

## CHINA CAVING

The Club's cavers are still going out to China regularly to survey the countless systems to be found there.

Eddie Edkins recalls a recent episode which sticks in his memory.

### Goat Herd Cave

We visited a stretch of hillside a few miles, south of Yanhe town on the west side of the mysterious but infectious Wu River which winds its way on towards the mighty Yangse near Wu Long. The approach road was very steep in places causing the heavy goods vehicles carrying rocks spinning their wheels on the slippery, stone surface. We parked close to where Yanhe's new dam is being constructed amid the sound of noisy construction vehicles and the chaos of materials being shunted around. A 35 minute walk down an interesting even-sided valley led us westwards to the entrance of Goat Herd Cave, our objective that day. The walk was punctuated by plenty of interest, the usual paraphernalia of Chinese rural sights and situations; a grand party was in process. We mused for a while at a sort of Chinese Ponderosa where the servants were all wearing bright red tunics; a large man-sized wooden box, which Bruce identified as a coffin, added to the scene; assortments of ducks and chickens were darting everywhere; a dry stone wall very neatly finished helped frame this collage of activity. Various items of machinery in the process of repair or being cannibalised, seeming almost abandoned, were scattered around. Many of these dismemberments were accompanied by very cheerful and smiling faces!

Alongside the road on the left of the track, which had long since been levelled out, the remains of the previous day's flood waters flowed innocuously into a quite large cave entrance set back about 20 metres. We accessed this entrance by descending the slope and clambering over a couple of metres of wall. The whole length of road hereabouts has been raised, levelled and supported by this wall sometime in the past.

Only a small trickle of water led into the entrance of Goat Herd Cave today and we entered the cave in the firm knowledge that much of the work has already been done surveying a large proportion of the system. Our objective however, was to try and establish a link with another discovery made earlier in the expedition. Bruce believed that the pitch, about 230 metres into the cave, would lead to the cave at a lower elevation. The first job is to descend the pitch by using a fixed rope which would enable us to return safely if our hunch was wrong. Time was moving on swiftly and since we didn't start out until after lunch time we were playing catch up! As we progressed through the long easy section of the cave and being so busy and fixed on our goal, we hardly notice the young man who had tagged along behind. Pleased to have more company than just Bruce, I checked him out and realised he was more ill equipped than myself. He has no source of light with him. (These sorts of event happen many times in whatever activity you carry out in China and

in any case these people are naturally adept in conditions where nowadays in the west, all sorts of sophisticated inventions and qualifications are a prerequisite to complete an activity). But even I had to concede a light in total darkness can have its advantages, especially in a cave!

When the pitch was rigged Bruce gave our new companion a small LED light bulb used for reading survey instruments and ushered him on his way back out of the cave to safety. He was so obviously disappointed not to be able to accompany us - but of course we wouldn't have time to explain and teach him SRT techniques if SRT became mandatory later on! In fact, fifteen or so minutes before we entered the cave, we came across a group of Chinese who appeared to be looking for something; but limited communication confounded any proper understanding and when we departed after a very brief encounter they seemed quite unhappy. They wandered off apparently grumbling a little, in another direction without doubt confident of their knowledge that they could show us around their cave system, moving with great competence carrying simple hand torches of which only one was in use. He must have been part of this group!

It took us what seems to me to be an eternity before Bruce found the junction in question, somewhere off to the right where our surveying work must start. By this time I had absolutely no idea where we were relative to the surveyed section, after all it was my first visit to this cave and I hadn't done my homework! We stopped briefly for Bruce to get the survey gear out of his sack and he gave me the tape, all of fifteen seconds and we were off again. It was my turn to lead now, and I have to say, the job of being the tape man and finding the next likely survey station gives only the misguided illusion of being the decision maker and pioneer in the team; the real work is done by the person who records the data and also sketches. The sketch work requires a detailed impression of the journey through the cave, as many cross sections of the system as practically possible and to keep an eye on the tape man and others who might be involved in surveying. This requires working in harmony. Bruce is a master of this, probably being a professional surveyor helps! So as I went off on my first leg there was time to reflect on the cave as it was unravelled before me but being attached the tape is also like a dog being restrained on its lead as it eagerly pulls its master forward getting disapproving yanks in response. Surveying that day with Bruce was a bit like that!

Most of the cave system is formed as immature vadose passage. In flood conditions the cave would take tremendous amounts of water and though this was not so apparent in the larger initial passages, as one gets to the lower sections, there is much evidence of flooding. The whole system has undergone some change in the very recent geological past due to both the effect of sediment invasion and boulder blockages brought in from the surface landscape which itself will have undergone change due to local irrigation and slope removal. This is to be expected of almost any Chinese cave since quite often surface conditions pre-suppose this type

of evolution. Caves and karst are an intrinsic part of the country life for most Chinese living in a karst environment.

A little further on, and it became apparent, even to me, that we were moving in a clockwise direction and that was how we were to eventually return to the pitch. For a short while we entered a section which was long and fairly straight with a roof which slowly reduced down and in doing so showed evidence of residual matter from very recent flooding. This probably occurred even when the others were here a few days ago! Is that why we're doing it today – had they lost the plot? A little further after the end of this section we arrived at a further junction and Bruce, thankfully, offered to check it out. Before I had time to get any relaxation out of this respite he arrived back again indicating with haste that the right hand turn was the way on. He thought the pitch linking the two caves would be close. He was right and after a quick look round sure enough there was the base of the pitch.

This confirmed that there was no further exploration required and we could return to the surface. I thought "great", Bruce hadn't been taking any prisoners today and had forged through the cave, for me anyway, at quite a pace which I could easily keep up with. When we stopped earlier, I had felt guilty about taking time out to do the necessary to raise my blood sugar and since this takes several minutes at least of adjustment before I can proceed confidently, it always seems to incense those who don't want to be held up! But this was my first and only SRT experience in China albeit only about 60 feet but it seemed to me that there was much more

water falling from the top of the pitch, was it raining outside? Feeling a little de-skilled using borrowed gear I ascended the pitch cautiously.

We proceeded quickly back to the entrance and thankfully when we exited, some 40 minutes or so later, the weather was fine and we commenced the long, laborious walk along the valley and up those nagging roller-coaster type steep bits often found in a karst landscape. Bruce set the pace and soon started to extend the lead but then he suddenly stopped and on approaching him I saw that he had taken an interest in a recently built dry stone wall so I took photos of him proudly standing in front of the wall which with Herculean effort, he attempted to re-build! He soon outpaced me again but it didn't matter as it was a wonderful quiet, subdued sort of evening and of course everything always seems different when you look at it from another perspective! Well, it was quiet until a small motorbike screamed to a halt beside me and the rider pointed to the empty pillion seat behind him. I was on like a shot and a few minutes later passed Bruce who was beginning to puff a little as he climbed a slope and I experienced the warm expected glow within, turning to see his look of surprise as he returned my wave. "Only two miles to go Bruce!" I shouted. The rider skilfully negotiated the steep and bumpy sections and dropped me at the van where the driver was relaxing engrossed in listening to some Chinese classical music. The rider waved to me in a knowing fashion and I knew without being told that he would return to pick up Bruce. Both Bruce and myself felt that the rider showed generosity of spirit that gave an added to an extremely enjoyable day.

## CHINA UPDATE

### GUANGXI 2010: BRIEF REPORT ON EXPEDITION ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS - TONY HARRISON

Guangxi 2010 (the 23rd China Caves Project expedition) was a "two-centre" trip, with visits planned to Leye County and to neighbouring Fengshan County, both in the north-west of Guangxi Province. Both areas had been visited previously by the China Caves Project; Leye in 2000 and 2002, and Fengshan twice in 2004 and again in 2005. For reasons beyond the expedition members' control, somewhat more time was spent in Leye than in Fengshan, compared to pre-expedition plans which were for a majority of caving time to be spent in Fengshan.

In Leye the expedition achieved much more than a two-day exploration of just one shaft which was envisaged before the team arrived in China. This was because about 6 days proved to be available for caving, as our stay in the county was extended to allow attendance at all the celebrations taking place (see below). The team focused on an area just to the south of the famous Dashiwei Tiankeng, which had not been visited by the earlier China Caves Project or other western expeditions to Leye. In total 13 caves were explored. The bulk of these were vertical shafts, some exceeding 100m in depth, but regrettably most had little horizontal development at the bottom. The most exciting find was Ye Zhu Tuo, a multi-pitch series of rifts which was not bottomed in the time available and which becomes a key target for a future team in the area.

In Fengshan the expedition's objective was to search for an underground link between the 38.5km Jiang Zhou cave system in the south of the county, and the extensive Ma Wang Dong system a few kilometres to the north. Whilst a link was not proved in the available time, considerable progress was made. Visits to the northern series in Jiang Zhou produced significant lengths of previously undiscovered passages but no links were achieved with other caves to the north. One of these, Long Shi Shaft (discovered in 2005), was the focus of particular attention, and from the foot of this 80m shaft, a large new passage was discovered heading in the direction of Ma Wang Dong. Yet again lack of time frustrated this attempt but the cave may well prove to be key in effecting an eventual link between the two large systems.

The main reason for the team visiting Leye County at the start of the expedition's time in China was to celebrate the strong relationship which has been built up between the China Caves Project and the local community in Leye, particularly since



2010 was the 10th anniversary of the first visit to the county by the China Caves Project. In the event, our visit coincided with an assessment by UNESCO of a submission by the recently established Leye-Fengshan National Geopark for listing in the UNESCO Global Geoparks Network. News of the success of this application came through whilst the team was in Leye and led to further celebrations in which the team was glad to be involved.

The findings of the expedition are now being assessed and surveys drawn up for publication in the near future.

Troglomorphic biological studies were carried out during the expedition (notably of millipedes and isopods); the findings will be included in the above mentioned publication. A small biological success achieved by the expedition above ground was the discovery of a new and remote location (half way down a 180m SRT pitch into the DashiweiTiankeng!) of the rare orchid *Paphiopedilum dianthum*, which is classified as endangered in the IUCN Red List.



The board celebrates a previous exploration to Dashiwei East and was photographed by John Whalley

To the left is an extract from the larger board.