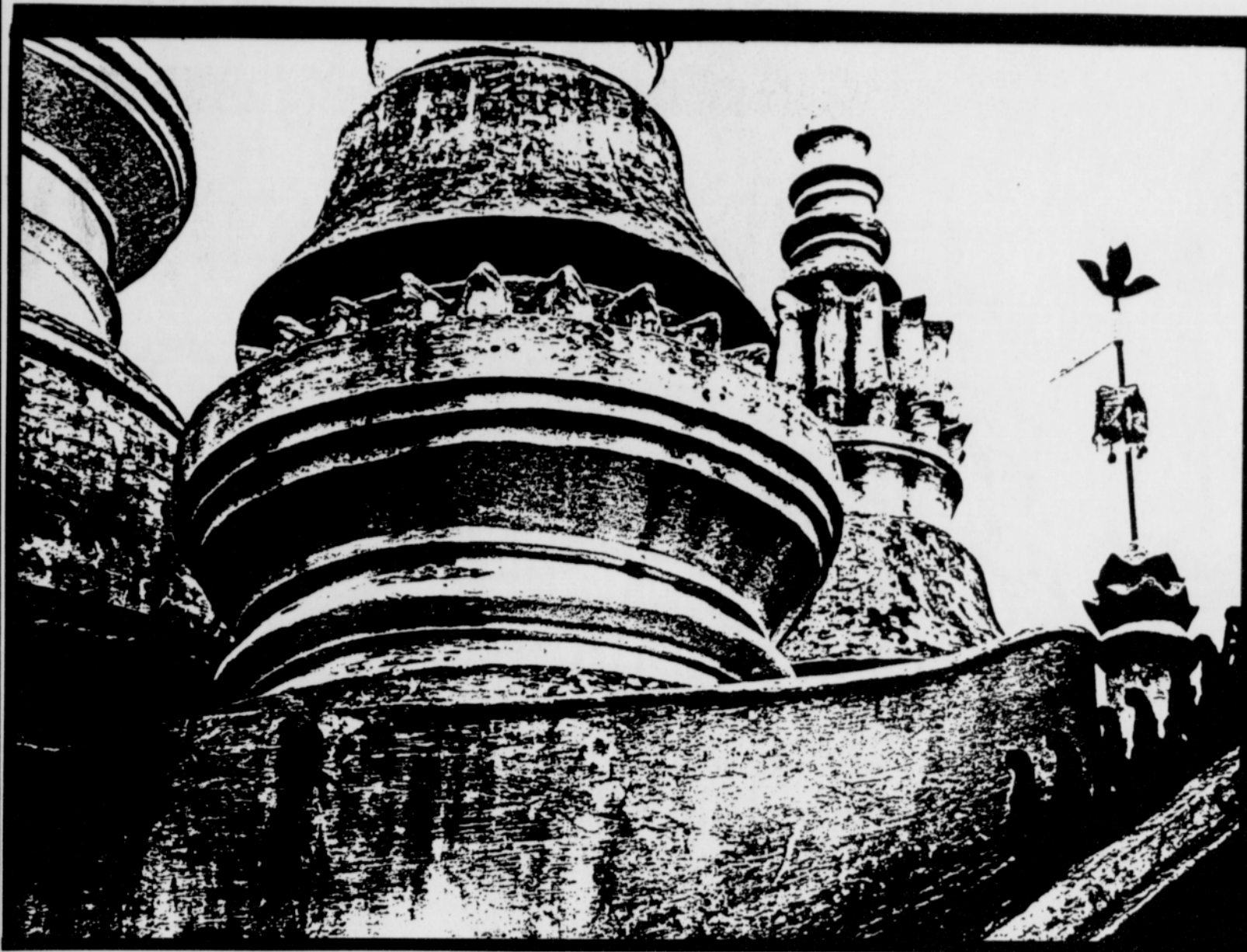




OCTAGON PAVILION, MANTING VILLAGE, PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN GOODENBERGER

side ledge to the Women's restroom window. But I was afraid that in my dizzied state I would fall. And I was afraid that if I was caught on the ledge I would be jailed for spying. I went back to my bed and meditated, hoping to not get sick in my sheets. At 6:00 a.m. I heard voices in the hall. There was a sharp thud at the door. I got up, tried the lock and opened the door without problem. Whether it had been locked from the outside or I had panicked in the night, it is hard to know. I hurried to the toilet as my insides gave way.

Kuilungkiang is no longer. When my father left in 1936, at the age of 12, China was still a medieval society of warlords. In the half century since, China has advanced to a society technologically equivalent to the United States in 1930, but not without its casualties. In the mid-'40s it became Chinese government policy that the Han should be majority in all parts of China. This tactic made it difficult for the Minorities to break away, set up their own government or join another. Tribal people tried to stop the invasion, setting dynamite under the bridge across the Mekong. But the bridge was saved. It is now guarded, and photographs are forbidden. The tribal people's homes were taken, some were killed, others fled into the hills. Virtually all the people in town are transplants. Where once stood jungle, now spreads a Han town of 10,000. Its name is Jinghong.

My grandfather's mission work is long forgotten. Stone skeletons once fleshed with dreams now crumble in decay: boarded windows, broken plaster, transixed roofs, bolted doors. Gone are the banana trees and gardens. Long extinct are the leopards and lions. Apartment blocks, sports arena and public toilets — faceless concrete structures beating the land into monochromatic.

Sixty years ago lepers were inspired, filled with hope of a better life. They carried stones from the river on their backs and strapped axes to their stump arms. They built a church of stone walls and wood roof in the form of a crucifix.

We photographed the church one drizzling afternoon. Its Gothic windows were squared and a second floor sliced through the sanctuary. An officer of the PLA came out from his nearby office. He told us to stop, we were on military ground. What once housed reassurance now houses military personnel. The hope of the early, turned to mindless officialdom of the present. I motioned to him to come stand under an eave while I pulled reprints of 60-year-old photographs from my satchel. I showed him a picture of the church when it was fresh and

new; and began the speech which I had given countless times before to the curious and militant: "Wode jiao Gu Johann. Woshi liuxuesheng zai Zhengzhou Da Shui. Tamen shi wo de baba he gege. Women shi Meiguoren. Wo de baba dansheng zai Jinghong..."

He was caught in a quandry. He knew our names, where we were from, and most importantly that my father was born in Jinghong. He knew we were not dangerous, but he couldn't justify foreigners on military soil. He placed three chairs on the porch outside his office and suggested we wait there until the rain stopped. His examination soon followed. No tea was offered. We went over and over my story. Each time pulling the same words out of my pocket dictionary. We broke his questions by asking him about his family. Then, we held out wedding pictures and a family portrait.

As much as I despise the Han's suffocation, those who carry out the orders are more worthy of sympathy than hatred. The PLA were rarely more than naive farmboys serving time for their country. And while surely misguided, those more committed to the military were often no more sophisticated. Meeting such people intensified my hatred of the government,

a power which turned the seemingly good into instruments of human suffering.

Our examiner, Mr. Li, was of this mold. He was 37, had been in the military over ten years and lived with his wife and father in a single room on the upper floor of the church. He was firm, slightly nervous and as warm as could be expected. After an hour he brought colored chalk and began writing in pinyin across the concrete floor. Then conferring with me, and I with Dad, he wrote in character, in pen, on a paper with an official letterhead. Together we wrote the architectural history of the church: a description of how Pa Gu (my grandfather, Ernest Goodenberger) built it in 1928, and how his son (John, my father), also a minister, and his grandsons, an architect and a musician, came to visit it more than half a century later. Finally, Mr. Li had a report for his superiors. My skull throbbed in exhaustion.

It was later the same afternoon that we began our search for Ruth. Ruth was buried in a yard next to a house owned by the Beebees, who translated bibles into Thai. A missionary, who died of malaria shortly after my grandparents arrived, was also buried there. The house now sits behind a large apartment complex, which threatens to push it over the river embankment. All evidence of the grave has been removed. It is a Thai belief that burial grounds are forever sacred, never to be built upon. But when the Thai Liu people were scattered, so also were their traditions. During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards destroyed relics of the past, which included the desecration of tombs. The stone which once marked Ruth's grave no doubt fell victim to such violation. Ruth's grave now lies unknown beneath a croquet field.

My father and I visited the site twice. The second time I dug my hands through flowers and vines to the side. I desperately hoped to find a piece of hand formed concrete, declaring the beloved daughter of Ernest and Hilda Goodenberger. There was nothing. I checked to see if it had been incorporated into the apartment's foundation. It had not.

Dad became sick the day after. He said he had been bothered by a cold breeze on his neck during the bus ride down. He was exhausted, and very distant, forgetful and absentminded. When asked if he felt like he had returned home, he replied, "Only in a vague sense." My father's memories had collided headlong into the present. Not only had he discovered the last shards of his childhood, but he had returned to a world which looked similar to that which he had met when he first saw America.

While Dad lay in bed recovering, Mark and I rode rented bikes through rice fields, into villages wrapped in tree islands. There were explosions in the mountains. At best it was the Chinese logging. Fatalistically, Mark said that if it were a political skirmish we would just have to wait and see what would happen. That night I lay in bed under a large and floral terry cloth towel. I massaged my dogeared stomach and wondered just what I had heard. The surrounding mountains were extremely difficult to monitor, no one could control what went on in their dark valleys. Was it the war drawing closer? Would there be a knock on the door telling us to flee? As Americans we would be ripe targets for the Vietnamese, and our Aryan features most difficult to disguise. Could we find room on a crowded bus heading north, or would we have to hide under blankets on a slow moving oxcart?

It seemed so unlike my childhood impressions of the place. Dad would talk wistfully about the gramophone his family left behind. It was shipped from America and carried over the mountains. They used to play Gilbert and Sullivan records into the night. Dad would imagine returning to his village and hearing a tribal chieftan playing the records out in the hills. Now there were explosions.

The thought of seeing war first hand was too fantastic. I denied it as I had all the potential dangers of the trip. Surely my imagination was just getting carried away. But just in case, my camera, film, journal and dictionary lay in a bag at the foot of my bed. I was ready to leave.

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