A Hmong Scholar’s Visit to China: the Hmong in the Triangle of Guizhou, Sichuan and Yunnan

by Kou Yang

Nyob luag ntuj yoog luag txuj, nyob luag av yoog luag tsav

(‘In Rome be like the Romans’--- Hmong proverb)

I have made a few visits to the Hmong of the triangle of Guizhou, Sichuan and Yunnan, and will highlight below two of these visits: the visit in August 2009 to the Hmong of Qianxi (黔西), and my 2014 visit to the Hmong of Xingwen, Gong xian, Junlian, Gulin, Xuyong, Yanjin, Yiliang and Zhaotong.

In early August 2009, I led a group of international scholars of Hmong studies to do a post conference visit to the Hmong/Miao in Guizhou Province, China. This visit was under the auspices and sponsorship of the Guizhou Miao Studies Association (also known as the Miao Cultural Development Association), and the guidance of its Vice-President, Professor Zhang Xiao. The group visited both Qiandongnan (Southeast Guizhou) and Qianxi (West Guizhou) Hmong/Miao of Guizhou. The visit was my third trip to Qiandongnan, so it was not so special because I had previously written about and travelled to many areas within Qiandongnan. Moreover, Qiandongnan has been Guizhou’s premier cultural tourist region for decades; the Hmu represent the largest sub-group of the Miao in Qiandongnan. The language of the Hmu belongs to the Eastern branch of the Miao language. Economically, educationally, and politically, the Hmu are much better off than the Hmong and Ah Mao, who speak the Western branch of the Miao language. For example, I met with so many politicians, bureaucrats and professors of Hmu ancestry in Guiyang, but only one professor of Hmong descent. More importantly, many Hmu hold important government posts. I have met, for example, Wang Chaowen, the former Guizhou Governor, who is a Hmu from Qiandongnan. He is not only the highest Hmu politician, but of all the groups under the name of Miao.

During the visit, it was Qianxi and Zhijin that captured my attention and emotional feeling. Although this was my eighth trip to China, the Hmong of Qianxi and Zhijing, and their officials made me feel as excited as I was during my first trip to China, which took place in 1986 - nearly three decades ago. My excitement originated mostly from the fact that many Hmong I met in Qianxi (黔西县) and Zhijin (织金) refer to themselves as Hmong, use the Qeej, and speak the western branch of the Miao language, which is the language spoken by most of the Hmong outside of China (including those in the United States). Their clothing and needle work, too, shares many similarities with the Hmong outside of China, except with much more refinery in their needle work (Hmong Pa Ndau or Paj Ntaub). They also have more designs, styles and techniques in their arts of Pa Ndau making and batiking.
**Qian** (Chian) is another term for Guizhou province, and **Xi** means West. The combination of Qian and Xi refers to western Guizhou. Both Qianxi and Zhijin are counties in Bijie Prefecture (毕节地区) in the western region of Guizhou Province. Precisely, Qianxi and Zhijin are in the triangle of Guizhou, Yunnan and Sichuan. When visiting the Hmong in Sichuan in February 2008, a Hmong scholar took me to the border of Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou and told me that the Hmong have a saying that a rooster’s crow can be heard by Hmong people of these three provinces. Surrounded by mountain ranges and high karst cliffs, Qianxi and Zhijin offered natural protection for Hmong but kept out outsiders and enemies alike. It has been both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is that the triangle has been a hidden region of the Hmong for, if not thousands of years, then at least many hundreds of years. Because of its mountainous geographical isolation, the Hmong here could always defend themselves against any invaders. Moreover, their isolation and remote villages helped them to maintain many aspects of their traditional way of life, costumes and culture. The curse is that their own inhospitable geographical environment also traps them into poverty and isolation. In the past, these rugged terrains only made it possible for them to produce food to survive from day to day without leisure time to devote to artistic work, and other endeavors. Moreover, their isolation made it impossible for them to develop commerce and scientific know-how, and prevented them from accessing new information and technology.

Because of its geographical isolation and difficult terrain, the region has just been recently opened to tourists due largely to a new expressway that connects Qianxi to other major cities and other roads that connect Qianxi and Zhijin to Hmong townships and villages. The expressway snakes over rivers and gorges, tunnels through many small and large mountains, and passes through countless towns and villages and hundreds of beautiful landscapes, including lakes, deep river-cut gorges and karst cliffs. The landscapes along the way are breathtaking to say the least.

The Governments of Qianxi and Zhijin Counties and townships have worked hard to promote Qianxi and Zhijin as new tourist frontiers that offer a multitude of tourist attractions. Qianxi alone offers about 30 tourist attractions that include landscapes, historical and cultural sightseeing, and ethno-cultural tours. The county’s guide book describes Qianxi County as “a magical world of nature. It boasts gorgeous mountains and limpid waters, pleasant weather all year round, and beautiful sceneries.”

Qianxi County promotes the “One Hundred-Li Azalea Belt” as one of its major tourist attractions. It is said that this belt is the largest Azalea Garden in China and the world. This belt stretches for more than 50 kilometers and covers an area of about 125.8 kilometers; it has a diverse variety of Azaleas, including some very rare Azalea. In Spring, Azalea flowers carpet the belt, making it resemble the needle work of the Hmong with its wide variety of colors and shapes. The landscapes of Qiangxi feature numerous high karst cliffs and mountains of all shapes and forms, and lakes of unparalleled beauty. Qianxi’s hills, canyons and other scenic wonders add up to making the region a new tourist frontier. Of significance is the “WuJiang
Yuan Hundred Mile Gallery,” which is said to be one of the top ten wonder karst stone cliff landscapes in China. It is, for me, a mini-Yosemite, but from the point of view of the Chinese, it is like a “colorful natural painting,” the likes of which are often depicted in Chinese paintings and poems. Moreover, the Chinese have names for every shape and form of the high karst stone cliffs of various shapes and forms. Finally, Qianxi has something that most other regions in China lack: ethnic diversity. About 18 ethnic groups, including the Hmong and Yi, are found living in this region.

Our group traveled from Guiyang, the Capital of Guizhou, to Qianxi via the new expressway, which, as mentioned above, connects Qianxi to other major cities. The expressway presented Qianxi to us as an endless scroll of painting – both magical and enchanted - the kind of natural beauty that befits the master works of painters and calligraphy of poets. We passed through a hundred or so villages, towns, fields and over countless landscapes, rivers, mountains, hills, tunnels, and bridges. We stopped at the Liuguang River Bridge, which has gained fame as the tallest bridge in Asia. From this bridge, we could see the Liuguang River and its environs from a bird’s eye view; its river-cut canyons, mountains and natural landscape caught our eyes and imaginations. It is the Mini Canyon of Qianxi, I might say. While we were busy taking pictures, a car stopped behind our bus. To our surprise, a beautiful young woman stepped out of the car. She was in a beautiful and colorful Hmong costume. She greeted us with a huge smile, and introduced herself as being Hmong. Unfortunately, she no longer speak Hmong because her family had been living in the city or apart from Hmong for generations. The Pa Ndau design of her Hmong clothing shared much familiarity with that of the Hmong in Southeast Asia, especially the needle work design, known in the west as snail (qab qwj). She has been brought there to welcome us as part of the showing hospitality by the Qianxi County Government. She was very friendly and informal. In this instance, she entertained us on the way from the bridge to the town of Qianxi, including singing in Hmong and Yi. She also provided us information about Qianxi and its tourist attractions. She was one among hundreds of young girls and young men in Qianxi, who had been trained as tourist guides. The Government of Qianxi relied on them to provide not only information and guidance to tourists about local attractions, but also enchant the tourists with the rich traditions and cultures of the native minorities in the region.

Our group received a special welcome because we were probably the very first international scholars to visit the area. Further, our visit was sponsored and arranged by the Guizhou Miao Studies Association, which furthered the importance of the visit. Furthermore, Qianxi County Government invests very heavily on tourism and has recently hired Ms. Gao Yueling, an English speaker and a doctoral student at Yunnan University to be its Vice Magistrate, overseeing the development of Qianxi’s tourism. Ms. Gao saw our visit as an opportunity to market their region to us and to solicit our inputs and feedbacks on how to open the region to tourists while protecting the region’s history, culture and ecology. The young and educated local administrators appear to be more open minded; they are hungry for knowledge and eager to learn globally, so they can act locally. Moreover, their education also enables them to see the
importance of preservation and protecting their historical and cultural sites, ethnic culture and the environment.

Our itinerary for the first day started with the visit to the HuaWuji Hmong village and the "WuJiang Yuan Hundred Mile Gallery," with the plan to spend the night at the hotel in the village, but local officials were concerned that the hotel in the village might not have enough rooms for our group, so they decided to check us into a hotel in Qianxi town. After an elaborate banquet hosted by Ms. Gao Yueling, the Vice-County Magistrate, we then proceeded to the HuaWuji Hmong Village. The welcoming ceremony was held at the gate of the tourist center or village center. It consisted of three tiers of music and rice wine greeting. The first tier comprised Hmong boys and girls performing the Qeej and other musical instruments. This was followed by the second tier with performance by the boys and girls of the Hmu. The third and last tier was assigned to boys and girls of the Su Miao.

The drink ritual at the gate followed the usual tradition and town protocol. If a visitor used his or her hands to hold the bowl of rice wine, then the visitor had to empty the bowl. In case the visitor did not drink, he or she could simply bow to the bowl, with his or her lips almost touching the rim of the bowl without using the hands; this gesture would suffice the act of drinking. When we arrived at the village, the leaders and elders of the village were present to welcome us. Some of them spoke Hmong to me and identified themselves as Hmong. Although we spoke the same western branch of the Miao language to each other, we had some difficulties understanding each other due to local accent and borrowed words. Having an unforeseen opportunity to meet each other filled us with an uncommon level of excitement and sentimental joy. I looked upon them as distant relatives who had been left behind. With similar wording and thought, they saw me as a long-lost cousin who had finally found his way home for a visit. Several members in our group were Hmong. We were the first group of Hmong outside of China to have ever visited this village, which is a well-known village in Qianxi. The elders told me that their village used to be so isolated from the rest of China that, if anyone wanted to go to other villages or towns, that person would need to use ropes to scale up and down the high cliffs. As a result, only young men could occasionally venture out of the village. In the evening, we became guests of the Administrator of HuaWuji Township. She came to welcome us in a Hmong costume and hosted a dinner banquet. In addition to drinking toasts offered by both the host and guests, a group of young girls and boys in Hmong costume were also on hand to sing for the guests and encouraged (coerced) the guests to gulp down more drinks. Drunkenness and merriment appeared to go hand-in-hand on this occasion.

Our group also visited Zhijin Cave and Zhijin County. Zhijin cave was introduced to us as the largest cave in China. The cave is very large and long, and has various types of bizarre shapes and forms of stalactite and stalagmite. I learned from the guide that the cave has more than forty kinds of karst formations. One of the stalagmite formations resembles George Washington or Jesus Christ, standing tall looking down to visitors. Other stalactites and stalagmites resemble
palatial pillars and various animals. Some of the surfaces of these formations resemble flowers with shining crystal.

The Zhijin township, which is one of many townships of Zhijin County, comprised many villages, and has a Hmong population of about 10,000. It is one of the most remote areas in the province. It had become accessible to visitors only in recent years. The presence of visitors, especially Hmong visitors as in our case, provided a rare respite to the people of Zhijin who were excited and enthralled to see us. They were somewhat astounded to find us conversing in their own Hmong language. As usual, they performed their Qeej (the Hmong Lusheng or reed-pipes) and danced to greet us. We were then taken to see their batiking and homes. One of the girls had already completed her college degree and planned to teach in the area. Another girl had just finished her high school and she spoke good English and wished to attend college in the coming fall. She had an ambitious dream, wanting to study in the United States or Australia. In recent years, the Chinese government has made major efforts to assist people in the rural areas. As a result, the construction of houses in this township has been partially funded by the government. Consequently, most houses have been built in recent years with modern materials and in modern styles. Few of the older houses, which were traditionally made from hay and clay, remained standing. The appearance of these old houses reflected the poverty and the harsh life in the highland of Guizhou. Yet, isolated as Zhijin Hmong Township had been over the millennium, it had not escaped modernity. Many of these old houses, in addition to their poor farmlands remind me of their poverty and the hardships in the highland of Guizhou. They might have been pushed and pulled to be hidden in these inhospitable highlands years ago; these inhospitable environments provided them a strategic location to defend themselves, but trapped them into poverty and isolation.

It appeared that few foreigners had visited this area. One might expect some fearful curiosity and reluctance among the locals of foreigners. Quite the opposite, the Hmong and other ethnic groups there exhibited an uncommon level of innocence, friendliness and hospitality. As a Hmong from a foreign land, I could only imagine that they were truly the remnants of the Hmong of the past, who had managed to remain until now untouched and unspoiled by the decadence and globalization. As a scholar on Hmong studies, I came to the realization that this is the region that scholars on Hmong could discover and harness knowledge that is indigenous to Hmong. However, as more foreign and Chinese tourists intrude into the area, the innocent way of life and culture of the local inhabitants will surely be impacted and forever change as have occurred in other parts of China and the world as a whole. One can only hope that modernity and globalization will bring improvements to the quality of life in the region while safeguarding the antiquity and cultural uniqueness that had sustained the Hmong there over the eon. Obviously, this is a tall order.

My visit to the Hmong in Sichuan and Yunnan began on April 11, 2014, when I left San Francisco for Shanghai and ended on May 12, when I returned home to California. Part of the visit was to attend the opening of the Roots-Searching Park in Xingwen, Sichuan. There were
two delegations for the opening of the Roots-Searching Park: The first of these two delegations consisted of 8 people and all of them, including myself, were from California. The second delegation came from Minnesota, consisting of 5 people. For the sake of this paper, I will only cover my perspective (or the perspective of the leader of the California delegation) of the visit to the Hmong in Sichuan and Yunnan (in the triangle of Guizhou, Sichuan and Yunnan). As such, the first person "I" is used for most of this paper as it reflects my own perspective on the whole trip.

To get acclimated to China, our delegation spent the first eight days to tour Shanghai, Suzhou, Hangzhou and Yibin. Shanghai, Suzhou and Hangzhou represent the well and fast developing Chinese east coast cities. Over the last 20 years, the old Shanghai is a thing of the past, and a new Shanghai has emerged and it is now the show case of the Chinese economic miracle. Sometimes, too fast does not mean too good; our tour guide explained that the construction of skyscrapers in Pudong is too fast and too many, and as a result their pressure on the ground led to many damages to the surrounding streets. In some areas in the heart of Pudong, he said, streets have to be rebuilt. One Chinese retired teacher said, there are too many skyscrapers, but there is no fire truck equipped with ladder capable of reaching the top of these buildings. She continued "in case of fire, those on the top floors will perish without help."

Hangzhou and Suzhou, which were known in ancient times as the two paradises on earth, are now the hotspots of tourist attraction, in addition to high-tech plants and other industries. For example, Suzhou is home to the largest manufacturing plant of Logitech, and other high-tech software industries, many big names, such as Canon, Fujiysu, France Eurofins, Korea Yetime, and so on. Combining the past and its futuristic high-tech plants made Suzhou one of the top destinations for Chinese and foreign tourists; its ancient mansions and waterways are remarkable, testifying to its past glory. Its miles and miles of high-tech manufactures also transform the city to the 21st century with the color of black and white, representing Yin and Yang: the future links to its past and the two are eternally connected.

Hangzhou, the ancient ‘paradise on earth’, is still a paradise for those who have money now. Hangzhou’s real estate is now the most expensive in China; a new three-bedroom apartment can cost from US$300,000 to $500,000. Its Long Qing (Dragon Well) tea can cost up to US$500 per kilograms, and its girls can demand a house, car and a lot of money in the bank before they agree to a marriage proposal. Both the Silk Road and the Grand Canal end in Hangzhou, where resources have been abundant since ancient times. The ancient Chinese said, a rich young scholar should first go to Hangzhou to buy his clothes, then move to Suzhou to get married. After the marriage, he and his bride must move to live their happy life in Guangzhou, but before their death, they need to move to Liuzhou. This saying basically implies that Hangzhou has the best silk, Suzhou has the most beautiful girls, Guangzhou has the best food and Liuzhou has the best timber for coffins. I want to add a personal story to the discussion of Hangzhou; I studied at Hangzhou University (now, Zhejiang University) in 1986, and met my future wife in this beautiful city. I used to know this city very well, so this trip was also a return home for both my
wife and I, though most of our friends have already left this city to live abroad or elsewhere. Surprisingly, we did not recognize many buildings and streets in Hangzhou, which have changed so much during the last 25 years. We did have lunch at the legendary Low Wai Low restaurant (楼外楼) located on Solitary Hill right at the heart of West Lake. Here one can enjoy real Hangzhou dishes, such as the famous Beggar's Chicken, West Lake West Lake Fish in Sweet Sour Sauce, Fried Shrimps with Long Jing Tea Leaves, and other dishes that have a long history and have been influenced by the local traditions of taste and the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) that made Hangzhou its capital. Both my wife and I used to visit this restaurant and have lunch here when we were dating. More importantly, our wedding reception was held at the Low Wei Low, which means "Building Beyond Building." When I was here in 1986, a decent lunch at the Low Wai Lou cost no more than 5 yuan (RMB). Now, the price can go as high as three thousand yuan or more; I was told that customers must be willing to pay 15,000 yuan or more to get a table on the top floor of the Low Wai Low.

When I studied in Hangzhou in 1986, the wife of my professor used to call me, Xu Xian - the young scholar who stole the heart of the White Snake. I was the only one who had a big camera at the time, so many girls, who came to the West Lake, asked me to take their pictures. The wife of the professor jokingly said "modern White Snake wants to be in the camera, not borrowing an umbrella anymore." In short, the White Snake story goes like this. The White Snake came to the West Lake and saw a young, bright and attractive scholar, so she turned herself into a beautiful young woman standing under the rain. The young scholar saw this beautiful young woman and her friend, the Green Snake, under the rain. They asked to be under his umbrella and he could not refuse. They walked with him for a short distance, then told him that she had arrived at her mansion near the West Lake. Wanting to see him again, she pretended to forget to return the umbrella to him. She later asked her friend the Green Snake to return the umbrella and invite Xu Xian to visit her in her mansion. Their love relationship began and grew very strong. As a result, they got married and had a son. A monk by the name of Fa Hai found out about White Snake and came after her. He fought with the White Snake and in the end, he used his magical powers to subdue her and then put her in captivity. Fa Hai then built the Leifeng Pagoda over the cage of the White Snake to keep her in the cage for eternity. In 1924 the Leifeng Pagoda collapsed and people said, "White Snake is finally free." In 2002, the Leifeng Pagoda was rebuilt and can be seen from the West Lake, but without the White Snake under it. Hangzhou is the land of Xu Xian and the White Snake. This love legend appears everywhere in Hangzhou---in paintings, wood carvings, operas, and tea house storytelling, and so on.

It was nice to visit Hangzhou again, but it reminded me that I was a young scholar when I first came to this city, and now I am a retired professor. Time flies! and nothing is permanent; many things I used to know about Hangzhou are no longer there, and many new things are now dominated the city. Urban sprawl has made Hangzhou unrecognizable; agricultural lands I used to know are now part of the Hangzhou metropolitan area, the Qiangtang River is now surrounded by skyscrapers, and the new airport is more than one hour driving distance from the old
downtown of Hangzhou; all of these are part of the show case of new China. Moreover, I no longer could see the sky in Hangzhou; the blue sky has been blocked by pollution and smog. The streets that used to have 1,000 bicycles are now dominated by 1,000 cars of all makes, including some of the most expensive ones, such as Lexus, Benz and BMW. Tall and slim Hangzhou girls used to ride bicycles with simple outfits with no makeup and no fancy purses. Now, Hangzhou girls wear brand name clothes with fancy purses; most of them are fake merchandises or copies of purses from Coach, Louis Vuiton, and so on... they represent the materialistic and fake generations of the new China, in which money is everything. In 2009, an elderly Chinese told me that young Chinese do not feel shame about what, where and how they make their money, but they do feel shame about not having money.

Interestingly, my wife and I became strangers in Hangzhou; we could not even find our way to climb Precious Stone Hill ((宝石山) to reach the Baochu Ta (保俶塔) or Baochu Pagoda, where I used to climb every week during my stay in Hangzhou. And, a relative came to guide us up the hill, but I no longer can climb as fast as I used to do. Moreover, we could not recognize the old Hangzhou University, our alma mater. It is now totally a makeover campus; there is a larger street to the university, campus buildings are properly painted, surrounded by beautiful landscapes and art pieces; these were then considered bourgeois and it was prohibited when we studied there nearly three decades ago.

In the evening of April 18, we flew from Hangzhou to Yibin to rest and be ready to attend the open ceremony of the Roots-Searching Park in Xingwen, which was scheduled for April 22. Yibin, the seat of Yibin Prefecture, is located on the junction of the Yangtze and Min Rivers in the Southeast of Sichuan Province. The economy of Yibin relies heavily on the Wuliang Ye (五粮液) Distillery, one taxi driver explained to us. Wuliang Ye is the second most well known liquor in China, after only Moutai. Like, Moutai, Wuliang Ye had suffered a major loss, after Xi Jinping recently ordered government officials to not use public funds to purchase expensive alcohol. Expensive is the right word here: Before Xi Jinping took the Chinese Presidency in March 2013, a top bottle of Wuliang Ye could cost up to 1,000 Yuan or more than US$150. Most ordinary people cannot afford such pricey liquor, so it is only officials who can buy them with public funds to entertain official guests and so on. We spent our first day in Yibin to tour the city on our own. Four of us decided to tour the junction of the Yangtze and Min Rivers, and to walk along the Yangtze River to Yibin's commercial area. In the afternoon, we climbed the hill in the center of the city to visit a Taoist temple and the greenery of the hill. The second day, we went to Bamboo Sea or Bamboo Forest (Shunan Zhuhai or 蜀南竹海国家公园) and Bamboo Museum about 70 kilometers away from Yibin City. The Bamboo Sea, which was partially used to film "Tiger Crouching, Hidden Dragon" is a natural wonder of China, covering about 120 square kilometers. The area of Bamboo Sea covers many ridges and peaks with a trail carving through kast mountainside where one can have a spectacular view of the valley on one side and on the other side, carved images of Buddha, Guanyin and other Chinese deities, and historical figures and events, such as some scenes from the "The Three Kingdoms." Overall, the Bamboo
Sea provided me an opportunity to see large bamboo forest, mountain, cave, waterfall, lake, and many shops with a variety of bamboo products. Before we visited the Bamboo Museum, we stopped by to have our lunch at a restaurant at the outskirts of the park. The menu of this lunch included mostly bamboo and mushrooms and other local greens from the park and its vicinity. Exhibition items in the Bamboo Museum include all things that are made from bamboo, including the Hmong Qeej and the whole bamboo scroll of the Art of War (孙子兵法) by Sun Tzu.

In the morning of April 20, a delegation from Xingwen came to welcome and take us to Xingwen. The leader of the delegation was Mr. Li Chengliang (李成亮), the Director of Religion and Minority Affairs, accompanied by many members, including Mr. Li Guowen (李国文), President of the Hmong Development Association, Mr. Yang Yonghua (杨永华), Vice-President of the Hmong Development Association, and several other officials. We arrived in Xingwen in the afternoon, and checked into the Dongsha Hotel in the heart of Xingwen town. After checking in, we were told that we had about an hour to unpack and rest before the welcoming dinner banquet. We were also advised that the Government of Xingwen highly honored our visit and the establishment of the Roots-Searching Park, so the welcoming banquet would be a large one to be hosted by Huang Yongfu (黄永富), the Vice-Magistrate of Xingwen County. He is a Hmong.

At the welcoming dinner banquet, we were seated around a large round dining table with Huang Yongfu to the center; I and another guest of honor sat on his left and right. Mr. Huang began the banquet with a brief welcoming remarks, and then offered the first toast. The banquet included nearly 50 dishes of their best food and the drink included some of the best liquor in the region. The happy occasion was marked by drinking and laughing as if long lost cousins had finally met each other.

The next day, we were taken to visit the village of the Li clan, about 30 kilometers from the town of Xingwen. The village is located on a mountainside overlooking a beautiful valley, but due to fog and mist, we could not have the best view of the town as well as the valley. We were briefed about the town and its economy by the village's Communist Party Secretary. We also shared with them brief information about the Hmong in America. They provided us a very nice lunch inside a large Hmong home, which has been remodeled into a guest house for city dwellers who want to spend time in the village or get away from the hectic hurly-burly of urban life and its pollution.

After lunch, we went to visit a Hmong-Sua (Hmoob-Suav) Water Bottle Company, which is a joint venture between a private investor and the local Hmong and Han Chinese. Basically, the company pipes water from a mountainside spring, filters and purifies, then bottles and sends it to market in the region.
In the late afternoon, we visited a school built specifically for Hmong and other minority students. A large Qeej is displayed at the gate of the school to symbolize Hmong culture and identity. Upon entering the school ground, we could hear the Hmong drum and Qeej, in addition to other music and traditional games. We went straight to one of the classrooms, where a Hmong music teacher was teaching Hmong song and music to students. One of the songs he was teaching is "Why Our Name Is Hmong" or (Vim Li Cas Peb Lub Npe Hu Ua Hmoob), which is the most popular one for the Hmong in China. Some Hmong claim that it is the Hmong Anthem. We also went to the playground and watched students and teachers demonstrate Hmong Qeej, drum, and other music and dances. The dinner banquet was hosted by Mr. Xiong, the leader of the district. When I was here in 2009, the school was in the stage of construction and the district had a different administrator.

After the big day on April 22, we spent one more full day in Xingwen to visit a middle school and high school of the town. I was asked to give a talk at the middle school, where a large proportion of the student body are Hmong. I gave them a brief overview of the Hmong in America, and related topics. Many young Hmong students touched my heart deeply, when they asked about how to get into an American university or how to be successful in university. I gave them a pep talk on how to study, get into university or American universities and how education could change their destiny. I also shared with them my own challenges in pursuing my education to inspire them to continue their education.

The next day, we were set to tour many counties, and towns of the triangle of Guizhou, Sichuan and Yunnan. The first town we visited outside of Xingwen was Gulin, which is the seat of Gulin County in Sichuan province. It is located more than 100 kilometers from Xingwen and close to the border of Guizhou. As custom required, Mr. Tao Yongchen, the President of Minority Development Association, our host, and other officials were waiting for us at the border of Gulin County to welcome us to their county. We were taken to the best hotel of Gulin Town, which is also home to its well known alcohol distillery. Mr. Tao, a Hmong, and his staff were well prepared to host us and there were many evidences of this, including their program to host us that had been beautifully printed. After our hotel check in, we walked a short distance to a large restaurant for the lunch banquet, hosted by Mr. Tao Yongchen and his wife, Mrs. Gu Senlan, the Director of the Gulin Minority Affairs Bureau. She is also a Hmong. As usual, it was a beautiful lunch served with their best wine and food. Following lunch was the information-sharing session held at the town's large auditorium with the Communist banner behind the podium. Here, I was given an opportunity to share with a large audience the history and contemporary experience of Hmong Americans. I was surprised to hear one young woman asking question in English. I later learned that she is a local official, graduated from Yunnan University for Nationalities. More importantly, she still speaks Hmong as she grew up in a Hmong village in Gulin County.

In the evening, we walked back to the large restaurant for our welcoming banquet, which I was told would be as grand and elegant as a banquet for provincial governor. The banquet was,
indeed, very elegant and hosted by Mr. Tao Yongchen with the presence of one of the Vice Magistrates of Gulin County. Participants were mostly officials of Hmong and Yi ethnic groups, in addition to Hmong officials from nearby town in Guizhou Province and from Gulin's Hmong districts. The food and the elegance of the banquet soon became secondary, when everyone had a few drinks; participants began to show their cultural talents. Many Hmong district leaders and county officials took out their Qeej and other music instruments and the whole dining room became a joyous and festive atmosphere. Many officials of Yi descent also sang their songs and toasted; their true brotherhood with the Hmong appeared. It is said, in the triangle of Guizhou, Sichuan and Yunnan, the real decisions and agreements are made at the banquet, not at the formal meeting. Also, friendship is made at the feasting and drinking banquet. Personally, I was so moved and pleased that they treated me as one of them. It is said, when they tell you only what you want to hear, then you are no friend, but if they tell you the good the bad and the ugly of themselves, then you are family.

The next day, we went to visit many Hmong villages in the highlands of Gulin. Some of the villages might be located as high as 7,000 feet up on the mountain ranges, which are parts of the Guizhou Yunnan Plateau (云贵高原). Reportedly, the People's Liberation Army recently found a pocket of anti-Chinese Communist government, who had used a cave near one of these villages as a shelter. The PLA soldiers stormed the cave and killed all of them. Some highland villages are not only beautiful and breathtaking, but appear to do well economically (better than I have expected). Tajai village, for example, has many special attractions. First, it is one of the rich Hmong districts in Gulin; secondly, its economy relies heavily on agriculture; and lastly, there are many new developments there that reflect current Chinese policies and the overall economy of the county. It is also surrounded by beautiful mountains on all sides of a flat valley, where the locals used to grow tobacco. Although it is labeled one of the richest Hmong districts in Gulin, most Hmong do not live in the lowlands near the most fertile level lands of the district. Hmong villages are scattered along the foothills of the mountain, while the nice houses on the plain are said to belong to the Han Chinese. The major agricultural crop of the district is tobacco, which may not be sustainable in the long run. The positive things about tobacco growing here are the support of the government and the use of modern scientific know-how to help farmers grow tobacco and maximize the productivity of the land. The district administrator, who is a young college-educated Hmong, but can no longer speak Hmong, took us to a newly built village in the valley and explained that the village had been built so that Hmong in the nearby mountains could come down and settle in it, but no one wanted to take up the offer, so Han Chinese moved into the village instead. He further explained that he does not blame the Hmong for not settling in the mentioned village because it is not economically beneficial for them. He said, they are offering housing, but no land to make their living, so they have to return to the highlands to tend to their fields and animals. Moreover, they are so used to their way of life in the highlands, where they are independent in conducting not just their life style, but Hmong culture and language. In the lowlands, they will have to negotiate and compromise their way of life and culture, though the
lowlands will allow access for their children to education and modern way of life. It seems like it is too risky for them.

After visiting this village, we went to a high-school of mixed ethnicities. Upon arrival, we heard the sound of the Qeej and then we saw a group of young boys and girls welcoming us with their dance to the tones of the Qeej. The dance was beautiful and moving as the young boys and girls were in Hmong costumes, but not all of them were Hmong. Some were Hmong, the rest Han and other ethnic groups, but everyone learns the culture of the others. Mr. Tao Yongchen explained that it was unthinkable 40 years ago that it could have been possible for a Hmong to marry a Han. It is now more and more common for Hmong and Han to marry each other and no parent seems to object to this inter-cultural marriage because they now live next to each other and have learned that they have more in common in terms of culture and way of life than differences.

In the evening, we stopped by the district where Mr. Tao Yongchen used to be the administrator. We stopped here to have our dinner and to chat with local villagers. The locals were so happy with our visit, some elders dressed in Hmong outfits and came to entertain us with traditional songs and stories. The people there were planning to light a bonfire for us, but fog and then rain preventing this from happening. Before returning to Gulin Town, Mr. Tao Yongchen shared with me that his mother used to sing out loud and then cry. He asked her once why did she cry and she told him that her Hmong life in the highlands was too poor and too hard. That incident, he said, reminded him to keep his mind and heart in school and to work hard to change their social economic condition. Among the Hmong I met in Gulin, they use Qhua Yawg, Qhua Zag, Qhua Dub, etc., to refer to their clans - very similar to some Hmong in Vietnam and the Hmong in Laos in the early 20th century. It is believed that these Hmong clan names are Hmong in origin (some scholars have suggested that the clan names, such as Yang, Lee, Thao, and Vang are not Hmong in origin). It appears that people from different areas of the county do have different accents or sub-dialects; I had a hard time to understand some of them, but not others. It also appears that they have kept much of their Hmong language and culture, though a few young and educated civil servants of Hmong descent have already lost their Hmong language.

The next day, we left Gulin town in the morning and headed to the border of Gulin and Xuyong. Mr. Ma Kanglun (马康伦) and other Xuyong officials were at the border waiting to welcome us to Xuyong. At the border of Xuyong, we toured a newly built village of mixed Hmong and Han Chinese. The village, which includes community center and clinic, was well designed and built by the government, but the owners had bought their houses and land on credit or with long term monthly payments. Almost all members of this village grow tobacco and use the cash from tobacco to buy rice and other needs. After the touring of the village and some of their tobacco fields, we were taken to Xuyong town. Along the way to Xuyong, we passed through many ridges, steep hills, high passes between majestic peaks. Our bus took us across beautiful mountain ranges, narrow mountain tops, and hillsides in Xuyong County, where many Hmong and other ethnic villages are located. Their terraced fields and houses next to them remind us of
the hard life of the people who carved these terraced fields and tend to them day and night, in addition to carrying their crops up and down on the terraces. Because of their high altitude, rice is not the suitable crop here, so these terraces are used for corn, potato, buckwheat, and other highland crops.

On the way, we stopped by to pay our respects to the Li Tombs near Xuyong town and at the border of Weixing County (Yunnan). Oral legend has it that an elder Li couple were home while their children went to work. An unknown number of robbers came to the home and robbed the elder Li couple; while they were struggling with these robbers, their horse saw the violent commotions, it growled very loudly as if it was ready to attack the robbers. The robbers shot the elder couple and then the horse. They burned the house down and disappeared up the road. When their children returned home they found their house totally burned down; upon careful inspection, they found the partially burned bodies of their parents and the horse. They buried their bodies exactly where they found them. And as such, the three tombs represent this incident; they are not next to each other nor in parallel with each other. The tomb of Mr. Li is located about 3 to 5 meters south of the tomb of his wife, and the tomb of their horse is a few meters away from them to their left. The tombs are about 400 years old, but has since then been repaired many times. Mr. Li Guowen, who is a descendant of the Li couple, led us to pay our respects to the spirits of the Li couple and the horse by burning incense, offering alcohol, and bowing three times. I also took out a small bottle of rice spirits bought earlier for this occasion to offer to the spirits of the Lis and the horse as Hmong tradition expected me to do.

After paying our respect to the Li Tombs, we went directly to Xuyong town, and were taken to a very nice hotel in the business district of the town, where most of their new skyscrapers are located. The business district is modeled after the history of the town or Chinese historical themes, so along the road are shops, restaurants and hotels that look like 19th century China, but at the back of these businesses are skyscrapers, representing the new China.

The welcoming dinner was hosted by Mr. Ma Gang, a Hmong and the Vice-Magistrate of Xuyong County. Other officials included the Director of the Minority Affairs Bureau, who is Yi. The larger ethnic groups in Xuyong are Yi, Hmong and Hui. Their economy relies heavily on coal mining and agriculture, such as tobacco, corn and potatoes. Mr. Ma Gang is about 40 years old and was very likeable, approachable, and appeared to be in-line with the Chinese Communist Party. Almost all Hmong officials we met during this trip tended to agree that Chi You was their ancestral king, but not Mr. Ma Gang, who suggested Hmong should embrace the school of thought that Hmong are descendants of the Huaxia, which can mean that the Hmong and the Han might share common ancestors. He also expressed his concern about the growing tension between China and the United States, and this perspective was very much in line with the outlook of the Chinese government. Upon hearing his concern on this issue, I quickly replied that the two countries cannot afford to wage war on each other as their economies rely too much on each other, so war would be a disaster for both countries.
We left Xuyong the next day for Gongxian. On the way to Gongxian, we stopped by Xingwen to drop Mr. Yang Yonghua off and to show Mr. Ma Kanglun the Roots-Searching Park. Mr. Yang Yonghua was our key contact person for this trip, so he had made all arrangements and accompanied us from Xingwen to Gulin and Xuyong, but could not go to Gongxian, as he needed to go home to Xingwen to help organize the May 1 Huashan Festival there.

In Gongxian, we were welcomed by Mr. Liu Fuhua (刘富华), the Director of the Communist Party’s United Front Work Department which is responsible for religious and minority affairs and his Vice-Director, Mr. Tao Xiaoping, who can speak the language of the Hmong in Wenshan (文山) in Yunnan, which is similar to ours. After lunch, Mr. Ma Kanglun said goodbye to us and returned to Xuyong; Mr. Tao Xiaoping would accompany us to the next county. Initially, it was planned for us to visit a Hmong village after our lunch, but due to our late arrival, we were taken to their local museum, where one room is designated for the Hmong and their exhibition. There, we watched a video program on Hmong life in Gongxian and their music and dances. We then were invited to join a round-table discussion on the Hmong in Gongxian as well as Hmong in the United States. They briefed us on Gongxian County as well as the Hmong there. We also briefed them about the Hmong in the United States.

The evening dinner was hosted by Mr. Liao with many officials and elders in attendance. As usual, officials of Hmong descent and Hmong elders were delighted to engage in conversation with us, but due to differences in accent and dialect, our discussion was minimized. We shared information about issues facing the Hmong in both countries as well as success stories.

The next day's breakfast was hosted by a young couple of the Yang Clan. The husband, Yang Youyuan, is a government employee near the border of Yunnan and he usually comes home during the weekend. His wife, who stays home with their son, is a helper in the museum where many of her needle works are displayed. Her mother also lives with them in Gongxian town.

After breakfast, we said goodbye to our hosts, and headed toward Junlian with the accompany of Mr. Tao Xiaoping. With bouquets of flowers in their hands, four women dressed in Hmong outfits were waiting on one side and many men were on the opposite side of the entrance of a hotel in Junlian Town to welcome us. Additionally, the electronic banner of the hotel also welcomed us in both Hmong and Chinese. Our host for the entire visit to Junlian was Mr. Ai Weimin and he treated us like high ranking officials and accorded us with proper protocol. After checking in, we were taken to the home of a younger brother of Mr. Ai Weimin for lunch. The lunch provided an opportunity for informal chat and getting to know each other. It also gave us an opportunity to learn about Hmong homes in a modern city. After lunch, we went to see an exhibition of photographs and arts in the local museum; some of them are beautiful photos of Hmong villages and their terraced fields.

The welcoming dinner was held at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Wang Yuenfeng. Mr. Wang is a Hmong and business entrepreneur. He used to live and do business in Zhejiang Province, but
decided to return home after many years away. He basically grew up in town with no Hmong, so he could not speak Hmong, but has strong Hmong identity and has the Hmong's best interest in his heart. He often mentioned issues related to the economic difficulties of the Hmong and how to improve their economic and education.

We were welcomed at the entrance into his large condominium with music from the Qeej and the suona (唢呐) in Han Chinese and Xyu in Hmong. We were told that the use of Xyu music instrument by the Hmong has already disappeared in many parts of the triangle, but it is well preserved in Junlian county. In Hmong culture, the Xyu, which has a loud and high-pitched sound, is usually played during happy or auspicious events, such as weddings, welcoming important guests, and so on. In this occasion, they welcomed us with the Qeej and Xyu to indicate their happiness and delight to host us in their home.

A long table was set out on Mr. and Mrs. Wang's large patio. The dishes of the banquet included many traditional Hmong dishes, such as the boiled whole chicken with head and feet intact. Like the Hmong in Laos and the United States, the feet and head of chicken are kept intact, so guest or elder can determine the event or future by ‘reading’ the chicken feet and head. It is said, the chicken feet or its head will tell whether the guest or host is happy or not or whether the guest or host will face misfortune in the near future. During this event, we all decided not to read the chicken feet or its head, but they did preserve one tradition that the head is to be given to the guest of honor; and I got one. Although the welcoming banquet was hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Wang, many important officials and elders also attended the banquet, including the Vice Magistrate of Junlian County, who is also a Hmong. But like most young officials of Hmong descent, the Vice Magistrate understands some Hmong, but speaks very little Hmong. It should be noted here that the welcoming speech was made in both Chinese and Hmong. The after dinner performance including an assemble of the Xyu (double-reed horn), gong, drum, flute and other percussive instruments. A young woman, who is a trained dancer and singer, also sang and dance for us.

We spent our second day in Junlian visiting Hao Ba Wu Gu, a Hmong village in the highlands about 70 kilometers from Junlian. To get there, we passed through many beautiful valleys, narrow ridges, and rugged mountains. About a kilometer before reaching the village, several elders and some young boys and girls were waiting to welcome us at a gate with a welcoming banner in both Hmong and Chinese. They welcomed us with rice wine and then guided us to their village. At the entrance to the village, stood many elders on one side and a number of young boys and girls on the other side; four of the girls holding bouquets of flowers to welcome us. The elders and the girls were dressed in their local Hmong outfits, but the boys were dressed in modern clothes. As we greeted our hosts and entered their village, the sounds of the Suona (Xyu) and its accompanying percussive musical instruments began. We were invited to sit at one side of a long table, then the elders sat on the opposite side of us. After everyone sat, a formal introduction began. We learned during the introduction that each elder there represented each
clan in the area, and in most cases, each clan has its own village not too far away from the other clans. The Hmong are clan exogamous and practice patrilocal residence, so a boy marries a girl from another clan and brings her to his clan. In this practice, most of them are related one way or another. As usual, following the introduction both sides had a brief chat and exchange of information. After the meeting, we were taken to see a demonstration of Hmong batiking on a piece of hemp cloth (linen) made by themselves. They told us hemp cloth is almost disappearing because very few people make it and the government also encourages people not to grow hemp. We also participated in the rice-pounded cake, another important tradition of the Hmong, especially during the New Year. The finished rice cake was first offered to the ancestors by an elder, then given to everyone. To make the rice cake more delicious, we dipped it in a bowl of honey (in Laos, it is served with liquid cane sugar).

Lunch was provided by members of the village and included rice, many dishes of pork, tofu, and vegetables. Both local distilled and commercial alcohol were provided. We learned later that they offered us the best lunch they had; in their everyday life, they consume corn meal as rice must be purchased from town, so they could not afford it. They can only grow corn, potato and other highland crops, not rice. I also learned later that the elders ate with us, and the rest of them ate whatever was left from our table.

During the visit many young men told me that they were working in the cities, such as Chengdu, Chongqing and other cities. One of them in his 30s has been working in Chengdu for 10 years and upon getting the message from his family that we would visit their village, he drove 10 hours to get home in time to welcome us. Many of these young people live and work in the city, but have left their children to be looked after by their parents in the village. They told me that only the elders and children stay in the village, as most young people come home only during the new year or at special events, such as a wedding in the family, and so on. One young Han woman, who is married to a Hmong, came to her husband's home about two months ago to give birth to her first child and will soon leave her child with his parents, then return to work in the city. One young man told me that there is no opportunity in this impoverished village, which can only grow corn, potato, and few other crops, not even rice.

We returned to Junlian town and had a farewell dinner at a restaurant as the majority of our delegation would leave on the next day. It was nice to sit in a private room to chat with our hosts, but many of us felt uneasy as we would have to say goodbye the next day. Joining us at this dinner were two local English teachers, who came to get to know us and practice their English.

April 30 was the departure day for most of our group; some returned home and others were to travel to other countries. Only four of us stayed behind. After sending off those who needed to depart from Julian, we gathered at a round table inside the hotel for an information sharing session. As usual, our hosts shared with us information about the Hmong in Junlian and we shared with them brief information on the Hmong in America. Many questions were also raised;
one of the participants had been to the United States and he observed that the Hmong Americans he met did not drink and smoke. He said, he smoked and drank and so did his father who had lived a very long life, so why was smoking considered unhealthy in America? I took time to explain to him that in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, smoking was very popular in the United States, but after the findings that smoking causes cancer, in addition to other health issues, smoking began to decline in the 1980s and 1990s. And, by the dawn of the 21st century, smoking was banned in most public places in California. Also, smoking is no longer popular and even second-hand smoking is considered dangerous to one's health. As for alcohol, people in the United States do drink, but their drinking culture is very different from the Chinese. They tend to, for example, not to encourage or force their guests or friends to drink as people do in China, and they may not make liquor one of the most important parts of a formal dinner or banquet. Also, people in the United States tend to drink in their private homes, so they might not get drunk in public, but inside their homes or private places.

Mr. Ai Weimin, our main host in Junlian, invited us to his house for lunch before sending us to Xingwen. He and his wife, who is a teacher, provided us a very lovely lunch with such a wide variety of dishes. Many friends and family members also came to the lunch. After lunch, the wife of Mr. Ai Weimin took us to her sewing room where she made a wide variety of Hmong outfits and needle works. She is very well known in the region as an expert of needle work. In fact, she has received numerous awards for her work and some of her works have been displayed in many local museums. She gave each one of us a sample of her work to take home.

We left Junlian in the afternoon to return to Xingwen for the May 1st Huashan Festival, which would be held the next day. The Huashan Festival, which is considered a Hmong New Year or festival to mark the end of spring, is recognized by the government as a major Hmong festival, so the local government provides generous funds for the Hmong to hold this festival. Moreover, people and officials come to the festival from many other towns and provinces, including Guizhou, Guangxi, Yunnan and Hunan. These guests or officials from out of town and province are guests of the government, so their lodging and food are all covered by the Xingwen government.

Upon our arrival in Xingwen, Mr. Yang Yonghua came to brief us on the Huashan Festival and asked us to join the elders in the spiritual ceremony of the event. We were delighted at the offer and accepted it wholeheartedly. He also told us that he would provide us with elder Hmong ceremonial outfits for the event. In the evening, we joined the Xingwen's welcoming banquet, which was hosted by the Magistrate of Xingwen County. This banquet was to welcome all guests, including us, to their county. During the banquet, we met officials of Hmong (and other sub-groups under the name Miao) descent from Yunnan, Guizhou, Hunan and Sichuan. Some officials from Yunnan recognized us from previous meetings, so we had much to share and discuss. Moreover, those from Yunnan speak the same dialect as ours, so it was easier to interact with them.
On the morning of May 1 we were taken from our hotel to the Stone Forest Geological Park (兴文石海世界地质公园), where the Huashan Festival has already started. The program of the morning included entertainment and a rehearsal of the ritual ceremony. The entertainment included show cases of those from out of town, such as Guizhou, Yunnan, Guangxi and Yunnan. The Hmong in Xingwen and nearby counties had also sent their singers and dancers to participate in this event. Upon arrival, we were taken to the festival ground of the Stone Forest Geological Park to briefly watch some of the entertainment, and then took part in the rehearsal for the ritual ceremony. We then went to lunch in one of the park's many restaurants. After lunch, we came back to the festival and were given Hmong elders' outfits for the ritual ceremony. The ceremony begin with a short parade from the "Hmong King's House" (several Hmong theme houses surrounding a large house with courtyard where the statue of Chi You is housed) to the center of the festival, where a money tree (ginkgo) is located. Several young men with ancient weapons (sword and spears) led the parade, followed by several girls carrying the Hmong flag, several young men carrying the heads of a cow and a pig, trays of bowls for alcohol, paper money and incense. Led by a shaman, we, the elders, were the last to follow the parade. Once the parade arrived at the ground of the money tree, the young men with weapons and the flag bearer girls made a large circle around the tree. The two plates containing the heads of the cow and pig were placed next to the money tree, and so was the paper money and incense. The elders stood south of the tree and led the people to join in the ritual ceremony. The shaman began the ceremony by chanting and incense burning. Then the elders burned their incense and placed them near the money tree. They then bowed three times: the first was to ask for good health for themselves and family, the second was to ask for good health and prosperity for the Hmong people, and the last one was to ask for peace to the nation and the world. Following the three bows was the offering of alcohol by the elders to the spirits; the elders slowly made a clockwise turn to their back, where several young girls stood behind with alcohol bowls in their hands. Each elder took one bowl of rice wine and slowly made a clockwise turn to the money tree. They slowly lowered their head and poured the rice wine from the bowls in their hands onto the ground near the tree. They once again made a clockwise turn to return the empty bowls to the girls behind them, and then took new bowls from another group of girls. They made a clockwise turn back to the tree. They lowered their heads and drank the rice wine from the bowls in their hands to initiate the celebration. The audience, if they liked to, could follow the elders in the celebration. The ritual ceremony concluded, the celebration began with festival songs and dances on stage. The elders joined the audience to greet friends and relatives and to join in the fun, asking heaven for more prosperity in the year to come.

The major activities for the evening were the bonfire and related entertainment. A bonfire was set in the middle of the festival ground, and the elders led the participants to light the fire. When the flame from the bonfire started, all lights were turned off, so the fire became the center of the event. The Qeej master began the dance music, and participants joined in to go around the bonfire. One dance followed another until everyone was exhausted and the bonfire was almost totally burned down.
The Huashan Festival lasted three days; a beauty contest took place on the second day, and the third day was set aside for displays of talent, including Qeej and other music instruments, folk song and others. It is partly used to preserve Hmong culture and encourage young Hmong to preserve their culture and be proud of their identity.

Our dinner banquet on May 3 was hosted by Mr. Li Guowen and his family. In their home, we met his wife and two grown sons and their wives and children. Many guests, including Mr. Li, the former Vice-Magistrate of Xingwen County, attended the dinner. He is retired and is now in the Xingwen Political Consultative Conference. He hosted me in an elegant welcoming banquet in the winter of 2008. As mentioned earlier, the wife of Mr. Li Guowen is a master of needle work and the art of making Hmong clothes. One of his two sons is now an administrator of a Hmong district in Xingwen county, which we were scheduled to visit the following day. Following dinner was the photo session, when all the household's women disappeared into their bedrooms and soon came out with their Hmong outfits on. While waiting for everyone to be ready, the 13 year old granddaughter of Mr. Li Guowen sang a song for us. Unlike many Hmong city children her age, she still speaks Hmong and appears to be very close to her grandparents.

On May 4, we visited the Hmong in Qinglin Mountain, not very far away from Xingwen. We were told that it was a poor village, but that the villagers were very good in keeping their culture and language. The village is partly poor because a paved road has not yet reached their village, so it is difficult to transport their goods to market in the nearby town and city. We were told that this village is one of the few Hmong villages that do not have a paved road in Sichuan province. As reputed, villagers entertained us with song, Qeej, gong and other music instruments. While we were in their village, they cooked Hmong food for us and entertained us with songs and dance. Basically, they kept us preoccupied with the presentation of their culture. Everyone - from the youngest to the oldest - came to greet and entertain us. After lunch, they took us to the top of the hill above their village to pay respects to an old tree, which is protected by the villagers and considered it as sacred tree. We burned paper money and incense, and as usual, we bowed three times toward the tree. The top of the hill also provided us with a good view of nearby three waterfalls and scenes of the surrounding mountains and valleys. Some of the hills had been carved into terraced fields to grow corn, potato, tobacco and other crops. It is only in the lowlands that rice and other lowland crops can be grown.

Before returning to Xingwen, we were taken to a resort owned by the daughter of Li Jingui (李金贵) and her husband. Mr. Li was one of our major hosts in Xingwen town and had accompanied us to many places while we stayed in this town. Shortly after we arrived, we learned that Mr. Li and his family would host our dinner banquet for the evening. Kitchen crew and family members quickly cooked and prepared a dinner banquet for about 50 people. Participants in this banquet included some officials in Xingwen and friends of Mr. Li and his wife. This was my third meeting with Mr. Li and my second with his daughter. When I came here in 2008, the daughter was a college student, and was home during the winter break, so I met
her in Xingwen. In fact, she sang for me during many of the banquets in Xingwen. I did not meet her in the summer of 2009 because she was attending Xiamen University in Fujian province. It was very nice for me to not only meet with the family again, but to be their guest of honor. It is said that in Asia, you know his or her name during the first meeting, know his work and his personality during the second meeting, but the third time, you will know his family.

On May 5, we went to visit the Hmong in the highlands of Xingwen. We passed through many breathtaking mountainous sceneries with high peaks, steep mountainsides, ridges, and canyons. We stopped by a Hmong village where a thousand years old tree has been protected and revered by the Hmong. As usual, we burned paper money and incense, and bowed three times toward the tree. After paying our respect to the thousand years old tree, we traveled another 20 plus kilometers to Xinglong to visit a small alcohol distillery owned and operated by a Hmong person. We visited the facility and its underground room used to age the distilled alcohol; like most of other alcohols, the older is always the better. The owner also offered us an opportunity to taste a few variety of their top brands. The price varies from brand to brand; some brands can cost up to US$100 or more.

Lunch for that day was hosted by Mr. Li Guowen's older son, who is the administrator of this Hmong district. The owner of the alcohol distillery also attended the lunch banquet and brought along with him several bottles of his liquor to the banquet. During the banquet, we learned that the daughter of this owner was the recent crowned ‘beauty of the year’ from the recent Huashan Festival in Xingwen. She is a college graduate and a civil servant in this district and she came to serve us during the lunch. The lunch became more enjoyable after everyone had had a few cups of the above mentioned spirit. We said goodbye to our hosts and headed back to Xingwen. On the way, we stopped by to visit the office of another Hmong district, and pay a visit to a Hmong family, and then drove another 30 minutes to Huánglínxiān, the top of a mountain village, to pay our respects to a 115 year old Hmong woman. She has been recognized by the government as one of the oldest persons in China. She lives with her 70 plus year old son and his wife, and many grandchildren and great grandchildren. She is able to walk around the house and reportedly very healthy. The village comprises only a few families, and a few more houses located a kilometer or so away. The village is located on a foothill and surrounded by permanent fields and gardens with a dirt road linking the village to other paved roads, which connect to the major express way of the region. On our way back, we stopped by a vista point that gave us a perfect view of the whole mountainous region, which consists of an express way serpentin ing through the valleys, hills, mountains and their ridges. Houses are seen spread out throughout the areas with fields and protected forest. Unlike the cities and towns of the region, which are highly polluted, sceneries of this area are beautiful under a blue sky with no construction and other noises. These might be some of the many factors that keep that Hmong woman healthy and having a long life.

The dinner banquet was hosted by Yang Yonghua and his family at his home in Xingwen. I have known Yang Yonghua since my first visit to Xingwen in 2008, and have assisted in getting
him to visit me in California in 2010, and for him to present a paper at the 2010 International Conference on Hmong Studies. The Roots-Searching Park was basically initiated by Yang Yonghua with the help of the Xingwen government, the Hmong Cultural Development organization, and the Hmong in the county, especially those Hmong in Ciu Xing who have sacrificed their land for the Roots-Searching Park. Yang Yonghua was also the principal host of our visit; he made all the arrangements for us to visit many other counties and accompanied us to Gulin, Xuyong, to many Hmong villages in Xingwen, Yanjin, Yiliang, Shimenkan, and Zhaotong. Consequently, we know each other well, so the dinner in his house reflected our good and sincere friendship. The only official attending this dinner was Mr. Li Guowen, the President of Hmong Cultural Development, who has also been to the United States, partly as a result of our friendship. All the other participants were members of Yang Yonghua's family: his wife, daughter and husband, son and wife, his two granddaughters, and Yang Yonghua's two brothers. It was more intimate family-like dinner with a lot of drinking to mark it as our farewell dinner from Yang Yonghua.

The next day was May 6 when another major Hmong festival was to be held at Xingwen's Number 2 High School. We were told earlier that we would have another round table discussion in Xingwen, but there was no detailed information about this. After breakfast a car came to pick us up and we were taken to the Number 2 High School. We were surprised to see a large gathering of students in the playground of the school; perhaps up to a thousand or more students were already there waiting for our arrival. About a third of these students were in Hmong outfits. Upon our arrival, we were taken to our reserved seats next to the Vice-Magistrate and the School Principle, surrounded by county officials. During the many speeches by local officials, we learned that the Chinese Congress had declared in 1987 that the Eight day of the Fourth month of the lunar calendar should be an official Hmong Festival. This year, this festival fell on May 6, and the county government sponsored the festival, so the Number 2 High School was selected as its venue. Following the introduction to all officials, including us, came speeches by county and school officials, which took nearly two hours under a somewhat hot and humid morning sun. The entertainment program included Hmong dances and songs as well as drama performed by students. The program concluded with a photo session with Hmong students and other performers. The lunch of the day was provided by the school and in the school cafeteria. Surprisingly, like all banquets in our honor, liquor was also provided for us in the school cafeteria.

After lunch, we briefly toured the school, and then went to the conference room to exchange information with county and school officials. The meeting began with a brief introduction of all present officials including us. The school principal gave a presentation of the school's student population and its effort to accommodate the Hmong program and Hmong students. He reported that the Number II High School had been designated in 2009 as an ethnic minority school, and his goal was for the school to become one of the national ethnic minority schools in the nation. Other officials also gave brief presentations about the socio-economic situation of the Hmong
and the progress as well as barriers in helping the Hmong to overcome some of their socio-economic situations. We were also asked to brief them about the Hmong in the United States. And, as done in my many previous discussions, I gave them a general overview of the Hmong in the United States, and because some officials attending this session had already heard some of my previous presentations, I devoted a large portion of my time for them to ask questions. Many of them did ask me questions related to high school and college tuition in the United States as well as about the American education system. I told them that K to 12 grade education is free in the United States, and free lunch is also provided to students from low-income families. Although students and their parents do have to pay university tuition, there are many forms of government and private financial assistance, and scholarships to help them, and because of such assistance many Hmong American students are able to attend prestigious and expensive universities, such as Stanford, Harvard and the University of California, Berkeley, etc..

Responding to a question from an educator about the differences between the American and Chinese education systems, I briefly told him that one of the major differences is that the American education system is decentralized while the Chinese one is centralized. The second difference I could think about is the teaching; Chinese teachers want students to memorize, imitate and take everything from teaching materials. On the other hand, American teachers challenge their students to think, be creative, and believe in hands-on learning. Third, I mentioned to him that Chinese students are better at test taking, but American students have more creative skills and critical thinking. Overall, the American education system allows the student to be an individual, a critical thinker and a creative person.

The farewell dinner banquet was hosted by Huang Yongfu, the Vice-Magistrate of Xingwen County. Participants included Mr. Li Guowen, Li Chengliang, Li Jingui, Yang Yonghua and several others. We thanked them for their warm welcome and generous hospitality, but deep down in our hearts, we were somewhat sad that we would leave them and the Hmong in Xingwen. They had given us the best of their food and drink, in addition to building the Roots-Searching Park in our honor. I personally feel that their friendship is a sincere one, and do hope to make it better in the years to come.

During my three visits to Xingwen, I gathered that the government of Xingwen has a visionary leadership, is open, generous, inclusive and does want sincere friendship with us. In establishing the Root-Searching Park and their overall hosting of us, the Xingwen government spent hundreds of thousands of Chinese Yuan. Moreover, the government and officials of Xingwen provided us the opportunity to not only learn from them and the Hmong in their county, but also to visit the Hmong in many parts of the triangle of Guizhou, Sichuan and Yunnan, and to talk to people from many walks of life.

The Hmong people in Xingwen are exemplary in their unity and collective efforts. Part of the funds used to build the Roots-Searching Park came from donations by the Hmong in the area. Moreover, many came to help building the road linking the Roots-Searching Park to the main street of the area, other came to help during the opening ceremony. Cooking and serving food
for 500 people at one long banquet required unity, cooperation and the will to make things happen; and the Hmong in Xingwen did it beautifully. Moreover, wherever we visited the Hmong people in Xingwen, we saw great cooperation and unity between Hmong officials and the local villagers; they worked like one hand of many different fingers. The people gave us the best of their food, drink and their dances and songs. And they did it with pride and wholeheartedly. I did feel as if the Hmong people here treated me as one of them; the welcoming ceremony at the Roots-Searching Park and the welcoming ceremonies of other Hmong villages touched me deeply. I do feel that I belong to these communities in many ways.

A banquet for 500 people

Overall, I have nothing but respect and admiration for the unity and cooperation between Xingwen government and its people, and between the different ethnic groups in the county. I am honored to have established my roots in Xingwen and to have become a small part of their life.

The next day, May 7, was the date of our departure from Xingwen for Yunnan Province. We left early and by noon, we had arrived in Yanjin, a Yunnanese county on the border of Sichuan. Officials from Yanjin County were waiting at the border of Yanjin town to welcome us to their county. We were taken to a local hotel where Mr. Xiong Hongqui and several women in Hmong outfits were waiting to welcome us. They helped us check in, and then we had our lunch banquet hosted by Mr. Xiong Hongqui, who was our main host in Yanjin. A retired military officer, Mr. Xiong is the Chairman of the People's Congress of Yanjin County. Like most prior banquets,
this banquet was rather formal beginning with an introduction, then a formal toast and followed with food and drink. Because of our limited time in Yanjin, we finished our banquet quickly and then headed toward the mountains to visit Hmong villages. First, we went to a village of the Ah Mao (another subgroup under the lumping name, Miao) quite far away from Yanjin. To get there, we passed through many mountains and ridges before reaching the newly built village. The villagers were at the village gate to welcome us with their Qeej, dance, and bowls of wine in their hands. As usual, each guest had to have a drink before being allowed to pass into the village. Mr. Xiong Hongqui led us to visit the village and several homes, and he explained that these villagers used to live high up on the nearby mountains. He continued that the government is very kind to them, building apartments in the village for them, and now their children can attend school, the villagers have access to road and medical care. When I asked about their farms and fields, he quickly replied that they no longer farm as the government gives each person about 100 Yuan per month for their living expenses. (100 Yuan is about $15; one kilogram of chicken breast - boneless, skinless - costs about 26 Yuan). And, their young people work in the city, so the old folks and children get money from their adult children in the city. Additionally, he told us that their former villages and fields have now been used to plant trees. When I heard that the people don't have to work anymore because the government gives them money and helps with other needs, it reminded me of American Indian reservations, where the government gives them money and brings them needed supplies. It made me think about a tiger in the zoo. What will happen to a very strong and proud tiger in his forest when it is captured and taken to the zoo? It is fed three times a day --- more food than it ever has before, but three years later, it becomes a dependent on the zoo keeper-- it no longer can hunt, so it cannot survive by itself.

The second village we visited was actually Mr. Xiong Hongqui’s old village; his mother and a brother still live there. It is a well-to-do village as most of its young people go to work in the city and send money back to rebuild their old homes in the village. Mr. Xiong proudly showed us one of these big houses. The house is well built and furnished with multiple stories; each is built with its own larger patio overlooking the river gorge below and the mountains on the two sides of the river. During the visit, we met the young grandmother of the house. She was probably in her late 40s and stays home with her four grandchildren. Her husband and their two sons and two daughters in-law do construction work in the city of Chongqing, and they usually return home only for the new year celebrations. They save money and when they return home, they keep adding another floor or another patio to the house. After touring the house, I asked "What is the big house for?" and our hosts, including Mr. Xiong seemed to be dumbfounded. They were surprised by my question and did not have an answer for me. I learned later on that these young Hmong work very hard in the city, but make their names in the village or the area around their homes. If they have a big house, people in the area will pay them more respect, and if one of their children wants to marry a local girl, the family of the girl is more likely to agree to their asking for her hand. This scenario reminded me of the 19th century Chinese in California, who worked so hard here, but no one treated them well, so they saved their money to return.
home, hoping to become big shot in their villages. On the way out, I asked Mr. Xiong, "What will happen when there are no more jobs for these unskilled young Hmong?" He quickly replied "They have saved a lot of money in the bank, so they can live the rest of their life on their savings." Later on, another person told me that China is now at the stage of rapid development, so there would always be work in the city for the young Hmong to do. Such optimism is now unusual in America, after the economic recession.

After a lovely dinner banquet in Yanjin town, we moved to a different room for our round table discussion. Mr. Xiong briefed us on the Hmong in Yanjin County and we briefed him on the Hmong in the United States. It was a long discussion after a few drinks as there were many questions for us about the Hmong in the United States as well as questions about education and economic development. As a former social worker and Ethnic Studies Professor, I used my experience and training in Social Work and Education to answer their questions as much as I could.

The next day, we left Yanjin early and headed toward Yiliang, home to a large population of the Yi ethnic group. As soon as we arrived in Yiliang Town we found the traffic to be so busy and chaotic partly due to construction work and lack of space to build any wider roads. It should be noted here that a series of earthquakes, ranging from the magnitude of 4.8 to 5.6 on the Richter scale, hit Yiliang and the surrounding area in September 2012, killing at least 81 people and damaging an estimated 20,000 homes. As a result, Yiliang Town was now very busy rebuilding itself after the damage done by the 2012 earthquakes. Yiliang and the whole triangle region is increasingly earthquake-prone. An earthquake in Yunnan in 1970 with a magnitude of 7.7 killed at least 15,000 people, a 2008 quake in Sichuan left nearly 90,000 people dead, and the most recent one, which occurred on August 3 2014, in Ludian, a town near Zhaotong, killed more than 500 people.¹

We passed through Yiliang Town and drove directly to Mushenge (木椿沟), an Ah Mao village next to a small creek, at the foothill of several high peaks. A group of women and officials were at the village gate to perform the welcoming ceremony, and as usual each guest had to have a drink or two before he or she was allowed to pass through the gate. This village, too, was built by the government as part of the relocation of people from the highlands to the lowlands. It appears to be well designed and built. From the outside of the village, it looks pleasant and rich with a mural wall of stories of the Ah Mao, and a tower that looks very similar to the drum towers of the Dong people. A statue of a large Qeej has been built on the top of one of the hills, overlooking the village, to symbolize the culture of the villagers. Also, the center of the village is the festival ground, where the Ah Mao hold their festivities. Now, it is used mostly to entertain tourists (most of them are Chinese tourists from outside the area). When taking a closer examination, however, it could be seen that the village was poorly maintained as it was not clean, the small creek was very polluted and the people there appeared to be poor and not well fed. As usual, many young people had gone off to work in the city, and only the older folks
stayed home. Those who want to grow crops for daily consumption must do it on the mountain sides and tops. We were told that many villagers are Christian and were Christians long before the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. Village officials said the Christians and non-Christians lived next to each other and inter-marriage between their children was very common. The administrator of the village offered us a simple lunch, including corn bread and rice. I took the corn bread and a potato, and told my host that corn bread reminded me about the hard life of my ancestors as well as the people in the triangle.\(^2\)

After lunch, we said goodbye to our hosts, and headed toward Zhaotong City, the capital of Zhaotong Prefecture. Zhaotong City, which is located on the Guizhou-Yunnan Plateau, is the largest city in northern Yunnan. The prefecture, which has a population nearly 6 million, is one of the poorest in Yunnan. As a result, the government encourages its people to work in other cities and bring income to support their villages and towns. Reportedly, more than half a million people from Zhaotong Prefecture went to work out of the prefecture in 2003, and many more have joined them in recent years.

After more than a hour on the expressway, we were told that a few officials from Zhaotong were waiting nearby to welcome us. Once we reached their car, which was parked on the roadside, Zhou Fuqiang, the Secretary of Xiong Qihua (the Chairman of the Zhaotong Political Consultative Conference), got out of his car to greet us and tell us that Mr. Xiong was busy with a meeting, so he had sent his Secretary to welcome us and take us to a village before going to Zhaotong City. We followed the car of the Secretary for nearly an hour (mostly on dirt roads) before reaching an Ah Mao village, known as the Five Star Village (五星苗寨). There, we went through a welcoming ceremony similar to the previous village, except that this was a much bigger village, and it has some fame as it was previously visited by Hu Jintao (Chinese President, 2002-2012). At the reception hall, we were served with simple Ah Mao food, including boiled pork and boiled potato. The elders here told us that their ancestors had moved from Guizhou to this area about 300 years ago, and they have ever since called this area their home. They also told us that many old houses were torn down in recent years to make room for the construction of new houses that are mostly built with the help of the government.

After a brief visit, we said farewell to our hosts and headed toward Zhaotong City. We were taken to a large local restaurant, where Mr. Xiong Qihua later joined us for dinner. Before going to Zhaotong, I was told that Mr. Xiong Qihua is the most influential official of Hmong descent in the triangle. He used to be a Deputy Mayor of Zhaotong City, and recently, he became the Chairman of the Zhaotong Prefecture's Political Consultative Conference. People I know credited him for being successful in his advocating for a hiring quota of 20 Hmong per year to work for Zhaotong Prefecture.
Like all banquets we had during the trip, this dinner banquet followed Chinese banquet etiquette, the host made the first and last toasts. Participants enjoyed their food and drink while exchanging conversation about the Hmong in Zhaotong and the United States. At one point, Mr. Xiong jokingly said he wanted young Hmong in Zhaotong to get their education in the United States, and asked us to tell President Barrack Obama to allow Hmong students to come to the United States. He might have been disappointed when I replied that the President of the United States does not have such power and authority to grant special privilege to one ethnic group. But, I said, there is a proper way to prepare young Hmong students for American university, and once they meet all the requirements (such as TOEFL, Test of English as a Foreign Language, and good academic records) for certain university, the university might accept them, and even provides them with basic financial aid.

The next day, Mr. Xiong and his wife came to have breakfast with us. We had another long discussion and exchange of information. After breakfast, a group of young women and men came to visit us. They were all in their Hmong outfits for a photo session with us. Soon after, two of our group flew to Kunming, leaving me and another person to go to Shimenkan (石门坎) in Weining County, Guizhou, where Samuel Pollard had lived, preached and died.

**Samuel Pollard** (1864 -1915), was a British Methodist missionary to Shimenkan, where he converted many of the Ah Mao in Weining, Guizhou to Christianity. He was also credited with building schools for Ah Mao children and created the Pollard Script or Miao script that is still in use today, mostly by Christian Ah Mao. He died in Shimenkan in 1915 and was buried on the hill where his home, church and school were located.

It was a long road snaking through many narrowed passes, steep hillsides and deep valleys, giving me an opportunity to get a glimpse of the hard life of the people there. I could only wonder how people can survive in such rugged terrain, harsh environment and isolation.

Once we reached Shimenkan, I got out of the car and looked around, sensed the sun and breathed the air. I could see why Pollard had selected this place as his base to preach Methodist Christianity. It is a mountainous region, where one can only see deep canyons, steep hills, and mountain ranges---one mountain after another. Many mountainsides, moreover, are composed of green terraced fields; it is breathtaking, beautiful, and look incredibly peaceful. We went straight to a small local restaurant to have our lunch, where a local elder who is an Ah Mao had been waiting for us. He is the local expert on the Rev. Pollard and his work in Shimenkan. At one point, he said Pollard had won the hearts and minds of the Ah Mao because he, unlike members of other ethnic groups in the region, treated the Ah Mao as equal to him and treated them with respect. He ate their food, wore straw shoes, and lived a very simple life among the Ah Mao. Prior to his arrival, the Ah Mao were badly treated by others, and were labeled as dumb and called other names. Pollard told them they were not dumb, but only suffered from lack of education and opportunities. Pollard converted them to Christianity and told them to preserve
their culture, and continue to use their Qeej. He also built a school there for their children, and as a result, some of their children went on to earn college and graduate degrees, proving that they could be just as good as anyone else, once they had an equal opportunity. Many Ah Mao continue to practice Christianity and have their own church in Shimenkan, which is now a small impoverished town.

Samuel Pollard’s grave

After lunch, we visited the ruins of Pollard's home, school and other structures. We also visited a museum that houses his documents, photographs, radio, typewriter, and photos of many students who went on to get higher education. We also stopped by his tomb, which was mostly destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. It was recently repaired and became an important site visited by both tourists and local people. In the late afternoon, we said goodbye to our friends and returned to Zhaotong.

We had our dinner in the hotel with Zhou Fuqiang (Secretary to Mr. Xiong Qihua), and several others, including a professor at Zhaotong Teacher College, staff of the Minority Affairs Bureau and a few other officials. We discussed many issues, mostly on academic topics and the professor's desire to write a book about the Hmong in Zhaotong. At one point, the professor asked me "Which country do you love more, China or America?" My response was very simple, "Do you love your mother more than your father?" Although I tried to be civilized, I felt a bit irritated by his question. Why would he ask such question, knowing that I am a citizen of the United States? I also asked him "Do you plan to tell readers of your book that the Hmong call themselves Hmong?" He said no because the name Miao is an official name recognized by the
Chinese government. During our discussion, though, he did use the name Hmong and so did all the Hmong at the table. And he did acknowledge that the Hmong in Zhaotong call themselves Hmong. In the United States, if a researcher calls someone else a name other than his or her own name, it can be considered an ethical or moral issue. A scholar is expected to research for new knowledge and disseminate what s/he has discovered to the public. If a scholar does not tell the truth, then what is a scholar for? Also, we scholars cannot blame everything on the government or use the government as an excuse for the faults of our own writings. I did not want to debate the issue with him, so I changed the topic to say that in China, people are more free than the United States. In China, I said, people can smoke in the car without asking permission from other passengers and writers can change the name of anything they feel like, etc.

The next day was May 10, the day of our departure to Kunming. After breakfast, Yang Yonghua and Ai Weimin came to my room to say goodbye. We shared notes about the overall visit, and I thanked them for their generosity, hospitality and guidance. They also thanked me for my help that had made it possible for them to come to the United States. We discussed other possibilities and the future development of the Roots-Searching Park in Xingwen. When talking about the future, Yang Yonghua broke down in tears that we had accomplished so much, but that there was still so much more to do. He cried because we are all now old and may not be able to do all the things we have wanted to. I, too, wanted to cry, but my tears have been dried out a long time ago over my many past experiences of tragedies and hardships. We said farewell, and both Yang Yonghua and Ai Weimin returned to their homes in Junlian and Xingwen. Yang Zhaowei, an employee of the Minority Affairs Bureau, took me and my friend to Zhaotong Airport for our short flight to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province.

We arrived in Kunming International Airport around noon and to my surprise Kunming had a brand new airport. In 2008, my wife and I had flown to Kunming and it was still the old airport; there was no mention of building another airport as the old one was in good condition and large enough to accommodate all flights to and from Kunming. I learned later that the financial crisis that struck America in 2008 led the Chinese government to take extreme measure to counter the tide of this crisis that might hit China. The government devoted a large budget to build many new airports, new cities, and other infrastructures, such as bullet train railways, subways, highways, bridges, and so on. Also, the Chinese government wants to urbanize the people of China, and to reverse the common knowledge in the past that 20 percent of the Chinese lived in the city and 80 percent lived in the countryside (it is already half in half now). These efforts have been made to provide jobs for the Chinese, so that the drop in demand for Chinese goods from the United States would not have a major impact on the Chinese economy.³

This is why everywhere I went in China at this time, I saw new skyscrapers, new cities outside the old city, new train stations, and new airports, new expressways, etc. Even a small town like Xingwen had its new town built outside of the old town. A high-ranking official in Xuyong told
me that he did not like the idea of building so many skyscrapers in his town, but it was the policy of the central government; they had pressured the local government to build and build with financial incentives from the central government.

Xiong Youyao, a good friend of mine since 1988, was waiting for me at the new Kunming International Airport. While driving me and my friend to our hotel, he told me that the new airport was not convenient for passengers for many reasons. First, most taxi drivers do not want to go there because they may not get passengers on their way back to the city, and they have to pay a parking fee, if they decide to wait for passengers. Secondly, the railways connecting the airport to the city have not yet been completed. Lastly, the airport is far away from town, so most local people do not want to drive that far to send their family or friend off. After checking into our hotel, Xiong Youyao took us to lunch and then drove us to Yunnan University of Nationalities- a university for ethnic minorities, where he teaches as an Adjunct Professor. He is a full time official at the Minority Affairs Bureau and a doctoral student at Shanghai Normal University. Yunnan University of Nationalities has branched out into two: the old one near the downtown is used mostly for graduate studies, and the new one, which has been newly built at the outskirts of the city is for undergraduate studies. When we were almost out of the city, he pointed to the many newly built skyscrapers along the two sides of the road and said, "People call these building 'ghost buildings'." He explained that no one lives in these buildings, so they stand tall in the dark at night-- just like a city of ghosts. This is another symptoms of the great effort of the Chinese government to build, and build as fast as they can, so its people can get jobs and China will look good as the fastest developing country. Too fast and too good to be true can mean the opposite of it. From the outside, most of the skyscrapers look great, but their interiors contain many problems and evidence of poor quality. In some of my hotel rooms in many new three or four star hotels, I found broken windows, improperly caulked bathtubs, and/or non-working faucets. Leaking water from bathtubs, toilets or faucets was common. In some rooms the doors and windows are not properly sealed, so one can hear noise from outside or the hallway.

Another issue we discussed was human trafficking, mostly from Vietnam to China. Xiong Youyao said that in the 1980s and 1990s, his free time was spent meeting with Hmong Americans and dealing with issues related to Hmong Americans. Now, it is all about helping girls from Vietnam and most of them are victims of human trafficking. Many Hmong and non-Hmong men go to Vietnam to court these girls. Once a girl falls into the trap of such a man, he will ask her to come with him to China, so he can marry her; he promises to give her a good life in China. She then comes with him on a motorcycle and they cross the unchecked border in the rural area. Once in China, he will sell her to a rural Chinese man who could not find a wife. Most of these cases go underground and no one would hear from the girl again. But there are a few cases that have surfaced because the sold girl runs away to the police. Occasionally the police would call Xiong Youyao for help because the victim does not speak Chinese. He said
these cases become more common now. Due to the one child policy, rural Chinese parents' preferences for boy children, and other factors, the sex imbalance in China has become a major problem. There are more than 20 million men in China without women, and the number keeps rising. Some of these men and their families are willing to pay up to US$20,000 for a wife.

We arrived at the brand new Yunnan University of Nationalities and walked into a classroom full of Hmong students. Xiong Youyao had called them earlier to gather in this room to meet with me, so they came. He told me that these students had been specially selected by him based on their Hmong language skills. He explained that several years ago a killing had occurred in Sipsong Panna and the provincial government had sent officials to investigate the incident. During the investigation, these officials learned that those police officers and others who made the report could not speak the language of those involved in the killing. As a result, many issues were raised about the accuracy of the report. The issue of the language barrier was brought up to the provincial government, and a decision was made that officers and officials who work in the minority areas must speak the language of the ethnic minority in the area. Consequently, a policy was made to give special admission preference to students who speak a minority language to enter Yunnan University of Nationalities. This issue is an urgent matter for the Hmong in the triangle as most young Hmong officials there do not speak Hmong, though their Hmong identity appear to be strong. I also shared with Xiong Youyao that bilingual civil servants in California get more pay than monolingual civil servants. So, it gives an incentive for students to learn two or more languages.

I was delighted to speak to these students in Hmong, though some understood me better than the others and this was due to regional accent. Moreover, some were more familiar with Hmong American accent than others, especially those from very rural areas that have no access to Hmong American song, video, and other media. Basically, they wanted me to share with them information about Hmong Americans and how to prepare for university education in America, so I spent more than an hour with them, mostly answering their questions.

At one point during the discussion, I asked them about the prospects for them to get jobs after graduation. Almost all of them said they may not get the jobs they were trained for as it is too competitive and too difficult to get what they want. Xiong Youyao also agreed that their chances of getting jobs were very slim. He said, for example, his office had recently advertised one position, and several hundred people had applied for the job; many of them were overly qualified for the job. One male student said he is likely to "ntaus zog" or become a laborer in the big city like most of his Hmong friends. Xiong Youyao told me later that there are currently 10,000 young Hmong living and working in Shanghai; they have become part of the so called Chinese "floating population" or migrant workers. Xinhua reported in 2011 that the Chinese floating population had exceeded 220 million. They work in big cities like Shanghai, but do not have the 'Hukou' (户籍), so they do not have the privilege to enjoy the economic miracle of the big
The Hukou system is a record of household and residency registration required by law in China. It is more than just an identification because it contains an official record of personal information pertaining to: name, date of birth, parents, spouse, and residency. Before China changed its economy from a socialist to a ‘market socialist’ one, the Hukou system was strictly enforced, preventing people from moving from one place to another. During the era of the Chinese economic miracle, millions of rural and poor Chinese and ethnic minorities went to work in big and prosperous cities, such as Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Shanghai and so on. It has been their cheap labor that made the Chinese economic miracle possible; cheap labor contributing to cheap merchandise moving from China to other countries, in return for the flow of dollars. Also, these unskilled workers do most of the hard work in building so many skyscrapers in Shanghai. While in Shanghai in the summer of 2008, I told a friend there that I would like to talk to some of the floating people in Shanghai, and he told me not to ask for trouble. One morning, I walked from my hotel to one of the construction sites of a skyscraper, and saw several of them camped at the site. I pretended to be a local and talked to some of them. Although my poor Chinese did not help me to get more information, I did learn that they were all floating people. An uncle of my wife took us to a local restaurant and the waitress, who did not understand Shanghai language, took the wrong order. Her boss yelled at her and told her that would deduct the wrong order from her paycheck. Our very kind and generous uncle intervened and offered to pay for the cost. We learned that she came from Anhui province. She, too, is a floating person. I was told that natives of Shanghai do not generally work in local restaurant, but only in five-star restaurant, prestigious jobs or jobs in international company.

Because the floating people do not have local Hukou, they are subjected to many abuses, such as getting less paid, their children have no access to local schools, and they have no one to speak for them. Further, some heartless businessmen take advantage of them; sometime not paying them for many months or requiring them to work overtime without overtime pay. Furthermore, local people look down on them. Their experience reminds me of the Chinese in the late 19th century California; they were known as Ku-li (bitter strength) who were willing to do the work that no citizen wanted to do. Also, the plight of the floating people is similar to the illegal immigrants in the United States, who take the work that no citizen wants to do and they are blamed for social problems and so on.

After class discussion, officers of the Hmong student club joined us for dinner at a local restaurant. There we continued our discussion on Hmong issues. These students also shared with me their life before coming to the university. For example, some of them lived in a very rural area, where they had to help their parents in the fields and help to raise their brothers and sister. They all knew about poverty; a few of them said their fathers work out of town to support their families. The majority of them came from farming families and were poor, relying heavily on scholarships to keep them in school. They also know that they are the few chosen or the lucky ones. Most of their friends back home do not have the opportunity to come to university because of the lack of financial support or poor academic records.
To mark the conclusion of the dinner with Hmong students and the end of my visit to the triangle of Guizhou, Sichuan and Yunnan, I ordered one dish of Cej (in Hmong) or qiao (荞) in Chinese. It is from the family of buckwheat. Hmong oral stories often mention "kuam cej kuam xua iab" or bitter buckwheat, the crop that they use only as their last resort to prevent starvation. On the highlands with poor soils, they could not grow rice or corn, so they grew buckwheat, which can thrive on poor acidic soils, without excessive nutrients and nitrogen. Sometimes, they grew all of them in different fields: rice, corn and buckwheat. When they ran out of rice, they used corn, and when they ran out of corn, they turned to buckwheat. I ordered this bitter staple food to remind me of my humble background and my ancestors who used to live in these regions. It was my way to say I understand my history and the hardships of my people.

The next day, I flew out of Kunming to Shanghai to prepare myself for the long flight back home in California. On May 12, I left Shanghai for San Francisco; thus my trip ended. The visit to the triangle provided me with much information to be sorted out. I befriended so many people and was a recipient of kind hospitality and generosity from the people of the region; many of them treated me as a long lost brother coming home to them. Wherever I went, they gave me the best food and drink they had. Many counties provided me with the best lodgings they had. I will cherish my memories of their friendship, generosity and kind hospitality.

In brief, I have always wondered why the Hmong people survive in any place they go—whether in the isolated, remote mountains or in the lowland practicing rice paddy fields, in the rural village or in the city, and in impoverished Laos or in America, the richest and most developed country on earth. I think I found some of the answers among the Hmong in the triangle. Some of the Hmong in the triangle live not only in isolation, but poverty due to their environment and lack of access to information, market and technology. In these areas, they can only grow corn, potato and a few other crops, such as buckwheat and so on.

During the Long March, Mao Zedong and his Red Army found the Hmong in the triangle to be "so poor that the women had to remain in their houses because they had no clothes. Teenage children worked naked in the fields. Miao families often had only one pair of trousers to be shared when needed by three or four adult males. It was also the land of the opium poppy. At that time the infant mortality rate was about fifty percent. Often families sold some of their young children to survive. The people of Miao lived on maize because they were too poor to afford rice."6 Although the Hmong in the triangle now no longer grow poppy, their backyard has becomes the territory of drug trafficking. One police officer told me to be extra careful when I went to the triangle because drug traffickers use the triangle to send their drugs to other parts of the region. And the new drugs such as methamphetamine are much more dangerous than the products from the poppy Hmong used to grow in China nearly a hundred years ago.
Like the soldiers who survived the Long March, those who survive such treacherous journeys became the strongest. The Hmong in the triangle, who have survive despite their extreme environment and other hardships, can survive anywhere and in any environment. The Hmong, like bristle-cone pine on the rock, are exposed to all types of weather, climate and conditions, but they won't die. As Confucius said "Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." Ralph Blum said, "Nothing is predestined: The obstacles of your past can become the gateway to new beginnings." And, Sun Tzu said "Confront them with annihilation, and they will then survive; plunge them into a deadly situation, and they will then live. When people fall into danger, they are then able to strive for victory."

Villagers and Dr. Yang on the site of the future Roots-Searching Park

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2. Many officials agreed when I mentioned that in many ways maize (which the Hmong in the triangle call mi) had in many ways saved our Hmong and Ah Mao people from starvation. They did not know it had first been imported into China from America; the introduction of maize, which grows well in the highlands without water, had a major impact on Hmong as the Chinese population expanded rapidly, pushing Hmong and Ah Mao further into the inhospitable mountains.

3. To learn more about this issue, see "How China Fooled the World". Online link to view youtube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2-axIk5yyI


5. China’s ‘floating population’ exceeds 221 mln. Xinhua (March 1, 2011). Online link to view from: http://www.china.org.cn/china/2011-03/01/content_22025827.htm