartering. The old women at the gate of the hotel smile at the barbarians who enter the Chengdu Hotel carrying a bag full of oranges.

#### May 28

Chengdu, city of 2.5 million people, a sprawling city, a polluted city. Today the smog hangs like a thick dirty gauze over the skyline. The factory smokestacks belch like dragons of industry. Buses and trucks rattle back and forth, and, as always, the constant stream of people fills the streets.

After dinner we attend the Chengdu opera. In a back street, midst the hole-in-the-wall shops and homes, stands the opera house. The play tonight is a comedy. The greatest comedy for me is to watch the people. Attendance at the opera is an informal event. Men come in undershirts. This is really operetta for the masses, a kind of entertainment that might have taken place in the Old West a hundred

years ago in the Red Dog Saloon. A famous opera star from the East comes to town, the miners and cowboys and Mexicans pack the hall. Opera in the provinces.

The Chinese have a habit of clearing their throats and their noses. They have developed this ritual into an art form. What a cacophony of sound begins when the first man clears his throat and spits into the aisle or in front of him. Then another follows suit until it seems the entire theater is busy clearing their throats and spitting in the row in front of them. Nauseating to some of our more sensitive Western foreigners; quite natural to the Chinese operagoer.

#### May 30

In the afternoon, we drive to the train station. Hundreds of people are there, but foreigners are whisked into the first-class facilities. The train to Zhongqing (or Chungking) is on time. It is a pleasant ride in the night. It rains.

On the train, our Chinese guide, Mrs. Wang, reveals part of her history. Her father was a rich man. He sided against Chang Kai-shek and was killed. When the Japanese invaded in 1939, Mrs. Wang, then a girl of 18, escaped by walking across three provinces of China. She lived with the peasants, a life of extreme poverty and brutality. The old feudal warlords and the old village bureaucrats kept the people enslaved. The rich got richer and the poor were treated like animals. An intelligent, young woman who had studied English in Hong Kong, Mrs. Wang saw the reality of China. She wanted to help her people and so she joined the Communist Party. It offered a hope where there was no hope. Today, people complain, "There is no free thought." But the masses still remember the conditions before 1949, and they know they are better off now.

#### May 31, Zhongqing

I awaken to greet the sun and to sing his song so the day may dawn. I look outside the train window. The train has stopped on a bridge that spans a river. All is silence. Below us, the river rushes mad and raging. It has rained all night, the mist and clouds hang close to the green hills, the yellow, muddied water rushes down to the river. We are suspended in space — suspended in time. I forget I have to go to the bathroom and sit by the train window, drinking in the beauty of the wet morning. The train jerks forward. I awaken.

"Grampa," I say, "where am I?"

"You are where I always thought you would



be," my grandfather answers. "In the center of your heart."

Zhongqing train station. Gray. Dirty. I have seen many like it. Zhongqing, city of Chang Kia-shek. Capital. You are gray and dirty. I do not like you. City of the Yangtze, you spew smoke from your factories.

Now I admit to myself, I am tired of China, I am sick of China. I only wish to return to my land, my earth. I wish to ride to Taos and see the mountains, I wish to see the Sangre de Cristo of Northern New Mexico, I want to fish in the small, blue stream of the Sangre de Cristo mountains. I do not wish to fish the raging waters of the brown, powerful Yangtze.

There is no privacy in China, no beauty, no creative imagination to be engendered and nourished and made to produce. Only the dull gray of the people, the streets, the polluted sky, the grime that hangs everywhere.

Yet there is one redeeming feature to Zhongqing: We have arrived at the Yangtze River. Through the fine mist of the morning rain, we catch our first glimpse of the dragon river, the center of China. It is boiling and muddy, full of spring runoff. The third largest river in the world, it cuts from the mountains of Tibet to empty into the Sea of China at Shanghai. Here in Zhongqing we will board a river boat for a three-day journey to Wuhan.

I remember growing up in Santa Rosa and playing every day along the banks of the Pecos River. I grew up along that river. I knew its seasons. In the spring the floods came. Then the quiet river, swollen with water, brought with it sediment and debris — the history of

the northern part of the state. We swam in those flooding waters, as Mao once swam the Yangtze. Symbolic endeavors. For us, it was coming of age; for Mao it was a return to the mother river of China, a symbolic act to draw China together. Smart man. Smart politics.

#### June 1, the Yangtze

Early in the morning we board the ship, the East is Red No. 45. Nearly 800 Chinese board with us. Intelligent, wise and traveled professors board together with Chinese peasants who carry their bundles. First class and fourth class. Even in the socialist state, the distinction remains. You get what you pay for.

I have dreamed of sailing down this magic river. Who has not? It is a river of the imagination. It is the blood of China. In the morning light, the water is the color of Chinese chocolate, the same color as the spring water of my childhood river, the same color as the Rio Grande. The Yangtze is China's past, present and future, all in one.

We have begun our journey into the heart of China. For three days, we will live on the river. Mile after mile, we stare at the Chinese in their sailboats, their ancient sampans, the faces of the people, the huts on the slopes of the hills, the meager fields of corn beautifully cultivated on the terrace slopes.

The day is a dream. The people whose pictures we take and wave to on the banks live in another reality, another time. The lesson is that parallel streams of time can exist side by side. I know why I am here: to connect the streams of time, to connect the people. To

connect and connect and keep making connections. I did not come to measure or count. I came to make love to China. Today I enter her blood and mix my dreams and thoughts with hers. For the day on the river, my faith in the people is renewed.

We dock at Wanxian for the night. After dinner, we go into the city, a city of more than a million people, and yet to us, it is only a river city. After the trip to the city, Patricia and I host a party in the lounge of the boat. We break out peanut butter, Kraft cheese spread, crackers and a bottle of Chinese brandy I bought in Zhongqing. The brandy makes me forget I am docked in Wanxian on the Yangtze in another time in another place.

#### June 3

Today I stare at the wide Yangtze and remember images of China:

□ In the middle of the wide river, we pass a small sampan. There is one man rowing, guiding the boat. In the middle of the boat sits an elegant, old woman dressed in black. She holds a bright purple umbrella over her head. She sits as if she is a lady of refinement going to an evening performance.

□ A Tibetan appears in the thick crowd we have drawn as we board the bus in Chengdu. He is dressed in his traditional dress. I say hello. His eyes are flat, menacing. He wears a long blade under his tunic.

□ At the Qing terra-cotta exhibition a young

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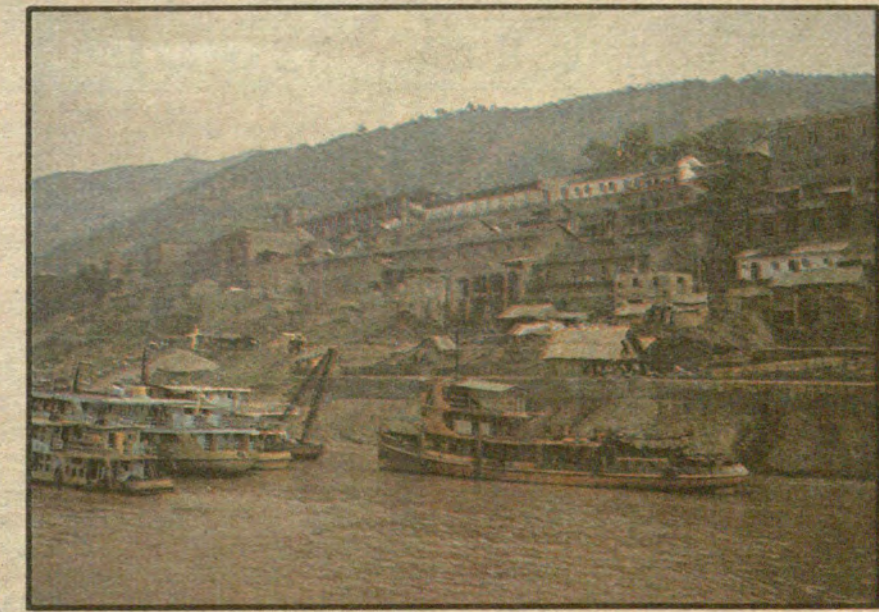
"The faces smile again, watch as I pass, do double takes."



"In the faces of the people is written the migrations."



"The dragon means supreme power."



"I have dreamed of this magic river."