

2000



I



*I speed down the highway on the back of a motorcycle. A fierce wind batters me as I cling to the seat. The nylon jacket a friend lent me flaps and balloons wildly in the wind.*

*I tell H how to get to the village but I'm not sure I know the way myself now. It's been nine years since I last visited Long Wan, and nothing looks as it did before.*

*I thought I would return to Long Wan sooner but my life in the United States took several unexpected turns.*

*We ride through the Ma Jong district but I don't see the dusty roadside bus stop where I used to stop for a rest. We continue down the highway but the landscape refuses to fall into place. Even the configuration of the roads has changed.*

*Rows of new three- and four-story office buildings have sprung up along the road, replacing what used to be village fields.*

*I spot a familiar landmark, a viaduct snaking through the fields, and know we are going in the right direction. I look for the turnoff to the village road but I don't see it anywhere.*

*H asks me if the area looks familiar. I tell him I recognize the viaduct but I don't see the turnoff that leads to the village.*

*He pulls to a stop in front of a roadside stand and asks the woman behind the counter for help.*

*Long Wan is a little farther down the road, she says. There's a turnoff up ahead on the left.*

*H climbs back on the motorcycle and speeds down the road again, stopping at an arched gateway that connects the highway to a village road. A man points to a road beyond the gate and says Long Wan is just a short distance in that direction.*

*We pass what looks like a small town, and I think it must be Mao village, the site of the Xiang, but I can't be sure.*

*We ride past new two- and three-story houses built along the side of the road.*

*I ask H to stop at a shop by the side of the road so I can see what they are selling inside. A huge poster of two lovers embracing hangs on the wall behind the counter.*

*Ten years ago a shop owner wouldn't have dared place such a poster on the wall of his shop.*

*I ask the man behind the counter in Mandarin if Long Wan is nearby, but I don't think he understands my question. I ask him about his shop and he says he just opened it. He says the building was only recently built.*

*The shop owner is well groomed. His shop is clean and bright. I ask him to stand in front of the shop for a picture and he agrees.*

*The countryside is changing. The new houses we pass are light and airy, enclosed by high walls. The people are better dressed than before.*

*We approach a traditional village gate and I ask H to stop. He asks me if this is Long Wan and I tell him I don't think so. Long Wan didn't have a gate, I say.*

*The man back there said this is Long Wan, he says. This must be the place. But that building on the other side of the gate doesn't look familiar, I say.*

*H approaches a group of men talking inside the gate. I scan faces and build-ings but nothing looks familiar.*

*Then I turn and see a very old man with a hunched back staring out at me. He walks with a cane and is dressed in an updated version of an old Mao cap. He looks familiar, like someone I photographed before.*

*He stares at me with a wild light shining in his eyes; he looks as if he had just seen a ghost.*

*He knows who I am. It has been almost a decade but how many foreigners have visited Long Wan?*

*H goes over to speak with him. The old man continues to look at me as he speaks. He says he knows you, H says. He says you used to come here many years ago.*

*Then it all comes back to me. I remember the day I photographed him. It was late in the afternoon and he was walking his bicycle down a village lane. He wore a Mao cap back then too - a Mao cap and a long overcoat. His brother was Liang Ni Fen who lived alone in a house filled with birds.*

### **A New Village School**

The layout of the village slowly falls back into place. The old village school is still standing but it looks much shabbier than it did nine years ago.

I ask an old man walking past me about a new building standing beside it - a two-story building with what looks like a small tower running up the facade. That's the new village school, he says.

I see several women moving around inside it. They must be teachers. They look more professional than the ones who taught here before.

I start to walk through the door but a woman stops me and warily asks me who I am looking for.

I explain that I came here many years ago to photograph the village. I tell her I visited and photographed the old school and would like to photograph the new one.

She calls a woman to the door who I think must be the head teacher. I explain to her that I have been here many times before and that people in the village know me. I explain that I am making a record of the village and want to take photos of the students inside the new school.

She says I can't take photos inside the school. Taking photographs is not allowed without special permission. The education department has rules that we are required to follow, she says.

I tell her I used to take photos inside the old school but she doesn't want to hear this. Her face is stern. Her words are stern. She walks away without another word.

I continue down the path into the heart of the village. The old village store that used to be in a shabby building near the old school is no longer there.

The lanes are still muddy and animals still wander down them. There are more chickens and pigs wandering along the paths than in the past.

I can tell right away that the village is richer than it used to be. In addition to the new village gate and school there are many new houses scattered along the lanes.

The people are better dressed. A decade ago everyone wore patched and worn-

out clothing, but now many people - especially the young people - wear brightly colored shirts, stylish slacks, T-shirts with images printed on the front.

### **Ancestral Temple**

We walk through a clearing to the village's ancestral temple. It's a new, larger temple and many people are gathered outside it.

An old man starts to wave us away as we approach the entrance. He seems very angry and warns us not to come any closer. I ask H why he is waving us off because in the past the villagers always let me visit the ancestral temple.

H approaches the man and explains to him that I would like to see the temple. The old man says he doesn't want us to come any closer. Today the new temple is being dedicated and only villagers are allowed inside.

H says the old man thinks we have come from the central government to spy on them.

The government still frowns on religious expression. The old man waved us off because he thinks the government will find out about the new temple and criticize them for building it.

I decide not to go any further. The old man is angry. He sees my camera and doesn't want me to take photos.

An older man wearing a cap invites me into his courtyard. He says he remembers me from the past but I only vaguely remember him.

The village is more prosperous than it was 10 years ago, he says. More people have their own businesses or work outside. His sons are doing well with their businesses - raising chickens and pigs and selling them in the Xuexi market.

He says the villagers raised the money to build the new school, collecting contributions from each family to help pay for it. The new school includes an elementary school and a junior middle school, he says. It's much nicer than the old village school.

His teenage grandson sits beside him dressed in a stylish T-shirt with a cartoon printed on the front. The boy looks and acts like a city boy.

He asks me where I come from and I tell him the United States. He says he would like to go to America someday.

America is a very rich country, he says. Someday I would like to live in a rich country like America.

I walk past a courtyard and see a familiar face. It's Liang Shou Nan, a villager I often spoke with in the past. He recognizes me and invites me into his courtyard to speak with him.

Dressed in an official uniform, he says he works for the government in Zhanjiang now.

Are you still living in Zhanjiang? he asks. You haven't been here for a long time. I tell him I live in the United States now and that I have just returned for a visit.

He says he spends most of his time in Zhanjiang now, working only part time as a farmer in Long Wan.

There have been many changes in the village since I was last here, he says. There's a new water tower, a new ancestral temple, and a new Buddhist temple.

Many people can afford to build new houses, he says. Some of the houses are very big.

I tell him that I saw them along the road as I entered the village.

He says many people work outside the village now but the farming money is better than before ¾ good enough to justify working as a farmer, at least part of the time.

Many of the villagers earn money raising water buffalo, chickens, and pigs, he says. Some buy products in the north and sell them in Zhanjiang; others buy bananas and oranges in the south and sell them in the north. Some have gone north to find work.

Many of Long Wan's young people leave the village to work in the cities now, he says. Some have started their own businesses there.

They go to Zhanjiang or Guangzhou to work as cooks. Some learn technical skills that make it easier for them to find work and live in the cities. The young women are also leaving the village to find work in the cities, he says.

Many of the young people only return to Zhanjiang to celebrate their parents' birthdays, Spring Festival, and the Mid-Autumn Festival, he says. Many have returned to the village today to celebrate the dedication of the new temple.

The young people may not come back often but it's not because they don't want to, he says. They are just too busy working, earning money for life. At least they return for the festivals, he says.

Liang says he has three sons: one works for the Zhanjiang government and the others have small businesses.

These days the old men and women do most of the day-to-day farm work, he says. Farming is more profitable now because the government has given the villagers larger plots to cultivate. This makes it possible for them to grow more food and earn more money, he says.

In the past the village was very, very poor but the government over time has adjusted its policy and now life in Long Wan is improving, he says.

A group of men walk along a village lane on their way back from the temple dedication.

Chen Shui Feng says he works about four days a month in a sugarcane factory in Xuexi County.

He's not the first person who has spoken about working in the sugarcane factory since I returned to Long Wan. Sugarcane is the most important cash crop for the farmers now.

Chen says he prefers to work outside Long Wan because the money is better. He can earn from 100 to 200 yuan a month working outside. He says he can't make anything near that amount working in the village.

But it's not always easy to find work outside, he says. There are too many people chasing too few jobs.

He says when he's not working outside the village he returns to Long Wan to help his family with the farm work. Working in the village at least allows him to grow enough rice for daily life. He says he grows only about 1600 jin but could plant more if he wanted to. He says 1600 jin isn't enough to sell in the market but is

enough to live on.

He says his life is a little hard right now but he tries not to complain about it.

Liang Xian Jing has also returned to the village for the temple dedication. Like his friend he spends most of his time working in Xuexi. He says he too works in the sugarcane factory but his pay is much higher, earning more than 1,000 yuan a month. He says he also has a business raising chickens and fish.

His friends joke that he is a little bit rich now. Look at his potbelly, they say. A belly like that is the sign of a rich man.

They all laugh, and Liang Xian Jing laughs with them. He doesn't get upset when they joke about his potbelly. He seems proud that his friends consider him rich now.

He says his mother still lives here in the village but his brothers live with him in the city now.

In the past, he served as a soldier in the People's Liberation Army, which made it easier for him find a job in the sugarcane factory, he says.

Many Chinese say that former soldiers have an easier time finding a job after they leave the service because the authorities give them preference when filling jobs.

### The New Buddhist Temple

I walk on through the afternoon heat toward the Buddhist temple. I hike up a hill at the edge of the lowland fields and follow the path through the fields.

I walk in circles under the high-noon sun until a farmer shows me the way to the temple.

There are two temples on the site now: a new one with an elaborate door and the old one-room temple that I visited the last time I was here. I try to enter the new temple but the door is locked. I look inside and realize that it's still unfinished.

I enter the old temple and find two men kowtowing before the altar. One is dressed like a city person in a white shirt and slacks; the other is dressed like a farmer in work clothes and a straw hat.

I ask them about the new temple and they say a wealthy person from Hong Kong has contributed money to build it.

I ask if I can photograph them inside the temple and they say, no, they don't want me to photograph them in the temple but I can take their picture outside if I want.

We walk outside and find a shady place to take their picture. They stand under the trees and wait for me to press the shutter. The man dressed in the white shirt smiles but the farmer wearing work clothes gazes sad-eyed at the camera, folding his hands in prayer as I snap.

The sun burns fiercely. The day grows hotter and the roads more dusty. Nothing moves in the paths and fields.

I look down into a valley and see a water buffalo staring up at me. The animal watches me so intensely from a distance that I think even it must know I am an outsider.

I continue down a muddy path but lose my balance and slip almost ankle-deep

in the muck. I keep walking, eventually finding by chance the road that leads back to the lowland fields.

I cross the lowland fields and start back down the village lanes. People wave to me as I pass.

A group of villagers crowd around a table to inspect a traveling salesman's collection of herbs. I see Liang Nu Li, who looks almost the same as before but moves more slowly now.

He smiles when he sees me. He must remember the afternoon we spent together at his house a decade ago. I say hello and snap his photo standing with a group of people.

I sit with a village family in the courtyard of their home, in the shade of small trees. Shadows float across the yard and faces. It's the kind of warm floating day I woke up to my first day in Zhanjiang in 1989.

Much of my time in Long Wan over the years has been spent sitting in courtyards like this, listening to stories.

This is the good life for the villagers, the best side of village life. A middle-aged son who works in Zhanjiang has returned with his son to spend the day with his father. Dressed like a city boy in shorts and T-shirt, the grandson is the look of the future, the new face of Long Wan, something that didn't exist when I first came here in 1989.

The village houses look brighter, cleaner and less crowded than a decade ago. The village feels more like a refuge now, a quiet place close to nature, a retreat from the anxieties of city life.

In many ways life is looking up for the people of Long Wan. Money is flowing into the village from the towns and cities where many village young people are working now.

But progress in the Chinese countryside is slow, a painstaking process. For the young people, life is elsewhere now, in the larger world outside, in distant cities where a different kind of life awaits them.































































