LONG WAN

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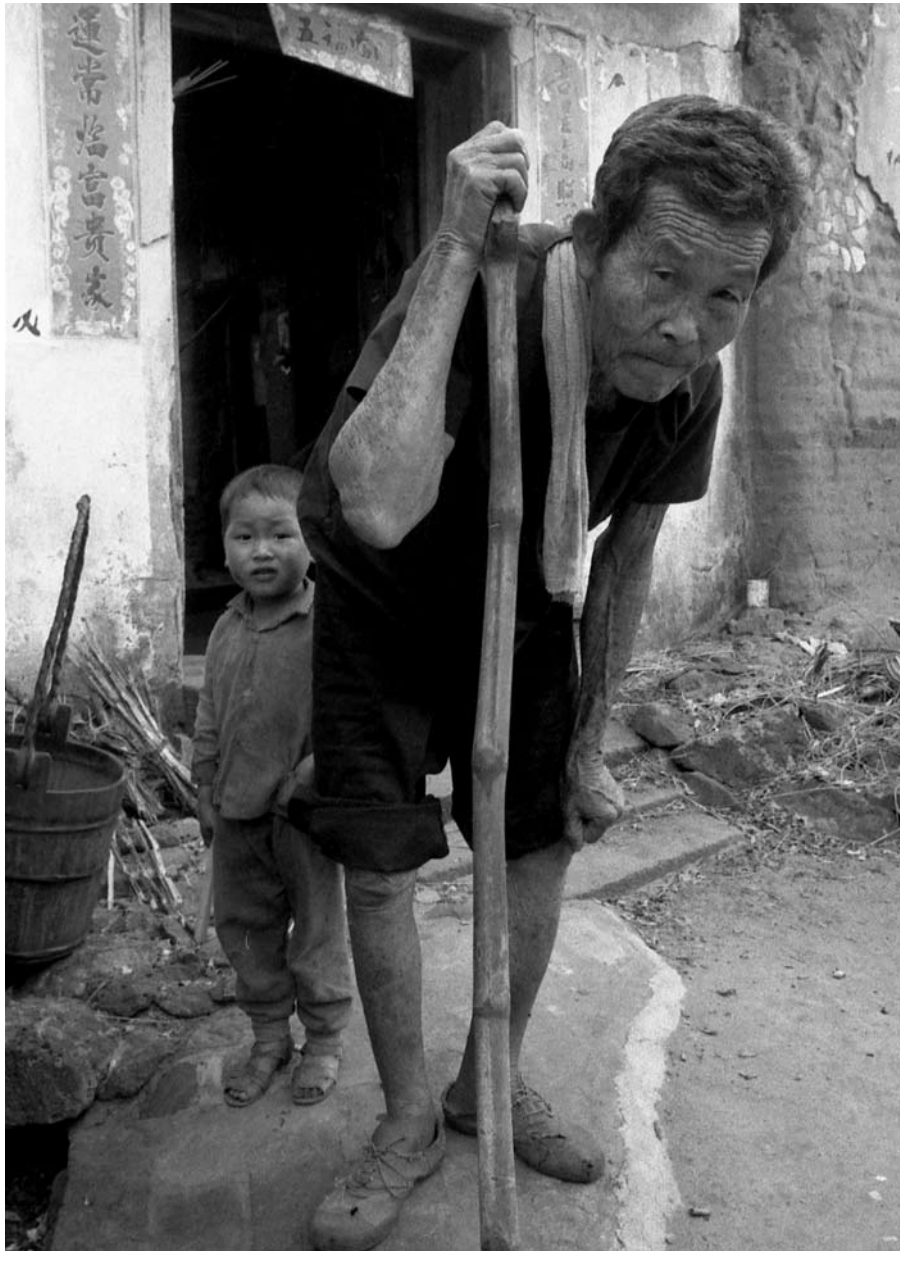
Stories from a Chinese Village

Long Wan (Dragon Bay) is a village in Guangdong Province, China, a 40-minute ride by bicycle from the port city of Zhanjiang on the South China Sea.

Between 1989 and 1991 I rode my bicycle to Long Wan at least once a week. I returned there in 2000 and 2005.

What follow is a record of what I found there: the people I met, the stories I heard, the faces I photographed, the changes that are slowly transforming villages across China.



1990 to 1991

I

I ride my bicycle down a dusty two-lane highway a few miles outside of Zhanjiang, a port city on the South China Sea.

I ride with Liu, a math teacher at Lei Zhou College, and his friend Liang, also a math teacher at the college. We are on our way to his friend's home village, a 45-minute bike ride from the city.

We pass the market town of Ma Jong bustling with afternoon shoppers. We pass a roadside bus stop crowded with battered white buses. The buses spew thick black exhaust into the sweltering afternoon light.

We share the highway with farmers riding platform bicycles piled high with leafy vegetables and ancient green dump trucks that stir up the dust as they rumble past us. The fields stretch to the horizon on either side of us. The land is flat, the sky overcast.

I arrived in Zhanjiang a month ago to work as an English teacher at Lei Zhou College. It is a tense time in China, just a few months after soldiers shot scores of demonstrators in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

The officials at the college monitor where I go. They listen to my conversations and tell the students not to speak with me about politics.

Already rumors start to circulate about why Robert walks around with a camera, why he has come to China so soon after the June 4th event.

Most foreigners have left China, but Robert has just arrived. He must be a spy for the overseas democracy movement....

Liu can ride his bicycle for hours under the fierce Guangdong sun without getting tired. He doesn't get flustered easily.

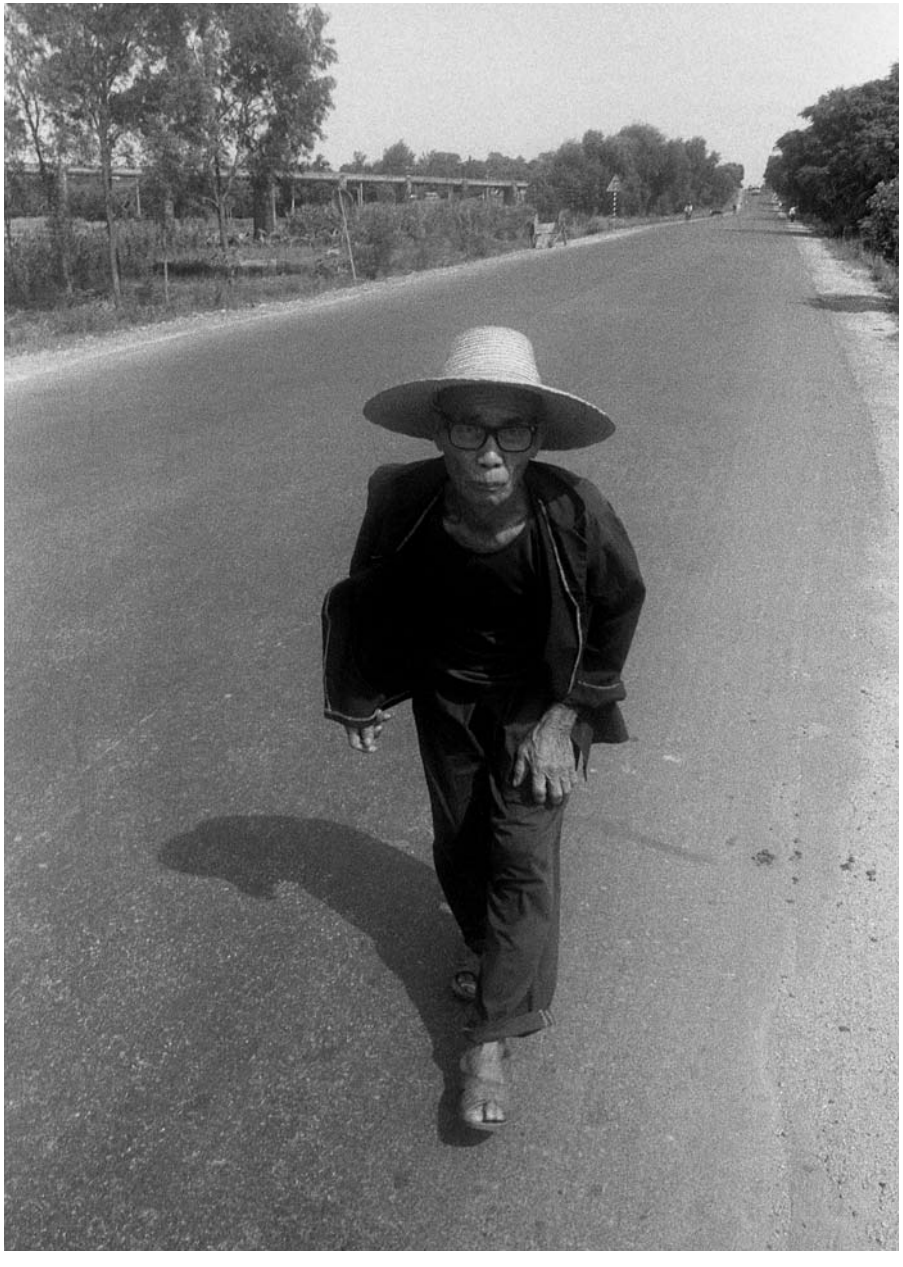
Last week when we were riding through the countryside I got off my bicycle and walked with my camera through a roadside village. Children followed close behind me, eager to see my foreign face.

I asked Liu if he knew of a village where I could photograph and interview people. He said his friend Liang grew up in a village just outside of Zhanjiang and could perhaps introduce me to his family.

He asked me why I wanted to visit a Chinese village - why I wanted to photograph and interview people I didn't know.

I tell him I want to know how other people live; I want to hear their stories. It doesn't matter if they are ordinary or extraordinary, if I know them or don't know them.

Liu listened without commenting. He doesn't ask me how much money I will earn from doing my interviews and taking my photographs. Many people here ask me how much money I earn for everything I do, but Liu never does.



The Road to Long Wan

The fields swallow up everything; they close in around us. The villages are hard to see at first, enclosed by fields of rice and sugarcane.

A dirt lane weaves from village to village, across a flow of lush green fields. Along the narrow rutted lane, a farmer passes on a bicycle, his daughter balanced on the crossbar, his son resting on the passenger seat behind him.

The villagers wear straw hats to shade their faces from the fierce Guangdong sun. The sun darkens their faces, dries and etches deep grooves into their skin.

The children gaze out impassively at strangers as they pass along the bumpy road, undisturbed by the steady jolting and swerving of their father's bicycle.

An old man walks behind a bullock-drawn cart filled with cut cane, a pouch hanging from his shoulder, his gold teeth glinting in the sun when he turns to smile.

In the roadside fields, farmers and their children harvest cane plants with small machetes. The villagers wear big hats and dress in patched-up clothing.

A woman leans low to the ground to harvest the cane, slicing the plant cleanly in one swift motion. Every now and then she stops to eat a piece of cut cane, lifting it to her mouth and biting off a chunk. She sucks out the sweet juice and spits out the pulp.

The road passes deeper into the countryside. The cane fields are dense and impenetrable, crowding out the sky, hissing when the wind touches them. The wind is warm, subtropical. The crops grow easily here, luxuriantly.

Long Wan's brick and stucco houses rise from the spreading field and sky. A dirt path leads from the main road past a dilapidated village school without doors or glass windows. Children play in the yard in front of the school, waiting for their afternoon classes to begin.

A little farther down the path, a group of farmers gathers at the village store, a dark, cave-like structure that is cool on sweltering summer days. Inside, men sit on battered wooden benches in front of a small black and white TV, talking quietly, drawing by turns on a long bamboo water pipe.

The men have time to rest and socialize today because the harvest is drawing to a close and the hard work will soon be over for another season.

Inside the store, children linger in front of the television or make small purchases from ancient candy jars resting on the counter. In a room nearby, a group of young men smoke a water pipe and play mah jong.

The village is a web of lanes and houses surrounded by farmland. The lanes are muddy and rutted. Leaky water pipes transform the paths into quagmires of mud and animal feces.

Here and there new houses are under construction, testifying to the new prosperity of some villagers.

Chickens, pigs, and turkeys wander down the lanes and across the courtyards; water buffalo stand like statues in the shade, tethered to walls and tree trunks.

Farmers and bands of children pass along the paths, walking or riding in

bullock-drawn carts.

A group of children trail behind me as I move from house to house, trying to catch a glimpse of my eyes, laughing and calling out to me:

Guailao, guailao, ghost man, ghost man!
Look at the guailao; look at his ghost eyes; look at his cat eyes.

The mournful sound of a Lei Zhou opera playing on a crackly tape recorder drifts from a village house; the steady beat of synthesized dance music imported from Hong Kong plays faintly in the distance.

Trees bend and hiss in a steady wind blowing in from the sea; the village light is sharp and bright, glowing in the leaves, casting deep shadows across the paths and courtyards.

The village grows more silent as the day deepens. The only sound is the murmuring of old people and children in the courtyards. The old people spend their days caring for grandchildren while their parents are at work in the fields.

Every village home has a courtyard where families spend much of their time, washing clothes, scrubbing vegetables, talking with their neighbors. In most families, parents, children, and grandchildren live under the same roof.

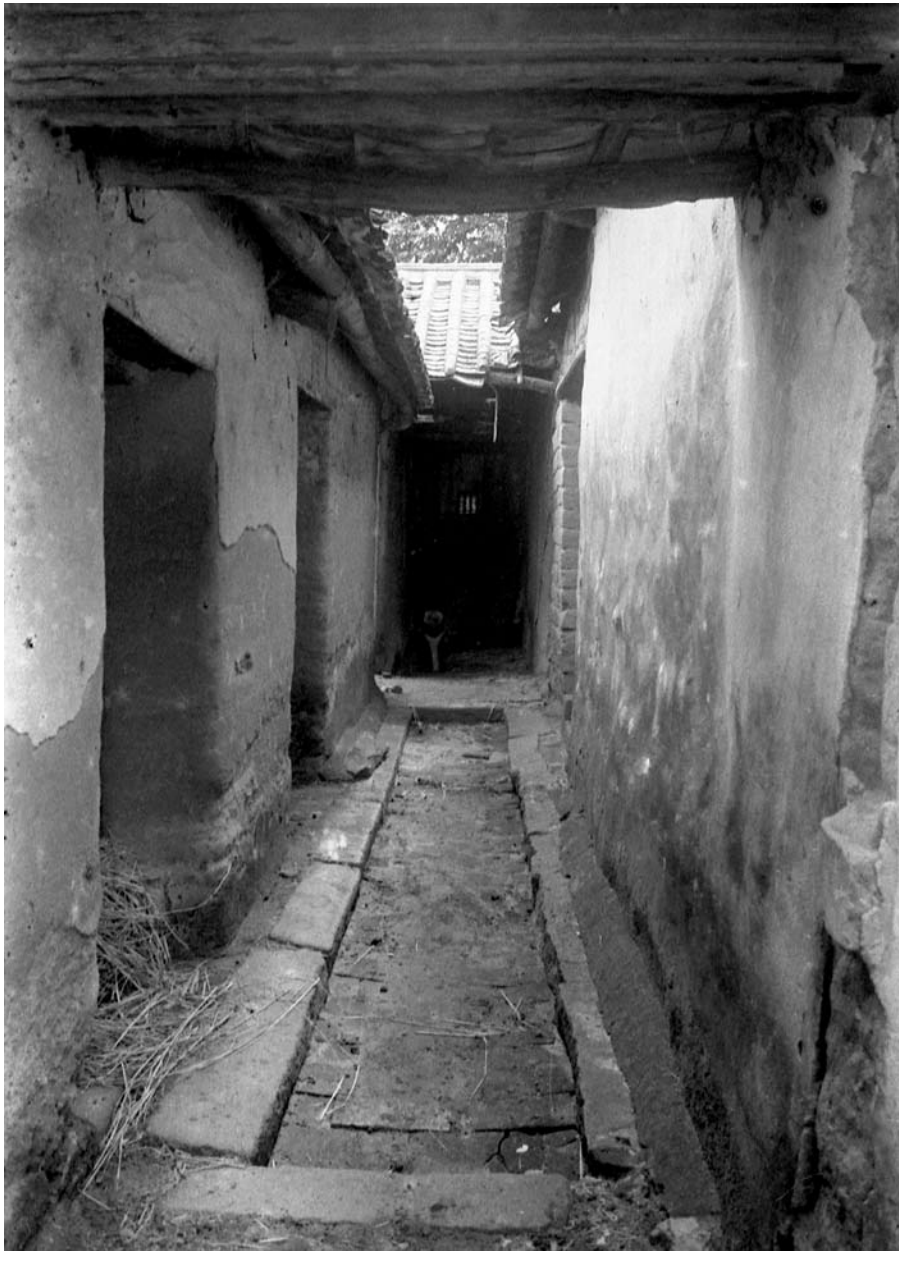
I sit at a round wooden table in the Liang family's home. Vegetable, chicken, pork, and fish dishes rest on the table. Each person receives a bowl of rice but the rest of the dinner is eaten from communal plates at the center of the table.

The Liang family treats me like a very special guest, putting out their best dishes in my honor. I am always treated this way whenever I visit Chinese homes. I am a foreigner, a very special guest.

Liang Ta Gann - a retired schoolteacher - is excited today because his two sons have returned for a visit. One son is a middle-school teacher in a nearby town; the other is a math teacher at Lei Zhou College.

The elder Liang says the villagers believe Long Wan (Dragon Bay) village is at least 300 years old, but no one knows for sure because its history has not been written down. The only knowledge people have of the past is what they have heard from their parents and grandparents.

In the days before the 1949 Communist "liberation," only about 300 people lived in the village, but about 900 people live in Long Wan today, he says.



A Farmer's Life

Liang Nu Li hoes a pepper field in the village's lowland fields. Seven decades working in the wind and sun have etched deep lines into his face, but his smile remains bright and youthful.

Liang says his father died when he was five years old and his mother remarried. She left him behind to live with an older brother in Long Wan when she moved to her new husband's village.

When he was 16 years old, tragedy struck his family a second time when his older brother died and left him alone in Long Wan. He says his mother returned to the village to live with him. She didn't want him to live alone and didn't have enough food in her new husband's village.

She soon realized that conditions in Long Wan weren't much better than what she had left behind, he says. Here too the poor hadn't enough land to cultivate and couldn't raise enough food to feed themselves. In Long Wan there had always been a disparity between those who had much and those who had little, and his family had very little.

To survive during the lean years, Liang scavenged the countryside for wood and leaves, trading what he found to the richer farmers for rice. One of his jobs, he says, was to look after the water buffalo for the rich landlords.

Some landlords were kind to the poor and would help them in times of need, but others were very bad and did nothing to help the poor. Even the good ones were not very good, he says. The rich ones would lend the poor money but charge them interest for the favor.

Liang says the war years brought changes to Long Wan. Japanese soldiers arrived in the village without warning from their camp in Zhanjiang in search of food, taking away chickens, pigs, vegetables, anything they could find.

When word spread that the Japanese had arrived, the young villagers fled to the hills above the village to hide until they departed. Only the elderly, who were too old to run, stayed behind to face the Japanese.

Eventually Guomindang soldiers also arrived in the village in search of food and fresh recruits to help them fight the Communists. The young people ran from the Guomindang as fast as they fled from the Japanese. The villagers weren't fond of the Guomindang government and had no desire to fight its battles for them, Liang says.

At about this time his mother brought home the young girl who would eventually become his wife. She was in her early teens and at first just lived in the house to help out with the housework.

They lived like this for five years, until his mother told him that he and the girl should get married. He says neither he nor the girl had much to say about the arrangement. They had to get along with each other whether they liked it or not.

But the two young people found they got along quite well. He laughs when he thinks about this early time in his life when his wife was still alive. They had five sons and two daughters, he says.

When the Communists won the civil war, many farmers thought that their hour had finally arrived. The land was taken from the rich landlords and redistributed to landless farmers like him.

Each farmer received an allotment of land to cultivate, though privileged villagers even then received more land than others, he says.

But the days when the villagers cultivated their own land didn't last long. About seven years after the Communists took power, Mao and the party introduced the People's Commune, which required China's farmers to work the land in common. Mao's goal was to make China a great socialist nation, a communist utopia.

Mao's great experiment was carried out in ordinary villages such as Long Wan. To gain the support of the people, the party played on the villagers' longing for a better and richer life.

Liang Nu Li recalls the earliest days of the commune system as a time when everyone shared the land, the work, and the harvest. It was an idealistic, joyful time when people thought the Communist system was fair and equitable compared with what came before it.

But those halcyon days passed quickly. Soon the villagers began to see the flaws of the new system. Some of the farmers were lazy and didn't do their fair share of the work. They went to the fields to work but didn't work very hard. Despite their laziness, they received the same rice allowance as those who worked hard.

In the end, all the cheery talk failed to give the villagers the better life they had hoped for. People continued to go hungry, especially during the Great Leap Forward movement of the late 1950s and early '60s.

Liang says life changed for the better when Deng Xiaoping rose to power and introduced economic reforms throughout China. The commune system was scrapped and each family was allotted its own plot of land to cultivate. He says Long Wan farmers, including his oldest son, have become more prosperous since the reforms.

Yet Liang and other farmers remain wary of the future. Village life in 1990 may be better than it was a decade ago but it's still not very good compared with city life. Two or three times a year he visits the nearby city of Zhanjiang and sees how people are living there. City people are free, he says. They don't have to work hard under the rain and sun.

He says he's worried about his youngest son, who is 23 years old and unmarried. His son wants to leave the village and find work in the city, but he can't find a job or a place to live there. He has no choice but to stay here, Liang says. He has to like the village even if he doesn't want to be here.

Liang Nu Li, who is in his 70s now, says he has tried to bring up his children well. He taught them the difference between right and wrong; he taught them not to steal or fight or argue with others. He passed down to them his knowledge of planting and harvesting.

He says he was too poor to go to school and doesn't know how to read and write. I couldn't teach them about books, he says. If I knew words, I would have taught them words.

He says he doesn't know what will happen to him when he dies; he doesn't know if there is another life after this one. I half believe, half disbelieve, he says.