



The Shennong River is a green jewel that flows into China's Yangtze. It is the ancestral home of a proud people whose way of life will soon vanish.

The Shennong River Trackers
A Vanishing Way of Life

by James Michael Dorsey

They call themselves, "River Trackers," and they are the last generation of a profession that has helped keep China's commerce flowing for centuries.

The Shennong River joins the Yangtze east of the Chongqing (Southwest China) in the center of a natural wonder known as the Three Gorges. Giant granite walls rising straight out of the water for a thousand feet (about 300 m) form the theater through which these rivers flow. Only a few feet above the ancient waterline, a thin ledge runs for several miles, hardly visible from the river. Barely two feet wide (60 cm), it was cut by hand from solid rock over many generations.

Thousands died to cut this track, for it required balancing on the side of a sheer cliff where one misstep committed the hapless victim to a 12-knot current racing below. When the water level fell or a particularly large boat was unable to traverse and got stuck in the Gorges, local "Trackers" went into action.

Stripped to a loincloth or sometimes naked, they formed a human chain on both sides of the river. Shouldering heavy ropes, they would drag the ship along by brute force until it was able to float freely. This was their work for centuries. It was hard, dirty and necessary. The Trackers were proud of their profession, but over time, engines made them obsolete.

The latest and final generation has retreated to the rear of a box canyon near the origin of the Shennong. With no ships to rescue anymore, they now make a living ferrying tourists up the river to their village. When the river is low they still strip down and pull their clients along in a small facsimile of their former glory. To my loss, when I visited them, it had been raining for a month and everything was flooded.

We found the Trackers at the confluence where the muddy pollution of the Yangtze meets the Emerald green of the Shennong. Dozens of them wait in their fragile boats, bobbing on the churning water, in hopes of securing a customer.

They are lean and wiry men, coffee-colored from a life under the sun. Many chew betelnut, palm nuts from the areca tree. Their rotten teeth give them away. Most were dressed in a concoction of rags and T-shirts that could only have been provided by their clientele from the outside world. A few spoke broken English. They are savvy business people and ready to barter a price to get you into their boats.



James Dorsey

They loaded us into what I would call a *sampan*, a Chinese wooden boat usually from 12 to 15 feet (about 3.5 — 4.5 m) long that sometimes includes a small house on board for shelter. But they called them Peapods.

River Trackers wait for customers.

The boats appeared ancient and pieced together from whatever scrap of wood could be pulled out of the river. I could see no nails and only a little bailing wire. They seemed to be assembled by a tongue and groove method, cut by hand and fitted by master craftsmen. There was a torn and worn sailcloth over the main cockpit to lessen the broiling sun, but the crew must be directly under its rays to handle the boat.

These men have been making boats like this for 2,000 years, and their appearance did not give away their seaworthiness.

Each boat carried a crew of six. A young boy sat on the bow, legs dangling, calling out the rocks ahead. A coxswain stood in the center and called out cadence in a loud singsong for the four others manning the paddles on either side. The paddlers sang along in rhythm, and as we pushed off onto the river, the melody was quite pleasant.

Occasionally a paddle was exchanged for a pole to push off from narrow cliff walls that towered above us. As we headed back into the canyon, the emerald green gave way to crystal clear water, and I could see fish darting below us.

Several times the coxswain pointed to caves high above us. With my zoom lens, I could make out what was left of rotted wooden burial boxes inside them. Village elders were laid to rest in these caves that now stood 100 feet (30 m) above us. Perhaps long ago, the river level was much higher. If not, I could see no way for people lacking modern equipment to place such large boxes that high on a sheer cliff. I speak no Chinese, and none of our crew spoke enough English to explain just how they got there. I have seen similar burial sites on the Northwest Coast of the Americas. Most have been looted by museums long ago.



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Floating along China's Shennong River

happiness comes from a job well done and living in the moment. They do not have material possessions, but they have great peace.

After several miles, we came to a large sand bar. Here, we got our first glimpse of the women, for they are not allowed to travel on the boats when occupied by foreigners. The women had spread brightly colored blankets along the sand, and these were covered with trinkets, knick-knacks and junk. We beached the Peapods and were ushered to the sales area.

Some of the objects were interesting, such as the carved wood and painted stones, while others were obviously brought in from the nearest tourist shops. Still others looked as though they had spent a great deal of time in the water and were salvaged in hopes of selling them to us.

The women were very friendly and not at all "in our face," as many Chinese merchants tend to be in the large cities. My wife bought a beautiful little box that appeared to be wood painted with cinnabar.

Beyond the sandbar, I could see a few huts back in the jungle. This was their village, and while no offer was made to take us there, I motioned with my camera in that direction. One of the headmen drew his finger across his throat, making it clear their home was not open to us this day.

We had begun the day in the cool of early morning, and now the sun was directly overhead. It was brutally hot and humid and time to say goodbye. As we boarded our boats, the women all came down to the shore to wave. They seemed very happy, and while their way of life is vanishing, I cannot help but feel they will continue to adapt.

We glided along in silence with only the call of cicadas and the churn of paddles through the water. Occasionally the rock walls gave way to thick forest and brightly colored birds.

It has always struck me how the local people in isolated areas such as this seem so in tune with their surroundings. Totally focused on the job at hand and singing loudly as they paddled, these men were obviously a happy bunch. By western standards, they are poor, yet time and again, such people have shown me that true

In a couple more years the giant dam project being built at Wuhan will flood this area. The water level will rise more than 200 feet (60 m) and the Shennong will no longer exist. The current will carry burial boxes away and the Peapods will not be strong enough to navigate the new river. Their village must be moved to higher ground, and that means leaving the valley.



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A way of life more than 2,000 years old is coming to an end.

In a couple years, the giant dam project being built at Wuhan will flood this area. The water level will rise more than 200 feet (60 m) and the Shennong will no longer exist.

Back at the river mouth, I paid the boatmen. They lined up to bow, and as I walked away, one smiled at me and said, "Thank you."

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