

THE GOLDEN SUMMIT

Hallowe'en "Ghost Story" from Memories of a Missionary Kid

By Donald Earl Willmott

Happy Birthday, Glenn [Willmott]. You once asked me to record some of my boyhood experiences in China. It was a life full of fascination and adventure. So it has been fun to reminisce about those times. Here I have just transcribed a tape recording of the slide presentation I gave at a Hallowe'en gathering some years ago. (I have not taken the time for editorial changes: as you will see, it is just an *ad lib* spoken account.) It tells of my experiences going to Mount Omei, that magical mystery mountain which is revered as one of the Buddhist Holy Mountains of China. Many missionaries had their summer cottages on one of the foothills, at an elevation of about 3,000 feet. The main part of this story is a trip from our cottage to the top of the Gin Din, the 10,000-foot peak of the Holy Mountain. That was one of the most weird and exciting experiences of my childhood.

The first leg of our trip was a two-day downriver trip in a small junk. We packed our belongings into 20 or 30 bamboo boxes. They were taken by carriers down to the dock on the Min River and put in the hold of the junk. We then set up cots under the curved mat roof. At night, when these junks were moored by the shore, a temporary roof was constructed over the front deck, to provide sleeping quarters for the crew, as shown here.

We went down the river for two days. It was a leisurely and pleasant trip, with the five or six boatmen standing rowing on the front deck — and sometimes just drifting. At the end of the second day, we arrived at the big city of Loshan, which is famous for the gigantic Buddha carved into the cliffs across the river. The city itself is at the juncture of two rivers which flow together there and then on down into the Yangtze River. When the water is high, a swift rapids is created which sweeps the boats towards this cliff, and they are rushed past the feet of the Buddha. I presume the Buddha was put there to protect the boats from crashing against the rock. Actually, there were many fateful accidents there. I believe the Endicotts' boat was once wrecked as it slammed into the shore at the feet of the Buddha.

We always made a point of visiting the big Buddha when we were in Loshan. It was one of the highlights of the trip. You had to climb up the long stone stairway to the top of the cliffs where there is a temple-pagoda right beside the head of the great idol. From there you can take narrow steps carved into the rock to go down to its feet. I vividly remember the huge toes, and I was told that 17 people could stand on his baby-toenail. The figure is 212 feet high — undoubtedly the tallest sculptured figure in the world.

This picture of Bill Phelps and me standing on the top of the Buddha's head will give you a better idea of the size of the figure. It is an example of what I call the "colonial

attitude” which we had in those days — a kind of innocent arrogance toward the Chinese. We kids would do almost anything we felt like, whether it was disrespectful of their religions or causing damage to their crops. They never dared to retaliate. They were always quite friendly. But maybe they did have in mind that on the Yangtze River, not far away, there were gunboats to protect us, and that sometimes these gunboats took action. The year after I was born, for example, a local warlord got into conflict with the British over the swamping of junks by the wash of their passing steamers. Two gunboats, the “Widgeon” and the “Cockchafer,” came up the river and bombarded the city of Wanhsien, burning out large parts of the city and killing several thousand people. But I’m getting off the point!

In Loshan we stayed overnight in the Mission compound — the place where both Bill Small and Jim Endicott were born, I believe. The next day we set out on foot, across the plain, across the rice fields, to the foot of Mt. Omei. The peak was covered with clouds as usual, but we watched carefully. Eventually the clouds broke and we got a glimpse of the peak, towering high in the sky. It was a thrilling moment.

In the 1880's, a Chinese-scholar pilgrim wrote a guide book for Omei pilgrims -- the one Dryden Phelps and Mother translated. This is a picture of the mountain, showing the cliff face as seen from the plain — or perhaps I should say “as remembered,” because Chinese illustrators and painters didn’t sit in front of their scene and paint it. They went home and painted from memory. So the paintings were never quite as you would see them in photographs. Here is the same scene, as seen by the camera. I can’t be sure, but I think the foothill which goes up on the right is the place where our summer cottages were built.

Next is a totally fictitious view, or you might say a map from the guidebook, showing the Buddhist temples on the mountain. There are over 50 of them, and they have all been illustrated here in an almost random array which nevertheless shows the footpaths linking them. The temple on the foothill where our cottages were was called Hsin K’ai Shih. It appears here on the left-hand margin, the sixth temple down from the top.

At the foot of the mountain was a temple called Bao Guo Shuh [Baoguo Si], meaning “Protect the Nation Temple.” At that point stood this gateway, through which thousands of pilgrims streamed every year on their trek up the Holy Mountain. It took two or three days of climbing. The road consisted mainly of narrow mud pathways or stone steps, but these widened out at temples along the way, as in the extreme example shown here.

All of the temples were monasteries, where numerous monks rigorously carried out the daily rituals of Buddhist worship every day, with meditation, incense-burning, and kow-towing before the idols. It was an ascetic life. But every monastery was also a hostel, where the monks provided rooms and eating facilities for the pilgrims on their way to the

top. They expected generous donations in exchange.

Every temple consisted of several halls full of idols representing various legendary figures and gods, but in the farthest back hall, the idol in the centre would always be the figure of Buddha and, on either side, reincarnations of Buddha. The Buddha idol was usually covered in gold leaf.

I only traveled once to the top of Mt. Omei, to the Gin Din, and that was when I was eight or nine years old. We passed through many temples on the trip up. The first one was Wan Nien Shih [Wannian], the Temple of Ten Thousand Years. It was the one that housed this huge bronze statue, which I remember clearly. It represents Pu Sian, the patron saint of Mt. Omei. According to legend, Pu Sian brought the Buddhist scriptures from India to Mt. Omei riding on an elephant. And everywhere the elephant set foot, a lotus flower immediately bloomed. We rested at Wan Nien Shih a while, and then set off up the mountain again.

The mountains on either side gradually closed in. We came to a very narrow gorge. Wooden beams had been fixed into either side of the gorge and a plank pathway was set in over the beams. I remember how exciting it was to go through this beautiful gorge, looking down at the raging torrent below. This is a painting that a Chinese friend made for us.

After the gorge, the valley widened out again, and leveled out. We came upon this pilgrim, a dwarf. I just had to take a picture of him — and of course, at the time I had little idea that this person would make this trip one of the most — well, *the* most weird and frightening and unforgettable trips I have made in my whole life.

Soon after this we started to climb a very steep, bare mountainside on a gravelly mountain path that zig-zagged back and forth, back and forth, and up and up almost endlessly. It was called “Jiu Shih Jiu Dao Guai” — the Ninety-nine Turns. I don’t know whether there *are* actually 99, but it certainly seemed like it. We often sat down to rest, or to view the scenery. But at one point I slipped and loosened some small stones which went tumbling down the slope. When I looked down, I saw that one of them had hit the pilgrim I had taken a picture of. And he — I still remember that he looked up at first almost in agony, but then in anger, and shook his staff at me. His eyes were blazing and I guess it was a yell that he did, but what actually came out was a sort of ghastly, croaking sound. I remembered that when we had spoken to him earlier he had only grunted, he hadn’t spoken. I concluded then that he had some kind of voice defect or maybe was completely unable to speak, but only to make noises like that. Now I shouted out an apology. But he just shook his head, and raised his staff again. I turned and went on up the mountain with the others, feeling miserable, of course, and hoping that I would never

see him again.

Late that afternoon we arrived at the monastery where we were to spend the night. It was called the Jiu Lao Dung, the Temple of the Nine Old Men Cave. It was a big monastery, and like all others, there were four large fierce-looking guardians in the entranceway. Looking at one of them, I shuddered because it reminded me of the angry pilgrim. In these monasteries, if you slept in the pilgrim accommodations, bedbugs would literally eat you alive. So we always traveled with our own cots and, when necessary, with mosquito nets. We set them up sometimes in one of the sanctuaries or, if the weather was good, right out in an open courtyard like the one shown here. This kind of courtyard would accommodate quite a few of our cots. I remember one night — it wasn't this particular night — lying out on one of these cots and watching shooting stars stream across the sky.

At the Jiu Lao Dung Temple we were welcomed by the Abbot. He was quite an imposing personage, as you can see from this picture, where he is standing with some of his attendants and novitiates who wait on him. By this time there was a light rain, so we had to avoid the courtyards. He showed us into one of the halls of worship, and allowed us to set up our cots there. My cot was set up just under a row of huge standing idols.

The meals in these temples were usually quite delicious, even though they were entirely vegetarian. The cooks were adept at dressing up vegetables or tofu to seem like meat or fish.

After supper, we decided to visit the cave which gave the temple its name. We walked on a very narrow, tiny path along the mountainside and around several large crags or pinnacles. In about half an hour we reached the mouth of the cave, and started to go in. It was immediately dark, of course, but there were little oil lamps that lit the way as we went down, farther and farther into the cave. It was a rocky path, not well prepared or finished. We stumbled along in the semi-dark, deeper and deeper down the slope. Then we began to hear a monk chanting. Soon we came to a place where the tunnel opened out into a larger chamber, better lit now. There was a large altar there with a Buddha idol on it. The monk was seated on a sort of stone bench, chanting "O Mi To Fu, O Mi To Fu," repeating it over and over again, as a kind of worship. I believe O Mi To Fu is another name for the Buddha, perhaps in an Indian language.

As soon as we came into the chamber, the monk stopped and made it clear that we were expected to make a donation. In return, he would provide us with a fortune, writing down a few characters predicting our future. Three of us took turns doing this. It starts by taking a large bamboo container that had a lot of numbered sticks in it. You hold the container and shake it kind of sideways and -- it's sort of weird -- as you shake it, one

stick will emerge out of the whole pack. You keep shaking a bit and the one stick will drop down. The monk picks it up and then consults his scriptural books, or whatever, and writes down your fortune. What I got was four characters, which I couldn't read, but when we got back to the temple my father deciphered them. They read: Pilgrim - Staff - Bridge - Death. Well, like all oracles, these words were entirely ambiguous and could mean anything, I supposed, but they did seem kind of ominous. Anyway, we didn't have any theories about it, and just laughed it off.

The hall where our cots were laid out was very dimly lit by the candles at the altar. And as we were getting ready for bed, I noticed in the shadows a man standing watching us — a very short man, the dwarf! At the moment of recognition, he grimaced, then shuffled away into a sort of corridor back of the row of idols beside my bed. In a minute or two, curious, I followed, and saw that back there was a narrow space where several pilgrims were laying out their bedding, including the dwarf, who also had a sleeping mat there. It gave me an uneasy feeling, and I guess I lay awake a long time before I went to sleep that night.

Suddenly, in the middle of the night I heard a loud BOOM! I woke up, not knowing what it was. Everything was silent. If the others had wakened, they weren't talking about it. I lay there for a while, looking up into the gilded faces of the large idols over my head. They seemed ominous too. For some reason or other, I felt they might topple over onto me. I even imagined that one of them was teetering dangerously! Then there was another boom. And after a while another boom. The booms came more and more rapidly, until they were a continuous rolling, thunderous sound. Obviously a very large drum.

As I couldn't go to sleep, I decided to get up and investigate the sound. I was in my pajamas, but that doesn't matter among Chinese, for whom "pajamas" are normal wear at any time. I made my way across the courtyard and into another hall where the sound was coming from. I saw a monk there beating a huge drum — I imagine it was five or six feet across — a really deep-sounding drum. I asked him about it. He explained that this was to wake up the Gods so that they would be fully present when they were worshiped in the midnight ceremony.

On my way back I noticed a side hall, a little more lighted up. I looked in. At the far end of the hall was an altar, with a kind of idol I had never seen before. As I walked towards it I suddenly realized that this must be the famous mummy that this temple was known for — a mummy that had been a former Abbot, perhaps a hundred years or so earlier. He had been embalmed before burial. We were told that well-known, or perhaps "saintly" Abbots were sometimes dug up years after burial, and if the body was still well intact, it was considered to indicate some kind of holiness. Then it would be suitable to worship

them, to maintain their guardianship of the temple, I suppose. The mummy was now painted, or maybe gold-leafed, even the face. The hands, which reached out from the robe, were also gilded with that gold colour. The eyes were replaced with glass eyes.

I didn't feel like staying long. As soon as I saw it was a mummy, it gave me a creepy feeling, and I started to leave. But just at the door I looked back, rather entranced by the mummy, and as I stared at it, somehow I got a perception or feeling that that hand was moving slightly, that the fingers were beckoning me to approach. I'm not a superstitious person, and I even then didn't believe in that kind of thing — but I was drawn forward by that almost imperceptible gesture, and stood in front of it kind of... transfixed — I guess that would be the word for it.

I don't know how long I stood there, but suddenly there was a tremendous crashing sound. Then a scream, which I recognized as my mother's voice. I immediately ran out of the hall, across the courtyard, and back to our sleeping place. Everyone was running around, shouting and calling. Several monks hurried in. Through a cloud of dust my cot could be seen under the wreckage of one of the huge idols, which had crashed down on it. My parents and the monks were desperately grabbing away chunks of the idol, looking for me. It was just — can we say “lucky” that I wasn't in my cot when the idol fell? I would certainly have been smashed too. You can imagine the scene when I turned up.

As the smoke cleared, the Abbot arrived. He apologized profusely, but had no explanation. Eventually I was squeezed onto the cot with my sister and everyone went back to bed. But before doing that, I had a crazy idea that the pilgrim might have had something to do with the fallen idol, and I went to look into the back corridor. Nothing there. The beds of all the pilgrims, including the dwarf's, were gone — by this time moved elsewhere in the Temple. Perhaps he had been in the crowd standing around viewing the wreckage, but I hadn't seen him. Anyway, I don't think I slept that night. In some far away corner of the temple, long before daylight, a monk began chanting as he beat out a regular rhythm on a gourd.

The next morning we packed up again and continued our trek up the mountain. Up the narrow paths and steep flagstone steps. Marvelous vistas. Many interesting temples. In one place we came across a large band of monkeys. They are actually rare in that part of China, but on Mt. Omei they are numerous. They beg for food and scraps, and are rarely disappointed. Very cute too.

One of the temples was called “The Bathing Elephant's Pool Temple” because, according to the legend, when the Goddess Pu Sian arrived from India she first stopped there to allow her elephant to bathe in the pool. I was disappointed because the “Pool” was so small. You can see it here just below the temple in the right-hand picture. The character

in the pool is “Chuh,” meaning pool or tank. It was indeed a tank, with only a little water at the bottom of its hexagonal stone walls. It was obvious to me that if the elephant had ever got into this well, it certainly could never have got out again!

That night we reached the Gin Din, the Golden Summit. We got sleeping quarters and a delicious meal in the monastery there. It was cold and misty and damp, and we just hoped that the next day would bring good weather for seeing the snow mountains of Tibet. And sure enough, that did happen. The next day, early in the morning, we could look west across the mountain tops to the very distant snowy peaks of Tibet. A thrilling sight!

Walking up past the highest temple hall, we came to the top of the precipice. To the northwest was a sea of clouds, and to the south adjacent peaks were illuminated by the early morning sun. The cliff here drops at least 4,000 feet into the gorge below. We were hoping and hoping that we would see the famous phenomenon called the “Buddha’s Glory.”

Here is the guidebook’s picture of Buddha’s Glory. Those little circles in front of the cliff are supposed to represent the kind of rainbow effect which you can sometimes see when standing at the temple looking over the cliff towards the plain. You see the rainbow if there is the right kind of mist when the sun is behind you. Then what you see is your own shadow surrounded by the rainbow. Traditionally the Chinese believed that the figure in the circle was Buddha himself. If there were other people there, Buddha was seen with his attendants.

In the picture here, if you look carefully, you can see that the Chinese artist has tried to portray a kind of rock promontory that sticks out from the cliff under the smaller Temple. The characters there give its name: Jin Gung Dzuay, Diamond Beak. That is a point from which you can get an especially good view of Buddha’s Glory. Notice the person who has crawled out there for a better look! In the next picture, you can see the outer part of the Diamond Beak below the balcony where the people are standing.

For anyone looking out over the awesome cliffs, the infinity of hills and mountains, and the mysterious bright image in the mists below, it is likely to be a transcendent spiritual experience. For many devout Buddhists, it was an invitation to “throw yourself into the arms of Buddha”, in order to assure oneself of reincarnation into a better life, or even to achieve the final state of Nirvana. In other words, it was a form of religious suicide. And it did happen, perhaps several times a year, and just occasionally in recent years.

That day we were indeed lucky. In the early afternoon, when the mists were gathering around in front of the cliff, the sun broke through the clouds and the upper part of the

rainbow glowed bright below. I wanted to get a better view of it, so I set out for the Diamond Beak. I backed down four or five yards of the rocky slope and gingerly crawled along the narrow top of a stone ridge, with a sheer drop on either side. Once on the flat top of the promontory, I got an absolutely breathtaking view of the full rainbow, with my own shadow at its centre, looking almost godlike.

Well, as I was standing there, I heard a grunting sound. I had heard it before, and I shuddered as I turned around. There was the dwarf, edging his way across the stone bridge toward me. He had a very grim, horrible look on his face. My heart sank. The Jiu Lao Dung prophesy flashed into my mind: “Pilgrim - Staff - Bridge - Death.” I couldn’t help thinking of his staff as a weapon.

But — he paid no attention to me. As soon as he got to the wider part of the promontory he stepped past me, without even looking at me. He planted his staff in a rocky niche, held on to the top of staff, and swung out into space like a pole-vaulter. His tiny body disappeared down into the mists below...

An unforgettable experience! It’s a haunting memory, every time I think about it.

A NOTE ON THE VERACITY OF THIS TALE

The trip and all of the places described are real. I did annoy a pilgrim by scattering stones down on him at the Ninety-Nine Turns. But the picture is not of him. In fact, I doubt whether it is a pilgrim at all. Pilgrims carried somewhat thicker staffs, usually with a carved Buddha or other figure at the top. I did get an inscription from the monk at the Nine Old Men Cave, but I have no idea what it said. That night I was awakened by the drum, and I heard the chanting monk and his gourd, though probably not the one pictured here. I did not get out of bed. The Abbot shown was the Abbot of that temple, and I think I took the courtyard picture there. The entrance guardians probably not. The mummified abbot pictured here is the one I saw in that temple, but the picture was not taken by me. The Diamond Beak promontory is almost as I described it. But needless to say, I did not go past the railing! Nor did anyone else while I was there. Nevertheless, it is true that pilgrims did occasionally make the fatal leap “into the arms of Buddha.”