



A Giant Cascade of Rocks

By: *Engr. Chin Mee Poon, F.I.E.M., P.Eng.*

No, it's not a glacier. It's not snow either. It's a mud-and-rock flow, a giant cascade of rocks!

I was travelling from Bingzongluo to Chawalong with a group of friends in May last year when we came across this spectacular natural phenomenon.

Bingzongluo is a village beside the mighty Nujiang River in the northwest corner of Yunnan province in China, and Chawalong is a smaller village beside the same river in the southeast corner of Xizang Autonomous Region (Tibet) in China. The two places are only about 80km apart but it took the 28 of us more than 8 hours to cover that distance in a pick-up and a small lorry.

We had earlier travelled from Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan, by an overnight sleeper-bus to Fugong, a town beside Nujiang and close to the Myanmar border.

The journey north from Fugong to Bingzongluo along Nujiang was done in two mini-buses. The unpaved road, sandwiched between a vertical rock face and a sheer cliff, wound its way treacherously in the deep gorge of Nujiang and brought us face-to-face with some of the most spectacular scenery we had ever witnessed.

Our overland journey, that would eventually end in Lhasa, the provincial capital of Tibet, followed a route that was used by tea caravans for centuries since more than a millennium ago to supply the essential tea from Yunnan to the Tibetans. The last tea caravan was seen on this route probably more than half a century ago. Since then this route has rarely been used by travellers. We were actually made to believe that ours was the first organised group of foreigners to travel on this route for years.

Our journey from Fugong to Chawalong along Nujiang River actually



covered a very unique region of China. This is a region where three mighty rivers flow in the north-south direction parallel to one another. Nujiang River originates from Tibet, flows south parallel to the Myanmar border and eventually enters Myanmar where it becomes known as Salween River. To the east of Nujiang is Lancangjiang River, which also originates from Tibet and flows south and southeast into Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam where it is known as the Mekong River. Further east is Jinshajiang River. This river originates from the Qinghai Province of China, flows south until it reaches the same latitude as Fugong where it encounters a massive obstacle and has to change its course to flow east instead (where it becomes known as Changjiang or Yangzi River) all the way to the East Sea. This unique region harbours some unique ecosystems for some extremely rare plants and animals. In 2003, this unique region was admitted to the list of world heritage sites by UNESCO.

This giant cascade of rocks was but one of the many unforgettable sights we encountered on the way. The road to Chawalong ran between the slope of rockflow on one side and Nujiang on the other. The authorities had constructed a retaining wall beside the road to stop the rocks from falling onto the road, but the rocks had filled up behind the retaining wall and spilled over onto the road. We had to drive through this stretch of road as quickly as possible to avoid being hit by falling rocks.

Unfortunately the road ran into a small uphill slope of loose rocks at the end of the retaining wall and one of our vehicles was bogged down there. We managed to push it through with much effort.

Our journey beyond Chawalong would see us riding on the back of mules and trekking to cross several mountain passes at more than 4000m above sea level, some of them covered by deep snow. But that's another story. ■