

THIS BEAUTIFUL EARTH: PHOTO ESSAY BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA 'THE PEAKS OF GUILIN'

The boat moved downstream amid the gray, misty landscape, looking like part of a Chinese ink painting. On both shores of the river appeared in succession—as if the scroll of such a painting were being unrolled—wonderful, mysterious rocky shapes. An old Chinese tale tells of a man who disappears into his own landscape painting. I imagined myself to be that man as we traveled down the river in Guilin.

Peaks pointed like paint brushes, rocks resembling a saber or a mallow flower, and Longtou-shan, “Dragon Head Mountain,” with its two horn-shaped peaks—there unfolded the great panorama of myriad summits jutting aloft in grandeur and grace.

It was a spring drizzle. Our guide said, “Guilin is most beautiful in the mist and rain.” Mountains faded in the hazy skies, their greenery suspended in midair. The beauty of those mountains and the river conveyed nature’s spirit. The Earth, a master painter of this magnificent scenery, her divine brush knowing no artifice, cleansed the viewer’s inner vision and carried his soul on a flight into the vast skies.

The day was April 26, 1980. My fifth visit to China was already more than half complete. We drove from the city of Guilin to a town called Yangti, and then walked for a while on a narrow path through a bamboo forest to a pier on the shore of the Li River.

When we were on the riverbank, several children came over. Two girls were peddling Chinese herbal medicines, carrying their articles for sale suspended from poles balanced on their shoulders. They called out: “We have every kind of medicine. Please choose whatever you wish!”

They were probably assisting with their family business. With plaits of hair hanging down unadorned, their eyes sparkled with serenity. I pointed at my forehead and said with smile, “Do you have a medicine to make my brain smarter?”

With a composed smile, one of the girls replied, “We just sold out of that.” Bright laughter broke out around us.

Impressed by her witty reply, I said, “That’s very unfortunate for me and my traveling companions.”

Afterward my wife and I bought many of their herbs as souvenirs. I wonder how those bright girls are doing now.

Our boat glided along on the exquisite jade-green surface of the Li River. About this splendid scenery was once sung, “The river flows—a sash of blue-green silk; the mountains lay—jade beads adorning a headdress.” The peaks stood like rows of painted screens. Out of the woods flew a bird, followed by two more. The wingtips of a swallow sliced the air just above the surface of the water.

In contrast with the poetry of the verdant landscape outside, a tense discussion continued aboard. At that time, hostility between China and the Soviet Union was growing. Soviet aggression in Afghanistan near the end of the previous year had further intensified China’s criticism.

Some members of the Chinese delegation did not think favorably of my visits to both nations to promote friendship. They told me that although I was building a bridge between China and Japan, if I continued to visit the Soviet Union, Japan’s relationship with China would be seen as disingenuous. They asked me not to visit the Soviet Union anymore.

While I appreciated their frank opinion, I could not agree. I said: “I understand your

sentiment. The times, however, are changing rapidly. Before the 21st century, we must set the course for all of humanity in the direction of peace. This is not a time for powerful nations to be caught up in mutual enmity and hatred. Eliciting good from one another to build harmony and supporting one another to create a new era—such humanistic approaches are what is most needed.”

Progress, however, did not come easily. The Chinese delegates continued to dwell on the same question: Which is more important, China or the Soviet Union?

Meanwhile, the beautiful scenery continued to float by outside, unpredictable, constantly changing. If I looked away, an entirely different scene would come into my view moments later. Likewise, the course of history cannot be judged solely by what is presently before our eyes.

The Li River flows unceasingly around many bends and curves into the Gui River, which, in turn, joins the mighty Zhu before it drains into the South China Sea. No one can stop the flow of time; it keeps moving toward the ocean of humanity where all peoples are united.

I kept speaking with earnestness: “I love China dearly. China is so important. At the same time, I love humanity. Thinking of humanity as a whole is essential. The Soviet leadership gave me a promise that they would never attack China, which I related to the Chinese leadership. My sole wish is for friendship between your two countries. I sincerely hope that you will someday understand my thoughts and feelings.”

Less than 10 years later, the conflict between China and the Soviet Union ended. Indeed, the Soviet Union no longer exists. The current of history seems to change everything. What remains constant, however, is the strength and vitality of the people living with faith in tomorrow.

Beyond the banks of the river now stretched a rustic, pastoral scene. I was told that it was rice-planting season. Some people were doing laundry by the river while others washed vegetables. I saw sheep and water buffaloes. A fisherman and his flock of fishing birds were resting by the water.

As the riverboat continued downstream through its picturesque setting, the rain stopped unnoticed. The spring rain turned to misty clouds, enveloping the mountain peaks. By the time we reached the town of Yangshuo, the destination of our river trip, the sun broke through. The river water started to glitter a pale green, reflecting inverted mountains. The boat smoothly moved from one floating peak to the next upon the jade-green water.

Traveling the Li River is beautiful in the sun as well as in rain or fog, it is said. In our short boat trip, we saw the river’s many faces. Alighting on the pier at Yangshuo, I glanced once again at the Li River flowing in splendid spring colors.

This area was the bottom of an ocean 300 million years ago. An underwater palace of prehistoric times surfaced to form the mountain range of Guilin. Compared to the eternal flow of time, even a thousand years pass as swiftly as a galloping horse.

Against the currents of ageless time, one riverboat sailed upstream to the city of Guilin, its image an endearing reminder of the ordinary people of China, who live each precious moment with all their might. With prayer for the great happiness of my friends in China, I clicked the shutter of my camera.

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