

EXPEDITION REPORT

CHINA Spring 2004

by Ged Campion

Following the Hidden River expedition to Leye in 2002, many discussions had taken place on how best to progress our work in North West Guangxi.

Our work to the West of the Hong Shui River had allowed close examination of the karst areas of Lingyun, Leye and Madrong where we had made quite spectacular finds and now it was time to turn our attentions to the south, looking closely at the bordering counties of Donglan, Tian'e, Fengshan and Bama.

Previous expeditions had been made up predominantly of YRC members but the rigours of regular expeditions to far off places was wearing a little thin on a few players so recruitment outside of the time honoured team was necessary.

With little time for the formalities of selection processes or even opportunities for taking up references, Three new candidates were rushed through the necessary inductions and prepared for a challenge in China.

The normal arrangements were agreed with The Karst Institute in Guilin and although Prof Zhu himself was unable to join us in the field, Zhang Hai a hydrologist of considerable prominence and an upstanding member of 'The Party' was chosen as our Chinese tour leader.

Jet lagged and weary we arrived in Guilin to be greeted by our hosts amongst them Mr. Chen, a quietly spoken man of considerable dignity with the quite unabashed title of 'Director of Caves' - what a title to have on your door at work.

Prof Zhu treated us to a sneak preview of his recently completed book 'Tiankengs of China' and then agreed a special group discount upon

purchase, all of us mindful of our luggage weight on the outward leg!

The other Mr. Chen, a film camera man from Nanking TV would join us in Tian'e to report back daily with film footage of the expedition and Miss Tang formerly from CCTV, was now a freelance journalist writing a book on the people of the karst countryside.

Then followed the usual ritual of untangling yards of muddy rope, abandoned by previous China Cave Projects expeditions, in the dingy CCP tackle room on the ground floor corridor of the Karst Institute.

Depending upon your view, this can be considered either as a veritable Aladdin's cave of technical wonders or a place where you can abandon anything that you think may be useful to an incoming expedition, from a pair of underpants to an unsuitable expedition member!

A few nights in Guilin saw us suitably prepared for our road journey to Hechi City, the administrative capital for both Tian'e and Fengshan counties.

On arrival we were greeted by dignitaries, officials and the irrepressible Mr Wen Yanto, Deputy Director of Tourism and much acclaimed expert on the culture and ethnic minorities in the area.

At the banquet that followed such was his thirst for gambaying (toasting competitively) he was duly christened 'Gambey Man' a title he was to relish and repeat throughout our time with him!

Forty Gambeyes later it was time to move on and the swagger of the bus matched perfectly the

curvatures of the Hong Shui River which led sinuously to the bustling Tian'e Town and hotel the centre of operations for our first area of inspection.

Tian'e is dominated by the construction of a huge hydropower station. This is one of the landmark energy projects in China costing 2.9 billion dollars. It will be furnished with nine 600,000 kilowatt hydro-generating sets with an annual capacity of 18.7 billion kilowatts of hydropower - that's a lot.

The dignitaries who took us there showed us the biggest concrete mixer in the world, stone washing plants and the foundations of a dam that will hold 5.6 million cubic metres of water!

A visit to the steep karst hills above Tian'e was our first port of call. From here it was possible to survey the craggy depths of the Longtan Gorge with the dust of the dam construction in the distance. It was this promise of vertical range that had attracted us to this area.

A number of shafts had been recorded in the area one of them a significant sink, Wei Dong, situated in a dusty quarry above the 'stone works'. Here clean washed and attractively polished pitches led to an even grander drop of 40m into a big gallery and more pitches to a thunderous tunnel littered with boulders the size of houses. Navigation between these led suddenly to a blue sump where only catfish swam possibly indicating we'd reached Hong Shui river level.

As Bruce waded into the water they inquisitively nibbled at his orange suite. Such curiosity was duly rewarded by careful capture in a wellie-boot trap - all in the interests of science of course!

Other shafts in Tian'e and the adjoining areas of Dung Lee and Ping Shang led to similarly disappointing conclusions in terms of cave development but provided some interest and insight into local fauna. It's amazing what ends up at the bottom of a shaft. In Jian Shi, Dave Williams found the body of a Spotted Linsang

(Prionodon Pardicolor), a type of civet cat formerly blamed for the Sars epidemic though after scrupulous examination Dave concluded that the animal had possibly wandered too close to the void and definitely hadn't been pushed!

We also explored a number of big fossil caves including what was called Number 8 Cave. The dimensions of this place were quite incredible. The biggest chamber was adorned by crispy ancient stalls and, of particular mention, a stalagmite almost 20 metres high.

Ernie Shield and Dave Appleing were given the task of surveying this immense chamber and both newcomers to China surveyed every nook and cranny, careful not to miss the possibility of a crawl or a smaller passage were they could escape the agoraphobia of the big wide open space.

Circumnavigation of the chamber led to decreasing circle syndrome and Ernie mysteriously disappeared for a while but eventually re-emerged from the darkness much to Dave's relief. Number 8 cave notched up a few kilometres before we moved to an area in the south and Lao Pung in particular.

Lao Pung was to reveal something quite special - a new Tiankeng. The Chinese for this Tiankeng was San Gu Shui meaning ancient water cave but as we peered over its precipitous entrance we could see no sign of water.

The Chinese had never been able to descend into this feature so it held much awe and mystery for them and we were not without our audience as we rigged off the biggest tree we could find which quite remarkably gave us a perfect 100 metre free-hang all the way to the bottom.

As the noise of the circus above melted away into confused echoes we disappeared away beneath the verdant forest canopy which formed the floor of the Tiankeng. It led steeply down through a low arch that guarded the access to the cave below.

San Gu Shui was a real gem, beautifully decorated and quite spectacular in size.

Big galleries led off up and down but no sign of a river or a pitch that would reward us with depth. We took photographs and made our way back to the Tiangkeng and prusiked up to starlight sky. The circus had left us the glowing embers of a burnt out fire and a yapping little dog which ran the risk of disappearing into the forest below.

Not too far away we found Jiang jia Tao in Gan Tang village which was to prove another major vertical find, a spectacular shaft 200 metres deep

The exploration of this gem was carried out over a period of two days but no continuation at the bottom could be found.

This feature was just on the boundary of Tian'e and Fengshan counties forming the highest point on the relief map but few other interesting features were immediately obvious so we started to turn our attentions to Fengshan county.

For a few years we had discounted the idea of visiting Fengshan mostly because of the work that had been done here by China Caves Projects in 1988-89. Huge caves like Ma Wang had been explored and part of the system had already been transformed into a show cave. Significant caves on the Bama border had also been discovered but in a country with so much limestone we were nervous about getting too close to an area partially worked out. As if this wasn't enough I had heard about a small Italian expedition visiting Fengshan though we were assured that their remit was strictly to study archaeology and biology in specific caves that were not part of our itinerary.

With these nagging doubts in our minds we took the long and tiring road across the range, our journey constantly punctuated with stops for road excavation. Dropping dramatically down from the dizzy Cone Karst heights gave us our

first view of smoky Fengshan town nestling somewhat awkwardly amongst the beautiful karst features in the valley below.

We were to be greeted by an enthusiastic local government and tourist group of officials including Mr Wei the Director of Tourism for the town who eagerly led us to the government hotel where waiting, was guess what -you've got it - our next banquet and a whole host of town officials!

Suitably welcomed and toasted we prepared for exploration in the area.

Next day our first assignment was to look at two fossil caves Dark and Light Cave as well as a shaft just north of the town. We were not disappointed; two very large entrances led of in opposing directions through quite spectacular ancient formations and galleries which we photographed. The shaft disappointingly choked at 80 metres, however.

Nearby in Xia Qan Ping we found Yu Long Dong a big cave with beautiful formations some of which had been removed by local people! The deeper we ventured into the cave the more evident the plunder became with yards of bamboo scaffolding reaching to the roof and the debris of fine white and crimson stal curtain languishing on the floor.

The removal and selling of stals is a lucrative business in China and despite the efforts of conservationists and tourist officials to prevent this happening the trade provides a welcome source of income to local people and is seen as just another way of harvesting local resources.

The way that the caves and people co-exist in China was very well illustrated the next day when we were taken by two young and attractive tourist office girls to an interesting cave 'in town' virtually nestling between shops and offices. The girls with brightly coloured handbags and winkle-picker shoes led us enthusiastically up to the cave.

Who needs tackle bags and wellies when you can get this sort of gear! This was Chong Dong or 'Factory Cave' as we christened it.

It comprised a huge entrance some 70 metres across and 50 metres high with a sizeable river flowing out. It was a huge truncated section of cave approximately 1km long.

The area inside of the cave had been totally divided up between stal bosses and speliotherms and littered with industrial space, housing 'units' manufacturing concrete blocks, grave stones, telegraph poles and a whole host of other assiduously crafted goods.

The girls were happy to demonstrate their survey skills and lead off enthusiastically through the cave armed with matching tape measure and handbags.

We later learnt that Chong Dong forms the upper part of the Qiaoyin River cave which emerges in Fengshan and flows south to Bama County with every possibility of intersecting more karst.

Factory Cave however was not quite the sort of cavern, measureless-to-man stuff, we'd been dreaming of back in England and our Chinese hosts seemed a little unsure of what to go for next.



PYLONS IN
FACTORY
CAVE

The non stop activity, deafening machines, and glare of mains electric lights gave the cave environment a strangely surreal atmosphere quite alien to what we are accustomed - an example perhaps of nature not quite in harmony with technology.

Nevertheless it was still a cave and as dutiful expedition members we had a responsibility to survey and record it.

In the absence of a good geological map, I had been looking at a large pictorial tourist map of Fengshan County outside the hotel. In the south an elegant karst arch was depicted appropriately surrounded by those give away horseshoe symbols indicating large cave entrances. Further probing revealed that these features were close to the village of Jiang Ghou 50K south west of Fengshan. We dispatched Ernie and Ruth to go and have a look at the area while the rest of us cleaned up loose ends closer to Fengshan.



WOODYARD

FACTORY
CAVE

When they returned they reported those caverns, measureless-to-man, that we had been thinking about. In fact a system called Man Fei that was considered by locals to be very extensive indeed. Man Fei proved to be a major find and very close to the Bama County border. Zhang Hai still drip feeding information on this area disclosed that our Italian colleagues had also done a recce to Jiang Ghou but had only strayed into the entrance of Man Fei without embarking upon a survey.

Compelled by a sudden sense of urgency we decided to put all our resources into exploring and surveying what parts of this system we could in the time we had left.

Zhang Hai however, as diplomatic as ever, wondered whether it would be better to leave Jiang Ghou as a separate project for another expedition. Sniffing a rat and fearful of an Italian return we began to realize the enormity of what we had uncovered so we decided to stamp our mark on the system there and then.

It was truly to pay dividends, the potential of the system was immense and there seemed a possibility that it could link with Ma Wang a cave

discovered by China Caves Projects back in 1989. A rough geological appraisal gave it a potential of over 30k going right under the county boundary to Bama.

Four days of furious exploration and surveying provided 7k of new cave as we left lead after lead routinely following passage in the order of 60m wide and 40m high. Although mostly fossil in nature, the sheer volume and antiquity of the cave kept us spell bound. A south east trending passage just beyond a huge chamber christened Colossus revealed a crevasse-style hole where echoed the dull thunder of a river a long way beneath us.

On the final day of exploration patently short of rope Dave Williams abseiled approximately 100m and slowly spinning in the void with the rope knot beneath his feet could just penetrate the darkness enough to see a slow moving mass of water 30m below.

That was it we had to come back!

Back on the surface momentum of another kind was picking up. The Chinese local government and tourism realizing the potential of this cave,

the surrounding karst features and a pedigree exploration history by an experienced foreign team were beginning to be blinded by dollar signs in their eyes.

The consensus of feeling was that the area merited Geo-national Park status and this could herald a steady flow of funds from Beijing to what was essentially a poor rural area of China.

We bade our goodbyes to the Fengshan Chinese team and headed back to Guilin relishing the likelihood of a return trip paid for by our Chinese hosts.

The team on this occasion comprised myself, Bruce Bensley, Ernie Shield, Ruth Shield, Dave Williams and Dave Appeing.

We were sponsored by the YRC, the Mount Everest Foundation and the Ghar Parau Foundation.

Members of the third Yorkshire Ramblers' Club and China Caves Project expedition, were in the field from 22 February to 19 March. Tian'e is located in Guangxi in south-western China and just to the east of Leye, the site of the club's previous 2000 and 2002 expeditions.

It is also home to the Hongshui River's Longtan Gorge, where work has just begun on what will be one of the largest dams in China.

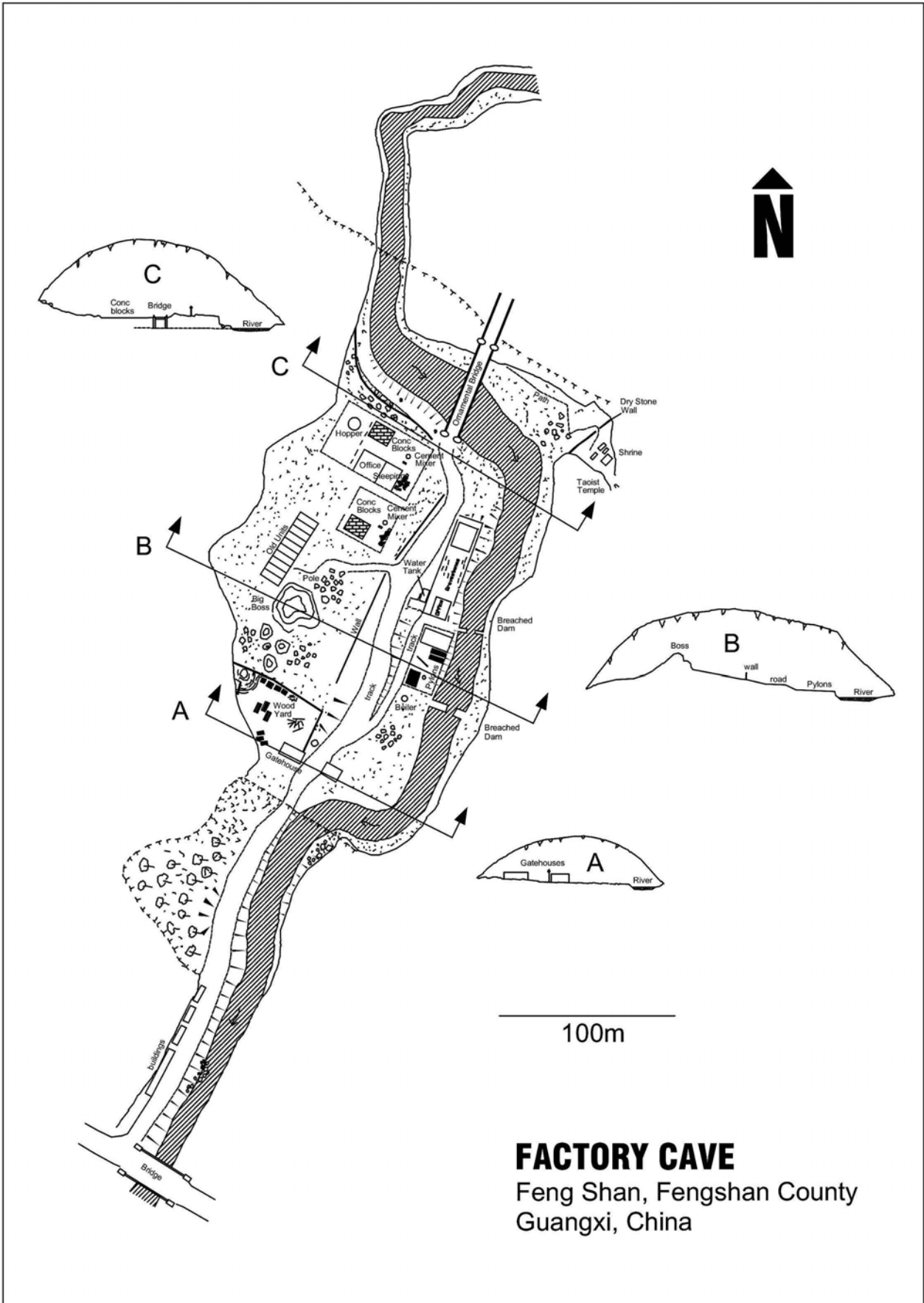
The team were joined by scientists from the Guilin Karst Institute, adventure cameraman Chen Lixin and several Chinese cavers.

Another team did indeed go out again late in 2004 and more will be reported in due course.

G.C.

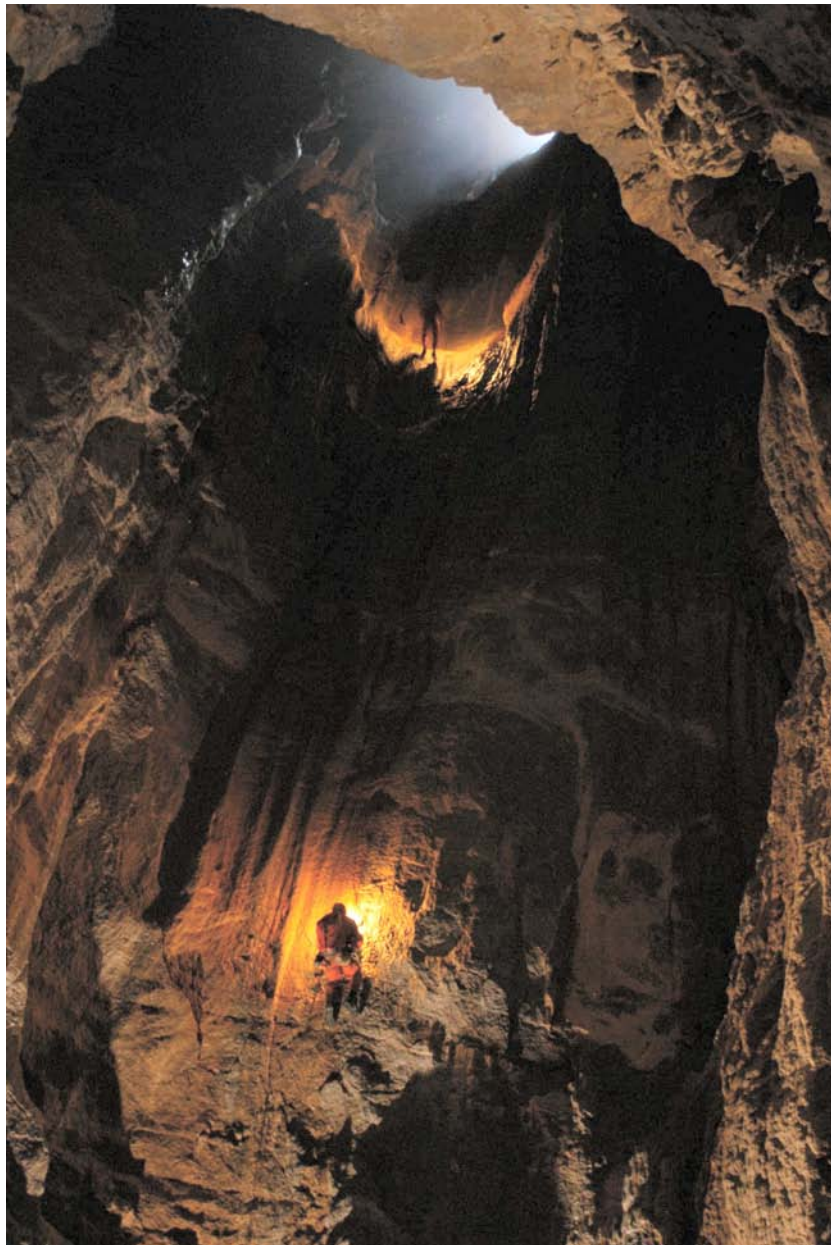
Editor







FACTORY CAVE - ENTRANCE AND GRAVESTONE MASONS AT WORK



JAING JIA TAO SHAFT

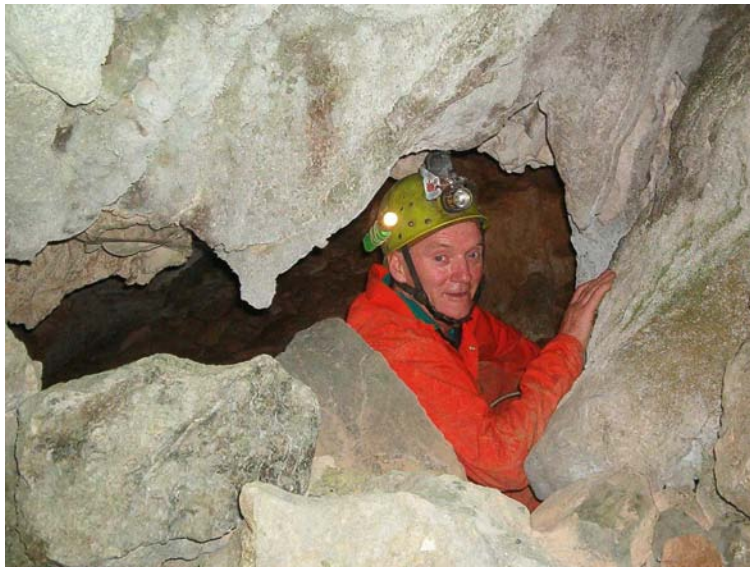


MAN FEI DONG ENTRANCE



LAO PUNG TIANKENG

LAO PUNG TREE ABSEIL



ERNIE SHIELD

