

The Yangtze River Tow Men

By Liu Bai

Translation by Madeleine Ross and Fang Li

An English merchant by the name of A. J. Little who spent a month and a half travelling by wooden sailing boat in the Three Gorges from Hankou to Chongqing in the spring of 1883 recorded this description in his book "Sailing the Three Gorges:"

A large sailing vessel of 150 tons would have over 100 sailors, 70 to 80 of whom were tow men. Their movements were coordinated by the beating of a drum, and the drummer in turn was directed by the helmsman. Between 12 and 20 men stayed on board. They had barge poles, which they used to fend the boat off from rocks or large boulders when it was in danger of crashing into them. At the same time they operated the huge oar made from an entire cedar tree at the prow¹ of the boat. Meanwhile, six other men would get off the boat and, jumping around on the rocks like cats, they'd pull out tow men's ropes which had been hung up there on the rocks. As well, three or four special swimmers, called watermen, all naked as Adam in the Garden of Eden, leapt about, sometimes squatting on the rocks in front, ready at any moment to dive into the water. There they'd pick up ropes hung from rocks that were unreachable from the bank, and begin to pull. Since the towing ropes were as thick as an arm, the boatmen needed a high level of skill and dexterity to be continuously rolling them up and stretching them out again, and to have become accustomed to the different lengths they needed to use along the route. Even though the ropes were very strong and resilient, they could only be used for a single

journey because of the continuous wear and tear from the sharp rock edges, and there were deep gouges dug out of some of the massive rocks by the grinding of the ropes.

This is perhaps the earliest description we have of the tow men. So, for how long have boatmen been working like this along this stretch of water on the Three Gorges? If the Dujiangyan Irrigation System was constructed in the Warring States Period (475 BC - 221 BC), I believe that this primitive way of maneuvering boats along the Yangtze River might not have been seen earlier than that.

Steamers appeared on the Yangtze in the early years of the 20th century. Mechanization and manpower worked side by side for about three quarters of the century. Before the 1980s, you could only see boats being towed where the tributaries of the Yangtze flowed into the main channel. But then, only a few years after that when the Three Gorges Project got onto the agenda and "doing the Three Gorges" became more and more of a craze, the tow men found themselves unexpectedly reduced to being the last notes of a beautiful song in their performances for tourists.

The tow paths in the Three Gorges have long since become overgrown, but they shouldn't for one moment be forgotten, because it wasn't so long ago that this river passage from Hubei to Sichuan had a grand reputation. In places along the tow paths, metal chains were riveted to the precipices for the tow men to haul on as they walked along in the rushing currents. Some people clearly took a fancy

1 Bow of the boat.



to these valuable historic items and when it was reported that the tow paths were going to be covered by water, the metal chains were secretly stolen or destroyed. And they weren't the only things that disappeared. The cylindrical tow men's rocks of all sizes that had been placed on both sides of the river in the gorges also vanished. Take, for example, the one that was over 10 metres high beneath the Flame Rock signal station on the south bank of Wuxia Gorge. During the high water season it was half submerged under the water, and from a distance, the reddish brown cylindrical rock looked like a ball of fire burning in the middle of the river. It, and all the other tow men's rocks were totally covered with gouges worn by the towing ropes over the years—a record of the river's history and the boatmen's suffering.

Starting in May of 1998, thieves of historical relics kept going to Flame Rock Village in Wuxia Gorge. A year later, the largest and sturdiest of the tow men's rocks, the one that was covered in the deepest gouges, disappeared from the river. Then another two disappeared in an even more peculiar way: It was rumoured in photography circles that someone was deliberately hired to push the remaining tow men's rocks into the water, just so a photographer could get the "ultimate shot."

It was the beginning of 1988, on my way to Shuifu County in Yunnan province to do some interviews, when for the first time in my life I saw tow men towing a boat against the current on Jialing River, a Yangtze tributary. Wearing straw sandals and with their long robes tucked up around their waists, they walked forward step by step along the river tow path, their bodies bent like bows, the long tow rope over their shoulders. The haozi (river song) they sang rose and fell with the sound of wind, filling the vast space above the water.

Five years later, on a special trip to look for

them again, the boatmen had disappeared from the river, and it was only at Shennong stream opposite Badong on the north side of the Yangtze, that I spotted their silhouettes by chance—unfortunately it was at the peak of the craze for "doing the Three Gorges."

There used to be a saying about Shennong Stream, that "there are three bends in half a kilometre, and at each bend there are rapids." The locals had worked out how to spin a buck from this, and pretended to be boatmen, pulling their "pea pod boats" to try and drum up business. Four or five men to a group, all naked, pulled pleasure boats with tow ropes slung across their backs as they walked along the crushed stone banks of the stream. Straining to move forward step by step, their bronzed bodies dissolved into the backdrop of the mountains and river.

On the north bank of Wuxia Gorge's eastern opening there was an ancient town called Guandukou (Ferry-Crossing Entrance) where people of the Tujia national minority lived. One of the most famous men of the town was a man already in his nineties, Tan Bangwu, who had been the top boatman in his day and was known far and wide.

Old Bangwu was 11 when he had begun to tow boats on the river, which was 80 years ago now. At the beginning, his father had steered and rowed and he followed along everywhere as his father's assistant. By the time he was 15, before he'd even fully matured, he was working the boats for a living.

That day I traveled upstream in a motorized boat belonging to his youngest son, with Old Bangwu himself at the helm. He wasn't a tall man, but he was very strong and capable. Wearing a white hand-woven shirt and a white head cloth wound around his head, he grasped the boat's steering wheel, and was quite the ship's captain, looking straight ahead at the path of water in front of us with his bright eyes as the towering green cliffs slid past the boat.



He was an old-style boat captain.

Once he met a famous film director who had come to shoot the film of the story about "The Woman and the Panda." The director told Tan Bangwu, "You're the perfect boat captain, we don't even need to put makeup on you!"

By middle age, after he had been towing boats for twenty or so years, he had his own boat, and it wasn't a bought one, he had made it himself. After building the first one, he just kept going, and in his lifetime had made as many as thirty or forty of them. Once he had the first boat he became a boss, namely the boss of that boat, the captain. But he wasn't the same as other captains; he was the only one who was daring enough to sail a boat at night on the rapids.

On the 24th of July in 2002, Tan Bangwu took me upstream by boat into the Gorges, pointing out the water routes and tow paths along the way. Our destination was the common boundary of Hubei and Sichuan province where we would find a carved inscription "Hubei Sichuan frontier" (Chushu honggou). Our starting point was the western end of Wuxia Gorge where a picture was engraved on the face of the cliff and above it the words "I show the routes." It had been carved by Tong Tianze, a supervisor of repair work in the 31st year of the Guangxu period of 1875-1908. Where the cliffs jutted out were etched scores of rope marks, some long, some short, some deep, some shallow—the mountain's memorial to the thousands of boats and boatmen; their shoulders, their legs, their courage and feelings.

As the dam's rising water submerges these markings, the water transportation routes will become things of the past. Old Bangwu gently ran his hands over the rope marks, mumbling to himself, "Now it's all done with, it's done with," and a disconsolate look flitted across his face.

He didn't say much, but from what he did say and his body language you got a sense of the man's strength of character—his spirit and energy had come from the river water that he had drunk in the gorges and the wind he had breathed there.

Old Bangwu's family lived on a small 20 metre-high hill not far from the eastern end of Wuxia Gorge. Before the Three Gorges Dam began storing water, the old man used to get up at the crack of dawn to tidy up and clean the courtyard. When he had eaten breakfast he would go down to the river's edge to put his twenty or so goats onto the long boat he had made and row them over to the south side of the river to grass pastures, and then row back again. After spending the whole day working in the fields, he used to row across to the south bank again to fetch the goats, but if he was too busy, he left the goats there on the hill for the night.

His elderly wife had passed away a few years ago. He was the only one at home now. The house was empty. If there was a surge of floodwater when a supply boat needed a pilot, he charged 50 yuan from Badong to Yichang. He didn't care about the money, he was just happy to know that people still remembered him.

Old Bangwu had always smoked tobacco. The tobacco grown in the Badong area was as dark as cigar tobacco and really packed a punch. I said I'd buy him a bunch of tobacco on the street, but he shook his head like a rattle drum, "No way, no way, how on earth would you know how to choose?" The two of us went into town together and after we bought the tobacco I followed him back home, carrying it. The man who had towed boats for much of his life was as happy as an old kid.

Tan Bangwu was born on October 13, 1913. He was 89 years old, or by Chinese reckoning, he was 90. A few months before this he had fallen 20 metres down a very steep slope during a



downpour. There was no one at home and he had sat for more than two hours in the muddy water before being discovered and taken to hospital. They put about twenty or so stitches in his head and sent him home. Tan Bangwu said that if he hadn't fallen he would be much stronger than he is now.

Tan Bangwu is alone. In his solitary evenings, the local tobacco is his only company. When people have lived to that point, everything that they have experienced has been filtered in their minds and only the deepest thoughts remain.

TAN BANGWU:

When I was 10, I followed my dad into life on the boats. When I worked the boats then, we used to see a lot of cedar boats, really huge ones. It was only later that a few little steam ships appeared on the river. Older people used to say, "You can become a scholar after 10 years of study, but it's nearly impossible to become a river man." I remembered this my whole life—to try and be a true river man.

My first boat was a kind called a marangzi (a hemp pulp boat) that was 20 metres long and seven metres wide, which I towed upstream against the current from Shashi to Badong. There were six of us towing and it took us a total of 12 days. I was young at the time and everyone looked after me. After I had been doing it for a few years I understood that in order to do this job and stay alive, you had to be willing to risk your life.

If you talk about how tough it was, we thought nothing of the fact that in summer we didn't wear shirts, and in winter we didn't wear padded clothes. It wasn't because we wanted to save money that we didn't wear shirts. When we were towing, the tow rope went over the shoulder nearest to the river, so that if there was unexpectedly some sort of emergency or accident, we could extricate

ourselves from the rope easily.

The stretch of river from Chongqing to Hankou was divided up and worked by eight groups of boatmen. Each group had men from three counties in it and each had its own banner. When you were on the river, you only needed to look at the banner to see which group of boatmen it was.

Ours was called Chu group and all of us were from Badong, Guizhou (or Zigui) and Xingshan. We had a white flag with the word "shun" (smoothly) on it. The flag of the group from Jingzhou, Yichang and Miaohe was a blue sky with a white disc on it. Fengwu group's flag was a yellow triangle; they were all from Fengjie, Dachang and Wushan. Yunkai group had people from Yunyang, Kaixian, and Wanxian counties. Their flag was also triangular and was edged in black with a tassel on it. Fengdu, Fuling and Changshou was another group, and their flag had a circle in the middle with red flowers round it, and there was also Five County group, which was all the counties upriver from Chongqing, I can't quite remember that one.

In the past if there was no wind, the 150 li big gorge (Wuxia Gorge) would have been impassable without boat tow men. The tow paths that they walked were called "cat-paths" because in the sections chiseled into the precipices we had to walk with our shoulders hunched and our backs arched like cats to move forward.

The boatmen's jobs on the gorge were finely demarcated. The helmsmen were the guys who steered small boats. The guys that pushed or took boats downstream were called oarsmen, the ones who towed boats up against the current were called tow men, the guys who worked the pole at the prow of the boat were called pole handlers, and the ones who steered at the back of the boat were the rear helmsman. The leader of the oarsmen was called the head oarsman, and the leader of the



tow men was called the foreman.

From Wuhan going toward Sichuan, the tow men mainly sang haozi about feeling homesick:

*Seeing the southern checkpoint, my eyes
are full of tears
I want to return to Sichuan and buy an
earthenware jar,
Seeing the Binshu Gorge, my thinking is
undone,
I miss mom and dad, because my money's
gone.
After going past Bream Stream I feel a
little hungry,
I think of my son and daughter, but haven't
brought any rice,
Getting to Longevity Pagoda the
earthenware jar breaks,
There's still a long way to go, two nine one
hundred eight!*

In winter, the water was cold, but no matter how cold it was we only wore a long shirt without any trousers. Wearing only straw sandals, our feet soaked all day in the white frothy water. They were red from being frozen and also ached, ached so badly that our eyes dripped with tears. There was one year that we were towing on our way back to Sichuan, and when we got to Tashiyi in Hubei, one of the older guys got sick, but the ruthless boat owner had him chucked onto the sloping bank. The fellow struggled to even sit up, saying "Boss, carry me back in the boat, I haven't died yet!"

Once when there was a huge swell of water in Wuxia Gorge, we braved the rain and kept towing up to Divination Rock when suddenly the boat got out of control, floated into the middle of the river and got caught in a current. A tow man called Yang who had been closest to the water's edge was dragged into the water. He waved his arms around just a few times on the surface before he wasn't seen again. But that time the boat owner was decent about it, and he got us all to burn paper money for Yang. The rest of the way on that

trip I wondered where Yang's family was and thought about how worried they must have been about him. If you're in this business, today you're on shore and you know you'll live, but you never know if tomorrow you'll be dead or alive ...

*Heave ho, heave ho along Chuan River
Dull as ditchwater along Ni (muddy) River
(below Shashi city, the crewmen don't
sing river songs)
Eat and drink well along Tang (sweet)
River (plain sailing along the Han River
area)
All fun and games along Xiang (fragrant)
River (the old river mouth)*

In those days they said I was young and had no fear of dying. But in fact I definitely didn't take my life for granted. The reason I dared to



ABOVE: The author with Tan Bangwu



navigate the rapids at night was because I had worked out how the water routes worked.

The whole way from Yichang to Chongqing was rough and turbulent. You had to remember so many things: how the appearance of the rocks at the river's edge changed when the water was high and when it was low; what the sound of the current was in each of the dangerous rapids; what the directions of the two underwater currents in the gorges were, which one was the way out, and which one meant death; and also the different positions of the constellations above your head as they changed from night to night, and season to season.

Xiling Gorge's Green Shoal (or New Shoal) was the longest stretch of dangerous rapids on the river in the gorges. It also had an ancient name—Exuberant Three Gorges. In the Han and Jin periods (Han 206 BC - 220 AD and Jin 265 BC - 450 AD), there were landslides and the river was blocked, so they changed the name to New Shoal.

New Shoal was three kilometres long, and the three parts of it, the upper, middle and lower rapids, made up three real danger spots. In the upper rapids the water was split into three passages by Chicken Heart Rock and Scales Rock. The southernmost part of the third passage was in fact the main channel. It looked as if it was 50 metres wide, but in reality the navigable stretch was only 30 metres wide. If you were even a little careless, the boat could crash into a hidden reef.

The water flow in the middle rapids was breathtakingly fast and you had to navigate in the shape of an "S". There were a number of well-known rocks in those rapids, Fake Armor Rock, Yellow Wax Rock and a massive rock as round as a pea called Pea Rock that stuck right out of the water. The water boiled around it in a rolling whirlpool, roaring loud enough to shake the heavens. The lower rapids also had many rocks that made the water surge

into whirlpools. The northern part, called Shehongqi or Sending Flood Shoal, was where the rocks forced the water into narrows. In the southern part, called Sunken Drum Rapids, the sound of the water was like the howling of a drum. In the Song Dynasty, the literary giant Su Dongpo went through the New Shoal and said of it that "White waves form across the river, broken teeth like snowy mountains."

From Guandukou (Ferry-Crossing Entrance), by fighting the current for 30 li, you finally got to the Lianzi Stream tow path which was the most dangerous stretch in the 66 li of Badong County's tow paths—it was on the southern bank of the river. The entire towpath was chiseled out of the steep cliff face towering over the river. It was three feet wide at most and at its narrowest point it wasn't quite a foot wide. There was always a risk of accidents when you towed a boat on this section of the route. On the inner rock wall of the tow path was this inscription:

*Governor Xiong of Kuizhou
Built on the 15th day of the 2nd month of the
11th year of the Kangxi period.*

The 11th year of the Kangxi period was 1672, which is 330 years ago. At the time it was constructed, they weren't making a road but just chiseling three pieces of iron chain—a horizontal, vertical and diagonal—into this key location on the precipice which was so difficult to get past.

Tan Bangwu and I sat down on a shiny flat rock next to Lianzi Stream where it was shady and cool, with a pleasing wind blowing from somewhere. The old man suddenly became exhilarated and began to sing:

*In mid-July the days are long
Girls come down to wash the clothes
In their hands they carry beating sticks
They look just like Sun'erniang (who killed
people and put their flesh into
dumplings)*



In those years towing boats on the river of the gorges, we rarely saw women near the river. If we did see a woman come down to the river to do her washing or carry water, the mood of all the tow men would run high for a while.

The songs were improvised and shouted so passionately that the sound shook heaven and earth. When the boat was docked at the wharf, we ate and had fun to our hearts' content. Towing boats was the sort of job where you lived for today because you didn't know if there would be a tomorrow. To use the tow men's own expression, "We are men eating while riding on the back of the black dragon." We used to say, "If today we have wine, we'll just get drunk," and when we had eaten our fill and had enough to drink, we would try and find a woman to sleep with. There were plenty of brothels of all classes in Chongqing, Wanxian and Shashi, and there were also the unregistered brothels which were the ones the tow men often patronized because they were cheap.

The sun shines on White Cliff as soon as it rises

A bunch of peonies blooms on White Cliff

Yellow flowers attract Miss Yellow

White flowers stir Scholar White's heart

Liang Shanbo stirs Zhu Yingtai's feelings.

(from the story of The Butterfly Lovers)

Battle one rapid after another

Turn the bend and it's Muddy Embankment.

There's something big happening there,

Enough blowing and beating to rouse the heavens.

The bride is carried in the sedan chair,

The old hired hand in the bamboo chair.

Poor me, I'm still a single man,

No sons, no daughters, it's so sad.

After 1949, nothing was the same again. There was a new tow men's song:

In the past I made lots of mistakes,

Whores and gambling, I did it all,

And I took a few drugs as well.

My relatives tried to give me advice.

But what rubbish those idiots talked.

They couldn't put up with my ways,

So I could only go cold turkey.

The wife remarried, gave me the flick,

I sold the kids for a dollar each and left.

Pinched a few roosters outside the south gate,

Stole some steelyard weights off north street.

The people got liberated in '49,

The army locked me up to kick the habit.

Three political education classes a day,

And folk dancing at noon.

Lianzi River seemed to spark so many memories for Tan Bangwu.

When he finished singing he pulled out a stalk of straw. This is called Chinese Alpine Rush (Dragon Beard Grass), there's a lot of it in Wuxia Gorge and it's used specially for making straw sandals. When they used to tow boats, the tow men's sandals were all made of this. Whenever they tow in this area, they are always especially careful. In the summer of the 20th year of the Republic of China (1932) there was a big flood. They were towing boats upstream and had just reached this place, but the water was flowing too fast and they were using too much force. Suddenly the rope snapped with a thump and three of the four tow men were swept away. Tan Bangwu was left by himself listening to the howling sound of the wind in Wuxia Gorge and the calls of wild animals. He had a night of sheer terror.

All the ropes we used to move boats around on the rivers were made of bamboo. Why was bamboo used and not hemp? Bamboo rope floats and doesn't get wrapped around rocks under the water. The length of a tow rope was determined by the size of the boat. The shortest was 30 metres and the longest could be several hundred metres. The standard rope sizes were made up of 12, 18, 20 or 24 strands. After they had been twisted they had to be boiled in limewater to make them soft and strong.



The minimum number of people to tow a boat was one, and the maximum was 110. While towing a boat, the tow men were very strict about sticking to a clear file order.

*Chongqing is the head of two rivers,
The earthen jar at the top, the vat at the
bottom.
Going past the Inch Rapids we have to look
out for each other
At Tang Jia Tuo we have to tie up to a
mooring;
I've got a lovely silk quilt but I can't make
love to it;
A lovely wedding gong, but I can't make it
sound...*

This is a river song from Upper Wuxian, but when we sang them the feeling was different. And when the boats went past Xiling, there was much more fervour in the song.

*There are rapids upon rapids in Xiling
Gorge,
Cliffs towering over cliffs, mountains facing
mountains.
Green Rapids and Vent Rapids aren't really
rapids,
The most terrifying is Kongling gates of hell.
When the boat goes through Xiling my heart
freezes solid,
One song and I'm through Green Shoal,
One song and I'm covered in sweat,
One song and I'm a brave guy...*

If all there was to it was just towing boats along the waters of the gorges, that would have been the end, but in fact it was far from being the case. The banks of the gorges are magnificently beautiful. They never stop pulling at your heartstrings; it's a world you can never stop learning from.

Working the boats the thing you worried about most was going through the big gorges, (that is, Wuxia and Xiling Gorges) because there were so many robbers. If you'd loaded up in Hankou with cotton to take to Chongqing or with goods in Wanxian to go downriver and

you had to go through Xiling Gorge or past the area around Taiping Stream, you could come across hundreds of pirates. It happened to me a couple of times and it was really frightening.

The thing that most scared boat owners was having to spend the night moored at the river's edge near an out-of-the-way rapids, because robbers hung about those parts. If they encountered robbers, the hard-working tow men could of course have turned a blind eye to the robbery in order to save their own lives, but if the boat's cargo was stolen, it meant that the tow men had wasted all their hard work for nothing on that trip.

Sometimes if a boat owner was really badly robbed, there was one thing he could do as a last resort. In the old days, there was an underworld gang boss called Yao Hanqing from around the area of Wanxian wharf, who was notorious along the entire river. When boat owners were going to rip off the cargo owners, they usually had to do it in league with him. At that time the most valuable cargo had to be salt. If a boat owner had it in for the owner of a cargo, they would wait until the salt had been loaded, and then secretly hand it over to boss Yao to sell on shore before the boat even set out, and replace it with a boat full of rocks. Then when it got going downstream they'd wait until the boat got to Muddled Rapids and let it get out of control and capsize, which was called "firing a gun" or "flying and firing a gun." It was river custom that in these circumstances the boat owner lost the boat and the cargo owner lost the cargo—and of course that was also the end of the boatmen.

Wanxian wasn't unique. There were these sorts of underworld bosses at all the wharves and even at all the dangerous rapids along the river, who belonged to the red or the black gang, dominated everyone and kept the underworld gangs going. There was a "Rapid's King" at the start of every rapids who was also like that. If boats weren't part of the



underground gang they'd have difficulty just pulling into shore. Before liberation the boss at the Badong wharf called Kong Jinshan, whose nickname was Big Lord Kong. That guy was a real savage. If an enemy fell into his hands he'd personally force him onto the embankment near the drill ground and knife him with his own hands.

But the underground gangs also set store by a sense of rough justice. If you left Badong and wanted to anchor on the bank at Big South Gate at Fengjie, and you needed help because you were having difficulties, you had to go to the Red Gang's top boss, make it clear that you were a gang member, and you had to say this:

Your humble little brother is from the Tan family, and my humble name is Bangwu. I'm from the small wharf at Badong. I've long heard about your esteemed big wharf, which has green mountains and excellent water. It is in a favourable position and the people are virtuous. I'm concerned that I haven't been humble enough. I've brought my humble name card along, but it isn't very elegant. It only has a bit of red and black scribble on it, and it's a bit curled up and dog-eared. I feel that my speech isn't very clear, my pronunciation isn't very good and I don't know all of the correct protocols. I've spent a lot of time back in the mountains and very little time studying, so I'm not very well-rounded, and I beg my great lord who wears long sleeves and sits on a high platform, to take me under his wing. Hang a dragon and phoenix flag over me, a rising sun flag, a flowery flag, a flag with a "good" character on it.

When he heard these words, the boss would realize that we were all on the same side, and he'd look after us in lots of ways, and even give us some travel expenses when we were leaving.

Getting around the river safely wasn't easy, so everyone had a high opinion of our family which had been manning boats for six

generations without an accident. Nothing bad had happened, but as well as making them learn by heart what was happening on and under the water, I also taught my kids and grandkids that they had "to pull together to overcome difficulties." Ordinary people live for their children and to be able to put food on the table and clothes on their backs. It's hard enough to support one's family, when you can't even be sure of staying alive, and there are already enough enemies on the waterways. I've been around the rivers for so many years, and the first thing is that I'd rather suffer a loss than harm another person; the second is that, as far as possible one should be kind to others. The most important thing in life is not to be a money grubber—that's the only way you can be a decent sailor.

I've disliked the Japanese all my life. They'd stop at no evil, and were really excessive. During the war of resistance, Japanese planes dropped bombs on Badong and sank some boats, and when they did kamikaze bombing lots of people died, some of whom simply lost their lives because of the shock caused by the bombing. After one raid I was at the helm of a sailing boat going up river and as we got to Flame Rock, I suddenly saw a much bigger cargo boat being rapidly carried downstream by the current. More than a hundred people clinging to the gunnels were frantically calling for help. What had happened was that going past Flame Rock, the captain of the bigger boat had heard Japanese planes up ahead. The situation made him so nervous that in a state of alarm he had let the stern of the boat hit submerged rocks which smashed the rudder and caused the boat to go out of control.

If the boat hadn't received help immediately it would have very quickly arrived at the rapids a little further down. So I quickly tied my boat to the stern of the cargo boat to act as a temporary rudder, until it could pull in to the bank safely at Badong. I swam to the bank from the stern of the boat. Can you imagine



what happened then? The hundred or more people, young and old, all knelt down together in front of me. One after another they pulled out any precious things they had on them to give me, but how could I accept anything? I just took twenty or thirty yuan for boat repairs from the captain.

The old tradition was that before setting out in a boat, you had to pray to the Buddha, put offerings in the prow of the boat, light candles, offer up a small feast, and recite, "Buddha, king of the river, give us your blessing for a safe journey and a safe return."

For six generations, my family has been protected by the Buddha, king of the river. But most people these days don't believe in Buddha any more. If you don't pray to the Buddha you aren't following the right procedure and disasters are bound to happen if you don't follow right procedures. Whenever our boats are about to set out, we always ask for the Buddha's blessing, no matter what other people are doing.

*Down Green Rapids winch us across Green
Rapids,
Pray to the god of the mountains to keep
us safe.
If the mountain god loses his temper,
The boat and its crew will go to the next
life. (Crewmen's ballad)*

That day, returning to Badong from the stone inscribed with "Frontier of Sichuan and Hubei" where Hubei and Sichuan share a border, Old Bangwu got very worked up as he recalled events that had happened and people from a long time in the past—his mother and wife. His wife, Peng Bixiu and he had grown up playing together as friends, and then at about the age of 18, before getting married they decided they wouldn't try to get wealth and high positions, they would just work hard together for the rest of their lives. In those days, the six months it took to tow a boat from Chongqing to Hankou and back was called

"the Han half year." Peng Bixiu used to count the days to around the time when Tan Bangwu would be in the area of Badong on those sorts of trips, and then go and stand on the bank waiting with delicious food for him. One, two, three days, she'd wait without catching a glimpse of him, and then not even go home at nightfall. What moved him most was the time he ran into danger near Lianzi Stream and as the boat passed by she waited on the bank, watching helplessly for two entire days and a night. When he got back to Guandukou, she hugged him tight, sobbing loudly enough for the sound to reach the sky.

There is a song sung by sad wives on the water routes called "Worries of looking for my husband." Tan's wife used to sing it to him and he remembered it by heart:

*Worries of looking for my husband, worries,
He doesn't come back, I don't leave.
Looking day after day, month after month,
Year after year, not turning my head.
Turning to stone, looking without end,
When he comes back, then I will speak.*

In Tan Bangwu's eyes, his mother was even more of a saint. He only had to walk down that long, ancient main street of Guandukou and the form of his mother would appear before his eyes. The little temple on the corner of the street was the place where Tan Bangwu had gone to school when he was young. By living very frugally, his mother saved up enough money to send him to this school when he was ten, in the hope that he would live up to the aspirations of all the generations of their family. For a whole year she burned incense every day on the family altar to the ancestors. He felt sorry for disappointing his mother's single-minded wish, but after spending a year at school, he couldn't resist the call of the river waves and he boarded a boat and began his career. He said that he'd only seen his mother cry twice in his life, the first time was when he told her that he was going to follow in his father's footsteps and wasn't going



back to school; the other time was when he first left home to go on his father's boat. That time the young Tan Bangwu was at a loss as he faced his mother crying her heart out. Later he understood, and understood better and better, but by that time he had already lost his mother and the great opportunity to study.

Now Tan Bangwu is old, and when he is at leisure he likes holding his long-stemmed pipe in his mouth, smoking one refreshing pipeful after another. The smoke blows away on the wind, his memories float away on the river. Then suddenly one day he remembered something that he had to do while he was still alive, and that was to bring his mother's remains back from Zigui where she had lived with his younger brother, so that she could be buried at Guandukou with his father.

In the autumn of 2000, he took a group of over a hundred descendants of the Tan family to Zigui on five boats to hold a funeral for his mother, and fulfilled his last wish. Tan Bangwu carried the urn containing the remains of his mother on to the bank at Guandukou. His tears and the sound of his crying until he buried the urn moved all of the relatives. They said that there had never been a 90-year-old man in Guandukou who had wept so bitterly for his old mother. Tan Bangwu also said that he had never cried so much and that a whole life's worth of tears flowed out of him on that one occasion. He wrote a paragraph on the new tomb that had been erected: "My mother was someone who could manage a household, who loved helping people, a real mother, an admirable mother!"

How many women are like the tow man's mother and wife!

Tan Bangwu still dresses like a boatman from the past; a white cloth wound around his head, clothing of coarse cloth and straw sandals. At the age of 90 he still walks

gracefully and lithely. Looking at him from behind as he walks along the bank he still looks like a tow man walking to his boat, about to set off on a long journey.

*Go barefoot up the slope,
I can only pull boats.
What is the reason for this?
So mom and dad can live well...*

At the end of our journey just as we were coming to Guandukou, Tan Bangwu sang one last river song. The setting sun still shone on the faint mist that had begun rising above the surface of the water. Leaning against the side of the boat and facing the misty expanse of the huge river he sang movingly. His voice embodied the trials of life and all the things he longed for from the past.

When the dam has filled up, there won't be any more dangerous rapids in the gorges, and there won't be anyone asking an old man to lead the way. The steam boats will go chugging up and down the river. There won't be any tow men, or any river songs.

"The Yangtze River Tow Men" is the fifth in a series of oral histories from China's Three Gorges region.

Banned and famed Chinese environmentalist and journalist Dai Qing has organized a team of journalists to record a remarkable collection of oral histories from the riverside towns and villages affected by the Three Gorges dam on China's Yangtze River. *Three Gorges Probe* is proud to bring you these uncensored, touching and often shocking stories. Those forcibly displaced by the world's largest hydroelectric project have been denied a voice for too long. This collection gives it back.

Translation, editing and online publication of the Three Gorges Oral History Series has been made possible by the Open Society Institute.

