



Raymond Zhou

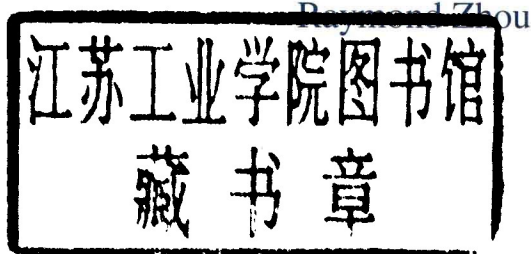
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THE BEAUTIFUL



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by Raymond Zhou

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Foreword

China Daily is blessed with some good writers and columnists: Some are Chinese with a world view; others are foreigners with global views of China.

But Raymond Zhou stands out — Chinese, yet an outsider who has studied and worked in the United States for 16 years, and brings a unique perspective to whatever he does.

He is the quintessential insider looking out; and the outsider looking in — without any emotional baggage.

His eclectic tastes — and specialties — are reflected in his writings: He majored in English language and Western culture from Hangzhou University and Sun Yat-sen University in China before being awarded an MBA from the University of California at Berkeley; he worked in capacities that promoted cultural exchange between China and the US; he is the most influential film critic in China, with a dozen books under his belt; he is considered a culture czar with a keen eye for art; featured across media and cultural platforms; and he is an avid fan of opera (both Western and Chinese) to boot.

Be they his much-commented-upon columns, his incisive commentary on social issues, his reports ranging from sociological matters to economic issues to travelogues where he paints a whole new face on a place, he has won over many.

What many readers enjoy — and appreciate — are his acute observations, empathy for his subjects and his pulse on the populace without ever being condescending.

Personally, I've enjoyed all his work. I'm sure you will, too. I wish his endeavor all the best.

Zhu Ling
Editor-in-Chief
China Daily Group

Preface

Before I left for the US in 1986, I lived in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou — three of China's biggest metropolises — and visited the terra-cotta army in Xi'an, and the karst mountains and Li River in Guilin.

That was all I saw of China.

Fast forward 16 years, I was back in China. I have had many opportunities to visit many more cities and provinces. It took a long absence and an outsider's perspective to appreciate what I did not know before or what I took for granted. This was a country I thought I knew but never learned to embrace.

The Chinese have a saying: Read ten thousand volumes and travel ten thousand miles. Having grown up in the latter half of the Cultural Revolution, I missed much of the reading, but I'm determined to make up for it with as much travel as possible. In a few short years, I have covered three quarters of the country's provinces, autonomous regions and central government-led municipalities.

Every place is a revelation.

I've learned to leave behind any presumptions associated with a place. The biggest surprise has always been whenever I approach a location with a blank mind, ready to absorb the sights and sounds afresh and hear locals tell their stories.

When I come back home, I follow up with reading, both materials provided by locals and those I dig up elsewhere. Beneath all the promotional froth, every place is unique, every person interesting and every story mesmerizing.

I love China because it cannot be neatly summed up. It is vast; it is complex; it is changing — mostly for the better. Traveling to so many parts of the country has been the best education I've had. Not only has it reconnected me with my cultural roots, but it has offered me an abundance of experiences and insights that I would never be able to obtain from books alone.

This is not a travelogue, though. It is based on the past six years of my life as a reporter. Many of the stories first appeared in China Daily as news features, profiles, investigations and, of course, travel pieces. They are not supposed to present a place guidebook-style, but incorporate old discoveries and new beginnings. Above all, they are my observations and recordings of a country that, for all its kinks and warts, I'm more and more proud to call my motherland.

Currency conversions are from the time the story was first published, which is mentioned inside the story.

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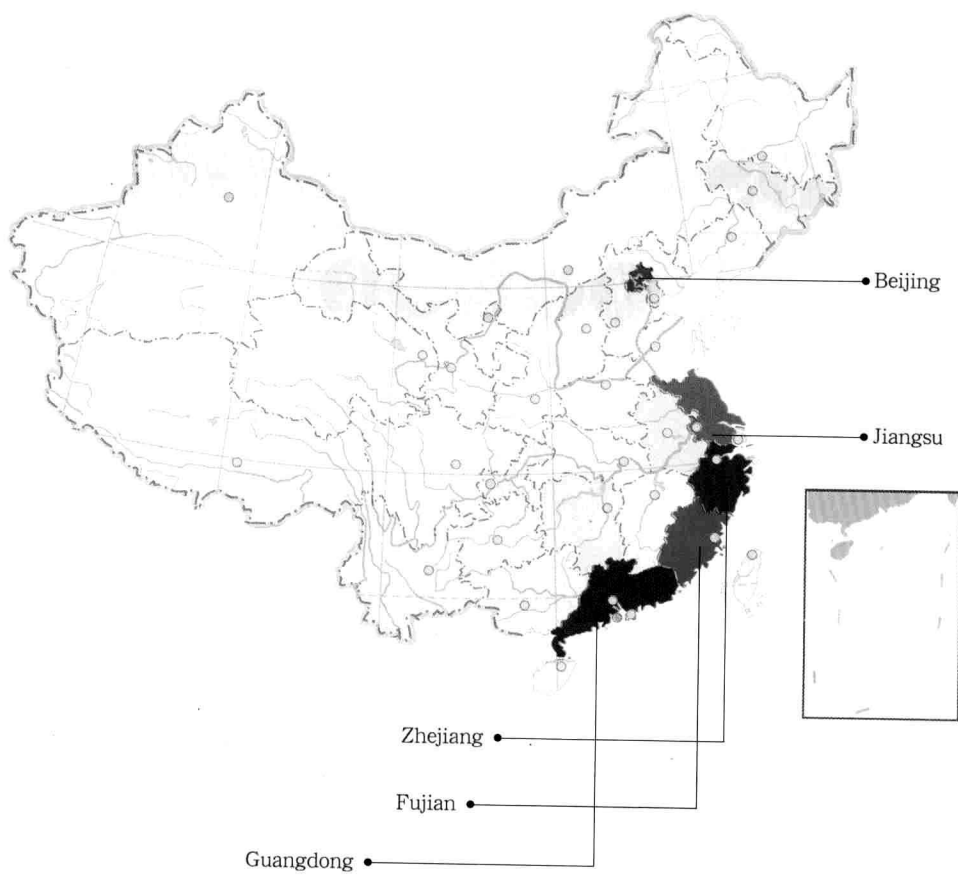
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Part One

Close to Home

常回家看看







I was born in northern Zhejiang. Before I went to the capital city of Hangzhou at the age of 15, I lived in a town with small rivers and stone bridges. I didn't find them beautiful until a few years ago when I visited a similar town in the same area restored to its former glory.

I suddenly realized why my hometown had given birth to legions of writers in the old times. Such a location, between the twin paradise cities of Suzhou and Hangzhou, offers an abundance in material life and leads to the appreciation of beautiful things such as painting, calligraphy and writing.

When I had a chance to visit Suzhou, I felt I must have spent my previous life there. As a matter of fact, the whole area between Suzhou and Hangzhou is essentially a maze of canals, exquisite houses and gentle people.

In the neighboring province of Fujian, I found the Taoist air of Wuyi Mountain beguiling. The more I learn about Taoism, the more I'm bewitched by its unique combination of detachment from material life and a lust for life.

In Beijing and Guangzhou, where I currently reside, there is not much I can detach from. Life in these metropolises is lived in the fast lane with hardly any time for contemplation. Someday, I'd like to rewind in a mountain or a riverside hut far from the maddening crowd.

Beijing Municipality

LOOKING AT THE GREAT WALL FROM UP HIGH – VERY HIGH

Leroy Chiao is not a Beijinger. He is a Houstonian. But when I first contacted him, he was looking at Beijing — from a distance of some 350 km in an international space station. That was where he spotted — or almost spotted — the Great Wall of China.

The greatness of the Great Wall does not lie in its being visible to the naked eye from outer space. Yet fascination with the notion is unceasing: It is enshrined in textbooks and has been embroiled in periodic debates over recent years.

It started as a typical urban myth.

There are at least two versions of the story. The Chinese version goes that the Great Wall is one of two man-made structures astronauts can view from outer space without visual enhancements (the other being giant reclamation projects in Amsterdam of the Netherlands). The Western version is even more absolute. It states that the Great Wall is the only human erected object visible from the Heavens.

According to William Lindesay, founder and director of International Friends of the Great Wall, the myth was started by those who had never seen the Wall. In the 1720s, when British historian William Stuckely described the Hadrian's Wall, he wrote something to the effect that it was so mammoth only China's Great Wall, which could be seen from the moon, surpassed it. In 1584, a drawing by Portuguese geographer Luis Jorge de Barbuda passed into the hands of the cartographer Abraham Ortelius, who used it as a source for a Latin-language map of China. This map featured defense structures that clearly resembled the Great Wall.

The myth was reinforced by Europeans who first saw the Wall with their own eyes. In 1793, British officer William Parish traveled across the Wall to pay a visit to the Chinese

emperor. He painted a water color based on his impressions, which featured a gigantic wall. Between 1907 and 1908, William Geil trekked along the Wall, taking numerous photographs. Luther Newton Hayes, who accompanied him for the first three weeks, published a book *The Great Wall of China* in 1929, in which he claimed the Wall could be spotted from Mars.

This urban myth got another bump when an astronaut said he saw the Wall from outer space.

Yet the truth appears far more complex.

Degrees of truth

When Yang Liwei, China's first space orbiter, said he didn't see the Wall on his 21-hour mission in October 2003, there was almost a palpable collective sigh of disappointment. Yet many scientists felt vindicated. Some had been claiming all along, to no avail, that it was impossible to see a structure like the Great Wall from above. Wang Yusheng, curator of the China Science and Technology Museum, explains that a spacecraft usually orbits at 300-400 km from Earth and, from that elevation, only objects with a circumference of at least 500 meters can "register on the naked eye".

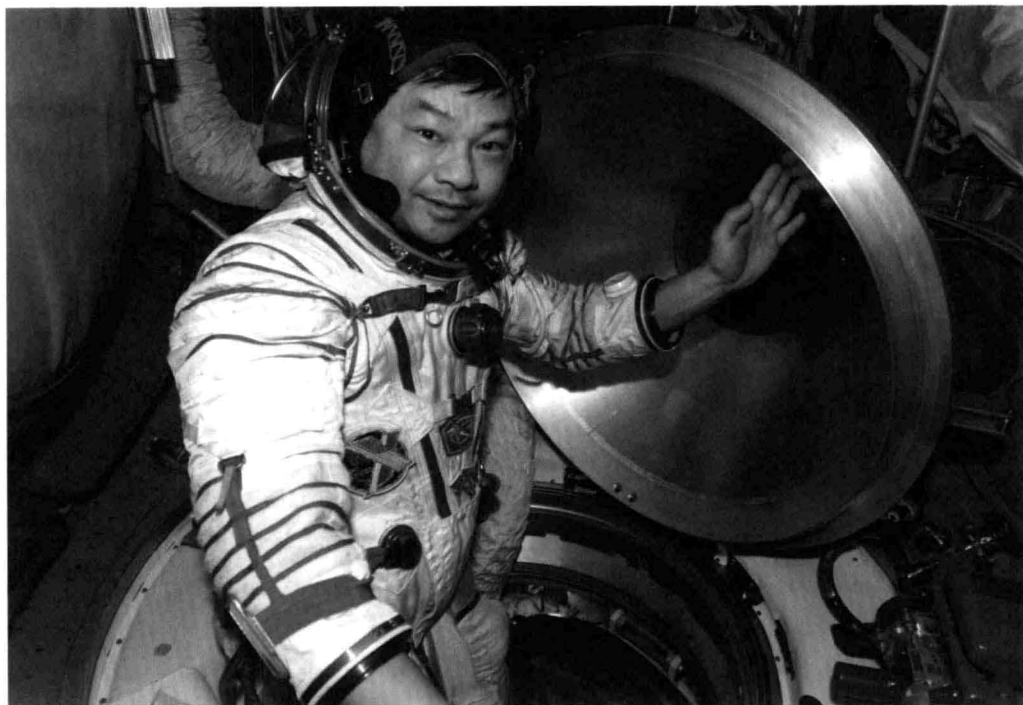
After Yang's space experience, there were calls to revise elementary school textbook articles "to reflect what has been proven with science and confirmed by China's own astronaut".

But US astronaut Eugene Cernan, who logged 566 hours and 15 minutes in space, insists that he did spot the Great Wall while he flew on Apollo missions. On a visit to Singapore, he again told reporters that in "Earth's orbit at a height of 160 to 320 km, the Great Wall of China is indeed visible to the naked eye".

If anyone can spot the Wall and show proof of it, it should be Chiao. A veteran astronaut with three flights to his credit, he was on a six-month assignment on the joint US-Russian space station from late 2004 to early 2005. That was when I started an almost daily email correspondence with him.

A Chinese-American and an expert photographer, he has a passion for spotting and photographing Chinese landmarks from his uniquely lofty position. "It is hard to say whether or not I have seen it," he said. "That's because from our altitude I cannot distinguish between the Wall and roads. I think that if I knew exactly where to look, I would have a chance."

A sequence of photos that Chao sent back in early 2005 proved the accuracy of his



Astronaut Leroy Chiao

descriptions. It really does strain the eye to distinguish the Wall from zig-zagging roads, ridges and valleys. It is tantalizingly possible, yet in reality, it is not very likely to know which is which.

Anatomy of a photo

Three photos Chiao emailed to me were taken on February 20, 2005, which he reported to be of the “region northwest of Beijing”.

I dispatched the photos to the renowned Professor Wei Chengjie for analysis. All of them turned out to be of the Badaling area where the Badaling section of the Great Wall is located, confirmed Wei, of the Institute of Remote Sensing Application at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and also of the National Remote Sensing Center of China.

Wei had participated in a research project of the Badaling section of the Great Wall, which was part of a 1983 project by the Beijing municipal government to use aviation infrared remote sensing technology — for the first time — in measuring the city’s resources.

The photograph printed here, one of the three photos, shows Badaling, the most popular

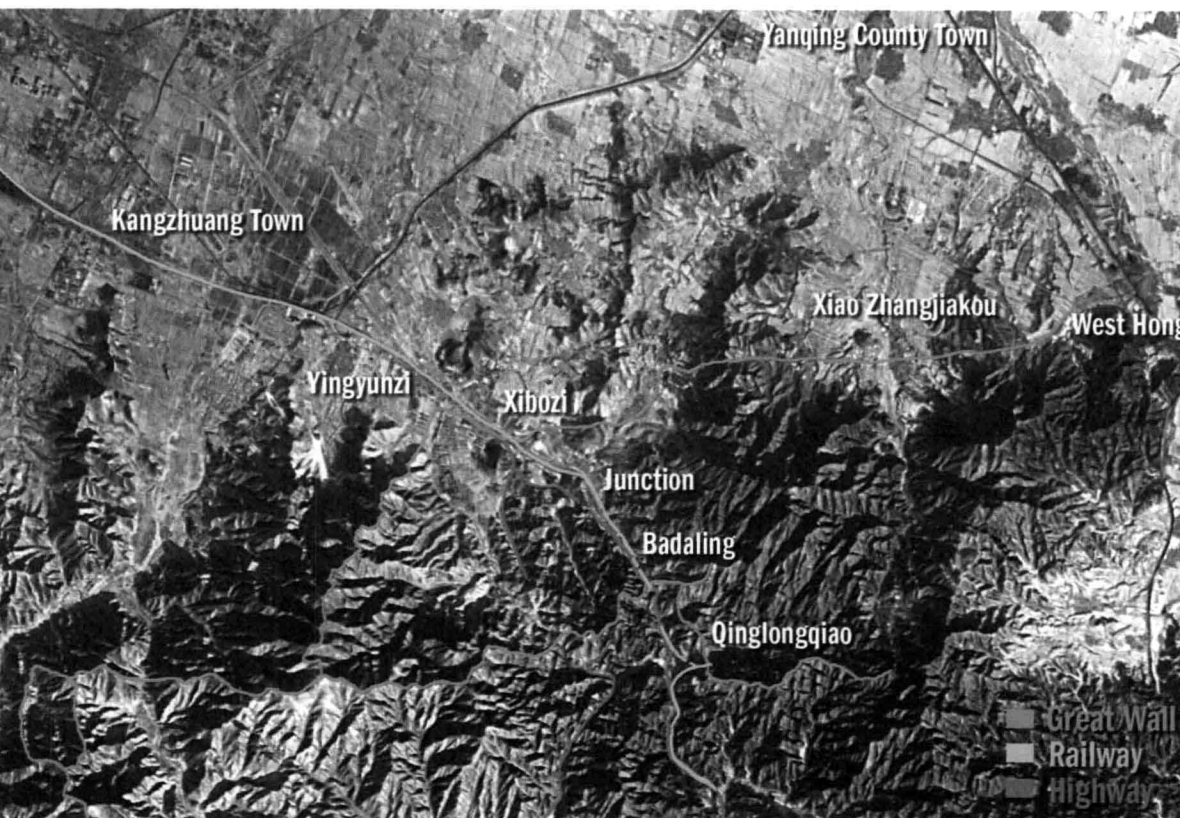
tourist section of the Wall, right in the center of the frame. To the layman's eye, the photo reveals just a few lines, which may be highways or railways as well as a swath of mountains. But Wei easily identifies all of them: "The Great Wall differs from them in one crucial aspect: It is dotted with beacon towers at regular intervals. If I have enough time, I can count all the towers for you," Wei said in a lengthy explanatory session.

He blew the photos up so that every pixel showed clearly on his computer screen. "From the railroad, I can infer that each pixel represents a width of about 7-8 meters on Earth — no more than 10 meters. An object of 3.5 pixels can usually be identified. A tower has an area of some 20 by 30 meters. It is usually made up of three pixels on the photo, one more than the width of the Wall."

Wei further pinned down the time the photos were taken to be around 9 am, which was later corroborated by Chiao. Indeed, it was a sunny morning, as confirmed by the Beijing Meteorological Bureau, and the sunlight had bounced off of the Wall and mountain ridges, imparting objects of substantial height with a sharper contrast.

"It could have made it easier for the naked eye to spot the Wall, but does not make a

Badaling section of the Great Wall as seen from outer space



difference for me in dissecting it in the photo,” Wei explained.

The funny thing is, people untrained in the scrutiny of space photos tend to mistake mountain ridges for valleys. One such photo, taken from a micro-satellite called Proba orbiting 600 km above Earth’s surface, was annotated as showing a section of the Great Wall. However, it was quickly suspected to be erroneous when it was released by the European Space Agency in May 2004.

“We studied that photo and it was definitely a stretch of valley or riverbed,” Wei said.

This misinterpretation was made because “it is easier to distinguish valleys and ridges with the naked eye, since you see them in three dimensions. That’s the way the human eye is designed. It is more difficult with a two-dimensional picture,” Chiao commented.

Kodak moments

But taking photos of the Great Wall is no simple snap shot. “This takes some real practice,” Chiao emphasized.

His photos were taken when the space station was 360 km from Earth. It orbits Earth once every 90 minutes, yielding mere flashes of opportunity.

“We cover approximately 5 miles (8km) every second at our orbital speed. So, there is not much time at all to shoot a particular spot. It is a matter of seconds, perhaps 15 or so. As you approach the target, you must identify the area and continuously refer to a map to keep up to date on where you are. Also, when photographing Earth at this speed, you must move the camera with Earth, in order to keep the image sharp. Otherwise, all that will show up is a blur,” Chiao revealed in an ongoing process of explaining the intricacies of shooting the Wall from way up high.

And the chances for shots are limited, since the space station orbits over different parts of Earth every 90 minutes. Chiao got to shoot the Wall area “maybe once every few days and only during daylight every three months.”

It’s like living near the North Pole. Beijing “is in darkness during our flyovers for about three months, and so on,” Chiao said.

Chiao uses a modified Nikon F5 camera, which Kodak equipped with digital capability and sold as a Kodak DCS 760. He uses a regular 50mm lens, or 180mm, 400mm or 800mm lenses. The February 20 photos of the Great Wall were taken with the 800mm lens. The shutter was set at 1/500 second, and the aperture was open to maximum, f2.8. The one printed here is 1.6 megabytes (mb) in JPEG format, or 17.4 mb uncompressed, with a width of 3,032 and a height of 2,008 lines. (The photo has been cropped for clarity.)