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Journal Entry: Er Hai Lake

July 18, 2004

Today was a very full day. We started with a boat ride in the rain across Er Hai Lake. Er Hai Lake is the seventh largest lake in China. It's just east of Dali, and on a map dwarfs the city. Our spirits were a bit low when we started our voyage as we've seen so much rain, and it was cool and damp on top of that. But after we got going the rain subsided, and eventually became pretty warm allowing most of us to venture to the prow of the boat and enjoy the views. On the north side of the lake we visited an old fishing village named Pan Xi. Right on the shore was a very old Guan Yin (Buddhist Goddess of Mercy) Temple and an ancestral shrine. The ancestral shrine had the names of people posted outside who had made donations. Both buildings were very modest and it soon became apparent that the village had not received any types of makeovers intended to attract the tourist eye. The homes in the village built were built very close to one another and separated only by narrow alleys. Garbage seemed to be everywhere, and Eileen explained that traditionally everyone buried their garbage, but the introduction of more products packaged in plastic posed a new problem they'd never had to deal with before. There really wasn't any garbage collection system. In the center of the village was a courtyard with two large buildings adjacent to it. These buildings had served as communal buildings from the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution when the village itself functioned as a cooperative. Looking around it was easy to picture many families sitting around the communal kitchen with the men and women wearing the Mao jackets and pants symbolic of that era.

Later that evening we were treated to a performance of Bai music featuring traditional instruments such as the *Pipa* (lute), *sangxi* (three-stringed guitar) and *arhu* (two-stringed fiddle). The music was similar to traditional Han music.

Before the day was over, Eileen led a discussion in which we responded to the question of "What is authentic?" Some of the participants observed that certain villages appeared to be more "authentic" than others. By that, it was inferred that they were less intended for tourists (less colorful costume, less exhibits, etc.) and therefore more authentic. The fear was expressed that if minority villages in particular continued to open themselves to outsiders – both Han and foreign, there might be a gradual loss of culture. This could be experienced through less use of minority languages, assimilation of outside influences and of course intermarriage. Some of us that had traveled to Tibet noted that there was a much finer line of co-existence in the relationship between the Bai and Naxi with the Han, than between the Tibetans and the Han. For the most part, the Tibetans had clung more closely to their traditions and language, but we acknowledged that it had been at a cost. Some participants noted that the increased interaction between the Bai and Naxi with outsiders was an inevitable process, and similar to the behavior of any group of people that wanted to improve their standard of living. For that reason, I concluded that while not everything we saw was traditional, everything we saw was authentic.

July 21, 2004

Today we walked through another village along a lake. This time the village was along a lake some 20-30 km northwest of Lijiang known as La Shi Hai Lake. The village was known as Dayu

Cun – and it had been settled for about 200-years. The Nature Conservancy had recently designated Dayu Cun as an official ecotour village for its strategic position on the lake. La Shi Hai Lake itself had once been a prosperous cormorant fishing village, but introduction of new types of fish offset the balance of food and compromised the levels of trout that had once existed. With 176 different households, and some 4000 people, the village was still quite large. But agriculture had supplanted fishing as the main form of sustenance.

We started on one end of the village and walked on the dirt road that bisected the village. All of the homes had a beautiful view of the lake. It was very peaceful and seemed a world away from the bustling city of Kunming where we'd been only a week earlier. The houses were mainly mud brick and straw, and many of them had storage areas above the first floor for firewood. Each home grew a multitude of crops including potatoes, corn, beans, peppers, turnips and squash. Raspberries and edelweiss grew on the side of the road. Chickens, pigs and goats walked freely. There were many dogs and cats as well. Eventually we came to a home that had prepared lunch for us ahead of time. We entered the family courtyard where two large tables sat waiting for us underneath the eave of the home that provided welcome relief from the sun. A cow was tied to a post and sat watching us. We were served a couple of bottles of Dali Beer, some water and some Coke. The lunch consisted of cooked mushrooms, beans, spinach, corn and rice, all grown in the village, as well as fish from the nearby lake. After lunch, a Naxi village elder spoke with us. He talked about the change he'd seen over the years. He said when he was young there had occasionally been bear and wolves in the village, but since more and more of the land had been turned to farmland they had all disappeared. This claim matched the briefing we'd received on the area from the Nature Conservancy. He recalled stories about the Chinese Civil War. "On one occasion, Kuomintang troops entered the village and warned everyone that the Red Army would enter and take all of their knives and forks because according to communism you should only have one of each. Therefore, we hid everything except for one knife and fork each". He also sang a Naxi song in which he repeated the same melody over and over while singing whatever words entered his head at the time. Afterwards he noted that this type of singing was very common among the Naxi. I thought it very clever and rhythmic. I managed to videotape about 60 seconds worth. After this we visited the village elementary school. The classrooms were centered round a courtyard. They were small and consisted of wooden desks intended for two students each. It reminded some of us of the movie "Not One Less". A teacher wandered into the school and talked about his life as a teacher. Like many rural teachers he had had 2-3 years of post-secondary education. He said that the salary wasn't that good, and that there was little in terms of supplies. There were no computers in the school. There was a basketball court outside. The rims were bent, and there were no nets. Grass was growing heavily through the pavement. Realizing that this village and school were probably much better off than most in rural China, I couldn't help but wonder how China as a nation could ever meet the ambitious goals that it continues to set for itself.