

Sichuan Photography

A Cultural Exchange Exhibition from
Sichuan Province to Washington State



The Old and the Young Are Good Companions in
Physical Training

Photographer: Liu Xianxiu

(Yang Mingzhao, the white-bearded gentleman, as a council member of the Sichuan branch of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and Dean of the Chinese Department at Sichuan University.)

September 17, 1983

Dear Friends:

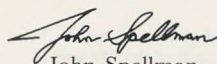
Welcome to the Sichuan Photography Exhibition. This is indeed a historic occasion, the beginning of what we hope will be a long series of cultural exchanges between Washington State and Sichuan Province. I would like to express my thanks to our friends in Sichuan for allowing us this opportunity to see and appreciate a part of their home province.

Formal relations of friendship between Washington State and Sichuan Province were established in October of 1982. Since that time, we have both taken major steps in planning and implementing substantive exchanges in many areas. Because art is an excellent and immediate means of communication, we have chosen to begin our exchanges with exhibitions like this one. While looking at these photographs, you will undoubtedly be impressed and occasionally surprised by the diversity and richness of Chinese society. Some of their experiences are quite similar to ours; others are of course very different. Each picture adds to what little we know of Sichuan and its people, which is precisely the purpose of this exchange: to allow us to gain a better understanding of a part of the world with whom we have such a close relationship.

The Sichuan Photography Exhibition is only the beginning. Our friends in Sichuan will soon have a similar opportunity to glimpse Washington State through the lenses of our photographers. Other art and cultural exchanges will continue between us in the years to come. By this process, we will make significant contributions to U.S.-China relations—and to world peace.

I hope you all enjoy this fascinating exhibition. It may just prove to be the spark which leads you to travel to Sichuan Province in person!

Sincerely,


John Spellman
Governor

Our Friendship Relations

The Washington State Friendship Delegation, led by Governor John Spellman, visited Sichuan Province from October 8 to 16, 1982, at the invitation of their Provincial People's Government. The two sides signed the Friendship Relations Agreement in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, on October 11. That occasion marked the culmination of nearly three years of preparation by both sides, yet it was only the beginning.

The People's Republic of China has emerged as a major economic and political power in recent years. Because of its geographic proximity to Washington State, business, educational, and government leaders in our state felt the increasing importance of developing close ties, knowing that this required a deep commitment in spirit, action, and time. Our objectives are not only to expand trade and promote commerce between us, but also to develop enduring exchanges in the equally important areas of culture, education, science and technology, and travel and tourism.

Our relations with Sichuan Province are still in the early stages of development. We are very encouraged by the accomplishments to date, such as the university exchanges beginning this fall, import and export activities, and of course, the photography and children's art exhibition exchanges. Through continued and deepening contacts with Sichuan, we hope to increase our understanding of each other, strengthen our friendship, and improve our respective economies.

Photography and Culture

Photography provides a visual record of culture. It is as if the collective cameras of a people act like a gigantic notary public, certifying events that concern us: "This is who we are." In America, as elsewhere in the world, photography is used by both the practicing professional and the dedicated amateur to interpret both everyday and special events. The faith we place in the visual medium—particularly photography—crops up in our everyday speech: "Seeing is believing—a picture is worth a thousand words."

These photographers from Sichuan Province in the People's Republic of China are also saying, "This is who we are." In that way, they are no different from photographers anywhere. But what can we learn from their photographs? Chinese

photographers today seem to be documenting a period of profound change. They are not only affirming the values of the present, but also those rooted in the past. Certain aspects of Chinese culture clearly remain important and are to be found in the photographs before you.

Dignity is one of these. The Chinese accord dignity and respect to work, education, family, the elderly, and their national minorities, for example. For the Chinese, schools are instruments of learning rather than places for challenges to authority. The aged remain part of the family and part of the family counsel. The Chinese make great mention of their numerous minority nationalities, as we can see in this exhibit. Clearly they seek to show that the minority peoples of China, though distinct in

appearance and customs, are an integral and respected part of Chinese society.

The dignity of work is another important concept. In scenes of Chinese at work, whether they be weaving baskets or picking tea, the photographers seem to be setting a stage for the viewer. There is a silent, posed quality which adds to the feeling of dignity in and respect for work.

As you view these photographs, you will notice that there are no images of people who are unhappy, scorned, or ridiculed. Why is this? It may seem as though China has somehow invented a marvelously happy society. But of course this is not true. For the Chinese, pain and disappointment are private concerns. They believe that art-speech (photography) ought to concern itself with what is good. What they present



Young Women of Miao Nationality
Photographer: Li Qingshan

to the public are ideals. Whether the medium is photography or traditional ink painting, the Chinese intention is to convey a sense of propriety and perfection.

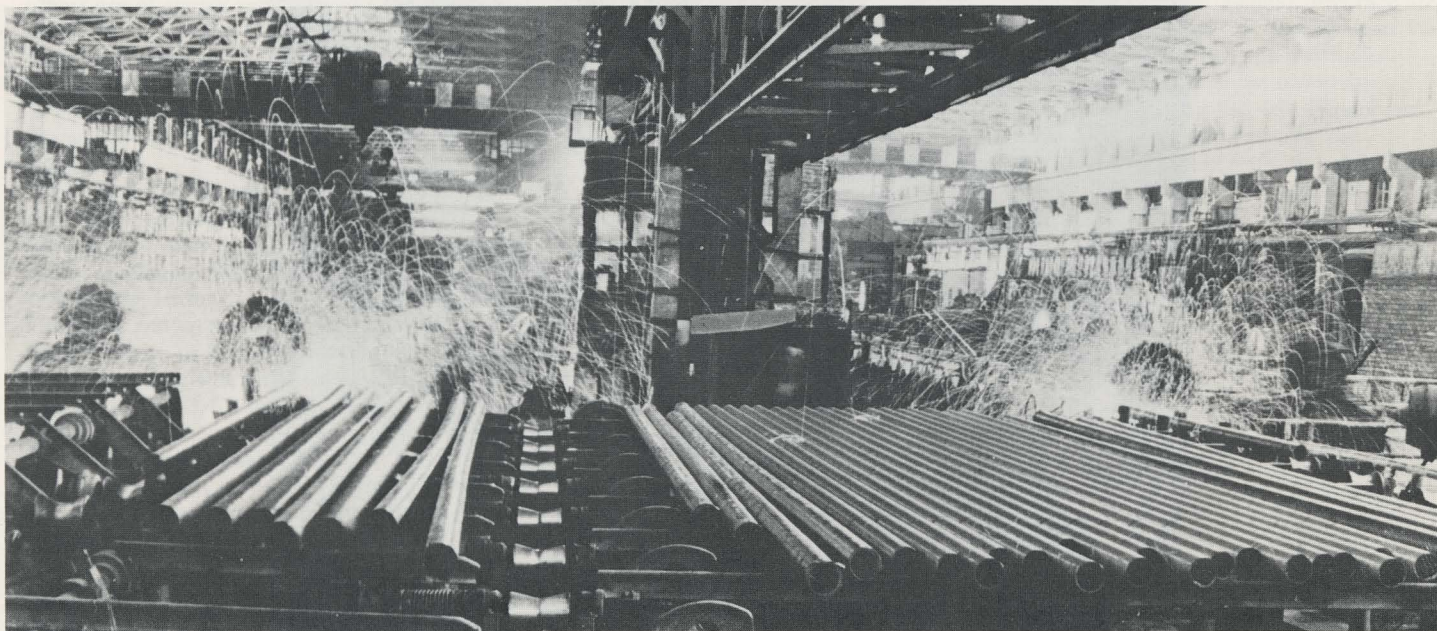
Certain subjects or themes occur with great frequency in Chinese photography. They are all represented in the exhibit.

There is always that awesome landscape. Particular scenes are photographed again and again in an effort to make the most ideal rendition. We rarely see images of just any landscape, but only those which are already well-known. Another favorite subject with photographers as well as painters is the lone boatman on a river or lake, usually completely overpowered by his natural surroundings as though to suggest his relative insignificance.

Photographs of industry and work are more prevalent in Chinese photographic exhibits than in those of the West. The Chinese are quick to point out that China had made a very "great leap forward" indeed! They add that the People's Republic of China began its existence under semi-feudal conditions and was forced to make two hundred years of progress almost at once. When we understand that, it is easy to see why Chinese photographers choose to photograph grand industrial scenes to exhibit alongside their awesome landscapes. It is this national miracle of progress that photographers have recorded with pride in such factory scenes as steel fabrication and turbine construction. While the subject matters are different, the visual conception of nature and of modern technology is the

same—that is, both are often portrayed with a feeling of monumentality and spectacle. The Chinese photographers seem to be suggesting that modern technology, like nature, easily dominates the human in scale and force. While we are a part of our natural environment and modern progress, we are but small and insignificant in comparison.

Family and celebration are also favorite subjects. We often notice Chinese photographs of entertainers, particularly dancers, and wonder about why they get so much attention. Perhaps it is because of their connection with celebration and joy. Traditional holidays, such as Chinese New Year and the Dragon Boat Race, are frequently photographed, as we can see in this exhibit. These pictures, in contrast to



Chengdu Seamless Steel Pipe Plant
Photographer: Xie Shaogang

the work scenes, are full of action and vitality, fully conveying the Chinese love of celebration.

The theme of the old and the new is repeated throughout the exhibit. For example, a scene showing a group of young boys frolicking in the river with a small herd of water buffaloes contrasts vividly with one showing a team of young boys playing baseball. The first reflects traditional China, the other modern China, but both show commonplace activities. Both the old and the new co-exist harmoniously and are well integrated into China's overall modernization efforts. Continuity and tradition are important values to the Chinese. Upon looking at the various photographs, the American viewer should pause to think that modern China with its

different political system is perhaps not quite so uniform and regimented as many believe. In fact, the texture of Chinese life is extremely rich and exciting both in its present developments and its respect for the past.

Chinese photographers today appear to underline the importance of social tranquility and everyday life. This is in marked contrast to photographic trends a decade ago. Today, we often see photographs of ordinary people and ordinary events. Instead of presenting us with their famous political leaders in a moment of history, they now show us a group of young children jogging alongside a warm and kind-looking elderly gentleman. These are not grand figures, but rather some very real people engaged in a perfectly ordinary

activity.

This is precisely the value of exchanges such as this one: ordinary people speaking directly to other ordinary people. We can only begin to understand the vast country of China through the small details of everyday life that touch all of us. We can only appreciate a different perspective through seeing it. If this exhibit has succeeded in making its audience feel a little closer to the Sichuan people half a world away, made you curious to learn more about China and Sichuan Province, then it has succeeded indeed.



Folk Handicraftsman in the Streets of Chengdu
Photographer: Cheng Dong

Introduction to Sichuan Province

Sichuan Province is situated in the southwest part of China, on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River. Its size is more than five times the size of Washington State, and its population is slightly under 100 million, making it the most populous province in China. In addition to the ethnic Han Chinese, there are fourteen minority nationalities in the province. Blessed with a temperate climate and rich resources, Sichuan Province is traditionally known as the "Land of Abundance." We of course are most familiar with the province for its famous hot and spicy cuisine. The beloved giant panda, now under world wildlife preservation efforts, is native to this area.

The province's topography is dominated by two features—the eastern and central Sichuan basin, and the western Sichuan

plateau. Within the basin, the Chengdu plain is the largest in southwest China and is a major producer of grain and oil-bearing crops. Chengdu is also the capital of Sichuan Province. The other important city is Chongqing, Seattle's "friendship city." Chongqing was recently given administrative status as a municipality encompassing twelve smaller cities and counties with a combined population of around 14 million people, making it the largest metropolis in China and the third largest in the world. More importantly, Chongqing now has economic powers equivalent to that of provinces and municipalities, with the authority to conduct its own foreign trade and economic relations.

Historically, Sichuan is one of the earliest developed provinces in China. During the Spring and Autumn Period

(722 B.C.-481 B.C.), it was known as the Kingdoms of Ba and Shu. Even early on, the area was an important center of trade, especially in silk and brocade. Today, the ancient tradition of silk embroidery in the province is still called shu embroidery.

Sichuan's agriculture occupies an important place in China. Its grain output, particularly in rice and wheat, is about one-tenth of the country's total, ranking first among China's provinces. The Chengdu plain is one of the richest agricultural areas in China. Today, it is still watered by the Dujiangyan Irrigation System, an engineering marvel built more than 2000 years ago. Other key agricultural products are rapeseed, maize (corn), sweet potatoes, sugar cane, tung oil, citrus, tea, and medicinal herbs.



The Three Gorges on the Changjiang (Yangtze) River
Photographer: Qiao Debing

Sichuan is also rich in forest resources and is one of the three major forest zones in China. Much of the province, especially the northwest, is undergoing major reforestation efforts. In the area of animal husbandry, it ranks number one in China in hog raising. As one of the five major pastoral lands in China, the western plateau is also suitable for herding horses, yaks, sheep, goats, and other animals. Ferrous and non-ferrous mineral resources abound in this province. These include coal, phosphate and iron ore deposits, copper, aluminum, and lead. Sichuan also has one of the largest natural gas deposits in China.

In commerce, foreign trade, and industry, Sichuan is particularly strong in the production of light and heavy

machinery, metal fabrication, chemicals, textiles, silks, garments, leather, processed foods, and a broad range of native handicraft items. Like much of China, it is engaging in major modernization efforts. The result is a dynamic blend of ancient industrial traditions and modern technological developments. In 1978, the province was selected by the central government as a testing ground for economic reforms within China. Since then, Sichuan has taken great strides in expanding its trade with foreign countries and improving its own economy.

Modern Sichuan is now linked with other parts of the province and China by a network of railways and highways. The Yangtze River is its main artery and serves

as the major inland water transportation together with more than 400 other rivers of various sizes.

The scenery in Sichuan Province is well known throughout Chinese history. Since it was only opened to foreign tourism in 1978, many places have yet to be discovered by foreign travellers. Some of the famous spots include the river excursion through the historic Three Gorges of the Yangtze River, the ancient Dujiangyan Irrigation System on the Chengdu plain, the Great Buddha of Leshan, the spectacular Mt. Emei (often depicted by Chinese painters), the Thatched Cottage of the famous Tang dynasty poet Du Fu, the recently opened Buddhist wall carvings and sculptures of Dazu, and the Baoguang (Precious Light) Monastery and Pagoda near Chengdu.



Dragon Boat Race on the Traditional Double-Fifth Festival
Photographer: Zhou Qinsong

Acknowledgements

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Curator for the *Sichuan Photography* exhibition was Sid White, Director of Evergreen Galleries, The Evergreen State College, and Exhibit Touring Services of Washington State. Cultural interpretation for the exhibit was prepared by Mitzi Hu, International Trade Specialist and China Exchange Coordinator, Washington State Department of Commerce and Economic Development.



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